TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the mountainous country of Lesotho, landlocked inside the Republic of South Africa, the Basotho people still live a simple rural life. The winds of change, blowing down Africa, brought independence from Britain to this little country of only 11,716 mountainous square miles and less than a million people in 1966. In Maseru, the small-town capital, the music of the Beatles is heard these days, there are plastic gadgets in the one or two trading stores, and the men have exchanged their brightly colored woolen blankets (made in Manchester) for western suits. But a few miles away, in the mud-hut villages scattered through the high mountain valleys, life continues much as it has since Moshweshwe, their first king, gathered together the wandering tribes of the region and founded the Basotho nation early in the nineteenth century.

Today many of the men leave their homes to work in the gold mines of the Republic of South Africa, but the women and children and old folk remain in the villages, planting the crops and tending the cattle that supply most of their needs. Their huts are built of clay and thatched with reeds, and a reed screen in front of the huts supplies privacy and shelter. Behind the screens the little dung fires burn smokily at night, for the mountains of Lesotho are bare and devoid of trees, and firewood is a scarce commodity.

Later in the evening, when the food has been cooked and eaten,

the children wheedle the older ones for stories. A single taboo about folk stories is in operation: no one must tell a story while the sun is shining, for then horns will grow from his head. This taboo, which is observed less and less in modern days, probably functioned to avoid wasting daylight hours with storytelling.

The stories serve no particular purpose other than one of entertainment. They do not even seem to point out morals, and in some stories virtue seems to be of no consequence and has no reward, as in the story of Mothemelle, the big bird, in which the unkind and unfeeling sister receives a reward equal to that of the kind and sympathetic one. The stories simply serve to while away the evening hours, for there is no electricity and no lamplight, and reading is still largely an unknown pastime. However, Lesotho has one of the highest percentages of school attendance of all Africa, and these evening story sessions might soon be no more than a memory.

In E. Jacottet's *Folk Tales of the Basuto*, Calloway writes that

> [they are] children's tales now, but not the invention of a child's intellect, nor all invented to gratify a child's fancy. The stories which are transmitted orally from one generation to another deserve to arrest the attention of the anthropologist, the historian and the philosopher. They take us back, as it were, to the earlier ages of humanity, show us what were the conditions and environment in which our forefathers lived, and more faithfully perhaps than anything else, give us an insight into the working of the primitive human mind. If anything can be considered now as beyond any possible doubt, it is the antiquity of the folk tales. They are, in their general tenor and sometimes even in many of their details, older than the oldest literary monuments of the ancient world.
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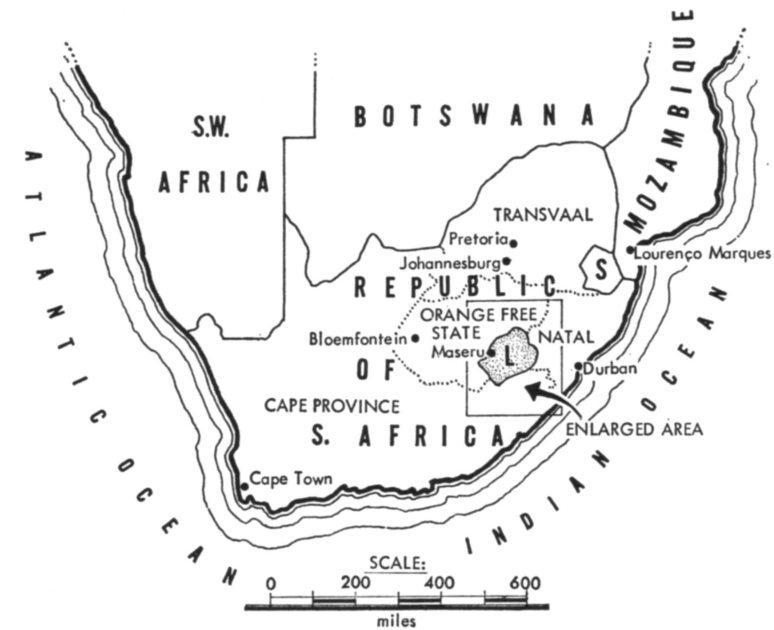
> Nothing enables us better than the study of folklore to see that the human is practically the same under all climes, and among all races of mankind, civilised or still barbarian.

All the black nations of Africa south of the Sahara have their origins in the lake districts of Central Africa. There is no similarity

THE MOUNTAINOUS COUNTRY OF LESOTHO, FORMERLY THE BRITISH CROWN COLONY BASUTOLAND, LANDLOCKED INSIDE THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA. IT IS BORDERED BY THE ORANGE FREE STATE TO THE WEST, THE CAPE PROVINCE TO THE SOUTH, AND NATAL TO THE EAST.



of language left, but the myths and legends of the many races are amazingly alike. Names differ, as may incidents in the stories, but the basic structure and the plots remain the same. During the centuries, the stories have acquired variations according to the history of the tribes concerned. The story of Tselane is a good example of this. In the original version of the story she was a black girl, but in later versions of the story she is a white girl with long hair, who lived in a strange white hut with wheels, with oxen drawing such huts by their tails. This represents, of course, the Dutch Voortrekker pioneers of a century and a half ago, who traveled northward much the same way as the American pioneers traveled westward in their covered wagons.

The audience may or may not join in when a song is part of the stories, but otherwise it does not participate. The storytelling of the Basotho is quite an art, and the simplest story becomes a thing of beauty when handled by a competent raconteur. He or she speaks in a soft, musical voice and uses many facial expressions and gesticulations as embellishments. Great care is taken to maintain a perfect sense of rhythm, and, if the storyteller feels that something is amiss with the rhythm, he will repeat a word or part of a word, a phrase, sometimes a whole sentence until the rhythm is to his satisfaction. Even whole paragraphs are repeated, to the increased joy of the listeners.

The Basotho storyteller wastes no time with an introduction of the "once upon a time there was a chief who had three daughters . . ." type. He simply begins his story with "They say that the eldest of the chief's daughters . . ." or "They tell of the time the daughter of the chief." . . . Nor does the storyteller work his story up to a climax or use any suspense. Since the audience probably knows the outcome of the story anyway, the attraction lies not in the content but in the manner in which the story is told.

Many white people may speak the Sesotho language quite flu-

ently, especially those who live in the Orange Free State, near Lesotho, and come into contact with the people of Lesotho. But no matter how fluently the white man may speak the language, he is in most cases still unable to reach the Basotho world of thought and feeling (Lesotho is the country; Sesotho the language; Mosotho is a denizen of the country; Basotho is both the collective or plural people and the adjective relating to the country and its people). Therefore, to many white people it is a revelation to discover that the Basotho have a rich heritage of myths and legends perhaps thousands of years old with origins in countries as remote as India or ancient Greece at the dawn of civilization. It is also a surprise to discover tales of the Western world in Basotho dress, such as that of Seendire-la (Cinderella) who met the brave young chief, resplendent in his leopard skin robe, at the tribal gathering.

Minnie Postma is one of the white people who have complete understanding and sympathy with the Basotho's thoughts and feelings. She spent her childhood on a farm bordering Lesotho, learning Sesotho from babyhood together with her own Afrikaans, the language of Dutch derivation spoken in South Africa. The children of the Basotho workers on her parents' farm were the playmates of Minnie Postma, and soon she knew the stories of the Basotho people better than she did those of Red Riding Hood or Snow White. Not only were her parents fluent enough in Sesotho to tell her many of the legends, but every evening, when the supper dishes had been washed and put away, it was also "*tsomo* time" in the kitchen. The white children and the Basotho house servants would sit together on the kitchen floor by the warmth of the wood stove, and the myths and legends of the Basotho would be told over and over again. It was a ritual that the storyteller would be, or pretend to be, reluctant to tell a story and had to be cajoled and teased into acquiescence, more often than not being bribed with a length of chewing tobacco or a few pieces of candy. Then the story would unfold by the light of a

flickering candle, while handfuls of dried corn cobs would be tossed into the fire from time to time to keep the embers alive and comfortingly warm.

Since girlhood Minnie Postma has made notes of these stories in their many variations. No two storytellers would ever tell the same version of a story. One raconteur would not even tell the story the same way twice in succession, for the mood of the teller and the reaction of the audience would often determine the variations that would go into the telling.

She also made notes of the stories that she wheedled out of the elderly Basotho folk she met. The old ones are almost the only ones left who are familiar with the *litsomo*, for the youth in Lesotho are like youth the world over, far more interested in pop music and the entertainment heroes of the day than in the rich heritage of their own folklore.

In South Africa most white children of middle class have black "nannies," whose principal function seems to be to keep their small white charges out of mischief and out of their parents' hair. While the white mother may tend to the child's important needs, such as feeding, putting to bed, and bathing, the nanny is the one who baby-sits and entertains. Much of the entertainment is the telling of stories, and as result the white children of South Africa are far more familiar with the folklore of their black neighbor races than, say, the white American child is familiar with the folklore of American Indian tribes.

Often Minnie Postma would overhear nannies speaking Sesotho among themselves in a park or on a beach; then she would speak to them, asking them to tell her a story, in order to add it to her collection.

She has avidly sought after and read any legends published in English or Sesotho, including the collection of stories published by the French missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society.

In time she became so familiar with the manner in which the

Basotho tell a story that she, too, could take a five-line jingle and embroider it into a *tsomo*, with the required length and all the poetic phraseology and repetitions and emphases that the Basotho use. Usually the tables were turned, and it was Mrs. Postma who told stories to Basotho audiences, who were amazed and amused that a white woman could make a "*tsomo* of the old people." When she married, her new in-laws were enchanted with the stories, and soon she found herself providing regular after-dinner entertainment whenever family and friends gathered.

About twenty years ago she began to write the stories, the major works being published in Afrikaans. They were *Legendes uit die Misrook* [Legends from the smoke of the dung fire], *Legendes uit Basoetoeland*, and *Litsomo*. Then there was *Bulane*, originally written for the radio but later rewritten as a book, and *Ons Maak die Kleipot oop* [We open the clay pot], now also a book after first appearing as a series of radio talks on the ways of life of the Basotho. She has also often told stories over the radio, singing the accompanying songs that illuminate the stories, and has presented this kind of entertainment at many a club meeting or dinner in South Africa.

Minnie Postma's quest after folklore is still not finished. Only recently, when teaching in the district of the Transvaal town Louis Trichardt, she heard and recorded some *tsomos* that she had never heard before.

The Basotho stories can roughly be classified into three categories: myths, animal stories, and domestic stories that do not contain any miraculous element at all. Sometimes the three overlap.

To the first category belongs the tender story of the origin of man. The first four people in the world were men, who were frightened and alarmed when they became aware of a strange creature living on an adjoining hill. At first they descended on her like birds of prey, only to discover that she was gentle like a fawn and needed

their protection and hunting skills. In return she showed them how to cook food and made warm clothes from the skins of the animals they killed.

Many of the stories are cruel and bloodthirsty in the extreme; others are crude and even vulgar, a relic of a time when the Basotho lived a primitive and harsh life, when such processes as elimination and sex took place with little privacy or inhibition.

Many myths exist about the childless woman, the *nyopa*, for in this primitive society childlessness is a tragedy. The schemes that the witch doctors devise to help these outcast *linyopa* make many a fascinating tale. The witch doctor not only helps the childless woman to bear children, but he also restores health to the sick and brings rain to the drought-stricken areas. If he is paid enough he will help people to be avenged for the wrongs done by their enemies —perhaps by sending a snake to eat their intestines from within.

The heroes and heroines of the myths and the domestic stories are always the chiefs and their wives, their sons and their daughters. The names do not matter much. The brave and handsome young warrior is almost always Masilo or Bulane, and the maiden is Tselane or Thakáne. There may be other names, but, if the story-teller momentarily forgets the name, he will have no qualms about substituting one of the other favorite names on the spur of the moment.

The maidens are usually so beautiful that they shine with a special light of their own. Even the light of the sun dims when such a maiden emerges from her hut. Plumpness is beautiful, for it brings a much admired yellow color to the face; in contrast, one who is starving and undernourished will become "black from thinness."

There are a myriad of stories about love in its many forms— the love between man and animal, parent and child, brother and sister as well as the love between a man and a woman, with or without the bonds of marriage. Thus arise the stories that deal with the unhappiness caused by polygamy, also jealously and envy and

hatred and bitterness between the children, especially when a half-brother and a half-sister fall in love, unaware of their kinship. The Basotho regard such a love as unnatural and evil.

In many a story there is an old woman of the village—crafty and wise and with many privileges. The young woman who goes off into the world will encounter the old one along the way, bewailing her dreadful diseases. She pleads pitifully that the young one should stay and help her. If she continues on her way without stopping, she will also go without the sage advice of the old one. If she stays to help and comfort, she receives detailed advice on coping with the obstacles awaiting her and eventually marries the handsome son of the chief, who gives her many skin blankets, many pots, many beads, and many children.

Some stories tell of how the old one is killed by a wicked man or woman and cooked while everyone is away tilling the fields. The cruel death is only discovered when someone finds a toe or a finger in the stewpot.

Revenge is a popular theme. A vengeful man or woman is seldom satisfied with anything less than death. This death comes in many forms: the food may be poisoned; the victim may be pushed into a crevasse in the mountains; the revenger may wait until the victim crawls into the cave where clay is gathered and then dance on the roof so that the roof falls in and smothers the victim; or a witch doctor may be paid to change him into an ant heap or "bury" him in the stomach of a cannibal.

That the fear of cannibalism was widespread in bygone days is obvious from the many legends about the *limo*, or *lelimo*. Apart from the ordinary cannibalistic *limo*, there are many other monsters: Kholumolumo, big as a mountain, who ate a whole tribe, including chickens and beasts of burden; the white Heletuma who ate a whole wedding party, "bride price" cattle and all; Obe, who sings a whole village to sleep with his sweet voice and carries off the young women one by one in his immense ears, to eat them later;

Nanabolele, with a skin that shines in the dark, who sleeps off his cannibalistic orgies in his home beneath the deep waters of the permanent pools that are fed by the flash floods of the mountains.

A popular figure is Moselantja, or Pulmagazan, a heartless woman with a hideous tail ending in a mouth with an insatiable appetite. During the day she hides the tail under her skirts, but at night the tail emerges to hunt for its favorite food, milk. The greed of the tail is the end of Moselantja. After she is put to death, she arises again in the form of a pumpkin plant that causes more misery. When the people of the village stab the pumpkin with spears, blood flows from the wounds. Still Pulmagazan is not dead, for then she lives in the form of insects and lice in the thatched roof of the hut of her enemy and comes out at night to attack. The hut is set on fire—but Pulmagazan lives on, this time as thorns in the path where the children of the hated one walk.

The romantic figure is Monyohe, the great snake of the deep pools, who casts a covetous eye on the daughter of the chief as she comes to dip water. Sometimes he beats her with his tail, as any right-minded Mosotho will beat his wife with a stick. In one story, remarkably reminiscent of the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche, he is the mysterious and invisible bridegroom-beast who comes to visit his bride at dead of night, when he cannot be seen. Invariably he is restored to human form: a brave young man, strong as a bull, an iron blanket over his shoulders, and his stick is no less than the horn of the mighty rhinoceros!

The hero of the animal stories is clever Rabbit, who outwits even the Lion. Naturally Rabbit is always in trouble, but he is the one who can run away the fastest, and he will even disguise himself by cutting off his ears and sitting right in the middle of the road with the raggedy ear-stumps, confident that no one will recognize him.

A rustic peace and beauty pervade the stories, which Minnie Postma has taken care to bring into her version of the tales. The feared Koeoko will, for instance, be pulling the only son of the chief

underneath the waters: at the same time, the mother, unaware of the danger, is hoeing the fields with the other women; the boys are trapping little birds in the hills; the girls, each with a baby tied to her back, are digging for edible bulbs in the veld; the old women will be dreaming in the gentle sunlight in front of the huts; and the old men, too old for man's work, will be hunting for firewood.

Minnie Postma has told the stories in the same style as the Basotho do; with all the exclamations and repetitions that are normally used; and she gives many a glimpse into the tribal life that is already a thing of the past in some areas, although still existing in others, where skin blankets are still worn and the young boys and girls still go to their separate "schools of initiation" before emerging as men and women of the tribe.