

**AGRICULTURE, SOIL CONSERVATION, AND THE STATE IN LESOTHO: THE
CASE OF LERIBE DISTRICT c.1800s-1966**

By

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**Thesis Submitted in Accordance with the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities for the Centre for Africa Studies at
the**

University of the Free State

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November 2025

Dedications

In loving memory of my late mother, Irene Sayi-Ngwenya, and to my father, Archibeld Makare, as well as to the women and men who believed in me and worked tirelessly to make this academic journey a success.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is a product of my own effort and the guidance I received from my supervisors and that it has not been submitted elsewhere for another award. Other sources used in this thesis have been acknowledged.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Clement Masakure, and the Co-Supervisors, Prof. Ian Phimister, Prof. Bryson Nkhoma, Dr Jennifer Chansa, Dr Laura Evans, and Dr Lotti Nkomo, for their unwavering guidance, patience, and encouragement. The numerous discussions, brainstorming sessions, insights, expertise, and critical feedback provided have been invaluable throughout this research and the writing of this dissertation.

A special thanks to Professor Ian Phimister and the International Studies Group for the PhD Fellowship and mentorship. Without the financial support, this work would not have been possible. Thank you for providing a stimulating and supportive academic environment and for access to the resources necessary for my research. To Mrs LeRoux and Ms Gwena, many thanks for your unmatched support during the personal ups and downs of this academic journey.

I owe tremendous gratitude to Dr Godfrey Hove for encouraging me to take up the challenge of pursuing a PhD. I appreciate the intellectual conversations and feedback necessary to see this project through to completion. To Christopher Conz and David Ambrose, I am forever grateful for sharing with me their knowledge about Lesotho and Leribe. It helped me to understand the Environmental History of the Kingdom of Lesotho. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the archivists from the Morija Museum and Archives, the Lesotho National Archives, the National University of Lesotho Archives, and the David Ambrose Archives for providing me with access to all the necessary files.

On a personal note, I am forever grateful to my father and my siblings. Special thanks to Dr. Klein and Dr. Bernard for their medical support. My colleagues from the International Studies Group: Nyasha Bushu, Nicola Yon, Keaobaka Tsholo, Saneze Tshayana, Audrey Maringa, and Shalot Nhete. Many thanks for being the comrades I needed to make this journey a success. To all the names I did not mention, your help is equally appreciated; this dissertation is as much yours as it is mine.

Abstract

This study explores the history of agriculture, soil conservation, and state power in the Leribe district of Lesotho from c.1800s to 1966. Focusing on the interplay between precolonial institutions, ecological systems, and subsequent colonial interventions, the study examines how Basotho communities negotiated, adapted to, and resisted shifting political, economic, and environmental pressures during this period. This study draws extensively on archival materials, including missionary records, colonial administrative reports, agricultural reports, and district records, to reconstruct the dynamics and often contested interactions between state actors and rural landscapes that are ecologically and topographically challenging. While the colonial state increasingly oversaw the governance of natural resources and agricultural production, the study argues that it was neither monolithic nor uniformly effective in reshaping indigenous agro-ecological practices. The Basotho demonstrated selective compliance with colonial agriculture and conservation policies in the Leribe district. The relations between those who held positions of authority, such as colonial officials and chiefs, with the farmers, traders, ordinary men and women, older people, and the youth were complex, contested, and dynamic. It was defined by communal agency at multiple social, economic, ecological, and political levels. Furthermore, although the colonial rule reconfigured existing environmental governance systems, its effects on livelihoods and soil management varied over time, place, gender, and class. For some groups, colonial interventions opened new opportunities, and for others, they deepened inequality and exclusion. The study argues that these differentiated responses ranged from ‘stepping up’ innovations to ‘hanging in’ and survival, and to ‘stepping out’ of agrarian practices, altogether contributing to shaping agriculture and conservation in an evolving landscape of the Leribe district. It also reveals that the legacies of uneven colonial encounters were extended to the new governments, which inherited and reproduced patterns of marginalisation embedded in earlier state and societal relations. By tracing the intersection of precolonial systems, colonial restructuring, and local agency over a century and a half, the thesis offers a fresh perspective on African environmental history, political ecology, and agrarian change in an area that has received limited scholarly attention. The main argument of this thesis is that agriculture and soil conservation in Leribe evolved through continuous negotiation between Basotho communities and an expanding colonial state, rather than through unilateral state imposition. While not claiming to provide a comprehensive national history, the study demonstrates the value of historically grounded, district-level research to understand

the complexities of rural livelihoods in Lesotho. The study contributes to the growing scholarship that reevaluates state-society relations in colonial southern Africa, highlighting how past governance and practices continue to shape present-day agroecological challenges.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AC	Assistant Commissioner
BCP	Basutoland Congress Party
BHA	Basutoland Homemakers Association
BNC	Basutoland National Council
BNP	Basotho National Party
BPA	Basutoland Progressive Association
CAC	Council on Agriculture and Animal Health
CDWF	Colonial Development and Welfare Fund
DC	District Council
DAPA	David Ambrose Private Archives
GS	Government Secretary of Basutoland
HC	British High Commissioner in southern Africa
LLB	Lekhotla la Bafo (Council of the Commoners)
LNA	Lesotho National Archives
MMA	Morija Museum and Archives
NUL	National University of Lesotho Archives

Glossary of local terms

Basotho	refers to more than one person who shares the Sesotho culture.
Basutoland	refers to the territory of the Basotho during the colonial period.
Borena	means chieftainship.
Leboella	is the singular term for a reserved grazing area.
Lekhotla	refers to the court or council.
Lerole	means dust or dust storm.
Letsema	is a singular term for a reserved grazing area.
Maboella	is the plural term for reserved grazing areas.
Mafisa	refers to animals entrusted to a person who shares the produce with the owner.
Masimo	means agricultural fields.
Matsema	refers to group work in exchange for cash or in-kind compensation for the labour.
Morena	is the chief.
Morena ea Moholo	is the Paramount Chief.
Mosotho	is one person in the language and culture of the Basotho.
Ramotse	is the village headman.
Sesotho	refers to the language and culture.
Sotho	constitutes the central concepts of the culture, language, and identity in Lesotho.

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CHAPTER ONE

Making Sense of the Soil and Agriculture: Conceptual and Historical Foundations

Introduction

This dissertation examines the socio-environmental history of Africans in Lesotho, focusing on agriculture and soil conservation in the Leribe district, in the northern part of the country, from the c.1800s to 1966. The research examines the nexus between African agricultural systems and soil conservation within the context of African initiatives and state policy. The study begins its analysis in the 1800s to capture the long-durée environmental and social historical trajectories that predate Basutoland's designation as a British protectorate in 1868 and the subsequent period of formal colonial rule, which commenced in 1884 and ended in 1966. The decades preceding the annexation were characterised by profound political, social, economic, and environmental transformations that fundamentally shaped agricultural and conservation practices. Beginning the analysis in the early to mid-1800s allows this study to capture these critical shifts and avoids presenting colonial interventions as emerging in a historical vacuum.

This pre-colonial background demonstrates the successive, challenging periods Africans and their environments faced, both as social groups and as chiefdoms. The period from the 1830s highlights the consolidation of the Sotho polity under Moshoeshoe 1, the emergence of new chieftaincies, and shifting patterns of authority, land allocation, and settlement.¹ Leribe was part of the Sotho society, but it was officially designated a district based on boundaries set by

¹ L. Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds Moshoeshoe of Lesotho 1786-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 29.

colonial officials. These political processes directly influenced how land was used, how fields were organised, and how labour was mobilised. Thus, to treat these dynamics merely as background would underplay the extent to which indigenous governance structures shaped agriculture. Missionaries, traders, hunters, and other external actors who interacted with the Basotho increasingly relied upon the existing indigenous systems. For instance, the missionaries did not introduce agriculture in the region; instead, they adapted to, appropriated, and sought to reshape productive practices that were already sophisticated, intensive, and embedded in local ecologies.² Studying the period before 1884 illuminates how economic interests, ecological pressures, and social differentiation shaped agricultural innovations long before the establishment of direct colonial administration. Agricultural practices were never static; they were continually adjusted in response to climatic and demographic changes, warfare, missionary influence, and the emergence of a regional market economy. Thus, this complex, varied, and fluid precolonial Sotho society of the 1800s helps to understand why certain practices persisted under colonial rule, why others were modified, and how others were recast as ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’ by colonial officials.

The study demonstrates that, as early as the mid-1830s, land use and environmental governance were reshaped through interactions among Africans, traders, and missionaries. The conducive environment of arable land, pasturelands, and water sources, and a population that sustained its livelihoods through agriculture and pastoralism, enabled external groups to intervene in the Basotho’s agrarian systems. These interventions were embedded in a complex web of politics and conflicts over authority, land use patterns, labour relations, and the meanings of ‘improved’ agricultural methods. The conducive environment of arable land, pasturelands, and water

² In this context, by region, I mean the Basotho Kingdom, whose agricultural and ecological knowledge was documented by the Paris Evangelical missionaries as far as the mid-1830s when the first missionaries arrived in the territory.

sources, and a population that sustained its livelihoods through agriculture and pastoralism, enabled external groups to intervene in the Basotho's agrarian systems. Missionaries and traders promoted new crops, especially wheat, for productive purposes and as part of broader efforts to influence social order, moral conduct, and economic incorporation into regional markets.³ African leaders (chiefs) and their people selectively adopted, modified, negotiated, and resisted these interventions in accordance with their own political agendas, livelihood strategies, and ecological knowledge. These contestations between chiefly authority and missionary influence, between different households and lineages, and later between the protectorate administration and Basotho institutions were shaping the landscape decades before the formal declaration of colonial rule in 1884. Thus, these dynamics from the early 1800s enable me to demonstrate that colonial environmental regimes did not emerge on an empty canvas in the Leribe district, but were built upon long-lasting, negotiated, and often conflictual systems of land use and governance. Hence, the adoption of new technical and scientific innovations, such as the introduction of the plough and new crops, promoted intensive agricultural production. This, in turn, marked the beginning of environmental degradation due to extensive land use, population growth, and increased demand for agricultural produce in the region.

Although missionaries and a few colonial officials within Lesotho and in colonial South Africa noted soil erosion in Leribe and Lesotho generally as early as the mid-nineteenth century, their concerns did not translate into a systematic environmental agenda until the 1930s.⁴ Such a delay in managing an ecological crisis reflected the political economy of the protectorate, the limited priorities of the colonial state, and the administrators' knowledge of local regimes that

³ S. Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho* (Moriya: Morija Museum and Archives, 1993); C.W. De Kieweit, *The Imperial Factor in South Africa: Social and Economic* (London: Routledge, 1937).

⁴ K. B. Showers, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 13.

guided the Basotho in different periods before they interacted with Europeans and their knowledge. Between 1868 and 1929, Britain's primary concerns were political stability and economic production, rather than environmental oversight in the Leribe district or the entire territory. As a result, agricultural practices, land allocation, and ecological management remained mainly in the hands of Africans, and early missionary observations of erosion were often treated as local matters rather than as signs of a crisis that required state intervention.

Before the 1930s, soil erosion was not yet framed as a problem to be addressed with or in policy because colonial officials lacked both scientific vocabulary and the political motivation to define it as such.⁵ The global discourse on soil conservation had not been developed, and the idea that African agrarian systems were ecologically destructive only gained policy traction in the interwar period, partly influenced by South Africa, the United States, and Britain itself. Thus, earlier comments by missionaries, travellers, and some colonial officials between the 1860s and 1920s were anecdotal, not embedded in a broader imperial conservation ideology that could mobilise resources or legislation.

Additionally, the economic incentives for active soil conservation only emerged when Lesotho became politically and economically integrated into the South African regional economy in the early twentieth century. The expansion of migrant labour, dependence on remittances, and the decline of local agricultural production increasingly worried colonial administrators, who began to interpret the erosion of arable land as a threat to both African subsistence and the labour supply needed for the mines. Only when agricultural decline appeared to endanger the broader political system did the state reframe soil erosion as a crisis.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the evolution of conservation discourse, see W. Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 143-162.

The Dust Bowl anxieties characterised the 1930s international environmental movement, the rise of “scientific” conservation, and increased imperial scrutiny that created the institutional and ideological conditions for conservation to become a major colonial priority. Thus, this global shift aligned with the concerns of South African experts such as Thornton and Willcock, who viewed Lesotho through a regional lens and described it as an ecological ‘crisis zone’ capable of causing siltation of rivers and dams shared between South Africa and Lesotho through runoff that sends degraded soils downstream.⁶ External pressure from South Africa, Britain, and the United States of America led to the politicisation of soil erosion within Lesotho. Thus, this study contends that the framing of soil erosion as a crisis was not purely ecological but was tied to the governance of rural populations. By the 1930s, conservation became a means for the colonial state to intervene more directly in land use, labour practices, livestock management, and chiefly authority. Soil erosion was highlighted alongside broader colonial objectives of stabilising rural livelihoods, governing land-use practices, and expanding administrative influence into everyday agricultural life.

In the 1930s, state conservation policies were framed within the context of global ecological experiences rather than the environmental realities on the ground.⁷ The American Great Dust Bowl marked the beginning of a new era in environmental governance.⁸ New ways of combating erosion, such as contour ridging, buffer strips, and grass strips, became mandatory in colonial territories such as colonial Lesotho, colonial Zimbabwe, African reserves in South

⁶ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 140.

⁷ See W.O. Mulwafu, ‘The State, Conservation and Sustainability in a Peasant Economy in Malawi, 1860-1964’ (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1999), 1.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the American Dust Bowl see D. Woster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); D. Anderson, ‘Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography, and Drought: The Colonial State and Soil Conservation in East Africa during the 1930s’, *African Affairs*, 83, 332 (1984), 321-343.

Africa, and other British colonies in East and West Africa.⁹ Hence, I use Leribe to explore the evolution of African agriculture and soil conservation in Lesotho during such drastic state interventionist conservation policies and practices.

Leribe district offers an analytically rich and historically distinctive site for examining the long-term political ecology of agriculture and conservation in colonial Lesotho. Unlike settler colonies elsewhere in Southern Africa, the territory of the Basotho remained an unconquered African polity after becoming a British protectorate in 1868. Although administered as a protectorate from the Cape Colony, the Basotho retained political autonomy until they were formally colonised by the British government in 1884.¹⁰ These political dynamics enabled Basotho communities in the Leribe district to maintain and adapt their indigenous agricultural practices. As a frontier zone bordering the expanding white settler territories of the Orange Free State, Leribe became a space where African agrarian systems not only persisted but were reshaped in response to shifting political and economic pressures.¹¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, Leribe was shaped by territorial conflicts, shifting borders, cattle raiding, and negotiations over land and labour as Basotho communities defended their autonomy while responding to missionary penetration, trade networks, and the growth of regional markets.¹² These dynamics produced a complex agrarian landscape in which African land-use strategies, gendered divisions of labour, and ecological knowledge interacted with, and in some cases resisted, gendered divisions of labour and environmental expertise, as well as external pressures, long before formal colonial rule in 1884.

⁹ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; S. Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and the White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe, c. 1908-1980' (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2013); Beinart, 'Introduction: the Politics of Colonial Conservation', 143-162.

¹⁰ B. D. Coplan, 'Unconquered Territory: Narrating the Caledon Valley', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13, 2 (2000), 185-206; P. Sanders, 'Throwing Down White Man: Cape Rule and Misrule in Colonial Lesotho, 1871-1884' (Moriya: Morija Museum and Archives, 2010), 36.

¹¹ Coplan, 'Unconquered Territory: Narrating the Caledon Valley', 185-206.

¹² See, 'The British Empire: Basutoland, in J. Scott-Keltie and M. Epstein, *The Stateman's Yearbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2016), 198; Sanders, 'Throwing Down White Man'.

Additionally, Leribe district provides a uniquely revealing vantage point for studying how environmental governance evolved across the precolonial period, the colonial transition, and the consolidation of state intervention in the twentieth century. Its fertile lowlands and relatively concentrated population made Leribe one of the focal points for early missionary agricultural experiments, commercial wheat production, and later the colonial state's escalating concerns about soil erosion in the 1930s.¹³ Thus, this generated an unusually dense archival footprint, including missionary records, district reports, agricultural surveys, traders' diaries, and newspapers, which would enable historical reconstruction. Also, Leribe, as a district, has been underrepresented in the works of scholars such as Elizabeth Eldredge, Christopher Conz, Tim Quinlan, Thackwray Driver, and James Ferguson, who have tended to focus on southern districts and on national-level narratives that obscure local ecological variability and political contestations.¹⁴ By centring Leribe, this study fills a notable historiographical gap while also offering comparative insights into broader debates on African agrarian resilience, frontier politics, and environmental authority in the region.

Also, Leribe, as a case study, enables the examination of how land use, authority, and environmental policy were negotiated at the scales of the village, field, households, and spaces where conservation policies and practices, labour demands, and notions of chieftaincy were interpreted, contested, negotiated, and transformed. Leribe's position at the intersection of African autonomy, missionary influence, colonial expansion, and cross-border capitalist

¹³ See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

¹⁴ E. A. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth Century Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); C. R. Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho: The Poverty of Progress*, (Boydell & Brewer, 2024); T. Quinlan, 'Grassland Degradation and Livestock Rearing in Lesotho', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 3 (1995), 491-507; T. Driver, 'The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland Conservation and Pastoral Development in Colonial Lesotho' (Ph.D. thesis, United Kingdom: University of London, 1998); J. Ferguson, 'The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho', *Man* (1985), 647-674.

pressures makes it an exemplary site for understanding the dynamic interplay between power, ecology, and livelihoods. In this sense, Leribe district is both representative of national patterns and distinctive in ways that illuminate wider southern African processes, rendering it an analytically fruitful case through which to explore the shifting environmental politics that culminated in 1966. This dissertation ends in 1966, when the nation attained political independence. Overall, this long historical period and case-specific study situate Lesotho within the broader context of colonial environmental governance in Africa. The dissertation interrogates the role of the state in both creating and attempting to resolve environmental degradation, particularly soil erosion, in a topographically and ecologically challenging landscape.

In this context, this study examines the interface among African agrarian methods, soil conservation, and the state's role in the Leribe district. In this way, the study explores the political and socio-environmental factors that have shaped Lesotho's agricultural methods and soil conservation practices. It highlights that state efforts were political, aimed at regulating rural land, labour, crop, and livestock production, and wealth accumulation. While it acknowledges the state's role during colonial rule in the Leribe district of Lesotho, it also highlights cases in which Africans and the environment exercised their own agency.¹⁵ For instance, during the introduction of soil conservation policies and programmes, which were framed as scientific and technical innovations to help Africans combat an ecological crisis in

¹⁵ See Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*; G. Wynn, et al (eds.), *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio University Press, 2022); Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*; M. Epprecht, *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad': Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 2001); J. Aerni- Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018); Mulwafu, 'The State, Conservation and Sustainability in a Peasant Economy in Malawi'; Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe 1908-1980'; M. Musemwa, 'Narratives of Scarcity: Colonial State Responses to Water Scarcity in Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1965', *Environmental History in the Making*, 7 (2016), 263-290; A. Mseba, 'Environmental Phenomena, Colonial Injustice, and Vernacular Discourse in the Early Colonial Zimbabwe, 1895-ca. 1935', in G. Wynn, et al, (eds.), *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio University Press, 2022): 193-220; Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*.

the late 1930s, up to independence.¹⁶ Thus, in the broader context, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing historiography on the politics of agricultural change and environmental governance in colonial Africa.

Historians such as William Beinart, Kate Showers, Christopher Conz, Marc Epprecht, John Aenni-Flessner, Wapulumuka Mulwafu, Simeon Maravanyika, Admire Mseba, and Elizabeth Eldredge have variously highlighted the tensions between colonial developmentalism, gender relations, social differentiation, socio-economic security, African agrarian expertise, and the coercive conservation regimes that emerged across southern Africa in the twentieth century.¹⁷ The study resonates with Beinart's 'environmental dimensions of colonial rule', Showers' work on the political construction of Lesotho's soil erosion crisis, and John McCracken and Sara Berry's broader arguments on African agency, adaptation, and knowledge systems in Agrarian history.¹⁸ At the same time, it engages with comparative insights from countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, where colonial conservation and agrarian development unfolded in similar ways. Patrick McAllister and Andrew Manson's insights on betterment schemes in colonial South Africa, land reorganisation and rural resistance, as well as debates in political ecology, are informed by James Scott's analysis of state legibility, Piers

¹⁶ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

¹⁷ Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation', Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Conz, *Environment, Knowledge*; G. Wynn, et al (eds.), *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio University Press, 2022); M. Epprecht, 'Women's Conservatism and the Politics of Gender in Late Colonial Lesotho', *Journal of African Studies*, 36, 1(1995), 29-56; W.O. Mulwafu, 'Soil Erosion and State Intervention into Estate Production in the Shire Highlands Economy of Colonial Malawi, 1891-1964', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28, 1(2002), 25-43; Mseba, 'Environmental Phenomena, Colonial Injustice', 193-220; Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*.

¹⁸ See Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation', 143-162; Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; J. McCracken, 'Colonialism, Capitalism and Ecological Crisis in Malawi, A Reassessment' in D. Anderson and R. Grove (eds.), *Conservation in Africa, People, Policies and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 63; S. Berry, 'The Food Crisis and Agrarian Change in Africa', *African Studies Review*, 27 (1984), 59-112.

Blaikie's work on degradation narratives, and Ferguson's critique of depoliticised development in Lesotho.¹⁹

Arguments of this Dissertation

This dissertation presents five essential arguments. First, it posits that by the 1800s, precolonial African societies had established systems of governing the environment. These systems enabled them to govern relations between humans and nature, or vice versa. While ecologies varied between different precolonial states, the environmental governance systems were related despite different locations.²⁰ For instance, the Eastern and Southern African states shared indigenous practices, such as the rain-making ceremony, a central practice in African agroecology.²¹ This practice is documented in various European accounts, such as missionary and traveler diaries, letters, drawings, and pictures of Africans and Europeans' interactions during pre-colonial times. The rain-making ceremonies were practiced in anticipation of abundant rain, sufficient for them and their animals for the coming season.

This highlights that African environmental governance was underpinned by socially embedded, ecologically responsive institutions and practices, among which rainmaking held particular significance. Africans understood such practices as central to their prediction and management of environmental uncertainty. Rainmaking constituted an integrated system of

¹⁹ P. McAllister, *Building the Homestead: Agriculture, Labour and Beer in South Africa's Transkei* (Routledge, 2020); A. Manson and B. Mbenga, *Land, Chiefs, Mining: South Africa's Northwest Province since 1840* (NYU Press, 2014); J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (Yale University Press, 2020); P. Blaikie and H. Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (Routledge, 2015); J. Ferguson, *Anti-politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

²⁰ J. Murombedzi, *Pre-colonial and Colonial Conservation Practices in Southern Africa and their Legacy Today* (Switzerland: IUCN 2003).

²¹ See A. Ntagwabira and M.K. Chapurukha, 'Ritual and State Making in Precolonial Rwanda', *The African Archaeological Review*, 38, 4 (2021), 569–95; T. Takuva, 'Rains Come from the Gods!': Anthropocene and the History of Rainmaking Rituals in Zimbabwe with Reference to Mberengwa District, c. 1890–2000', *Southern Africa Historical Journal*, 73, 1 (2021), 138–161; N.J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

ecological observation, social regulation, and political authority. Specialists such as chiefs, divine healers, and hereditary rainmakers were responsible for interpreting atmospheric patterns, reading environmental signs, and coordinating collective responses to drought or irregular rainfall. Scholars such as Isaac Schapera, Terrance Ranger, John Comaroff, and Jean Comaroff have shown how these practices played a critical role in maintaining social cohesion, organizing labour for seasonal agricultural activities, and encoding local environmental knowledge built over generations.²²

Indigenous practices also worked as institutionalized mechanisms for environmental governance. For instance, *Maboella* (a Basotho practice of governing pastures or forests) and *Chitemene* (traditional shifting cultivation in Zambia) linked cosmology, ecology, and political authority in ways that were highly attuned to local conditions.²³ Both systems were passed down from one generation to the next through observation, initiation, folktales, and other forms of information dissemination. The agroecological practices created a balance between society's needs and its surroundings. Although these methods existed and functioned as agricultural and conservation systems within the region, they were not recognised as conservation practices, as the term was coined in Western science and introduced during the colonial period. Historian Kate Showers notes that many colonial officers entered the territory of the Basotho with preconceived notions about African soil and climatic processes, even though producers in the Leribe district and elsewhere in the Kingdom had previously demonstrated methods of farming, land and water conservation, and landscape management.²⁴ William Beinart also highlights

²² I. Schapera, 'Anthropology and the Native Problem', *South African Journal of Science*, 36, 12 (1939), 89-103; T. O. Ranger, *African Traditional Religion, The World's Religions* (Routledge, 1988), 864-872; J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Routledge, 2019).

²³ E.M. Kapekele, *Determinants of Slash and Burn: The Case of Chitemene Farming System in Zambia*, (University of Pretoria: South Africa, 2006); B.M. Swallow and W.B. Daniel W. Bromley, 'Institutions, Governance and Incentives in Common Property Regimes for African Rangelands', *Environmental and Resource Economics*, 6, 2 (1995), 99-118.

²⁴ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

how such expertise was questioned and displaced by technocratic conservation schemes that neither appreciated nor matched indigenous environmental knowledge. Yet, in practice, such knowledge and practices regulated necessary social behavior, such as cattle movement, planting seasons, communal labour allocation, and the observance of customs and beliefs that protected land, water, and grazing sources. Thus, recognizing the ecological and social significance of indigenous processes illuminates the holistic nature of pre-colonial African environmental governance, which operated through a combination of empirical observation, collective practices, and political responsibility.

Secondly, I argue that colonial interventions reconfigured and often destabilized existing African agroecological practices, which were themselves dynamic, locally adapted, and periodically contested. Thus, colonial policy did not encounter a blank slate, nor did it replace wholly coherent systems; instead, it inserted new forms of authority and expertise into already complex agrarian landscapes, frequently undermining established knowledge, labour arrangements, and environmental management strategies.²⁵ Colonial authorities created rigid borders, instituted new administrative categories, and imposed relocation into increasingly overcrowded and ecologically fragile reserves.²⁶ These interventions reworked existing land-use arrangements and incorporated Basotho households into a capitalist labour regime that relied heavily on migrant labour.²⁷ As in other parts of Southern Africa, this incorporation initially created opportunities for a small number of households to accumulate wealth through

²⁵ J. L. Comaroff, 'Colonialism, Culture and the Law: A Foreword', *Law and Social Enquiry*, 26 (2001), 305-14; F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005); N.W. Pule and M. Thabane (eds), *Aspects of the Political Economy of Lesotho, 1500-2000* (Department of History, National University of Lesotho, Roma, 2002).

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of colonial borders, see E. M. Gbenenye, 'African Colonial Boundaries and Nation-Building', *Inkanyiso*, 8, 2 (2016), 117-124.

²⁷ See C. Murray, 'Migrant Labour and Changing Family Structure in the Rural Periphery of Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6, 2 (1980), 139-156.

livestock, wage remittances, or commodity production.²⁸ However, these opportunities were short-lived. Over time, colonial land policies, taxation, and conservation schemes intensified social differentiation and exacerbated land disputes. They facilitated dispossession among ordinary people and within chiefly structures in Leribe district and across the entire territory. Thus, rather than producing broad-based rural prosperity, colonial governance progressively narrowed the prospects for accumulation and deepened structural inequalities within the Leribe district and across the entire Basotho society.

The imperial interventions shifted the traditional patriarchal roles of men and women in an agro-pastoral society. Colonialism placed disproportionate responsibilities on women with male roles upon the reproductive roles and household chores that women had before colonialism. Most women had to assume leadership roles within their homesteads, as men migrated in search of opportunities to meet the demands of capitalism, such as taxation, excessive agricultural production to meet the demand for grain, such as wheat, in the region and new necessities and luxuries commodities that were introduced to them following their interaction with the Europeans first with missionaries, traders, travelers and colonial government. Excessive land-use patterns degraded the environment at an accelerated rate, unlike before. Traditional land tenure systems were altered to provide land for most of the people in the area, in line with the colonial authorities' interests in capitalizing on African labour and agricultural produce. I emphasise that these transformations significantly contributed to the decline in soil exhaustion, erosion, and landscape degradation over time, even as Africans in the Leribe district negotiated, resisted, adapted, adopted, and adjusted to the new opportunities and constraints colonialism brought to their environment.

²⁸ C. Bundy, 'The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry', *African Affairs*, 71(1972), 369–88; C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London, Heinemann, 1979).

My third argument is that state approaches to environmental governance were complex and fluid in the Leribe district. The policies set to address ecological crises and improve agriculture were less shaped by the immediate environmental needs of the local community, but by broader economic and political considerations operating at both regional and global levels. The state responded to dynamics and patterns of African agricultural production, labour availability, and shifting global political and economic pressures. In the main, the state interventions were framed to secure state authority, stabilize labour supply, and serve metropolitan or regional economic interests, rather than to directly mitigate the ecological crises experienced by Basotho in the Leribe district. This is evidenced by the colonial authorities' reactionary responses to the soil conservation discourse that emerged in the 1930s. The soil conservation policies followed the 1929 economic slump, which affected global market prices. The 1940s were followed by the betterment schemes and the modernised, mechanized development programmes launched after the Second World War, ostensibly designed to improve the lives of people in colonial territories and to develop their environments.²⁹ All these programmes were imposed on Africans and their environments, even though they had also raised their ecological concerns with the government, such as a decline in soil fertility, a shortage of pastures and arable lands, unprecedented weather conditions that damaged crops or led to crop failure, and, in the end, caused famine. Still, the colonial state continued to prioritize soil conservation practices as desired by the imperial country. This, in turn, taught Africans to adopt, adapt, resist, and sometimes negotiate state-led environmental and agricultural initiatives to sustain their livelihoods.

²⁹ Although these events occurred at different times, they provide a systematic pattern of the operations of the Imperial State over time. The details of the events will be thoroughly discussed in the substantive chapters of this dissertation.

Using the case of Leribe, my fourth argument is that gendered livelihoods under colonial rule were structured by unequal access to political and economic opportunities, and that women's agency must be understood through the stratified landscapes of possibilities and constraints that characterized the era. Women's experiences of colonial transformation in Lesotho were neither uniform nor incidental but were fundamentally shaped by differentiated political, economic, and social factors in livelihoods. The political ascent of Mantšebo marked the emergence of other female regents, demonstrating that women stepped up, using new openings in the colonial and chiefly structures to claim authority and influence local governance. Likewise, women with access to land, labour, and cooperative networks were able to exploit emerging agricultural and commercial opportunities and positioned themselves at the center of rural livelihood transformations. However, these gains were uneven. Some women continued hanging in to the shifting land relations, conservation pressures, and patriarchal patterns that left them with little or no room for advancement.

Lastly, I argue that unless the state implements rural community-based policies that are inclusive and ecologically and topographically sensitive, its efforts to address land degradation in naturally contested landscapes could be futile, as this research demonstrates. The long historical study reveals how exclusive environmental governance and ecological crisis management unfolded in the Leribe district during colonial times. This study resonates with current dynamics where state policies remain disconnected from community realities and are embedded in colonial legacies. Although community members have experience with their landscapes and know how to navigate and negotiate survival measures to mitigate ecological challenges in rural communities, they still face significant challenges of exclusion and marginalization in policy making. Perhaps an inclusive approach to agro-ecological problems could make the countryside a better place by addressing the long, historically inherited colonial

legacies, as sustainably revealed in this study, benefiting the world's environmentalists, policymakers, geographers, scientists, and communities. Overall, this study contributes to the literature that argues that colonial agricultural and soil conservation policies were shaped within the framework of colonial authority and power relations.

Historical overview of Lesotho and Leribe's environmental landscape

Lesotho is well known for massive land degradation and soil erosion, leading to the development of gullies that have become a standard feature of its landscape.³⁰ It is a landlocked country encircled by South Africa. During the colonial period, the term Basotho referred to Sesotho-speaking Africans who identified with the Sotho polity rather than to all residents of Lesotho. The white settlers and missionaries who lived in the territory were not included in this designation. The Basotho people relied on crop production, pastoralism, gathering edible wild plants, and hunting for their subsistence.³¹ Within this Sesotho-speaking society, there was a distinction between chiefs, landholders, and landless Basotho; some were prosperous cultivators, others were struggling subsistence farmers, and others were households that increasingly relied on migrant labour from the late nineteenth century onward to the Witwatersrand mines.³² However, those in the Leribe district are the primary focus of this dissertation: their daily agrarian practices, their environmental impacts, and their interactions with the state, regardless of gender or age. Based on this background, I use the term 'peasant' to refer to the people of Leribe, who are central to my study despite their varied ways of earning a living in the rural communities of Leribe during the colonial period. I acknowledge the

³⁰ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 45.

³¹ For a more detailed history of pre-colonial Basotho communities, see Pule and Thabane (eds.), *Essays on Aspects of the Political Economy of Lesotho*, 12.

³² Pule, and Thabane, 'Lesotho's Land Tenure Regimes: Experiences of Rural Communities and the Calls for Land Reform', 283-303.

multiple debates surrounding the term ‘peasants’.³³ However, I do not aim to define or describe all the politics surrounding this term in this study, nor to describe the Basotho as such in the Leribe district or the entire territory, as this would restrict my analysis to a particular group of people and outweigh the others.

In this context, I refer to the people in the Leribe district as Basotho, Africans, producers, farmers, men, and women to integrate the various social groups in the district. This allows this study to analyse changes over time in the agricultural and non-agricultural opportunities and constraints experienced by Africans as they faced different internal socio-political, economic, and ecological challenges. The people of Leribe depended on agriculture and pastoral systems, but these systems were not static; they adapted and diversified as the pressures and opportunities of emerging capitalist relations shaped local livelihoods. To appreciate the various ways the Basotho adapted and diversified their agrarian livelihoods, I employ variations of the concept ‘stepping up, hanging in, and stepping out,’ borrowed from Andrew Dorward’s work.³⁴ Some ‘stepped up’ by adopting new methods to secure land productivity; some ‘hung in’ as they complied minimally with conservation work to protect access to land, labour, and chief’s support, while others ‘stepped out’ through labour migration and other alternative income sources to sustain their rural livelihoods. Using this approach moves the analysis beyond simple binaries of resistance and compliance, illustrating how livelihood pressures, ecological constraints, and the political dynamics of rural governance shaped African choices in the Leribe district.

³³ See I. Scoones, ‘Pastoralists and Peasants: Perspectives on Agrarian Change’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48, 1 (2021), 1-47; M. Edelman, ‘What is a Peasant? What are Peasantries? A Briefing Paper on Issues of Definition.’ First Session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on a United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, *Geneva* (2013), 15-19; D. Barkin, ‘Who are the Peasants?’, *Latin American Research Review*, 39, 3 (2004), 270-281.

³⁴ For a detailed understanding of the concept, see A. Dorward, ‘Integrated Contested Aspirations, Processes and Policy: Development as Hang In, Stepping Up and Stepping Out’, *Development Policy Review*, 27, 2 (2009), 131-146.

During the pre-colonial era, people known today as Basotho engaged in trade with more distant communities in the region, such as the Nguni in modern-day KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape of South Africa.³⁵ Trade gave indigenous people access to copper, iron hoes, ploughs, animal skins, beads, cattle, tobacco, and grain.³⁶ Beyond the subsistence activities, nineteenth-century missionaries encouraged market-oriented agriculture among the Basotho communities. Thus, agricultural production increased, and the market also grew; by 1884, Leribe had 12 trading stations exporting grain.³⁷ This highlights the efficiency of Basotho agricultural systems before the advent of colonial agrarian and conservation policies.

Historically, indigenous communities across Lesotho used local agricultural and soil conservation systems to govern their environments. Among the Basotho, these systems included *Matsema*, which refers to the cooperative labour organized by ordinary people to cultivate the chief's field; *Bohali*, which is the transfer of cattle as bridal wealth to reinforce social and economic relations; and *Maboella*, which is, the customary principles through which chiefs allocated land for settlement, cultivation, and grazing.³⁸ Chiefs played a central role in determining how land was used and ensuring that access aligned with broader communal needs. Equally important was the institution of *Morui*, a system through which wealthier livestock owners lent cattle to poor households, enabling them to plough and to benefit from milk in return.³⁹ *Morui* not only supported poor families but also helped stabilise herd distribution and prevent problems of overstocking and overgrazing. Together, these systems illustrate how

³⁵ S. Maliehe, 'An Obscured Narrative in the Political Economy of Colonial Commerce in Lesotho, 1870–1966', *Historia*, 59, 2 (2014), 28–45.

³⁶ Maliehe, 'An Obscured Narrative', 30.

³⁷ Maliehe, 'An Obscured Narrative', 31.

³⁸ Sheddick, *Ethnographic Survey*, 26.

³⁹ Sheddick, *Ethnographic Survey*, 27.

precolonial Basotho governance intertwined social obligations, resource use, and environmental stewardship.

The systems managed their environment before colonial rule.⁴⁰ These methods had, for a long time, supported sustainable agricultural production. However, due to colonialism, they faced land scarcity and increased demand for more agriculturally productive land. In fact, during the colonial period, Leribe district was the first to establish a mass agricultural training school, the Machobane Mass Agricultural College, in 1957 to address hunger, poverty, starvation, unprecedented weather conditions, and shortages of arable land in the district and throughout the territory. This initiative was launched by James Machobane, an elite Mosotho man who used his personal funds to train others to spread his combined indigenous agricultural and scientific knowledge through intensive extension work.⁴¹ Thus, Leribe, the case study, became both a significant site of colonial soil conservation initiatives, such as Machobane's "*Mantsa Tlala*" discussed by Robertson and Konz in their individual works.⁴² These works demonstrate that African farmers developed their own responses to ecological pressures, making Leribe a valuable lens for exploring the intersection of African soil conservation and agrarian systems within broader political and socio-economic contexts, and offering a historical perspective.

It is crucial to note that although the Basotho had previously been defeated by various groups before 1868, the year marked the establishment of imperial borders. The former territories

⁴⁰ Colonial intervention in Basotho agricultural and conservation practices began in the late 1930s; before then, indigenous agricultural and soil conservation systems sustained the Basotho landscape.

⁴¹ See A. F. Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane and "Mantsa Tlala"', *African Affairs*, 93, 370 (1994), 99-121; C. R. Konz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House: Compiling Environmental Knowledge in Lesotho, Southern Africa, 1880-1965' (PhD thesis, Boston University, 2017), 35-42.

⁴² Konz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 43.

extended as far as the area between the Caledon and Orange Rivers, from present-day Wepener to Zastron, and to the area north of the Caledon River, which includes present-day Harrismith and other regions of the Free State.⁴³ During this period, the Basotho lost land to the Afrikaners, including the most fertile and agriculturally productive areas historically used by Basotho communities. These lowlands and foothill zones had ‘deeper, richer soils and more reliable’ rainfall, making them central to precolonial crop cultivation and settlement.⁴⁴ By contrast, the areas that remained under Basotho jurisdiction were increasingly concentrated in the highlands, where topographical and ecological conditions were far less favourable for arable farming.

The highlands were characterized by thin, stony soils, steep slopes, shorter growing seasons, and harsh climatic conditions, all of which limited agricultural productivity and increased vulnerability to erosion.⁴⁵ Hereafter, much of the remaining lowlands and foothills land consisted of duplex soils, which Leribe is part of. Duplex soils have a coarse, sandy top layer and a dense clayey subsoil.⁴⁶ Such characteristics make the soil highly prone to runoff, sheet erosion, and gullyng, particularly under conditions of demographic pressure, reduced land availability, and restrictive colonial land-use regulations.⁴⁷ This combination of geopolitical dispossession and ecological constraints fundamentally shaped how Basotho households in the districts such as Leribe practiced agriculture, organized labour, and responded to later colonial soil conservation policies.

⁴³ For a more detailed history of the wars, see <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/basotho-wars-1858-1868> accessed 26 July 2023.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 32.

⁴⁵ G. Schmitz and F. Rooyani, *Lesotho: Geology, Geomorphology, Soils* (National University of Lesotho: Roma, 1987), 20.

⁴⁶ Schmitz and F. Rooyani, *Lesotho: Geology, Geomorphology, Soils*, 21.

⁴⁷ K.B. Showers, ‘Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho: Origins and Colonial Response, 1830s-1950’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15,15 (1989), 263.

As a result, the Basotho had to live under new political and environmental circumstances and continue their agricultural practices in the Leribe district, where 50% of the land was duplex soil. In contrast, others moved to the highlands due to land scarcity and at the direction of the colonial administration.⁴⁸ However, those who moved to the mountains did not do so without resistance. Terrence Ranger and Amanda Cooper have critiqued earlier narratives that cast Africans as passive in the face of imperial authority.⁴⁹ Individually, they have revealed how Africans in their households have actively negotiated, adapted to, and reshaped the pressures they faced. This was also evident in Lesotho, where Basotho communities in the Leribe district developed diverse livelihood strategies in response to the agroecological constraints posed by shallow, erosion-prone soils and declining arable land, as noted by Collin Murray and Kate Showers.⁵⁰ However, these factors constrained the Africans in the Leribe district, maximizing household resilience through collective cultivation of crops, livestock keeping, and migrant labour. My analysis builds on this literature by demonstrating how such adaptive strategies shaped and complicated the implementation of colonial agricultural and soil conservation policies in Leribe district. Thus, this dissertation explores how Africans used their indigenous knowledge and practices in the Leribe district.

Although soil erosion was widespread throughout the Kingdom of Lesotho, its impact has been more pronounced in the lowlands and foothills, where the topography and soils are more

⁴⁸ M. Thabane, Towards an identification of Historical Roots of Lesotho's Political Instability in M. Thabane (eds.), *Toward an Anatomy of Persistent Political Instability in Lesotho, 1966-2016* (National University of Lesotho: Roma, 2017), 25.

⁴⁹ T. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study*, (University of California Press, 1985); T. Ranger, 'The People in African Resistance: A Review', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4, 1 (1977), 125-146; A. Cooper, 'Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa 1910 -1992: The Human Dimension' (PhD thesis, University of Natal Durban, 1996).

⁵⁰ C. Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*, Vol. 29 (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

conducive to intensive agriculture.⁵¹ This dissertation focuses on Leribe, which borders the Free State Province of South Africa. It examines agriculture and soil erosion across all ecological zones of Leribe, a district whose lowlands constitute the largest and most densely cultivated area. The Leribe highlands and foothills border the Thaba Tseka and Mokhotlong districts, which have distinct ecological conditions, with the lowlands enabling these ecological zones to respond differently to agricultural and environmental pressures.⁵² Therefore, with the lowlands forming the most significant and most intensively used part of the district, they became both the most vulnerable to erosion and the principal target of conservation initiatives, considering the district as a whole while paying careful attention to the distinct pressures faced in the lowland areas of Leribe. The district is still regarded as the most fertile land for crops such as maize, sorghum, beans, and wheat, and is also suited to animal husbandry.⁵³ Leribe district has been one of the most populous lowland districts in the country since the colonial era. Like other districts in Lesotho, Leribe faced environmental challenges of soil erosion due to duplex soils, which are prone to erosion even without human intervention. Gerard Schmitz and Firouz Rooyani note that the landscape's prehistoric evolution indicates that magnetic and tectonic changes over time sculpted Lesotho's landscape.⁵⁴ They argue that climatic, soil, and terrain factors also played a significant role in erosional processes, apart from human activities.⁵⁵ Thus, Leribe offers an entry point into examining African agricultural and soil conservation initiatives made by Basotho as they interacted with their environment.

⁵¹ Q. K. Chakela (eds.), *State of the Environment in Lesotho* (National Environment Secretariat of the Government of Lesotho: Maseru, 1999), 4.

⁵² The district of Leribe lies on the Hlotse River, in the northwest of Lesotho, and borders the Free State Province of South Africa. It also borders four of Lesotho's districts: Butha-Buthe District, Mokhotlong District, Thaba-Tseka District, and Berea District. In addition to the district's capital, Hlotse, the town of Maputsoe lies within the Leribe district. The town of Hlotse was founded in 1876 and has always been an important market town for Lesotho and Leribe's capital. It marked the genesis of modern business, where people traded grain for ploughs, harrows, and domestic animals. This helped the district become agriculturally productive, in addition to its having some of the most fertile land in the country.

⁵³ The Lesotho Review: An overview of the Kingdom of Lesotho's economy – 2000 edition, 2.

⁵⁴ G. Schmitz and F. Rooyani, *Lesotho: Geology, Geomorphology, Soils*, 20.

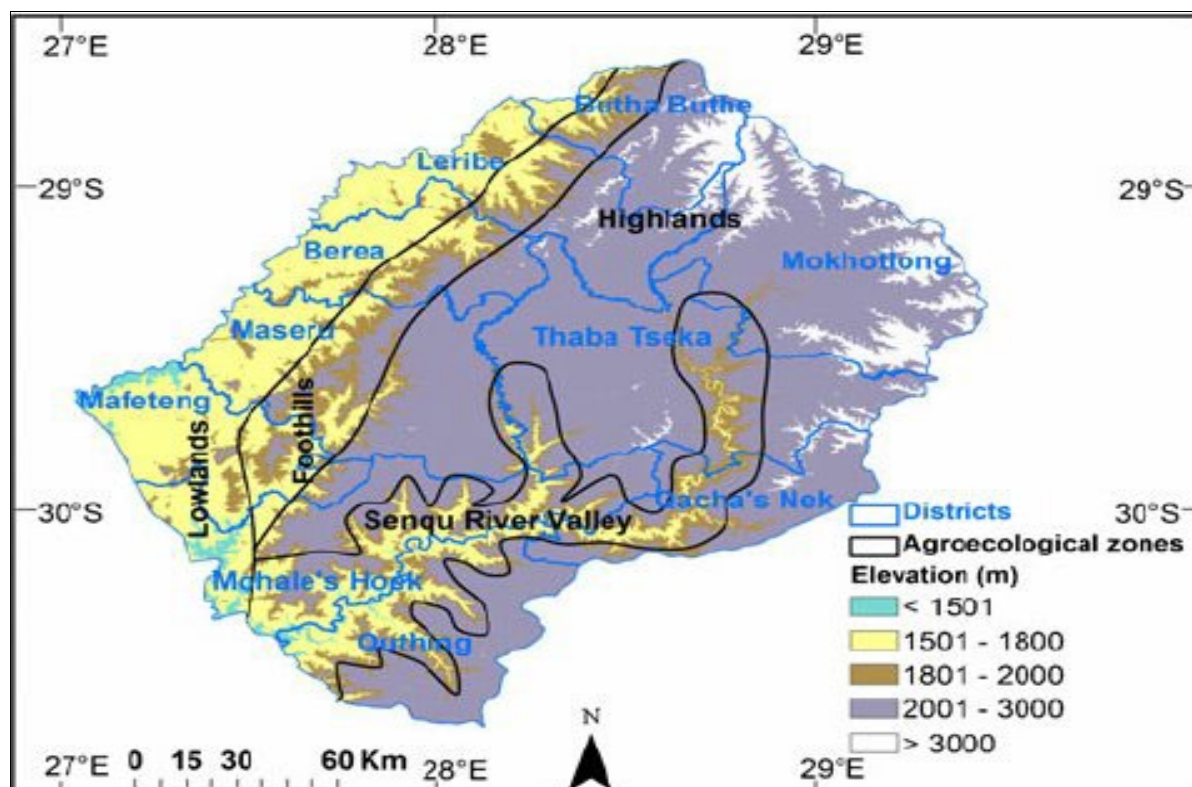
⁵⁵ Schmitz and Rooyani, '*Lesotho: Geology*', 42.

Figure 1: The Map of Lesotho



Source: <https://www.mappr.co/counties/lesotho/>, accessed 22 March 2022.

Figure 2: The Agro-ecological Map of Lesotho



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257449112_Moeletsi_ME_Walker_S_Agro_climatological_suitability_mapping_for_dryland_maize_production_in_Lesotho_Theoretical_and_Applied_Climatology_1141-2/figures?lo=1, accessed 23 March 2025.

Despite having duplex soils, agrarian systems in the Leribe district have survived ecological challenges, and the region has maintained the title of ‘the most agriculturally productive district of Lesotho’ from the colonial period to the present. Leribe covers both the lowlands and foothills, which are composed of duplex soils considered unsuitable for agricultural practices.⁵⁶ In other parts of the world where duplex soils are found, such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Australia, these environments are used for cattle rearing, and in some parts of Australia, for

⁵⁶ Schmitz and Rooyani, ‘Lesotho: Geology’, 43.

winter cropping.⁵⁷ In Lesotho, these soils are considered the best for agricultural practices, given the harsh topography elsewhere.

Rationale of the study

Lesotho is considered one of the countries worldwide experiencing severe erosion.⁵⁸ Moreover, the country is highly mountainous, earning it the moniker the ‘Mountain Kingdom’. With an estimated 80% of the Basotho living in rural areas where crop cultivation and animal husbandry have historically underpinned their livelihoods, the relationship between agricultural regimes and land degradation has been critical in shaping the country’s environmental and socio-economic landscapes.⁵⁹ However, there is a paucity of historical studies that examine the intersection of soil conservation and African agriculture within the context of the country’s socio-political and ecological realities during the colonial period. In many ways, this knowledge of soil erosion clarifies that the changes occurring during this period were linked to historical tensions and developments not only in other colonial territories in Africa but also in rural areas more broadly. This research demonstrates how older beliefs about soil erosion and conservation practice overlapped and sometimes collided with newer ones. It provides an analytical understanding of how local and non-local political leaders and experts exert their influence over soil erosion and encourages them to adopt specific approaches. Not least, it helps scholars and policymakers understand that people’s expectations from their governments, perhaps as much as from their environment, have shifted over time. This information is fragile considering the available literature, and this study addresses this gap.

⁵⁷ Schmitz and Rooyani, ‘Lesotho: Geology’, 44.

⁵⁸ Showers, ‘Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho’, 265.

⁵⁹ <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/lesotho>, accessed 03 April 2023.

This dearth in the literature is evident in the fact that soil scientist Kate Showers has dominated the historiography of soil erosion and conservation in Lesotho. In different works, she delineates colonial conservation policies, arguing that state interventions, including the widespread use of technology, worsened the problem because they failed to account for soil and topography.⁶⁰ She presents the Basotho and their landscape primarily as victims of colonial interventions.⁶¹ Her technical and scientific analyses largely overlook the local socio-political and economic context and fail to consider African agency adequately. This study draws on and builds on existing work on soil erosion and conservation, but extends the frontiers of enquiry into African agency in agriculture and conservation, and its interaction with power. It extends its focus to the relationship between agricultural regimes and soil conservation, exploring the communal initiatives versus state conservation policies and programmes. Thus, by examining the web of interactions among the indigenous Basotho agrarian systems, their environment, and the state, and the socio-economic, political, and environmental factors that shaped soil erosion and conservation over time, this historiographical gap is addressed.

Literature Review

Scholars such as Nancy Jacob, Admire Mseba, Christopher Konz, and Kate Showers have shifted from viewing the environment as a static backdrop awaiting human action to considering the extensive global efforts to promote sustainable rural development.⁶² The state or international agencies do this through soil and water conservation projects, land tenure reforms, and social and equity-oriented programmes. It should be noted that most of these

⁶⁰ See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 102; Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 286; K. B. Showers, 'From Forestry to Soil Conservation: British Tree Management in Lesotho's Grassland Ecosystem', *Conservation and Society*, 4, 1 (2006), 1-35.

⁶¹ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 212.

⁶² Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*; Mseba, 'Environmental Phenomena, Colonial Injustice'; C. R. Konz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

measures are driven by a scholarly perspective. In this context, I mean research conducted across multiple disciplines to inform policy and practice with specific attention to rural agriculture and conservation. I acknowledge the scholars who have engaged with conservation narratives, including Beinart, Phimister, Khan, Cooper, Swai, and Showers.⁶³ Some scholars stress that indigenous practices affected the environment, and others emphasize that colonial state interventions caused or accelerated environmental degradation. This study focuses on the roles of both indigenous people and later-arriving Europeans in the development and degradation of the environment.

For instance, the historiography of colonial conservation in Africa reveals a persistent tension between scholars' interpretations of environmental change. Early scholarship, such as that by Showers and Anderson, drew mainly on colonial agronomic reports and development literature, depicting conservation as a rational, scientifically grounded response to what officials characterised as African mismanagement of land.⁶⁴ Such accounts portrayed indigenous agricultural systems as environmentally 'destructive, primitive or static' while casting colonial experts as the 'only experts' capable of rehabilitating supposedly degrading landscapes.⁶⁵ Beinart and McCann unsettled such narratives and demonstrated that African societies possessed adaptive and context-specific environmental management practices long before

⁶³ See W. Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, 1 (1984), 52-83; I. Phimister, 'Discourse and Discipline of Historical Context: Conservationism and Ideas about Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1930-1950', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12, 2 (1986), 263-275; F. Khan, 'Soil Wars: The Role of the National Soil Conservation Association in South Africa, 1953-1959', *Environmental History*, 2, 4 (1997), 439-459; Cooper, 'Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa 1910 -1992'; B. Swai, 'Colonial Rural Development Policy and Agrarian Policy and Agrarian Protest in Tanganyika Territory: The Usambara Case 1920-1960', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 12 (1983), 153-174, Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

⁶⁴ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 270; Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography', 321-343.

⁶⁵ R. Grove, Scottish Missionaries, Evangelical Discourses and the Origins of Conservation Thinking in Southern Africa 1820-1900, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 163-187; N.W. Hudson, 'A World View of the Development of Soil Conservation', *Agricultural History*, 59, 2 (1985), 326-339.

colonial rule.⁶⁶ Erosion was frequently overstated as a crisis and strategically constructed to legitimise deeper administrative authority.⁶⁷ This body of work further reveals that colonial conservation was not entirely technical or neutral; instead, it operated as a profoundly political project that reconfigured chieftaincy, intensified labour demands, and entrenched new forms of social and special discipline.⁶⁸ This analysis highlights that African communities did not merely receive conservation policy but also negotiated, reworked, and resisted it, thereby exposing the uneven, contested terrain of colonial environmental governance.⁶⁹ Taken together, this scholarship underscores the inadequacy of such scholarly framing and demonstrates the necessity of approaching colonial conservation as a dynamic field of power, knowledge, and local agency.

This study recognises the environment as a dynamic entity. It resonates with Admire Mseba, who posits that the environment is a ‘biogeophysical entity’.⁷⁰ He argues that acknowledging this trio helps to think about “allocation and exercise of environmental and social agency; the consequences associated with the intersection of power and environment...”⁷¹ His contribution does not ignore the environment’s physical qualities or the science applied to it. Graeme Wynn concurs with Mseba and contends that environments were not blank slates awaiting to be filled or inscribed with ideas and influences; ecologies change, and climate change, rain, wind, and drought work their effects on the landscape without human interaction.⁷² Their works help this

⁶⁶ Beinart, ‘Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 143-162; L. McCann and R. Claassen, ‘Farmer Transaction Costs of Participating in Federal Conservation Programs: Magnitudes and Determinants’, *Land Economics*, 92, 2 (2016), 256-272.

⁶⁷ Beinart, ‘Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 143.

⁶⁸ R. Grove, *Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony, and Popular Resistance: Towards a Global Synthesis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Anderson, ‘Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography’, 321-343.

⁶⁹ S.S. Berry, ‘The Food Crisis and Agrarian Change in Africa: A Review Essay’ *African Studies Review*, 27, 2 (1984), 59-112.

⁷⁰ Mseba, ‘Environmental Phenomena, Colonial Injustice’, 193.

⁷¹ Wynn, *et al*, *Environment, Power, and Justice*, 308.

⁷² G. Wynn, *et al* (eds.) *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio University Press, 2022), 308.

work to consider the environment of Leribe as an active historical agent. It allows this research to integrate local Basotho knowledge, ecological processes, and the relations that existed. However, it is essential to understand the scholarship that preceded this trinity approach to environmental governance.

Colonial scholarship has generally described indigenous agrarian and conservation systems as unproductive and unsustainable. Revisionist scholars, such as Bryson Nkhoma, have demonstrated how colonial agrarian policy typically used racial perspectives to observe African initiatives, often blatantly disregarding them.⁷³ Historians such as Nkhoma and others before him represent a growing segment of the academy that has begun to challenge this standpoint and advance a counter thesis that focuses on African agrarian consciousness. Within the same agency of agrarian consciousness, historians such as Ian Phimister, William Beinart, and Pius Nyambara, among many, attempted to establish the link between peasant agricultural development and soil conservation.⁷⁴ Their work shows that interventions in soil management were closely tied to changing patterns of land use, the expansion of smallholder production, demographic pressures, and shifts in labour and market relations. In this literature, conservation schemes are both technical responses to environmental degradation and political and economic strategies designed to reshape peasant production, discipline rural labour, and stabilise the agrarian order under colonial authority. By linking the evolution of peasant agriculture to the rise of conservation ideology, these scholars argue that soil conservation functioned as a

⁷³ B. Nkhoma, 'The 'Malnutrition Syndrome': African Diets, Nutrition Science, and Colonial Research in Southern Africa', *African Historical Review*, 10 (2022), 1-13.

⁷⁴ See Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960', 52-83; Phimister, 'Discourse and Discipline of Historical Context: Conservationism and Ideas about Development in Southern Rhodesia', 263-275; Khan, 'Soil Wars: The Role of the National Soil Conservation Association in South Africa, 1953-1959', *Environmental History*, 2, 4 (1997), 439-459; Cooper, 'Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa 1910-1992'; Swai, 'Colonial Rural Development Policy and Agrarian Policy and Agrarian Protest in Tanganyika', 153-174.

mechanism through which the colonial state sought to regulate access to land, restructure agrarian livelihoods, and secure a more compliant and productive rural population

However, Terrence Ranger wrote about peasant consciousness and guerrilla war in Zimbabwe. This literature focuses on developments in the rise of peasant consciousness and nationalist movements, which were a response to the realisation of the exploitative nature of the white state's agrarian systems.⁷⁵ The major themes that have emerged in this context include rural resistance and reveal complex dynamics in rural communities' responses to colonial development.⁷⁶ There is also literature on soil erosion and conservation from which this study draws, and to which it makes a modest contribution.⁷⁷ However, the majority of these studies fail to situate peasant agrarian development within the context of how African indigenous knowledge was used as a response to militating socio-political and environmental challenges. Thus, this study advances scholarship on African agriculture by demonstrating how environmental governance, shifting power relations, and socio-cultural practices shaped agrarian change in the Leribe district. By tracing how Basotho farmers negotiated, resisted, and adapted to conservation policies across different ecological zones, the study offers a nuanced account of how colonial interventions reconfigured land use, authority, and rural livelihoods.

Agrarian and Conservation Discourses in Southern Africa

The earliest scholars writing about colonial agrarian systems in the 1970s portrayed indigenous agrarian systems as unproductive. Colin Bundy traces the rise and fall of the African peasantry

⁷⁵ See Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*; Ranger, 'The People in African Resistance', 125-146.

⁷⁶ T. Ranger, 'Growing from the roots: reflections on peasant research in central and southern Africa' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 1 (1978), 99-133.

⁷⁷ See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 263-286.

using the underdevelopment theory in South Africa.⁷⁸ He demonstrates the successes of African peasants from the late nineteenth century and their decline during the first half of the twentieth century, stressing the impact of colonialism and capitalism as the leading causes of African agrarian development and decline. He concedes that African agriculturalists in the nineteenth century responded positively and successfully to the pressures and opportunities of the colonial economy by producing agricultural surpluses for sale on the markets of southern Africa, only to collapse due to colonial inducements to join the labour market. Bundy's work is limited in that it defines peasant success within a narrow capitalist context. He suggests that capitalism spurred African agriculture, ignoring that it was already flourishing. This approach to studying peasant agrarian development is limited. This shortcoming has been demonstrated by scholars such as Beinart and Cloete.⁷⁹ Much criticism has been directed at the earlier perspectives that placed disproportionate emphasis on colonialism and overstated the role in shaping African development.

Among many of Bundy's critiques, Helen Bradford and Pius Nyambara join historians such as Eira Punt in challenging Bundy's rise-and-fall thesis by demonstrating African agrarian consciousness and resilient agricultural methods throughout various stages of the colonial epoch.⁸⁰ Bradford's critique of Bundy provides an essential corrective to the dominant

⁷⁸ See Bundy 'The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry', 369-388; Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, 56.

⁷⁹ See Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development: A Southern African Exploration, 1900-1960', 52-83; E. L. Cloete, 'Going to the Bush: Language, Power and the Conserved Environment in Southern Africa', *Environmental Education Research*, 17, 1 (2011), 35-51; Phimister, 'Discourse and Discipline of Historical Context: Conservationism and Ideas about Development in Southern Rhodesia', 263-275; Khan, 'Soil Wars: The Role of the National Soil Conservation Association in South Africa', 439-459; Cooper, 'Soil Conservation Policy in South Africa 1910 -1992'.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, H. Bradford, 'Peasants, Historians, and Gender: A South African Case Study Revisited, 1850-1886', *History and Theory*, 39, 4 (2000), 86-110; P. S. Nyambara, 'That Place Was Wonderful!' African Tenants on Rhodesdale Estate, Colonial Zimbabwe, c. 1900-1952', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 38, 2 (2005), 267-99; P. S. Nyambara, 'Colonial Policy and Peasant Cotton Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia, 1904-1953', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33, 1 (2000), 81-111; E. Punt, 'The Development of African Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Inter-war Years' (M. A. thesis, University of Natal, 1979), 153-55.

narrative of widespread peasant prosperity in the late nineteenth century. She argues that Bundy's account overstates the scale and significance of peasant accumulation by selectively drawing on cases that reflect exceptional rather than typical experiences.⁸¹ Using evidence from Herschel, Bradford contends that the period was characterized less by broad-based African agrarian advancement and more by deepening and distinctly gendered impoverishment, particularly among women whose access to land and livestock was increasingly constrained.⁸² Her work, therefore, challenges celebratory readings of the 'peasant mode of production' and calls for greater attention to the uneven, gendered, and often precarious realities of rural livelihoods.

Additionally, the scholars mentioned above also contribute to the growing post-colonial historiography that demonstrates African agrarian resilience and shows that Africans were not passive victims of colonial agricultural and conservation policies. This study joins this latter scholarship and argues that colonialism was not the single force that either promoted or drove African agriculture to the fringes of colonial development. Within the context of Lesotho's political economy, the study provides a nuanced discussion that departs from the linear argument advanced by many European scholars that agrarian systems were unproductive, leading to the development of Lesotho as a labour reservoir. Thus, this study explores the agency of African agricultural systems in the Leribe district, which has historically experienced mixed fortunes in peasant agriculture.

Drawing on case studies from colonial Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, many historians have demonstrated the resilience of African agriculture within the context of rural agrarian

⁸¹ H. Bradford, 'Peasants, Historians, and Gender: A South African Case Study Revisited, 1850–1886', *History and Theory*, 39, 4 (2000), 86–110.

⁸² Bradford, 'Peasants, Historians, and Gender', 100.

development. Prominent historians such as Jotham Momba, Ian Phimister, and Freida Khan indeed laid the groundwork for later scholars such as Godfrey Hove and, more recently, Bryson Nkhoma to lay bare the resilience of African agriculture even in the wake of restrictive colonial conditions.⁸³ These works still build on African agrarian agency by demonstrating how Africans tamed and adapted to the colonial environment through their own thrift. My study draws on an environmentally challenged landscape in Leribe, Lesotho, and joins these present works in a conversation, adding to the usefulness of inclusive engagement of African initiatives for the development of rural agrarian systems.

On the other hand, studies on soil conservation drew heavily on Western scholarship to articulate the origins of the conservation discourses. The case of the United States of America was drawn upon by the works of scholars Hugh Bennett, who recognized ‘the significance of sheet erosion – less visible than gully erosion, (but) just as damaging in terms of soil ‘loss’ and began writing extensively on soil erosion in America.⁸⁴ This discourse gained momentum during the 1930s, with the Great Dust Bowl Disaster, which brought to the fore the intricate connection between agricultural methods and environmental consciousness. David Anderson demonstrated the implications of the Great Dust Bowl in East Africa and how it influenced colonial state and soil conservation policies during this period.⁸⁵ With reference to southern Africa, Richard Groves has examined the relationship between conservation ideas from the British metropole and the formulation and implementation of policy over time. ⁸⁶ This was followed by scholars who made a salient point about the outcome of state-led conservation initiatives in the colonial period, discussing the motives behind these policies. This literature

⁸³ G. Hove, ‘The State, Farmers and Dairy Farming in Colonial Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) 1890-1951’, (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2015); B. Nkhoma, ‘Peasant, Ecology and the State: Food Security in the Lake Chilwa Basin of Southern Malawi, 1891-1994’ (PhD thesis, University of the Free State, 2018).

⁸⁴ Grove, *Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony, and Popular Resistance*, 132.

⁸⁵ Anderson, ‘Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography’, 321-343.

⁸⁶ Grove, ‘Scottish Missionaries, Evangelical Discourses and the Origins of Conservation, 163-187.

provided the earliest European conversations on agricultural and conservation discourse, which were used to formulate colonial policies that were not aligned with African environments. These conversations contributed to the colonial historiography that presents African agricultural and conservation methods in a limited and prejudiced way, which saw African landscapes as environmentally unstable and unsustainable.

In the southern African context, William Beinart is one of the first environmental historians to discuss conservation policy in light of land degradation during the early years of colonial rule, specifically examining the environmental, ecological, and agrarian contexts in which conservation policies were conceived and implemented.⁸⁷ He argues that ‘ideas and prescriptions associated with conservationists were evoked, elaborated and applied in a specific context, first in relation to the settler and then in peasant agriculture.’⁸⁸ Jane Carruthers and Frieda Khan concur with Beinart’s ideas.⁸⁹ Carruthers examined colonial wildlife management and the creation of national parks in South Africa.⁹⁰ Khan scrutinised African perceptions and interests regarding the soil conservation ideology and discussed the influence of politics on conservation policies and practices. Khan demonstrates that conservation and politics in South Africa cannot be separated, arguing that conservation has been and remains a politicised issue among politicians inside and outside government, often manipulated and exploited to suit their demands. Most of the existing literature conflates conservation issues with politics and presents Africans as victims of political systems during the colonial period.

⁸⁷ Beinart, ‘Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development’, 55.

⁸⁸ Beinart, ‘Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development’, 56.

⁸⁹ J. Carruthers, ‘Conservation and Wildlife Management in South African National Parks 1930s-1960s’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 41, 2 (2008), 203-236; Khan, ‘Soil Wars: The Role of the National Soil Conservation Association in South Africa’, 439-459; J. Carruthers, ‘Creating a National Park, 1910 to 1926’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15 (1989), 188-218.

⁹⁰ J. Carruthers, ‘Creating a National Park, 1910 to 1926’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15 (1989), 188-218.

However, postcolonial scholarship elevates African agency and shows how indigenous knowledge systems continued to serve as the bedrock of African agriculture and conservation systems despite the political challenges they faced. Within the Southern Rhodesian context, revisionist scholarship by scholars such as Ian Phimister and Eira Kramer sought to decompartmentalise the political dimensions of agrarian development in colonial society.⁹¹ In the Southern Rhodesian case, the two historians have shown that conservation policy was not only conceived and implemented within a narrow environmental framework but also had broader socio-economic and political aims.⁹² Works by JoAnn McGregor and Eira Punt, focusing on colonial conservation policies, discuss African resistance to the use of top-down coercive methods in their implementation.⁹³ In this case, they offered a broader, more nuanced perspective on the evolution of conservation policy, taking into account ongoing developments within colonial society. Thus, they revealed that colonial society was not static; hence, the evolution of colonial policy in agriculture encompassed many aspects of colonial society beyond the political dimensions. My study of colonial Lesotho, specifically the Leribe district, draws on these debates by examining the link between colonial aims and objectives and the conservation programmes implemented during the colonial period.

Simeon Maravanyika also examines soil conservation and the white agrarian environment in colonial Zimbabwe. Maravanyika evaluated the roles of the government and the agricultural sector to reveal their interest in soil conservation and preservation.⁹⁴ He used political ecology,

⁹¹ Phimister, 'Discourse and Discipline of Historical Context in Southern Rhodesia', 263-275; E. Kramer, 'A Clash of Economies: Early Centralisation Efforts in Central Zimbabwe, 1929-1935', *Zambezia*, XV, 1 (1998), 83-98.

⁹² E. Kramer, 'A Clash of Economies: early Centralisation efforts in Central Zimbabwe, 1929-1935', *Zambezia*, XV, 1 (1998), 83-98.

⁹³ J. McGregor, 'Conservation, Control and Ecological Change: The Politics and Ecology of Colonial Conservation in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe', *Environmental History*, 1, 3 (1995), 257-279; E. Punt, 'The Development of African Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Inter-war Years' (MA. thesis, University of Natal, 1979).

⁹⁴ Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe', 58.

community conservation, and settler culture approaches to understand the dynamics of soil conservation.⁹⁵ He demonstrated the link between political-economic realities and the environmental policies introduced, showing that the political and socio-economic factors drove the conservation methods. Like many others, Maravanyika seems to overemphasise the state's power in determining colonial agrarian policy, a point Nancy Jacobs fully illustrates.⁹⁶ Unlike Maravanyika, Jacobs argues that the power dynamics that shaped conservation policy pre-dated colonialism and transcended time. For her, even during the colonial period, indigenous people contributed to the trajectory of environmental policy. This research extends the bounds of enquiry to explore the role of indigenous people in shaping conservation. Africans were not objects of history, but they played an important role in adopting and modifying state-led conservation policies. It acknowledges political ecology as an approach but also highlights its limitations in naturally topographically and ecologically challenging landscapes such as Leribe in Lesotho, where most people, despite the environmental conditions, largely depend on agriculture for sustenance.

My study builds on political ecology underpinnings as discussed by Maravanyika but extends to political economy, sustainable livelihoods, and social-environmental history approaches.⁹⁷ I integrate these approaches to reveal how resilience, local knowledge, and strategies shaped human-environmental interactions from as early as the 1800s to 1966. Indeed, the approaches are many, but for this study, integrating and intersecting them helps in the long-term historical analysis of Lesotho's socio-environmental history, using the Leribe district as the case study and bearing in mind that these approaches or theories are experience-centered. Theorists, or their critics, are influenced by the contemporary struggles they faced and by those who came

⁹⁵ Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe', 363.

⁹⁶ Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice*.

⁹⁷ I. Scoones, *Sustainable Livelihood and Rural Development Rugby* (Practical Action Publishing, 2015).

before them. However, their works in this study help frame and conceptualise how Africans acted during the pre-colonial era, why they persisted in maintaining certain beliefs and customs during the colonial era, yet gave in to others. By using these approaches, I intend to highlight the variation and consistency in Africans' relations with nature and power across time, space, and location.

Firstly, the socio-environmental political economy in environmental history allows this study to explore beyond environmental changes and intersect with economic and political layers in the region and in Leribe as a case study. Works by foundational thinkers such as Karl Marx and David Harvey demonstrate that the commodification of land and labour under capitalism produced enduring ecological transformation.⁹⁸ On the other hand, James O' Connor identifies environmental degradation as an internal crisis of accumulation under his concept of 'second contradiction of capitalism.'⁹⁹ In the same manner, Donald Worster and William Cronon have also demonstrated how capitalist and market-driven expansion drove soil erosion and ecological crisis, using the Dust Bowl and its transformation of the United States.¹⁰⁰ Hence, the two frameworks reveal that land degradation and conservation cannot be separated from economic systems but are integral to the reproduction of those systems. Thus, building them helps us understand how and why environmental changes occurred when they did, especially with respect to power, production, gender, and inequality in this case study and beyond. This, in turn, assists in understanding the political and economic systems that shaped resources used

⁹⁸ See, D. Harvey, D, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (Oxford University Press, 2017); N. Castree, 'David Harvey: Marxism, Capitalism and the Geographical Imagination', *New Political Economy*, 12, 1 (2007), 97-115; K. Polanyi, 'The Great Transformation', *Readings in Economic Sociology* (2002), 38-62.

⁹⁹ J. O'Connor, 'Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction', *Nature Socialism*, 1 (1988), 11-38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455758809358356>, Accessed 14 April 2024; J. O'Connor, 'On the Two Contradictions of Capitalism', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 2, 3 (1991), 107-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455759109358463>. Accessed 23 June 2025.)

¹⁰⁰ See D. Worster, 'The Ecology of Order and Chaos', *Environmental History Review*, 14, 1-2 (1990), 1-18; W. Cronon, 'The Uses of Environmental History', *Environmental History Review*, 17, 3 (1993), 1-22.

during the precolonial and colonial eras and anticipates contributing to sustainable resources and environmental governance by the end of this thesis.

I acknowledge that the sustainable livelihood approach has many limitations, beginning with its formulation as a concept and a practice.¹⁰¹ It should be noted that development practitioners mainly use this approach to ensure that their interventions support disadvantaged communities. According to Chambers and Conway “a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets; stores, resources, claims, access and activities required for a means of living; a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels in the short and long term.”¹⁰² I employ it in this study because it is ‘people-centered’ and, in practice, the approach stresses that a livelihood should be understood in its vulnerability and institutional context before interventions are designed and implemented to help the community. The approach resonates with my study and provides a foundation for discussing Africans as key players in their environments, including their everyday agricultural and pastoral practices. It helps to translate the Basotho lived experiences of adaptation and resilience into broader historical transformations Africans experienced in relation to the environment, intruders, and the colonial state over time. However, it also extends to discuss power and cultural dimensions, which this approach seems not to prioritise in its theoretical underpinnings.

¹⁰¹ For the full details on the Sustainable Livelihood Approach, see I. Scoones, *Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development* (Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 2015); I. Scoones, *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis* (United Kingdom: Institute for Development Studies, 1998); F. Amalric, ‘The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: General Report of the Sustainable Livelihoods Project 1995–1997’, *Society for International Development* (Rome, 1998); S. Morse, Having Faith in the Sustainable Livelihood Approach: A Review, *Sustainability*, 17, 2 (2025)539 accessed on <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/2/539>.

¹⁰² R. Chambers and G.R. Conway, ‘Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century’ IDS Discussion Paper No 296 (Brighton: United Kingdom, 1992)

Political ecology helps unpack the politics of environmental governance. It assists in exploring the human and ecological interactions that happened in Leribe during the period under study. It examines the underlying factors in environmental policy, investigating how ideas are framed and the incentives and motives behind state or authority-led ecological crisis management or development. Some scholars have focused on the nexus between African agro-ecological knowledge and colonial rule. For instance, Paul Richard's work on indigenous knowledge and rice production systems in West Africa epitomizes this historiographical strand, which has gained currency in recent years amid climate change and debates over mitigation programmes.¹⁰³ Richard argues that African agroecological knowledge, disrupted by the colonial order, may have contributed to land degradation during the early colonial period. Essentially prescribing the adoption of African knowledge forms, he suggests that had colonial empires focused on building upon African systems, land degradation may not have been as rampant as it became during the colonial period. The limitations of his research are that he did not extensively focus on the development of African agriculture and the extent to which the frontiers of conservation methods. This research draws from this Africanist study and examines the nexus between the colonial system and African agriculture and conservation regimes within their socio-cultural and economic milieu.

Recent scholarship on African rural livelihoods has increasingly emphasised the differentiated strategies households use to navigate agrarian change. Scholars such as Dorward conceptualise the 'stepping up, hanging in, and stepping out' framework to capture the dynamics in which smallholders invest in, sustain, or exit agriculture under shifting political, economic, and

¹⁰³ P. Richard, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution: Ecological Change and the Politics of African Land Use*, *African Studies Review*, 26 (1983), 1-72.

ecological pressures.¹⁰⁴ While this typology emerged from contemporary development economics, it offers a useful heuristic for historical analysis. In the context of Leribe, it helps to explain how different categories of Africans, including livestock owners, crop farmers, landholders, and landless people in the territory, migrant labourers, and the educated, among other social groups, responded to state interventions in agriculture and conservation practices. This helps to show that responses were not homogeneous and were shaped by access to resources, social position, gendered divisions, and ecological constraints. By integrating this framework with political ecology, environmental history, and the sustainable livelihood approach, it becomes possible to explore how power, authority, and social relations intersect with ecological management over time.

Environmental scientist Amanda Cooper examines the influence of topographical and ecological analyses on the formulation of soil conservation policies. The author states that the geological assessment of the area alone, without considering other factors, has led to limited, slow progress in soil conservation in Africa. She focuses on the human factors that shaped the formulation of South Africa's environmental conservation policies from 1910 to 1992.¹⁰⁵ The author investigates inter- and intra-environmental dynamics to account for the efficacy or failure of conservation policies. Cooper contends that the effectiveness of initiatives and policies aimed at controlling soil erosion owes much to the values of individuals active in the areas where the policies were implemented. She argues that soil erosion should be seen as a social, political, and economic issue rather than a predominantly physical one. She joins Punt, Phimister, McGregor, and Kramer, who see the adoption of conservation policies as not only a political issue but as a complex matter that needs to be examined from within the context of

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed understanding of the concept, see A. Dorward, 'Integrated Contested Aspirations, Processes and Policy: Development as Hang In, Stepping Up and Stepping Out', *Development Policy Review*, 27, 2 (2009), 131-146.

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, 'Soil Conservation Policy', 140.

social and economic considerations. This research brings together these socio-economic and cultural perspectives, which helped shape Basotho African agricultural and conservation systems during the colonial period.

The work by historian Wapulumuka Mulwafu also contributed to the scholarship, as mentioned earlier, by arguing that, beyond the political dimensions, other social factors were of immense importance in environmental policy. Mulwafu examines the origins and effects of policies on soil conservation in Malawi, which required an integrated approach to the use and management of natural resources such as land, water, and forestry, and their legacies in the post-colonial era.¹⁰⁶ In his nuanced account, he demonstrates the environmental changes brought by religion and colonisation. He outlines conservation methods introduced by the state and religion to prevent soil erosion in colonial Malawi.¹⁰⁷ His study introduced a new dynamic into the role of religion in conservation policies during the colonial period. This study draws on this thesis to examine the role of religion in shaping agrarian and conservation policies in Lesotho. It uses missionary documents to understand the Basotho's agrarian and conservation methods in Leribe District during the colonial period.

Scholarship on the Agrarian and conservation history of Lesotho

The existing body of literature on Lesotho's agricultural history is dominated by scholarship that centers on colonial perspectives, presenting Basotho agriculture and conservation systems as poor and unproductive, attributing this to ecological and topographical factors. Soil scientist Kate Showers is the scholarly authority on conservation in Lesotho. Showers argues that

¹⁰⁶ M.O. Wapulumuka, *Conservation Song: A History of Peasant-State Relations and the Environment in Malawi, 1860–2000* (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁷ Wapulumuka, *Conservation Song*, 15.

colonial agricultural and conservation systems introduced during the colonial period devastated the landscape and eventually led to the development of gullies through accelerated soil erosion in Lesotho. Her argument, however, has been discredited. For instance, David Ambrose argues that Lesotho was prone to soil erosion long before colonial intervention, due to soil types, even in the absence of agricultural activity.¹⁰⁸ In her 1982 doctoral thesis titled '*Assessment of the land use potential of Ha Makhopo, Lesotho, and Southern Africa: a holistic approach to agricultural evaluation*', Showers examined soil properties and meteorological parameters in relation to crop productivity.¹⁰⁹ Using the Alan Pim Commission of Inquiry Financial Report of Basutoland of 1935 and the Ecological Survey Report of 1938, respectively, she argued that the colonial administration initiatives, particularly contour ridges in the Lowlands and Foothills of Lesotho, promoted rather than arrested gully formation.¹¹⁰

Her thesis was followed up by a 2005 book: *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*, wherein she reinforces the ideas initially developed in her thesis, suggesting that, before state intervention, gullies had only existed along transport routes and not on cultivated lands, which is denied by the scientific and geological works of Schmitz and Rooyani.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Dodson, reviewing Kate Shower's book, argues that Basotho duplex soils, by their nature, promote gully formation, and Dutton's work shows images of pre-colonial gullies.¹¹² Although Dutton's work does not provide a narrative of human interaction with transport routes or cultivation and soil conservation measures, it adds to the scientific and ecological literature that views Lesotho as naturally prone to soil erosion. Hence, this refutes Showers' claims on gully formation as a colonial legacy in Lesotho's environmental history.

¹⁰⁸ E. A.T. Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1923).

¹⁰⁹ K. B. Showers, 'Assessment of the Land Use Potential of Ha Makhopo, Lesotho, Southern Africa: A Holistic Approach to Agricultural Evaluation' (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1982).

¹¹⁰ Showers, 'Assessment of the Land', 30.

¹¹¹ Schmitz and Rooyani, '*Lesotho: Geology*', 60.

¹¹² Dutton, '*The Basuto of Basutoland*', 3.

This study examines the colonial agricultural and conservation methods of the Basotho and how they changed or persisted during the colonial state's intervention in the Leribe district, and the effects on the environment.

Showers' primarily ethnographic approach enabled her to have a personal encounter with the local Basotho land and life.¹¹³ She spent many years living and working in Lesotho, and her account of the physical and human geography of the Tsilo Valley in Chapter 4 is rich and detailed, with personal experience and thorough interviews. However, Dodson argues that Shower's work may be environmentally sound, but her historical analysis is limited, as she oversimplifies the colonial administration's interventions in Lesotho. She presented the colonial official's conservation work as overly interventionist. Building on these ideas, this study examines the nexus between state conservation policies, African agricultural regimes within the evolving local socio-economic and political environment in colonial Lesotho, with a particular focus on the Leribe district. The research, by focusing on a shorter period than Showers and a specific case study, offers a more nuanced examination of the relationship between agricultural systems, state policy, and African agency over time.

Early scholarship on agrarian development in Lesotho presented peasant prosperity as non-existent. The period beginning from the early 1880s was a turning point for Basotho agrarian historiography. Scholars viewed Lesotho as nothing more than just a labour reserve for South Africa with a non-viable agricultural system to support itself. Anthropologists like Colin Murray and Elizabeth Eldredge presented Lesotho as either a labour reserve with a weak, dysfunctional internal economy or a thriving agricultural society shaped by its environmental

¹¹³B. Dodson, Review of *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*, by K. B. Showers, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 39, 3 (2006), 548–550.

challenges during the colonial period. Colin Murray argued that most homesteads during the colonial and post-colonial periods survived on wage labour, earning from South Africa, and that most Basotho men worked.¹¹⁴ He does not focus on internal economic activities, such as agriculture, that sustain local livelihoods. Basotho agrarian prosperity is thus presented as non-existent, yet the country experienced sustained periods of success in peasant agriculture. Early missionary writings from the 1830s portray the Basotho as agriculturists and grain exporters in Southern Africa.¹¹⁵

Elizabeth Eldredge acknowledges that Lesotho was agriculturally productive at one point and later faced food insecurity, and that it came to be viewed as a labour reserve due to historical events during the pre-colonial and colonial periods.¹¹⁶ She indicates that all local economic developments were centered around the pursuit of security and power because their livelihood were continuously threatened.¹¹⁷ Although she admits that agricultural production for export reduced the fertility of their land through over-cultivation on small plots, she falls short of explaining how African indigenous agricultural practices boosted the local economy and how the Basotho agricultural economy survives without the input of colonial initiatives into indigenous farming systems and practices. This research argues that Lesotho's agrarian development was somehow independent from state intervention.

Furthermore, Eldredge generalises about the internal socio-economic processes in Lesotho, especially the indigenous culture and its agriculture, yet these have always been the mainstay of the Basotho economy since the 1750s.¹¹⁸ However, the African agency is not fully

¹¹⁴ Murray, 'Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho', 23.

¹¹⁵ Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, 25.

¹¹⁶ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 48.

¹¹⁷ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 9.

¹¹⁸ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 79.

appreciated in the history of Lesotho, and the existing literature has primarily been written within the context of South African economic relations with Lesotho (as a labour reserve for South Africa). Thus, there is a need to revisit Lesotho's financial history and to uplift African peasants by examining how the Basotho interacted with their land and how their agricultural and conservation activities impacted the landscape over time in the Leribe district.

These historical narratives portrayed Africans during the colonial period as dependent on European intervention in indigenous agrarian and conservation systems, as Bundy noted.¹¹⁹ However, not all male adults from Lesotho worked in South Africa during this period, and agriculture has always been the bedrock of the Basotho economy. Therefore, this warrants an examination of the Basotho's internal indigenous agricultural and conservation systems to understand how they thrived in such a topographically and ecologically challenging environment during the colonial period, thereby filling this historical gap.

As with Showers, historian Christopher Conz writes about state intervention in African agriculture. He demonstrates that agricultural demonstrators were sent to villages to learn how Basotho indigenous agriculture worked, including in animal husbandry and crop production.¹²⁰ Conz critiques Showers's work by showing that Africans were not passive victims of the colonial agriculture and soil conservation policies. In his 2017 doctoral thesis titled "*Wisdom Does Not Live in One House*": *Compiling Environmental Knowledge in Lesotho, Southern Africa, c.1880-1965*, Conz focuses on colonial government interventions into Basotho agriculture and pastoralism using Qacha's Nek, a mountainous district in Lesotho.¹²¹ He argues

¹¹⁹ Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*.

¹²⁰ C. Conz, 'Origins and Pathways of Agricultural Demonstration in Lesotho, Southern Africa, 1924–1960s', *Agricultural History Society*, 93, 2 (2019), 233-263.

¹²¹ Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 15.

that colonial interventions served as sites for examining historical changes in how Basotho people engaged with the environment when they moved to Qacha's Nek.

In another article, Konz argues that in Lesotho, the location of agricultural demonstrations by colonial agrarian extension workers, the identity of the demonstrators, and their changing priorities and approaches to conducting demonstrations in villages were key factors in determining how conservation and farming programs unfolded during the colonial period.¹²² This work promotes African agency and shows that Africans were not passive victims of the colonial state, arguing that the Basotho played a crucial role during the colonial period, specifically through the practical application of agricultural initiatives and soil conservation programs. This study draws from Konz's work and adds to his scholarly perspective on Lesotho.

In a more recent article, Konz examines the African initiatives undertaken by Basotho to address agro-ecological problems in Lesotho during the colonial period, drawing on the work of James Machobane.¹²³ He concedes that Machobane's efforts were seen as a threat by the state and the Basotho, as they failed to understand his scheme, which aimed to bring the state initiative and the already existing African agricultural regimes into coexistence to improve food production within limited land while remaining ecologically conscious.¹²⁴ His effort to strike a balance between the two systems, using personal funds to empower the communities through launching a Mass Agricultural College in Lesotho, was limited. Due to limited funding, Machobane's work had a notable impact in the Leribe district than in other districts where the

¹²² Konz, 'Origins and Pathways of Agricultural Demonstration', 233–263.

¹²³ C.R. Konz, 'Stick to thy Hillock? James Machobane and the Problem of Agroecology in Lesotho' in G. Wynn, *et al* (eds.), *Environment, Power, and Justice: Southern African Histories* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2022), 221–249.

¹²⁴ Konz, 'Stick to thy Hillock', 240.

Mass Agricultural College was located. Konz argues that Machobane was determined to produce, circulate, and apply agricultural knowledge to those threatened mainly by the 'historical violence of colonialism' and to resist capitalist food production because the Basotho had lost large tracts of land to the Boers. He wanted everyone to have access to food and produce, even with limited resources.¹²⁵ His agro-ecological solutions were seen as political activism by the locals and the state. Konz's work is critical in demonstrating that Africans were never stripped of their agency, and the state policies were not as destructive to the local environment as Showers labelled them.

Thus, this dissertation also builds on Konz's work, which has contributed to the historiography of colonial African agricultural and conservation in Lesotho. However, this work intends to examine what soil conservation policies were promulgated by the colonial state in Lesotho, and how the Basotho responded to them, and the impact of that, using a bottom-up approach to represent African agency in the already existing African agricultural and soil conservation historiography of Lesotho, using Leribe as a case study. This will help make a comparative analysis of similarities, changes, and continuities in Basotho agricultural and conservation history, as Lesotho is not a homogeneous landscape.

The post-2000s period is dominated by an Africanist perspective that reconstructs the above claims and presents Lesotho as a nation with its own internal historical dynamics outside the labour-reserve narrative. They discuss the land, agricultural, and conservation issues that occurred in Lesotho. Neville Pule and Motlatsi Thabane discuss Lesotho's land tenure regimes, noting that land governance in Lesotho has historically been ambiguous, leading to disputes over land ownership and access. Examining the binary between the indigenous system, in

¹²⁵ Konz, 'Stick to thy Hillock', 241.

which chiefs held administrative title over land, and the civil system, in which the central government could initiate programmes and intervene in some cases, they argue that the dual system gave rise not only to conflict but also to possible misuse of land.¹²⁶ In another work, Thabane provides a historical overview of Lesotho's environmental challenges from the outset of colonialism, arguing that, owing to the land's topography and size, land shortages would be inevitable, leading to land degradation and potential conflict if the country's industrial capacity were not fully developed.¹²⁷ These works provide a solid context for further studies of Lesotho's environmental and agricultural history by outlining the country's land, farming, and conservation history. This research contributes to the ongoing historiographical conversation of African agency through examining indigenous agrarian and conservation systems during the colonial period in the Leribe district.

More recent works by James Ferguson and Tim Quinlan¹²⁸ discuss the intersection of bureaucratic power, development policies, and African agriculture.¹²⁹ Focusing on Thaba Tseka as a case study, Ferguson's work provides an important starting point for the understanding of the relationship between local livestock owners and crop cultivators on the one hand and state policy on the other. Tim Quinlan emphasizes the need for a social-scientific analysis and engages with concepts from the natural sciences.¹³⁰ For him, they are essential for providing a good context for the environmental and agricultural history of Lesotho and for how the state used top-down, coercive measures to implement policies without understanding the Basotho's traditional agrarian values and practices. However, these works do not engage with

¹²⁶ N. W. Pule and M. Thabane, 'Lesotho's Land Tenure Regimes: Experiences of Rural Communities and the Calls for Land Reform', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 42, 2 (2004), 283-303.

¹²⁷ Thabane, *Toward an anatomy of Persistent Political Instability in Lesotho*, 72.

¹²⁸ T. Quinlan, 'Grassland Degradation and Livestock Rearing in Lesotho', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 3 (1995), 491-507.

¹²⁹ J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 45.

¹³⁰ Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, 46.

indigenous soil conservation and local people's interactions with the state and their land over time in Lesotho. This research explores African agency through a bottom-up approach, presenting the African voice on how they circumvented environmental challenges and state-led initiatives during the colonial period. Recent literature shows that the Basotho still value their indigenous agricultural systems and methods more than state-led initiatives. The African voice is not so well articulated in these works. They overemphasise the state's power to dictate African agricultural policy.

Taken together, this body of literature reveals the complex and uneven development of African agriculture and soil conservation during the colonial period in Lesotho. Much of the existing scholarship relies on a top-down perspective that foregrounds state policy and portrays African participation primarily in terms of how colonial rule either facilitated or constrained African agency. This left fewer studies that illuminate the persistence, adaptability, and technical sophistication of African agrarian and conservation practices across different zones. By drawing on socio-environmental history, political economy, political ecology, and the sustainable livelihood approach, this study seeks to bridge that gap. It brings the analysis of colonial policy into conversation with the environmental realities, cultural practices, and everyday livelihood strategies of communities in the Leribe district. In so doing, it employs Dorward's conceptual framework, particularly the distinction between 'hanging in', 'stepping up', and 'stepping out', to show how Basotho households variously coped with environmental stress, invested in agricultural improvement, and pursued alternative livelihoods in response to shifting political and ecological conditions. This integrated approach allows for a more grounded understanding of agrarian change, one that situates conservation not simply as a state-imposed project but as a set of contested practices negotiated within dynamic social, economic, and ecological landscapes in Leribe district, Lesotho, and beyond.

Research Design and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design, with archival sources as its bedrock. The following Archives were consulted: Thomas Mafolo Library at the National University of Lesotho, David Ambrose's Archive at Ladybrand, the National Archives in Maseru, and Morija Museum and Archives. The qualitative research design allows this research to examine the intertwined histories of African agriculture, soil conservation, and the state in Leribe district, Lesotho, between 1800 and 1966. The study is rooted in a qualitative historical methodology that draws on the traditions of socio-environmental history, political economy, and the sustainable livelihood approach. These frameworks enable a critical reconstruction of how knowledge about the environment, colonial policy, and peasant practices shaped both the physical and political landscape of Leribe in Lesotho.

This dissertation uses a multi-scalar, diachronic approach to understand environmental and agrarian transformations through social and political processes rather than solely from a scientific or technocratic perspective. Using archival sources such as missionary reports, journals, diaries, travellers' journals, and Cape Colony government official reports, which date from the mid-1830s, helps this research trace continuities and ruptures in land use, access, and distribution from precolonial times to the year the Basotho attained political independence.

Guided by socio-environmental history, the study considers the biological, physical, and geological systems as historical actors. In contrast, the political economy perspective situates these environmental processes within broader economic structures such as commodity and labour markets, migration, accumulation, and state interventions. Political ecology adds a lens to engage with power and knowledge and reveal how colonial conservation discourse reordered

relations of power and gender between chiefs and the people, state and the chiefs, state and the entire society, chiefs among themselves, men and women, and other social relations that existed in the Leribe district and Lesotho. The sustainable livelihoods framework complements these different approaches by foregrounding household strategies and peasant agency. It reveals how ordinary people, among themselves, with the chiefs or the state, negotiated constraints and pursued security under shifting ecological and political conditions. This integrative design connects theoretical perspectives to the lived experiences of communities in the Leribe District. It enables this study to conduct a historical grounding analysis of the intersection of environmental governance and peasant livelihoods over time.

The study focuses on Leribe, which borders the Free State Province of South Africa. It serves as one of the most agriculturally productive areas in Lesotho from the pre-colonial period to the present. Therefore, this case study draws on a long history of Basotho agricultural methods and practices to explore and present African agency within the existing historical literature. This approach is informed by socio-environmental history and political economy, which stresses the co-constitution of ecological and political processes over time. This, in turn, allows this research to critically analyse agriculture and soil conservation, engaging with power, gender, culture, and inequality.

Several archival documents document the ecological, political, and economic events that took place in Leribe as early as the mid-1830s. Firstly, the three volumes of Basutoland Records on compiled by the Cape Government by G.M. Theal, serve as a valuable source, for the first chapter it consists of letters, reports on Basotho as one of the ethnic groups in the region, their interactions with other groups, the wars of dispossession in the area, the rise of Basotho

kingdom, the droughts, frosts and different ecological conditions faced were documented. His collection of this document was under the guidance of J.W. Sauer, who was the Secretary for Native Affairs in 1883 when the work was done. However, like other colonial documents, they tend to represent the colonial perspective on Africans and how they related with each other and the environment. Overall, the compiled fieldwork helps us understand the Basotho, particularly those of the Leribe district, and why they persisted in adhering to different traditions and customs in environmental governance during the colonial period.

Additionally, used some published books I found at the National University of Lesotho, written by J.C. McGregor, A. Sekese, and D.F. Ellenberger as primary sources. McGregor was one of the first colonial administrators in Basutoland. He was one of the eyewitnesses to the 1884 political shifts and the political unrest in the Leribe district. Thus, his book *Basuto Traditions*, published in 1905, was influenced by the events he witnessed in Leribe.¹³¹ He portrayed the Basotho who lived there as different from the rest of the territory. However, Eldredge argues that his personal experience was limited to the inhabitants of the Leribe district, who served as his book's informants.¹³² Just as other oral sources do, they distort or omit certain events, claims, or cultures. Ellenberger combined the ancient and modern history of the Basotho in French, but McGregor translated it into English in 1912.¹³³ His contribution reveals the customs and practices of the Basotho, drawing on oral sources that emphasise the significance of family ancestry lines over those of other groups in the territory. However, all these writings helped me to examine issues of power and inequality among the Basotho and their neighbors before the advent of colonialism.

¹³¹ MMA, J.C. Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions*, (Cape Town, 1905).

¹³² MMA, D.F. Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern* (Caxton Publishing Company, Limited, 1912).

¹³³ E. A. Eldredge, 'Land, Politics, and Censorship: The Historiography of Nineteenth Century Lesotho', *History in Africa*, 15 (1988), 191-209.

Sekese presents the African voices in the archives through his publication in one of the first African newspapers, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, published by Protestant Missionaries at Morija in Sesotho. Sekese wrote about Sesotho customs, norms, and myths, providing a sense of the Basotho's history and origins. However, he was working for the missionaries, and his source writing could have been influenced and aimed to please his employer. Overall, his work, combined with other nineteenth-century archival sources I could find, allows me to reconstruct the pre-colonial African agricultural history in relation to this study.

Regarding missionary relations, the thesis draws on the Paris Evangelical Missionary documents held at the Morija Museum and Archives. They include the Chronicles of Basutoland, a commentary on events from 1830 to 1902 by French Protestant Missionaries in Southern Africa, translated by R.C. Germond, and published at Morija. There are several works by E. Casalis, one of the first missionaries to interact with the Basotho and who worked closely with the founder of the Basotho Kingdom. His writing, such as *My Life in Basutoland*, *The Basutos*, and *Twenty Years in Basutoland*, among others, was used as a primary document in this study.¹³⁴ This is because Casalis is one of the few eyewitnesses to the Basotho precolonial history. He documented the lives of the Basotho as he saw them: their agrarian and pastoral livelihoods, and the political and ecological systems that shaped them. However, like other missionary records, Casalis wrote his documents with his background in mind; the Basotho environment, socio-cultural, and economic traditions were parallel to his.

¹³⁴ (Morija Museum and Archive hereafter MMA), E. Casalis, *The Basutos*, (Morija: Morija Museum and Archives, 1861); E. Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland, A History of Missionary Enterprise in South Africa*, translated from French by J. Brierley (Paternoster Row, 1889).

I found other missionary documents at the Morija Museum and Archives, including recordings, diaries, memoirs, drawings, correspondence, and photographs. One challenge is that some documents are in French, and I could not have them all translated or transcribed due to limited research time and funding. However, it is worth noting that Robert Germond, the grandson of missionary Paul Germond, who arrived in Basutoland in 1860, wrote a series of journals titled ‘Chronicles of Basutoland’, which became a very informative source as it contains the observations and experiences of French missionaries since their arrival and extends to the early colonial period. Such a chronological compilation by Theal and Germond prompted me to adopt a chronological approach in this study. However, there were missing pages, which made it difficult to obtain responses and to follow events involving government officials, missionaries with Moshoeshoe, the leader of the Basotho, and the treaties between Moshoeshoe and the Cape Colony and the British government of South Africa.

In addition, David Ambrose’s private archives contain primary documents on Basotho history, including journals and newspapers. The archives have translated documents on Basotho culture from Sesotho into English. It includes scientific and technical documents that explain the topographical and ecological conditions of Lesotho, in the form of photographs, magazines, and drawings, showing that Lesotho has always had dongas and gullies, way before colonial encounters and initiatives—the documents in this archive date from 1923 to 2022.

The Lesotho National Archives (LNA) in Maseru and the National University of Lesotho (NUL) Archives in Roma hold a wealth of files on soil erosion and conservation, including Ecological Survey reports, inter- and intra-ministerial correspondence, Ministry of Agriculture Research reports, and other archival manuscripts and newspapers. Analysis of these files provides the researcher with information about soil erosion and conservation during the

colonial period, conservation policy formulation, operations, and relations with farmers. Reports from the Ministry of Agriculture were also used, together with primary documents from the Archives. Information at the Ministry of Agriculture includes ministerial minutes, annual reports, pamphlets, and posters. I also used information from various colonial newspapers documenting farmers' complaints against the state to understand broader issues in agriculture, soil erosion, and conservation in colonial Lesotho.

It is understood that colonial archives often marginalised African voices. For instance, files such as those produced by missionary documents reflect the European perceptions of the missionaries towards the environment of Basutoland, which their own environmental conditions would have strongly influenced in France. Based on this understanding, much of the research involves reading the archives "against the grain".¹³⁵ This helps establish an in-depth knowledge of African initiatives and practices in agriculture during the colonial period and examines how they protected or disturbed their environment in the presence of the state and its soil conservation initiatives in the Leribe district.

One notable methodological limitation of this study is the absence of interviews. Incorporating interviews would have significantly strengthened the analysis by providing nuanced, first-hand perspectives on the key issues under discussion. However, constraints related to my limited proficiency in Sesotho, coupled with financial limitations that precluded the employment of a research assistant, necessitated reliance on archival sources. These materials served as the

¹³⁵ See A. L. Stoler, Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance, *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 87–109, R.G. S. Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria* (2006), 215–233, A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

primary basis for reconstructing the social, political, and environmental processes in the Leribe district.

Structure of the thesis

This dissertation comprises seven chapters. Chapter one introduces the African agrarian practices from the grassroots of pre-colonial times and their evolution through different phases of external interactions with the outside world. It outlines the scholarly context in which African agrarian and conservation practices should be understood in relation to the state over time. It summarises the arguments made in this thesis. It highlights the research problem and provides a historical overview of Leribe district and the ecological and topographical conditions of Lesotho as a landscape, building on the precolonial state to examine the continuities and ruptures over time in agrarian and conservation practices. It provides the historiography of agriculture, conservation, and ecology in Lesotho. The chapter ends with the methodology used in this thesis to collect and analyse data.

Chapter two provides a historical background to the indigenous agrarian systems of the people who became known as the Basotho before British occupation in 1884. It demonstrates the fluid and adaptive nature of indigenous systems in the face of harsh climatic, topographical, and adverse political conditions in Southern Africa. The importance of this chapter is that it foregrounds further discussion of the adaptive agrarian and conservation development of the Basotho in Leribe District during colonial occupation, which is the main thrust of this dissertation. It further provides a rich context for discussing shifting attitudes among the Basotho towards colonial policies on their indigenous agrarian and conservation systems. Overall, the chapter argues that land was an essential resource on which Basotho custom and

statehood were built. Consequently, agricultural development and conservation issues were shaped by the political discourses of precolonial statecraft.

Chapter Three builds on the previous chapter, which examines the nature of colonial authority in Leribe from 1884 to 1929. It reveals that struggles of powers continued at various levels. The British agents in the territory, the Paramount chief, subordinate chiefs, and the indigenes of the territory. It shows how the Basotho resisted and struggled to accommodate the agents of European rule within the systems of land use, agrarian relations of production, conservation, and colonial agriculture. It argues that the British succeeded in introducing measures that centralised power in the hands of the paramount chief and a few subordinated chiefs, allowing for growing exploitation and abuse of office. However, in agriculture, peasants maintained their indigenous agrarian and conservation systems despite the harsh challenges posed by ecological problems, bovine diseases, population growth, land dispossession, and economic recessions. It argues that although issues of soil erosion were mentioned during this period, they were not a cause for concern for the Basotho or the imperial administration.

Chapter Four examines the agrarian and conservation regimes introduced by colonial officials, following the soil conservation discourse, a prime international issue. This was triggered by the American Great Dust Bowl of the 1930s and the global economic slump of 1929. However, the previous chapter reveals that soil erosion was not a new phenomenon among the Basotho. Hence, during the first half of the decade, the peasants were concerned about other issues affecting their agrarian livelihoods, rather than erosion. The educated Basotho were now questioning the relevance of *Matsema* (cooperative work by commoners on the chief's fields) in their society. They argued that it no longer served its purpose for the commoners. Lerole (an exceptional drought) was a wake-up call for the Basotho, showing that the system no longer

served commoners because the chiefs did not distribute grain to them. On the other hand, the Famine relief programs had their own conditions that served imperial interests. Therefore, the Basotho insisted that it was time to change agrarian practices that served the chiefs or imperialists. Building on this, the chapter discusses the political, social, and economic imperatives that led to the introduction of new agricultural and conservation methods. It demonstrates the Basotho's self-consciousness in adopting and adapting to the British soil conservation strategies introduced during the second half of the decade. It argues that the Basotho continued to exercise their agency even as they adopted soil conservation practices in the global context; new ideas were introduced, but the Basotho never entirely abandoned their indigenous farming and soil conservation methods.

Chapter Five discusses the agriculture and conservation systems under the reign of Mantsebo, a female regent. This was a new political shift in the nation's history. The chapter demonstrates how the new Regent shaped and reshaped peasant livelihoods in Leribe through endorsing agrarian and conservation policies that aligned with imperial interests. It analyses the changes and continuities in Basotho agrarian and conservation systems. It demonstrates African agency in issues of conservation and agricultural change. It argues that Basotho attitudes towards the new methods were guided by how the British had previously directed Basotho affairs politically and economically. Overall, the chapter argues that agrarian development and conservation issues were shaped by the political discourses of colonial statecraft rather than by environmental problems.

Chapter Six reveals how the Basotho circumvented the political tensions in the territory. It demonstrates that, despite various levels of political struggle, Leribe farmers continued to depend on agriculture. It discusses the agricultural and anti-erosion measures taken despite the

political and social disputes. The chapter also reveals that farmers in Leribe showed considerable resilience amid environmental challenges and state policies; they adopted and adapted to soil conservation schemes to sustain livelihoods, as a population that depended on agriculture for sustenance. A mass agricultural college was established during this period, and educated Basotho found ways to share their knowledge on agrarian and conservation matters that served the Basotho. This improved food security and indeed sustained the livelihoods of the people who depended on agriculture. Therefore, I argue that the Basotho were innovative and adaptive to the internal and social pressures that affected their agrarian and conservation systems.

Chapter Seven, as the last chapter, concludes the thesis. It provides a summary of the essential findings and highlights emerging scholarly conclusions. It concludes by highlighting its contributions to the environmental historiography of Lesotho and beyond, and by outlining areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

Land and Agrarian Livelihoods among the Basotho c.1800s-1883

Introduction

This chapter reconstructs Basotho agrarian livelihoods from c.1800 to 1883. It begins its analysis with the history of state formation in the 1800s because it is essential to the development of agriculture and conservation in Leribe, as the political institutions and power structures established during this period fundamentally shaped the organisation and governance of land, labour, and natural resources. The consolidation of the Basotho polity under Moshoeshe I created the territorial, chiefly, and administrative foundations that later determined who controlled land allocation, how grazing areas were regulated, and how agricultural decisions were coordinated at the community level and in households. Additionally, the political upheavals of the nineteenth century, such as shifting alliances, missionary influence, and eventual incorporation of Basutoland under British authority in 1883, directly influenced patterns of settlement, livestock ownership, and land pressure, all of which had long-term consequences for soil use and degradation. By tracing this political history, this chapter discusses agricultural and conservation issues in the following sections, which did not emerge in isolation but were embedded in evolving systems of authority and external interventions. It argues that transformations of the nineteenth century created both the institutional framework and ecological pressures that later shaped colonial agricultural policies and Basotho responses to them, particularly in the Leribe district.

It should be noted that from the 1800s to 1822, the people who were regarded as Basotho existed as small chiefdoms or groups. Some of these groups include Bafuking, Bakwena,

Batlokoa, Banareng, Bataung, Baphuti, Bakhatla, and a host of smaller clans named after persons such as Bahamaieane, Basili, Bamokotedi, Bamonaheng, Batlakwana in the region.¹ These groups shared a common culture and language (Sesotho) and are all known as Basotho today. They were found in the northern valley of the Mohokare River (Caledon River), which separates them from other indigenous groups in Lesotho, such as the San, whom they later joined after land alienation. They were pushed further south of the Caledon River, the present-day territorial boundary divides Lesotho and the Free State Province of South Africa.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the process of state formation of the Basotho Kingdom from the 1800s to the 1820s. The second section discusses the effects of Missionaries' relations on Basotho livelihoods from c.1830 to 1883 and the last section reveals the significant political, economic, and environmental shifts that overshadowed the period between 1850 and 1883 in Lesotho and, more broadly, in Leribe. These sections, taken together, reveal that although African agrarian systems and environmental practices contributed to landscape changes, they also incorporated a range of strategies to sustain soils and manage natural resources. The sections highlight that the African agricultural systems were fluid, adaptive, undifferentiated, and embedded in complex social and political institutions. It examines land-use patterns, crop and livestock keeping and distribution, the role of chiefs in environmental governance, and resource distribution. The chapter challenges colonial narratives that framed African Agriculture as 'destructive and unsophisticated'.² It does not seek to romanticise African practices; instead, it highlights how pre-colonial Basotho communities managed ecological challenges, regulated land access, and maintained

¹ For a detailed analysis of these social groups and their identity, see J.C. Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions* (Cape Town, 1905), 10.

² For detailed analysis on "Primitive Africa" see M. Hall, 'Archaeology and Modes of Production in Pre-colonial Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14, 1 (1987), 1-17; H. Kuper, 'The Development of a Primitive Nation', *Bantu Studies*, 15, 1 (1941), 339-368; A. Hoernle, 'South-West Africa as a Primitive Culture Area', *South African Geographical Journal*, 6, 1 (1923), 14-28.

productivity through social norms and localised governance under historical constraints. Drawing on the livelihoods framework, the chapter situates these practices as historically situated strategies rather than static traditions, laying the foundations for understanding how colonial conservation later disrupted and restructured African systems.

The chapter uses biographies and writings by missionaries, such as the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, as well as journals, diaries, books, and compiled Basutoland records from the Cape Colony issued by the Native Affairs Department. It should be noted that three volumes of Basutoland records used in this chapter are from the Cape Colony official journals, reports, treaties between Moshoeshoe and the Afrikaners, the British officials, and letters between Moshoeshoe and the Cape Colony officials, which provide first-hand accounts of the Basotho and the Anthropocene before it became a British colony and before its interaction with the missionaries but simply with other groups in the region Africans and Europeans. It is within this context that identity, culture, and power became essential facets of indigenous communities. Based on these dynamics, agrarian development, culture, power, and identity became intricately intertwined from the onset.

The Formation of the Basotho Nation, c.1800s-1820s

The pre-colonial communities in southern Africa were socially and economically diverse and underwent significant evolution over time. Various factors, including environmental conditions, cultural practices, and interactions with external forces through trade and European interventions, shaped indigenous communities. Historian Elizabeth Eldredge described the Bantu communities in Southern Africa from the early 1800s to the 1820s as mobile chiefdoms,

characterized by small size and a lack of centralized governance.³ Eldredge notes that during this period, land was plentiful, which enabled greater mobility in search of favourable socio-economic and political conditions for each group.⁴ These conditions facilitated the development of agrarian and pastoral communities, such as the Sotho, Ndebele, Zulu, and Tswana.⁵ The groups were not uniform; some were larger and more powerful than others. Some overran and absorbed smaller chiefdoms through raids and assimilation.⁶ Hence, this reflects the internal and complex variations within the region's social groups.

The uneven fertility of the land and the availability of key resources were central in determining where communities established themselves, adding an ecological dimension to the social landscape. Thus, the Sotho groups settled in the fertile soils and abundant water sources along the Mohokare River. They became known as expert cattle herders and agriculturalists due to the availability of fertile soils, water, and other resources. Scholars like E. A. T. Dutton have portrayed the Sotho as having a different social and economic organisation than the San hunter-gatherer communities.⁷ The San were known as the original inhabitants of the territory, residing in the mountainous regions, where they practiced hunting and gathering. The livelihoods of the

³ E. Eldredge, *Power in Colonial Africa: Conflict and Discourse in Lesotho, 1870–1960* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007); S. Rosenberg and R. F. Weisfelder, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

⁴ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 2.

⁵ MMA, D.F. Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern* (Caxton Publishing Company, Limited, 1912); T. Maggs, Iron Age Patterns and Sotho History on the Southern Highveld: South Africa. *World Archaeology*, 7,3 (1976), 318-332; S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *The Ndebele Nation: Reflections on Hegemony, Memory and Historiography*. Vol. 7 (Rozenberg Publishers, 2009); J. Gump, 'Origins of the Zulu kingdom', *The Historian*, 5, 4 (1988), 521-534; T. Tlou and A. Campbell, *History of Botswana* (Gaborone: Macmillan Botswana, 1984), 20-70.

⁶ S. Rosenberg and R. F. Weisfelder, *Historical Dictionary of Lesotho* (United Kingdom: Scarecrow Press, 2013) and for the pre-colonial land debates see M. Widgren, 'Pre-colonial Landesque Capital: A Global Perspective, Rethinking Environmental History' *World-system History and Global Environmental Change*, (2007), 61-77; J. A. K. Kandawire, 'Thangata in Pre-colonial and Colonial Systems of Land Tenure in Southern Malawi with Special reference to Chingale' *Africa*, 47, 2 (1977), 185-191.

⁷ For the San history see E.A.T. Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1923), 31, A.D. Mazel, 'Changing fortunes: 150 years of San hunter-gatherer history in the Natal Drakensberg, *South Africa' Antiquity*, 66, 252 (1992), 758-767; M. Wessels, 'Smoking Around the Campfire: A San Encounter with the Colonial', *African Studies*, 75, 3 (2016), 338-357.

San tended to have less concentrated environmental impacts than those of the Basotho, due to the San's primarily mobile lifestyle. Even though they hunted animals in their local areas, there were no records that suggested that the San tilled the land to sustain their livelihood.⁸ However, following regional political upheavals, accelerated migration among various indigenous social groups in the Southern African region in the 18th century forced the San to coexist with the Sotho.

Historians such as Eldredge, Cobbing, and Etherington have, in their individual works, debated the causes and meanings of the political upheaval known as the *Mfecane/Lifaqane*.⁹ It is not clear whether the upheaval was a product of internal African state formation, external pressures from the colonial encroachment and trade, or a convergence of both. I chose to examine the upheaval as a political phenomenon and its effects on various social groups, chiefdoms, and the environment. At first, the Sotho, as agriculturalists, did not interfere with the San's lives until the time of the *Lifaqane*, as will be explained later in this chapter. The Sotho established semi-permanent huts made of clay and wood in the Lowlands, where they first settled. In recent times, the Leribe district has accounted for the largest share of the Lowlands. The duplex soils of Leribe, which combine a sandy topsoil with a heavier clay subsoil, were generally conducive to both arable farming and animal husbandry.¹⁰ These conditions supported subsistence agriculture, as Sotho families organised production within small kin-based households. Small chiefdoms were established from these households based on kinship ties through intermarriage

⁸ Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland*, 31.

⁹ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*; J. Cobbing, 'The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', *The Journal of African History*, 29, 3 (1988), 487-519; K. Etherington, *Trauma, The Body and Transformation: A Narrative Inquiry* (New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001).

¹⁰ David Ambrose Private Archive (Hereafter DAPA), Geology and Geomorphology files, 5.

among the Bakoena, Batlokoa, Banareng, Bataung, Baphuti, Bakhatla, and other groups in their vicinity.¹¹

However, assessing the environmental conditions in the lowlands during this precolonial era is complicated by the fragmentary and uneven nature of available records. The Basutoland records by Theal provide an overview of the 1811 and 1813 droughts, but do not specify their locations.¹² The missionary accounts began in the mid-1830s, documenting the people and landscape. However, one of the first French missionaries to interact with the Basotho, Thomas Arbousset, in his journal, stated that,

Under the influence of a healthy climate, in which prolonged and excessive heat is unknown, but cold, sometimes severe, prompted by the necessity of guarding against famine and held in the state of constant alarm by the fear of enemy attacks, they (Basotho) have acquired a certain superiority over the surrounding groups. The Basotho have attained a similar degree of development, at least insofar as agricultural progress is concerned. Despite the imperfections of their work, they harvest in abundance. They send their animals to the mountains during the ploughing season. Their agrarian and pastoral system is quite remarkable.¹³

Arbousset suggests that the Basotho were a people with a functional pastoral and agricultural system that gave them a vantage point over other groups in the region. The quotation also emphasizes that the environment (the Lowlands) was conducive to such a livelihood. While there are no recorded conversations about environmental consciousness during this period, Africans' choices to settle near water sources, arable land, and pasturelands demonstrate that they considered the environment essential to sustaining their livelihoods. These considerations affect the economic and social status and practices of each group, as well as those of other groups in the region. This way, some groups were absorbed by others through socio-political and economic alliances. The alliances produced distinctive groups of 'weak and strong'

¹¹ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 32.

¹² See G.M. Theal, *Basutoland Records*, Vol. 2 (1883).

¹³ MMA, T. Arbousset, March 1847, 33 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*.

chiefdoms, identified by population size, the number of animals owned, and the military expertise of certain groups over others in the region.¹⁴ This led to the development of more complex organisations, which, in turn, invariably transformed the socio-economic and environmental conditions of pre-colonial society in Southern Africa.

Social differentiation among the Sotho-speaking groups and other chiefdoms within the region, affected by the political upheavals, became visible. This resulted from chiefdoms breaking away with ambitions to establish independent chiefdoms of their kinships by blood, wealth, or consent. Blood ties alone could not sustain a chiefdom. The need to accumulate more land, animals, and people to maintain chiefdoms and sustain livelihoods led to conflicts among relatives and fragmented families into groups of significant size, so-called 'rich and poor', meaning those who possessed a considerable number of people, land, and animals within their group. Land disputes led chiefs to establish their spheres of influence, with land rights controlled by each chief.¹⁵ The powers include 'right to summon his people to discuss the state of affairs, call them to labour in fields in times of ploughing, all offences were reported to him, he controlled property rights... right to possess all stray cattle.'¹⁶ Dutton argues that it was at this point that the chief's powers and privileges increased. I contend that, hereafter, social differentiation among the Sotho became significant, as power and possessions divided the people into different groups and established social hierarchies. This accelerated the rates of conflict within Sotho communities and with other chiefdoms, as individuals sought power, status, and privilege over others.¹⁷

¹⁴ MMA, T. Arbousset, March 1847, 33.

¹⁵ The chief was the trustee of the land but, it belonged to his people.

¹⁶ Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland*, 58.

¹⁷ S. Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho: A Study in the Political Economy of the Basotho Chieftaincy from Pre-colonial Times to the Present' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1993), 110.

One of the principal avenues through which individuals sought to enhance their power and status was the accumulation of livestock, with cattle raiding emerging as a key strategy within this socio-political landscape between the Sotho and their neighbours. Melville Herskovits and Richard Mtetwa have written about the significance of cattle in African societies.¹⁸ Herskovits builds his analysis from a cultural anthropologist's perspective; he considered the relationship between Africans and cattle to be mystical.¹⁹ He introduced the 'cattle complex' to consolidate the deep cultural, emotional, and religious attachment that many African societies have to cattle. He trivialised the economic importance of cattle in African culture and society. In the pre-colonial context, cattle became the highest form of accumulation, and they differentiated one man from another. In response to Herskovits, Mtetwa argues that cattle are first an economic asset; they are also a financial asset, and all the socio-religious attitudes held by Africans towards cattle are based on their monetary value.²⁰ Together, the scholars highlighted the cultural, symbolic, material, and political-economic functions of cattle within systems of production and power. I posit that at this point, they simultaneously revealed cattle as integral to the economic, political, and cultural African livelihoods, power, and identities. Those who possessed many cattle had a greater chance to expand their chiefdoms through intermarriages and create alliances with other chiefdoms than those without. Hence, their herds increased, and the population grew, giving some groups power over others and their land. As herds grew, the availability of pasture for the cattle became an issue.²¹ Numerous disputes occurred over land,

¹⁸ M. J. Herskovits, 'The Cattle Complex in East Africa' *American Anthropologist*, 28, 1(1926), 230-272; R.M. Mtetwa, 'Myth or Reality: The Cattle Complex in Southeast Africa, with Special Reference to Rhodesia', *Zambezia*, 6, 1 (1978), 23-36.

¹⁹ M. J. Herskovits, 'The Cattle Complex in East Africa' *American Anthropologist*, 28, 1(1926), 230-272

²⁰ R.M. Mtetwa, 'Myth or Reality: The Cattle Complex in Southeast Africa, with special reference to Rhodesia', *Zambezia*, 6, 1 (1978), 23-36.

²¹ Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho', 45.

missionaries mentioned the practice of witchcraft, and to establish social and political authority, causing unrest among communities in the region.

As conflicts continued to cause unrest among the Sotho communities, there was a ‘wise man called Mohlomi who appeared to have stood out for his famous wisdom on making peaceful conflict resolutions. Reverend Ellenberger, a member of the Paris Evangelical Missionaries, in his journal wrote about Mohlomi as follows,

Some men are born great, others have greatness upon them, says the proverb. Mohlomi was a great man. He lived at Ngoliloe (Ficksburg)... he played a significant role in the history of his country due to his attributes. He was no warrior: there are no conquests or extension of power to record as substantial, but the influence he acquired over his people and other nations far and near was very great, significant indeed, and on the whole, it was an influence for good. As a chief, he was kind, affable, and of easy access; he loved men without distinction, and he judged by equity and with a rare sight of wisdom. In the art of healing, he had surpassed all men. He made it his duty to relieve the distressed, and he counted widows and orphans as his children.²²

In this way, Mohlomi became a central figure in shaping Sotho customs and values. His influence extended as far as the Tswana on the verge of the Kalahari Desert, the Venda near the Limpopo River, the Nguni near the Indian Ocean, and the Phuti near the confluence between the Caledon and Orange rivers.²³ Ellenberger also added that in 1833, when the first Paris Evangelical Missionaries arrived in the territory, Mohlomi’s life and influence were well spoken of.²⁴ Mohlomi had advocated peace and justice within chiefdoms and encouraged the protection and welfare of marginalised groups.²⁵ Hence, Ellenberger argues that Mohlomi maintained peace despite population density and resource distribution imbalances among the Sotho chiefdoms. While the modes of transport and communication were still limited, Mohlomi

²² D.F. Ellenberger, ‘History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern’ written in English by J.C. MacGregor, the Assistant Commissioner of Leribe in 1912, 90-91.

²³ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 25.

²⁴ Ellenberger, ‘History of the Basuto’, 154.

²⁵ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 26.

is portrayed as the most influential figure in handling the region's social affairs. Historian L. Thompson argues that Mohlomi was "the only Mosotho person in the position of power" during this era, determining that the Sotho-speaking chiefdoms were heading towards a crisis, *Lifaqane*.²⁶ While Thompson's claim is absolute, after Mohlomi died in 1815, the region experienced a period of turmoil over resources and power, distinct from the period when Mohlomi was alive. However, I argue that there was indeed an unequal distribution of resources, people, and power in pre-colonial societies. There was a close entanglement between politics, ritual practice, land use, and access among the pre-capitalist Basotho communities.

Politics played a significant role in indigenous land-use and management systems. It was the responsibility of every chief to ensure that his household remained in power. Thus, even after the death of a chief, he was succeeded by his first son from the senior wife. If this household had females only, the succession was passed on to the next household in the chronological marital order of the chief's wives.²⁷ This was done to protect his group's ancestral lands and to avoid being overrun by other groups. It was the duty of the royal family members to preserve the land as a royal and national asset. In some instances, the brother of the incumbent chief took it upon himself to protect the clan from losing power to other chiefdoms. A familiar story among the Basotho is that of Mokhachane, who saved his family's chieftaincy by ascending to power after his brother, Libe, failed to demonstrate the expected qualities of a chieftain.²⁸ Mokhachane had a good record of generosity and justice, whereas his brother Libe lacked them.²⁹ This way, chieftainships became increasingly contested, as character and resources

²⁶Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 26.

²⁷ Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho', 83.

²⁸Dutton, *Basuto of Basutoland*, 31.

²⁹ Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho', 83.

became vital tools for accruing more power, wealth, and influence against other chiefdoms in pre-colonial Southern Africa.³⁰

Economically, the chief had authority over land within their jurisdiction (access, use, and management). He allocated the land for grazing and cultivation to his subjects. The chief also mobilized labour for his agricultural fields and those of his senior wife through the *Matsema* system.³¹ During natural disasters, such as droughts, the grain would be distributed to the community. In some cases, part of the grain was used to feed widows and orphans. This system ensured food security because chiefs practised this system. I argue that this demonstrates that the Basotho were aware of ecological and topographical challenges, and they stored grain for future use. This also reveals that ecological disasters were not foreign to what became Lesotho. Cattle raids were another important, vital safety net among the small chiefdoms. The raids happened among the Sotho groups, and some extended to raiding other communities. The cattle amassed from raids belonged to the *Morena*, who in turn loaned them to his subjects through the *Mafisa* system.³² This further reinforced hierarchical power relations between the chiefs and their people, thereby stabilising the Basotho's internal social and economic affairs.

Alongside these patronage-based systems, ritual practices like rainmaking ceremonies also played a central role in negotiating authority over land. Despite being purely spiritual acts, rituals were embedded in political processes that structured relations between communities, chiefs, and the natural environment. The chief had control over the chiefdom's spiritual and

³⁰ S. F. Khunou, 'A Legal History of Traditional Leadership in South Africa, Botswana, and Lesotho' (PhD thesis, North- West University), 373.

³¹ Khunou, 'A Legal History of Traditional Leadership', 374.

³² Khunou, 'A Legal History of Traditional Leadership', 374.

ritual institutions. The Sotho-speaking people, like other African societies, showed a distinct and close relationship with spiritual institutions in their mundane activities. The rainmaking ceremonies were also an indigenous way of addressing droughts and famine among the Bantu communities in this region.³³ This practice revealed that ecological problems had been part of the Basotho's experience: they had experienced the consequences of environmental disasters and responded to them through indigenous practices.³⁴ I argue that the Basotho demonstrated profound awareness of their environment and its effects on their livelihoods and material well-being, even as social hierarchies, contestations over authority, and shifting ecological pressures shaped their practices.

In addition, land became a class-based resource among the Sotho and other neighbouring groups in the region. Chiefdoms that acquired authority over large tracts of land based on their large populations and possession of material wealth in the form of cattle became wealthier and more powerful than others. Within these chiefdoms, families that owned cattle also became dominant within their kinship spheres of influence.³⁵ Among the Basotho, a powerful clan known as the Bakoena established itself at Menkhoaneng in the valley of Hlotse, a tributary of the Caledon, now known as the Leribe District.³⁶ The *Morena e Moholo* of the unified Basotho nation emerged from the Bakoena ancestral line. His ability to accumulate wealth in the form of cattle, more than other chiefs through raiding, changed the social status of his lineage.³⁷ Thus, the Bakoena emerged as a powerful clan among the Basotho from the second decade of

³³There were no other ceremonies mentioned considering environmental calamities related to Basotho documented by missionaries at that time.

³⁴ See S. Beharie, 'Climate-Related Societal Consequences and Responses During the 19th Century, South Africa and Lesotho, 1830-1900' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2019).

³⁵ Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho', 244.

³⁶ J.C. Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions* (Cape Town, 1905), 10; M. Damane, *Lithoko, Sotho Praise Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 2.

³⁷ Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions*, 10.

the 1800s. This promoted social differentiation among the Basotho, and the Bakoena became more potent than others.

On the other hand, military prowess was an added advantage during this period to build a powerful chiefdom. Tshaka's (an army leader and son of a minor Zulu chief, Senzangakhona) military abilities had immediately and gradually affected the Basotho and other chiefdoms near the Zulu Kingdom.³⁸ In the early 1820s, Tshaka would send his *Impis* (soldiers) to raid cattle, and sometimes the raiders brought people from the eastern and southern parts of his jurisdiction with them. The captured small groups, and their cattle, were driven up the passage formed by the dyke to the grass-covered summit.³⁹ These raids were accentuated by his quest to increase his influence in the interior by having more cattle and people under his care. Ellenberger also stated that, 'in the days of the 'African wars' Tshaka and his 'predator' soldiers could block the narrow pass with boulders and defy their strong antagonists, who might search in vain for other means of access after losing their cattle and people. Occasionally, other groups would take refuge or form alliances as small groups against the common foe.'⁴⁰ James Macgregor, an Assistant Commissioner in Leribe district in 1904, in his brief histories on the indigenes of what he called the 'British South African Colonies and possessions', noted that 'by 1822 the fights between different indigenous chiefdoms became more common than usual due to Zulu attacks on neighbouring chiefdoms.'⁴¹ The wealth and power of the Zulu people grew significantly due to this forcible accumulation of land and cattle on the plateau. This period is known as the *Lifaqane* among the Basotho.⁴² This period restructured the political hierarchy

³⁸ Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions*, 11.

³⁹ Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland*, 18.

⁴⁰ Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland*, 21.

⁴¹ Macgregor, *Basuto Traditions*, 17.

⁴² On the controversies around Mfecane see J. Cobbing, *The Case Against the Mfecane* (1984), J.D. Omer-Cooper, *A History of Southern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1987), 52-66; J. J.D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath* (London: Longmans, 1966); C.A. Hamilton, 'The Character and Objects of Chaka': A Reconsideration of the

for some African societies, shifting from chiefdoms to Kingdoms, and some collapsed. Based on the evidence above, I posit that *Lifaqane* contributed to the unification of small chiefdoms of Sotho-speaking people and other groups, the centralisation of power, and the expansion of the military.

Lifaqane had significant socioeconomic consequences for the Basotho. Thompson argues that most of the Basotho's livestock and grain stores were destroyed. As a result, most fields ceased cultivation.⁴³ Many chiefdoms lost their entire ruling families, some vanished as organised communities, and others were driven away from their homes and subjected to deprivation and suffering.⁴⁴ This experience demoralized many Sotho groups from establishing chiefdoms without the influence of a powerful *Morena e Moholo*. The wars created widespread political and economic instability, leading many smaller groups to submit to Moshoeshoe.⁴⁵ Since these groups shared a common culture and language (Sesotho), it helped Moshoeshoe to create a sense of identity and unity, facilitating the formation of a kingdom. After he left Leribe, Moshoeshoe first settled at Butha-Buthe with his group before establishing his capital at Thaba Bosiu.⁴⁶ This shows that migration continued in the region even after *Lifaqane*.

Peter Sanders and Leonard Thompson attributed the departure of the Basotho from Butha-Buthe to Thaba Bosiu to the endless battles with other indigenous chiefs, such as Matiwane, Mpangazitha, Shekeshe, and Sekonyela.⁴⁷ In 1824, Moshoeshoe became *Morena e Moholo*,

Making of Shaka as 'Mfecane' Motor', *The Journal of African History*, 33, 1(1992),37–63; J. B. Peires, 'Paradigm Deleted: the Materialist Interpretation of the Mfecane', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 2 (1993),295–313.

⁴³ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 34.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 35.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 35.

⁴⁶ P. Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 39.

⁴⁷ Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho*; Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*, 38-44.

and all the clans under his territory were identified as the Basotho.⁴⁸ Thus, Moshoeshoe capitalised on this catastrophic event to consolidate power and form his nation for the Basotho. He drew on Sotho-Tswana traditions to formulate Sesotho laws and customs that enabled him to protect his wealth and subjects, including Tshaka.⁴⁹ Thompson argues that Mohlomi's teachings shaped Moshoeshoe during his transformative season of manhood.⁵⁰ This demonstrates that the Basotho were not passive victims of the political pressures they faced; they found ways to survive these political and ecological setbacks.

Environmental and political pressures influenced the Basotho to select an adaptive and strategic location for establishing the Basotho kingdom. The geographical location of Thaba Bosiu offered a natural barrier against external threats for the Basotho. It provided the Basotho with the rugged terrain they needed, following the constant attacks they encountered at Butha-Buthe. The place gave them a vantage point over their enemies, unlike Butha Buthe, because of the terrain. In 1833, Moshoeshoe told the missionaries that, "...this mountain is my mother...had it not been for her, you would have found this country entirely without inhabitants".⁵¹ Due to this topographical location, the Basotho defeated the Ndebele in 1831 before the Ndebele reached Thaba Bosiu to attack them.⁵² This demonstrates that the Basotho were conscious of the environment; even in times of calamity, they considered establishing their settlements in places that guaranteed security and facilitated agrarian and pastoral production.

⁴⁸The word Morena originated from a verb '*Rena*' which means to be prosperous, to be tranquil and it signified one who watches the public safety and welfare, see MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 214.

⁴⁹See S. F. Khunou, 'A Legal History of Traditional Leadership in South Africa, Botswana, and Lesotho' (PhD thesis, North- West University), 470; P. Duncan, *Sotho Laws, and Customs* (Moriya: Morija Museum and Archives, 2006).

⁵⁰S. F. Khunou, 'A Legal History of Traditional Leadership in South Africa', 472.

⁵¹ Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho*, 15.

⁵² For a detailed analysis of the battle see Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*, 56.

The topography allowed the Basotho to structure Thaba Bosiu so that, at night, cattle were penned at the centre of their capital in a circular stone-walled enclosure.⁵³ The cattle were amassed from the communities they raided or conquered. Thus, due to the large herd, they required ample pastureland, fertile soil, and sufficient land to accommodate population growth and ensure economic stability. I argue that the teachings of Mohlomi had influenced *Morena oa Basotho* (Chief of the Basotho) as well; he demonstrated exceptional leadership skills among the surrounding groups of Sesotho-speaking chiefs, and they started recognising him as Morena oa Basotho. In different journals, Casalis and Ellenberger concur that Moshoeshoe was an intelligent, wise, and foresighted man compared to many of his contemporaries.⁵⁴ Moshoeshoe established the capital of his chiefdom in a location that offered abundant land for farming, a defensive position in case of attacks, and room for expansion. Moshoeshoe had about 25,000 subjects in 1836.⁵⁵ This was so because the conquered groups lived under his name and were considered Basotho. The land and livestock became the property of the Basotho under Moshoeshoe's leadership. Moshoeshoe's area grew, based on population growth, territorial expansion through more land, and livestock accumulated through raiding. He became *Morena e Moholo* for his people, and his territory became known as the Basotho Kingdom. Therefore, he was addressed as King Moshoeshoe by the Europeans and *as Morena e Moholo* by the unified groups he governed.

The Basotho developed coping mechanisms to safeguard their territory and resources. In terms of governance, Moshoeshoe allowed the chiefs who had joined him to rule their clans in all matters that concerned them alone. In all national affairs, Moshoeshoe operated with the

⁵³ R. C. Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland* (Moriya: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1967), 25.

⁵⁴ MMA, Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*; Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland 1833-1933*.

⁵⁵ Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho*, 16.

consent of his council; he could not act without first learning the will of his people, whom he represented.⁵⁶ He placed his sons and brothers throughout the territory as senior chiefs or governors to control the many chiefs who had come under his rule and to ensure loyalty from his subjects. Sekese, in a newspaper article, stated that ‘Moshoeshoe’s scope for alliances was wide and broad. He had assured survival among the Basotho, but the old centrifugal tendencies threatened to reassert themselves from time to time. His sons and close relatives were the ropes by which he kept his kingdom in check.’⁵⁷ Hereafter, by placing his family in charge, he wanted to reduce social and political upheavals in his kingdom. However, the peace was short-lived due to external forces that threatened land use and management.

Despite these complex political changes, in agriculture, Moshoeshoe emphasised the importance of food security and land management. The Basotho were able to rebuild their agricultural production system after *Lifaqane* destroyed their grain stores, and some had lost their domestic animals, which played a crucial role in the Basotho’s economic and social systems.⁵⁸ Even the missionaries praised the Basotho’s agricultural practices upon their arrival in Thaba Bosiu in 1833.⁵⁹ This was because Moshoeshoe introduced a system to ensure food security through cooperative fieldwork, or, as Bessant and Muringai called it, communal work parties known as ‘*Nhimbe*’ in Zimbabwe.⁶⁰ In the Basotho Kingdom, it was known as *Matsema* or *Letsema*, which, in its simplest form, meant providing labour for ploughing, hoeing, and harvesting.⁶¹ This formed the basis of agricultural production that the missionaries and other

⁵⁶ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 39.

⁵⁷ MMA, Sekese, ‘Thaba tse ling tsa khale’, *Leselinyana*, 21 July 1914, see also Sanders, ‘*Throwing Down White Man*’, 19.

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*.

⁵⁹ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 31.

⁶⁰ L. Bessant, E. Muringai, ‘Peasants, Businessmen, and Moral Economy in the Chiweshe Reserve, Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930–1968’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4 (1993), 551–592.

⁶¹ V. G. J. Sheddick, *Land tenure in Basutoland*, (1954), 82.

Europeans who came into the region found the Basotho doing. This way, most of the Basotho became agriculturalists by default. Thus, while there was no agricultural college to teach them systematic methods of ploughing and hoeing, they did it in their own way, influenced by the circumstances they had faced and by what the environment allowed them to survive on.⁶² I contend that although the acknowledgement of the African agrarian systems was assessed in comparison to European agricultural systems, it also reveals that they were farming and productive.

On the other hand, *Matsema* extended from field labour to any form of labour required by the chief. These labour calls mainly were for men in his territory, unlike the friendly fieldwork parties, which were inclusive of men and women of the territory. Sheddick stressed that men who absconded from these labour calls were punished.⁶³ Moshoeshoe did not regard the provision of food in the territory of the Basotho as the key feature of *Matsema*, but also as a sign of loyalty to his leadership. He allowed some of the senior chiefs he chose to call *Matsema* for personal fieldwork and for *lira* in their areas of jurisdiction. This expanded the Basotho's agricultural fields. As agrarian yields increased, so did the Basotho population, through people who continued to seek refuge under the Basotho Kingdom and through intermarriages within Sotho society and with their neighbours.⁶⁴ I argue that the Basotho demonstrated their intensive agricultural production way before their interaction with the missionaries and colonialism.

Mafisa and *Maboella* were the other core indigenous practices that ensured the welfare of people, animals, and the environment. *Mafisa* is a long-term livestock loan between wealthy

⁶² Sheddick, *Land tenure in Basutoland*, 84.

⁶³ Sheddick, *Land tenure in Basutoland*, 82.

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*.

individuals and those of lower socioeconomic status. The chief owned more cattle than other men in the territory.⁶⁵ This was so because all the raided cattle belonged to the chief. He distributed the cattle to his subjects through the chiefs and minor chiefs all over the territory as a loan. In exchange, he allowed them to use the cattle for their welfare while they herded them for the King.⁶⁶ Hence, Eldredge stresses that *Mafisa* helped Moshoeshoe expand his territory because many people followed him for his generosity.⁶⁷ The pastures were controlled through a system known as *Maboella*. Anthropologist Ian Hamnett, in his book *Chieftainship and Legitimacy: An Anthropological Study of Executive Law in Lesotho*, argued that *Maboella* was an integral part that established the chiefs' authority and helped maintain social order.⁶⁸ He described it as follows,

Maboella is used in cases involving land resources. *Maboella* and *Liremo* include reed beds, trees, and woods not allocated to households, as well as other similar sources of supply. Still, the term is most often applied to pastureland and refers to mountain grazing grounds where cattle are driven for summer grazing and are withdrawn from arable use. Grazing in these areas is permitted only at certain times of year, as laid down by the chief who controls them. However, once the leboella is open, all those who fall within the permitted category of chiefly allegiance can use them equally. Leboella constitutes a second, parallel resource alongside arable lands and is highly valued. The grazing rights are essentially diffuse: they give a category of people the right to use any part of a large pasture area from the time the leboella is open until the onset of winter and the long trek home. The chief has the right to open the leboella, and he administers the land as a national asset. The chief is not allowed to manipulate it for personal gain or even choose between one person and another, as he does when allocating arable land.⁶⁹

This way, livestock was decentralized, and the availability of land allowed cattle to be grazed in different areas, thereby preventing overgrazing or overstocking. It should be noted that I did not find the pre-colonial terms for overgrazing and overstocking during this research. However, considering the meaningful purpose of *Maboella* and *Mafisa* among the Basotho, it served

⁶⁵ This was so because all the cattle obtained through cattle raiding were surrendered to the chief. He later distributed the cattle to his subjects as he saw fit, but he remained in possession of the large herd throughout the pre-colonial era.

⁶⁶ E. Eldredge, 'An Economic History of Lesotho in the Nineteenth Century' (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1986), 86.

⁶⁷ Eldredge, 'An Economic History of Lesotho', 87.

⁶⁸ I. Hamnett, *Chieftainship and Legitimacy: An Anthropological Study of Executive Law in Lesotho* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 64-65.

⁶⁹ Hamnett, *Chieftainship and Legitimacy*, 65.

those purposes. They were not just daily livelihood strategies but also practices of maintaining and governing the environment. Overall, the Basotho viewed these systems as practical means of ensuring food security and participated loyally. In contrast, the practices also led the King to earn the loyalty and patronage of the Basotho, including for their land and livestock. However, this indicates the exploitation of the subjects through the centralisation of resources to the ruling class only.

While Thaba Bosiu became a defensive fortress for the Basotho people, it continued to experience raids by neighbouring chiefs, such as Sekonyela, chief of the Tlokwa, who was also trying to expand his chiefdom in the late 1820s. Damane and Sanders argued that in 1829, there were only two chiefdoms of importance in the Caledon valley: Moshoeshoe's Sotho at Thaba Bosiu and Sekonyela's Tlokwa at Marabeng.⁷⁰ Hereafter, rivalries continued, as Sekonyela sought to be the principal chief in the area, while Moshoeshoe seemed to be leading. Hence, Sekonyela never stopped pursuing his ambitions. One Wesleyan missionary, Richard Giddy, wrote a letter describing the unrest in the area. He said,

The primary source of unrest in this area was the violent, unstable, and ambitious Sekonyela, who failed to accept the presence of rivals such as Moshoeshoe in his near neighbourhood and lived in constant enmity with the Basotho. He continues his marauding exploits and holds the surrounding country in anxiety and alarm. The result is that our missions in and near the country that belongs to him have become depopulated, and the people are drawn off to other places, where they obtain better protection for their cattle. Some have gone over to Moshoeshoe, and others to Thaba Nchu.⁷¹

The Afrikaners also attacked him under Piet Wet Voet with firearms, and in 1830, he had a similar encounter with Ntlo-e-kholo, another chief who behaved like Sekonyela.⁷² It is believed that Moshoeshoe enlisted the support of outside forces, such as missionaries, to strengthen his

⁷⁰ M. Damane, *Lithoko, Sotho Praise Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 3.

⁷¹ MMA, Letter exchanged between Reverend R. Giddy, of Thaba Nchu and Wesleyan Superiors, 6 December 1841.

⁷² Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland*, 40.

power and protect his people from further attacks. Based on these continuous incursions and past experiences, Moshoeshoe recognized the need to engage external forces to maintain his reputation and stature among the chiefs of Southern Africa.

Moshoeshoe formed alliances with other chiefs to counter external pressures that threatened the Basotho kingdom's security. He paid tribute to Motuoane, the Tswana chief, to preserve peace. On the other hand, Moshoeshoe paid homage to defeated groups, such as the Ndebele in present-day South Africa, by offering cattle to earn their loyalty.⁷³ I argue that Moshoeshoe had learned from previous attacks by Sekonyela that other groups sought to remain independent; the only way to achieve this was through raiding others. Thus, by rewarding his enemies with what they needed, the chances of being attacked again were reduced. Moshoeshoe pardoned those who were accused of witchcraft. This showed that Moshoeshoe wanted a peaceful Basotho nation as desired by Mohlomi. However, the peaceful nation he wanted was short-lived. The recurrent raids from neighbouring indigenous chiefs and the migrants flooded the northern part of their territory. This unsettled the Basotho. In response, Moshoeshoe opened the territory to external interventions to protect his kingdom from external political pressures. Hence, in 1833, he found himself with the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society.

The effects of Basotho and Missionaries' relations on Basotho livelihoods c.1830-1883

Relations between the Missionaries and Africans in Southern Africa during the nineteenth century were complex. On the one hand, scholars consider missionaries as agents of imperialism.⁷⁴ It argues that the missionary work was centred on the assimilation, cultural

⁷³ Sanders, *Moshoeshoe Chief of the Sotho*, 13.

⁷⁴ For critical analysis of the missionary work in Southern Africa see the following works by S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Colonial Modernity and the African Worldview: Theorising and Historicising Religious Encounters in South-

invasion, and indigenisation of Africans to the European way of living through Christianity. On the other hand, other scholars view missionaries as instruments for spreading European cultural norms and values among the indigenous peoples of Africa.⁷⁵ These norms and values paved the way for the political and economic dominance of European powers throughout colonial rule. In the context of the Basotho, the PEMS played a dual role in the process of capitalism and colonialism. Indeed, they converted, educated, and became foreign officers for Basotho external affairs; however, this section focuses on how the relations between PEMS and Basotho altered and transformed the landscape and livelihoods. It focuses on the changing notions of land tenure, agrarian systems, and conservation patterns of the Basotho as they interacted with the missionaries. It argues that the interventions and interactions between the Basotho and the missionaries increasingly moved beyond matters of faith, drawing both groups into a more expansive terrain of negotiation, influence, and contestation.

As a result, missionary engagement became deeply entangled with Basotho political and social life, setting the stage for a significant shift in their relationship over time. The Basotho-missionary relationship had begun on a positive note. The Basotho had heard of the positive works of missionaries among other indigenous groups on the coast and in the central portions of present-day South Africa. For instance, the extraordinary influence of Robert Moffat, a missionary from the London Missionary Society, on Moselekatse, a dreadful warrior, to make

Western Zimbabwe,' *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*, 27, 2 (2011), 100; C. J. Kaunda and R. R. Hewitt, 'Together Towards Life: Reconceptualising Mission-Formation in Changing Landscape of World Christianity,' *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 96 (2015), 1–11; C. J. Kaunda, 'Imagining a Just and Equitable African Christian Community: A Critical Analysis of the Contribution of Theological Education Fund/Ecumenical Theological Education (1910-2012)' (PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2013), 59; J. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or How Euro-America is Evolving towards Africa Paradigm* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers CO, 2012).

⁷⁵ R. Dunch, 'Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity', *History and Theory*, 41, 3 (2002), 301-325; R. J. Priest, 'Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist', *Current Anthropology*, 42, 1 (2001), 29-68; W. J. Moses, 'Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, and William H. Ferris's the African Abroad, 1911' *Journal of Education*, 173, 1 (1991), 76-90.

peace with others, led Africans to believe that missionaries possessed magical powers that Africans did not.⁷⁶ Indigenous groups saw the Griquas as transforming into a wealthy agricultural community under the guidance of missionaries.⁷⁷ The PEMS missionaries, upon their arrival the previous year at Table Bay, hoping to minister to the Bahurutsi, found the group broken up, impoverished, and scattered. Thus, Moshoeshoe's request was a prospective avenue worth exploring.⁷⁸ I posit that this background initially led the two parties involved to have a cordial relationship.

Upon arrival at Thaba Bosiu, the Paris Evangelical Missionaries Eugene Casalis, Thomas Arbousset, and Constant Gosselin were welcomed by Moshoeshoe as follows:

My heart is white with joy; your words are great and good. It is enough for me to see your clothing, your arms, and the rolling houses in which you travel, to understand how much intelligence and strength you have. You see our desolation. This country was full of inhabitants. Wars have devastated it. Multitudes have perished; others are refugees in foreign lands; I remain almost alone on this rock. I have been told you can help us. You promise to do it. That is enough. That is all I want to know. Remain with us. You shall instruct us. We will do all you wish. The country is at your disposal. We can go through it together, and you can select the place that best suits you.⁷⁹

The welcome remarks reveal that the Basotho believed that the missionaries had solutions to curb external political threats. It also indicates that their leader understood that he had to offer the missionaries something to keep them. Thus, Moshoeshoe and his people were open to European customs and values. The missionaries, according to Casalis, considered this reception to be the will of God, given that they had been received warmly by other indigenous groups in Southern Africa.⁸⁰ Informed by this, one can argue that the relationship became a quid pro quo

⁷⁶ J. Du Plessis, *A History of Christian Missions in South Africa*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1911), 190.

⁷⁷ Du Plessis, *A History of Christian Missions*, 191.

⁷⁸ Du Plessis, *A History of Christian Missions*, 192.

⁷⁹ MMA, Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, 183-184.

⁸⁰ MMA, Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, 185.

at this point. The reception shaped the missionaries' attitudes towards the Basotho and their livelihoods, and vice versa.

The acquisition and utilisation of land by the missionaries in the territory of the Basotho marked a change in the Basotho's social and economic structures. The land was communally owned, and only the Basotho had land rights. However, the missionaries were allowed access to land by Moshoeshe under usufruct terms. Moshoeshe was its custodian as king. He proposed the Mokhoarane base as a suitable spot for their mission station, so that it could act as a buffer between the Basotho and their attackers across the Mokhoarane valley.⁸¹ The missionaries chose Morija.⁸² Casalis stated that they decided on Morija because it supplied firewood.⁸³ Despite the political and environmental considerations mentioned above, the missionaries were accepted among the Basotho. This opened the territory to European social and economic ways, which were parallel to the indigenous norms.

The King also ordered a group of Basotho men and women to settle around the mission station and assist in establishing the mission, as well as with other tasks the missionaries needed.⁸⁴ Sanders argues that the Basotho were Moshoeshe's people in every sense; their identity as a chiefdom was not by being Basotho but by their recognition of him as their chief.⁸⁵ Sanders argues that Moshoeshe placed his sons in charge of the Basotho villages established near the mission to reduce the likelihood that his followers would rise against him.⁸⁶ Conceivably, he

⁸¹ Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, 48.

⁸² MMA, Report from T. Arbousset to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, July 1833.

⁸³ MMA, Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, 188.

⁸⁴ See P. Sanders, *Moshoeshe Chief of the Sotho* (London: Heinemann, 1975) for the details of established villages in Morija from December 1833.

⁸⁵ Sanders, *Throwing Down the White Man*, 19.

⁸⁶ Sanders, *Throwing Down the White Man*, 20.

may have done this to assimilate the missionaries into Basotho culture or to ensure that the Basotho in this region continued to subscribe to their indigenous customs. Archival records produced by missionaries and colonial officials often depict the Basotho and the missionaries as cordial toward one another.⁸⁷ This could also suggest that Moshoeshoe's decision to settle the missionaries among Basotho men and women was not only to assist them with establishing a mission but also a deliberate attempt to integrate them into Basotho social and cultural life. Casalis, in his book, *The Basutos*, highlighted that his relationship with the Basotho evolved as he got to understand them and their culture; he grew to like some of their practices, food, and way of thinking.⁸⁸ However, the relationship between Robert Moffat and the Tswana was different, and his writing does not reveal any attachment, as Casalis demonstrates.

However, the missionaries also showed that they wanted to maintain their European standards despite what they saw and experienced with the Basotho. For instance, traditional Basotho houses were constructed with mud and thatched with grass in the territory; they insisted on getting sites that suited their European culture, rather than those of the Basotho. One of the missionaries in his journal noted that,

Thaba Bosiu did not appear to offer us the advantages we desired. Wood for building was lacking. We must have a site where we can build houses and cultivate the ground according to our ideas and habits. Our buildings and plantations would also serve as a model for the Basotho, whom we regretted seeing dwelling in huts and living in such a precarious manner.⁸⁹

Moshoeshoe allowed the missionaries to have their own will within the mission stations. Still, their ideas and practices clashed with the *Maboella* system, which was an integral part of Basotho environmental governance. I argue that at this point, the missionaries did not consider

⁸⁷ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*; Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*; Basutoland Records 1852 -1868; Germond, *Chronicles of Basuto*, 356.

⁸⁸ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 109.

⁸⁹ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 183.

why the Basotho did not rely on trees as part of their livelihoods, either for housing or for fuel; the Basotho had come to terms with their environment and preserved the little forests they had. However, the missionaries were absorbed in maintaining their way of life without considering the environmental realities. For the Basotho, this demonstrates that their customs and systems could be altered in exchange for statehood at the expense of the environment.

The missionaries' need to sustain European livelihoods in Basotho territory superseded their judgment of Basotho lifestyles and environment. Their environmental standards were limited to the environment in which they originated, namely, France.⁹⁰ This was a different ecological and topographical region from theirs, but they still compared the environments in their writings. For instance, one of the missionaries who was also a carpenter, Maeder noted that, 'wood can only be found in willows, wild olives, *kraaihout*, and the stinkwood. None of this wood is suitable for building purposes; besides its inferior quality, it is small and twisted.'⁹¹ The remarks 'inferior and small' reveal the comparative mindset of the missionaries. In 1837, another missionary, Gosselin, wrote that, 'most of the trees of this country tend to develop the most fantastic embranchments and protuberances, rather than to adopt the vertical habit. Nevertheless, we got younger trunks to meet our requirements.'⁹² This led the missionaries to introduce exotic trees, such as Eucalyptus and pine, to provide easy access to timber for future projects in the territory.⁹³ Although this happened within mission stations, it exposed Basotho to new socio-environmental systems. Before then, the cutting of grass and trees was done communally, despite these resources being needed for individual use, with the chiefs' permission to preserve them.⁹⁴ However, the missionaries did so without restraint, showing the

⁹⁰ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 183-184.

⁹¹ MMA, Maeder, 19 July 1836.

⁹² MMA, Report from C. Gosselin to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, July 1837.

⁹³ MMA, Report from C. Gosselin to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, July 1837.

⁹⁴ I. Hamnett, *Chieftainship and Legitimacy* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

society that customs and beliefs could be altered. This reveals that the Basotho's social and economic structures were gradually changing.

There were cultural differences between the missionaries and the Basotho, but their relationship remained cordial. For instance, the Basotho believed that land should be communally owned to prevent it from falling into the hands of non-Basotho. On the other hand, the missionaries believed land could be bought or sold.⁹⁵ Consequently, they considered the gifts they presented to Moshoeshoe to be equivalent to the purchase price.⁹⁶ The Basotho considered it a token of appreciation for their hospitality, as it was part of their custom for visitors or subjects to offer gifts to *Morena oa Moholo*.⁹⁷ In this regard, Moshoeshoe and his subjects believed that the missionaries were grateful for the land they had been provided with, along with their people. There were no interpreters in the written documents I accessed to defend this exchange and the meaning attached to it by the parties involved. Thus, these divergent views eventually led to a conflict between one of the missionaries, Adolphe Mabile, and *Morena oa Moholo* in the 1860s over land developments at Morija Mission carried out without Moshoeshoe's approval.⁹⁸ Mabile had created a stone wall around his garden and orchard, and Moshoeshoe believed that Mabile was claiming ownership of the land by enclosing land outside the mission station. Hence, he made it clear that no property was to be granted on title or to be sold in his territory.⁹⁹ Beyond the issue of land, differences were also in other socio-economic spheres. As African norms and values were different from those of Europeans, the missionaries were against polygamy, initiation schools, and other indigenous practices of the Basotho that they

⁹⁵ E.W. Smith, *The Mabilles of Basutoland* (Morija: Morija Museum and Archives, 1939), 8.

⁹⁶ Smith, *The Mabilles of Basutoland*, 9.

⁹⁷ National University of Lesotho Archives (hereafter NUL), G. M. Theal, 'Letter from Moshoeshoe to the Secretary Government, 15 May 1845, in Basutoland Records, 1833-1852.

⁹⁸ MMA, Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland, 1833-1933*, 11.

⁹⁹ NUL, G. M. Theal, *Basutoland Records*, Vol. 111.

considered ‘ungodly’ practices.¹⁰⁰ One of the missionaries, Gosselin, after his encounter with the Basotho and their culture, said, ‘The ability to understand culture requires remarkable intelligence to understand that common sense is by no means common.’¹⁰¹ Such perceptions showed that relations between the two were not always smooth; differences in norms and values often sparked conflict.

While other missionaries canvased Africans and their practices as ‘primitive,’ the French missionaries painted a different picture.¹⁰² The missionaries appreciated other aspects of Basotho livelihoods, despite their cultural differences. They observed the Basotho’s agrarian patterns and found they were productive agriculturalists. The missionaries explained the Basotho agriculture as follows,

The Basotho had acquired a certain superiority over the surrounding communities, and they had attained a certain degree of development, at any rate in so far as agricultural progress is concerned. The Basotho are better agriculturalists; they plough in patches, here and there, in the most disorderly fashion. Despite the imperfection of their work, the earth is turned. It yields in abundance millet and maize, the stalks of which sometimes reach a height of seven to eight feet.¹⁰³

Although this quote demonstrates that African agricultural practices were productive, it also reflects the ambivalent gaze of Eurocentric comments on Basotho agrarian practices. On one hand, the quote acknowledges Basotho ‘superiority’ and development compared to the surrounding chiefdoms. It points out the indigenous innovation and adaptation in their agriculture. In the same manner, it downgrades the practice by viewing it through the systematic order of European notions.

¹⁰⁰ MMA, Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland, 1833-1933*, 45.

¹⁰¹ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 7.

¹⁰² See Robert Moffat’s evaluations of BaTswana in J. Du Plessis, *A History of Christian Missions in South Africa* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1911), 190.

¹⁰³ MMA, Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland*, 29.

The missionaries also documented the Basotho as possessing a sophisticated understanding of astronomy and ecological knowledge, as evidenced by their management of their agrarian and conservation systems to sustain their livelihoods.¹⁰⁴ Owing to this extensive knowledge and use of fields among the Basotho, Thaba Bosiu already had considerable flocks and fields cultivated with care in 1833.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the interest shown by French missionaries in the agrarian systems of the Basotho, rather than their conversion to Christianity, makes them agents of imperialism, just like other missionary groups.

Besides the Basotho cultivation pattern, the environmental conditions at Thaba Bosiu and in areas near the capital encouraged the missionaries to teach the Basotho other agricultural methods and crops they believed could be successful in this region. One of the leading missionaries, Eugene Casalis, described the topography, within and around the Basotho capital kingdom, Thaba Bosiu, as follows,

The soils are exceedingly fertile. Nearly everywhere, a foundation of clay is found, covered with a blackish soil of the richest nature, three or two feet in depth. The grass reaches such a height that it is necessary to destroy it every winter using fire, and it is perhaps to these annual conflagrations that we must ascribe the remarkable scarcity of trees. These are hardly ever to be found except on the banks of the rivers and in high mountain passes. The streams of water that meet one at almost every step generally run over a bed of basalt and wash down a significant quantity of opaque or crystallised quartz, agates, and cornelians.¹⁰⁶

The availability of natural resources, such as land and water, which were crucial to agricultural production, made it easier for missionaries to introduce new methods and crops to the indigenous Basotho communities. Missionaries introduced new cereals, various seeds, new types of *lephutse* (pumpkins), new types of *linawa* (beans), *moroho* (vegetables), and various exotic trees, such as pines and gum trees.¹⁰⁷ Casalis noted that most of the crops were new

¹⁰⁴ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 165.

¹⁰⁵ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 19.

varieties of crops the Basotho already had, such as beans, pumpkins, and vegetables, which were part of their diet before their encounter with the missionaries. It should be noted that the Basotho also traded with their neighbours, such as the Tswana, who had an early encounter with the London Missionary Society missionaries. The Basotho had encountered the Portuguese through trade and got maize. Germond stated that the Basotho were familiar with maize production, but it was not popular among them; they preferred sorghum and millet as their primary grain, for their resistance to the region's unprecedented weather conditions and their high yield.¹⁰⁸

Among the introduced crops, wheat significantly altered the Basotho's agrarian and conservation practices. The missionaries found the Basotho producing millet to secure food, which they described as plentiful; however, they argued that the surplus was almost unremunerative.¹⁰⁹ Thus, by encouraging irrigation and the growing of wheat, a remunerative crop to the missionaries, the Basotho would be open to external trade. The missionaries also considered the temperatures suitable for the winter cropping. For instance, they observed that after millet, maize, and sorghum were grown together and harvested quickly, the fields would be empty during the winter. Hence, the missionaries believed this could be an opportunity to plant wheat, export it, and reach a broader market. *Morena e Moholo* was not keen on the missionaries' push to make them market-oriented producers, perhaps fearing that his subjects could lose interest in him as their leader if they were given economic freedom. Additionally, wheat was labour-intensive, unlike their sorghum and millet.

¹⁰⁸ MMA, Germond, 'Chronicles of Basutoland', 325.

¹⁰⁹ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 66.

Casalis argues that the missionaries were aware that the indigenous groups in Southern Africa were being inexorably drawn into the orbit of a commercial, and later an industrial, South Africa dominated by European values, technology, and culture.¹¹⁰ In this logic, the missionaries assumed responsibility for equipping the Basotho with specific skills that would benefit them within the capitalist system. This includes the introduction of the plough, irrigation schemes, and new crops that could easily find a market. However, the fact that they were aware of the regional changes awaiting the Basotho and continued to shape them in that direction reveals that the missionaries were indeed agents of colonialism in Africa.

Some Basotho were not keen on the missionary agrarian innovations. At a May 1844 annual conference (to discuss internal affairs between the missionaries and the Basotho) held at Thaba Bosiu, irrigation was one of the subjects.¹¹¹ One missionary, Arbousset, said,

The Basotho converts recognised the advantages of the proposed innovation, but Moshoeshoe opposed it, mainly due to security concerns (social and political). The Basotho are passionate about growing millet, which thrives without irrigation. Still, this commodity is unmarketable, and the price it fetches is by no means proportionate to the care it demands. The station offers few facilities for growing wheat, but there are several good springs in the neighbourhood. The Christians endeavour to obtain permission from Moshoeshoe to sow ground which they might irrigate, but the latter has hitherto discouraged them with all sorts of delays and invasions.¹¹²

The ordinary Basotho were open to change, *even those in Leribe*, and the leaders were not. I argue that the leaders feared giving Europeans too much agency. In terms of power, the indigenous ruler had more power than the missionaries. However, allowing missionaries to make changes undermined the Basotho's socio-political hierarchy. But for the missionaries, this revealed a system of governance that lacked economic sense and dwelt on excessive supremacy. However, the missionaries understood that the Basotho controlled their

¹¹⁰ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 32.

¹¹¹ MMA, Annual Conference of the Paris Missionaries Report, Thaba Bosiu, May 1844.

¹¹² MMA, Annual Conference of the Paris Missionaries Report, Thaba Bosiu, May 1844.

environment. I argue that Basotho relations with missionaries revealed a complex interplay of selective appropriation, negotiation, resistance, and adaptation.

Despite the fears, the King eventually allowed the people to practise winter cropping with the help of missionaries. The cultivation of wheat enabled the Basotho to relocate to the lowlands and to establish permanent settlements far from the quarters of *Morena e Moholo*. This way, a significant number of Basotho moved to the Foothill and Lowland regions of the territory; these two topographical zones constitute the greater part of the Leribe district, making it a more populous area than Thaba Bosiu, where water and arable land had depleted.¹¹³ This was so because of population growth, intensive agricultural production, and pastoralism close to the King's capital. It is noteworthy that as the Basotho population increases, so did their livestock. Thus, inevitably, they had to disperse and relocate throughout the Kingdom. These conditions combined to make the Lowlands become the dominant wheat-producing area. Leribe was one of the significant areas mentioned in colonial and missionary records as flat with large fields of wheat viewed from the other side of the Mohokare River.¹¹⁴ Following this excessive wheat production in Leribe, many trading stores were established there, owned by Europeans.¹¹⁵ However, there were no colonial boundaries yet; it was simply Moshoeshoe's territory, recognised by the Cape Colony, which approached it as visitors and recognised him as the chief of the Basotho in their writings.

¹¹³ The regional names used are of the present-day Lesotho because at this point, clear boundaries of regions and district names started with the colonial administration.

¹¹⁴ MMA, Ellenberger, *A Century of Missionary Work in Basutoland*, 201.

¹¹⁵ See M. Thabane, 'Aspects of Colonial Economy and Society, 1868-1966', in N.W. Pule and M. Thabane (eds), *Aspects of the Political Economy of Lesotho, 1500-2000* (Department of History, National University of Lesotho, Roma, 2002)

With the rise of agricultural production in Leribe and other lowland districts, Moshoeshoe established his jurisdiction by appointing one of his sons, Molapo, as the senior chief to protect it from invasion or subordination by other powerful chiefs in the region, such as Sekonyela. Molapo became the senior chief in charge of the people and other subchiefs in Leribe and other northern districts, which were parts of the Lowlands. This helped Moshoeshoe remain in charge of the Basotho even after they moved away from him, because his son reported to him. This shows that the Basotho strategised, negotiated, and sometimes instrumentalised missionaries to pursue their own political and social goals.¹¹⁶

Trade also affected the Basotho's environmental management systems. Dutton argues that the wheat grown by the Basotho in the lowlands, such as Leribe, was mainly for export because it was more challenging to prepare than their millet and sorghum.¹¹⁷ Timothy Keegan also states that during the 1840s and 1850s, wheat was imported from Basutoland, and the Eastern Cape was heavily dependent on Basotho grain supplies.¹¹⁸ This reveals that there was indeed concentrated wheat production and trade, but there are no statistical records showing changes in the numbers for this period. However, the scholarship on the development of agrarian capitalism by Colin Bundy emphasises that black peasants in the nineteenth century successfully responded to a growing market by investing in agricultural technologies and new crops, as well as by expanding their production.¹¹⁹ The high returns in wheat production in areas such as Leribe attracted men to concentrate on fieldwork than before, and boys were sent to herd livestock as more land needed to be cleared to produce wheat. It should be noted that

¹¹⁶ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Dutton, *The Basuto of Basutoland*, 63.

¹¹⁸ T. Keegan, 'Trade Accumulation and Impoverishment: Mercantile Capital and the Economic Transformations of Lesotho and the Conquered Territory', 1870-1920, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12 (1986), 198.

¹¹⁹ Bundy, 'The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry', 369-88; Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, 285; Journal des Missions Evangeliques, 1874 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 462.

millet, sorghum, and maize production also continued, so there was enough grain in the territory. Thus, there is room to argue that the Basotho were at a vantage point than their neighbours in the production of grain. This came at the cost of compromising the Basotho's social and environmental values.

Furthermore, the large-scale production of wheat in Leribe and other lowland areas changed the agrarian relations of production. Following the introduction of the plough, crop cultivation became patriarchal due to the high economic returns and the intensive labour required to pull it.¹²⁰ Hence, in some ways, this relieved women from the initial sowing labour. However, tasks such as weeding, harvesting, and winnowing grain remained typically associated with women. Therefore, agricultural relations of production were now negotiated as needed. Due to the high returns in wheat production, most Basotho managed to purchase livestock, inspired by fellow indigenes who returned with cattle after years of working in the Cape.¹²¹ Thus, agriculture drove the accumulation of cattle and other livestock, such as sheep and goats. However, the Basotho were more focused on external trade; they continued to capitalise on their land to increase cereal exports.¹²² Thus, even grazing lands were put under cultivation in the Leribe area and other lowland areas, further disturbing the *Maboella* system.

Between Resilience and Encroachment of the Basotho Kingdom, c.1850-1883

Significant political, economic, and environmental shifts overshadowed the period between 1850 and 1883 in Lesotho and, more broadly, in Leribe. Historians such as Gill, Machobane,

¹²⁰ Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 179.

¹²¹ The first Basuto men who were working in the Cape came back with cattle and instilled hope in other indigenes that commoners can also own cattle like their leaders.

¹²² See J. Kimble, 'Towards an Understanding of the Political Economy of 1830-1885', (MA thesis, National University of Lesotho, 1978).

and Eldredge, in different works, described this period as an era of indigenous statecraft and ecological adaptation, and the Basotho faced more intense external pressures from the Afrikaners, the British, and from chiefdoms surrounding their territory.¹²³ Scholars such as Eldredge foregrounded African agency in the environmental and political developments of this period.¹²⁴ She situated Moshoeshoe's diplomatic engagement with external groups within broader patterns of African state formation. On the other hand, Conz and Showers, through their individual works, emphasised how local ecological knowledge shaped agricultural adaptations long before colonial conservation emerged. Thus, this section builds on these works to show that the Africans were adaptive to change; they negotiated and strategised their local and regional relations through political flexibility and environmental ingenuity.

Politically, the 1850s were a period of consolidation and crisis. In the first section, I demonstrated how Moshoeshoe I had unified different clans and refugees into a cohesive polity. Firstly, the year 1843 marked the beginning of the first formal Basotho diplomatic and territorial foundations, which led to the political and economic tensions that unfolded between 1850 and 1883, culminating in the signing of the Napier Treaty.¹²⁵ Casalis advised the diplomatic approach to the attacks faced by the Basotho. It should be noted that Casalis had a close relationship with Moshoeshoe and served as an advisor. However, Eldredge, Comaroff, and Comaroff reframe missionaries as agents of knowledge production and power translation, and they concur that they played an essential role in redefining sovereignty, land, and laws in ways advantageous to colonial authorities.¹²⁶ The Comaroff stress that their linguistic

¹²³ See Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*; L.L. B. Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho, 1800–1966*, (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990); Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*.

¹²⁴ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 97.

¹²⁵ NUL, Sir George Napier Treaty 5, October 1843, in G. M. Theal, *Basutoland Records, 1833-1852*.

¹²⁶ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*; Comaroff, and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*.

translations and moral narratives gave colonial officials intellectual and ethical justification for formalising imperial control over African polities, masquerading as protection or order.¹²⁷

In the case of the Basotho, Casalis advised Moshoeshoe to report his adversaries to Major Sir George Napier, the then Governor of the Cape Colony, anticipating that the governor would rule in favour of the Basotho. However, the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir George Napier, the Afrikaner representative, Adam Kok of Philippolis, and Moshoeshoe, the leader of the Basotho, signed the Napier Treaty.¹²⁸ Still, the results were unfavourable for the Basotho. The Treaty was lengthy, and here I focused on the parts that resonate with this section and, more broadly, with this study. Some of the terms read as follows:

1. The territory of Moshoeshoe is bounded from the west, from the junction of the Caledon with the Gariep or Orange Rivers to the sources of those rivers: on the south by the Gariep River from the intersection aforesaid: on the north by a line extending from about 25 to 30 miles north of the Caledon River, excepting near to its source, and its junction with the Gariep, where the lands of Sekonyela come close upon its northern bank.
2. Moshoeshoe should assist the colonial authorities in any enterprise which they may find it necessary to undertake for the recovery of property, or the apprehension of the immigrants who, having been pursued from the Colony, may have taken refuge in any part of his country.
3. Moshoeshoe is to engage the colonial authorities of any intended predatory or hostile attempt against the Colony, which may come to his knowledge, and to co-operate cordially and in good faith with the colonial authorities in preserving peace and extending civilisation among the indigenous communities. Moshoeshoe will receive £75 per annum, as he desires, in arms and ammunition or in currency. Kok will receive £100 and a certain supply of arms and ammunition.¹²⁹

The Treaty established defined borders between the Basotho Kingdom and the colonial frontier of the settlers in the Orange River region. I posit that by setting vague and contested boundaries, the Napier Treaty paved the way for a new spatial logic of colonial mapping and territorialisation in the region. The vague boundaries left the fertile Caledon Valley open to

¹²⁷ Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, 27.

¹²⁸ MMA, Papers of the Kaffirs, No.424, xxxviii, *Basutoland Records*, 55.

¹²⁹ MMA, Sir George Napier Treaty 5, October 1843.

settler claims. This, in turn, was one of the most significant triggers of the Basotho-Boer wars that followed in 1858 and ended in 1868.

The territorial boundaries had economic and environmental repercussions for the Basotho in Leribe and throughout the territory. The Afrikaners continued to expand into Basotho territory and claimed the lands west of the Mohokare River as their own. This led to the first Basotho-Afrikaner war in 1858 over this territory. Moshoeshoe also claimed it as his own because the people under his care had their ancestral home there, and those who sought refuge under him or were part of the territories he had conquered, as was the case with other Kings in the region, such as Tshaka. Thus, intensified encroachment caused war. With the missionaries' advice, Moshoeshoe approached the British for assistance against the Afrikaner and African invaders in his territory. Historian Leonard Thompson argues that Moshoeshoe's relations with the British authorities were formed on the basis that he wanted his kingdom to be spared from the pressures exerted by the European settlers expanding their settlements in his territory.¹³⁰ However, British intervention disadvantaged Moshoeshoe as they took advantage of his supposed peaceful demeanour. Although Moshoeshoe and his people accepted the situation to maintain peaceful relations with the Cape government, their relationship with the missionaries changed as more treaties were signed between the Basotho and the Europeans.

The Treaty of Thaba Bosiu, signed in 1866, was intended to address territorial disputes and end hostilities. Again, the missionaries played a mediating role because Moshoeshoe anticipated peace and negotiation as means of statecraft. However, the treaty exposed the limitations of African political agency in the emerging imperial order. This was because the

¹³⁰ Thompson, *Surviving in Two Worlds*, 125.

Treaty of Thaba Bosiu was signed between the Basotho and the British. However, it was intended to address conflicts between the Basotho and the Boers over territorial claims.

¹³¹Nevertheless, the Treaty of Thaba Bosiu favoured the Basotho to some extent. It recognised some of the territorial boundaries established under the Napier Treaty. Still, others were not observed due to the treaty's vague terms, which limited Moshoeshe and the Basotho's ability to appeal for territorial expansion in the region. However, the territory established by the British for the Basotho extended into the territory of an indigenous neighbouring chiefdom, led by Chief Sekonyela.¹³² The territory north of the Caledon was now considered to fall under Moshoeshe's authority because the other chiefs, like Sekonyela, had no signed agreement with the British. Sekonyela's relationship with the European settlers was pronounced weak and unfavourable by Sanders, and Thompson concurs with him, extending it to the point that even Sekonyela's relations with other chiefs like Moshoeshe were not cordial.¹³³ However, this conflict over boundaries promoted by the imperial effort was intended to erode African models of flexible frontiers and negotiated coexistence that had existed before.¹³⁴ I posit that this mismatch and ambiguity in territorial boundaries foreshadowed later disputes that eventually led to the Basotho losing more land, including present-day areas of the Free State Province, including Thaba Nchu, which had previously been Basotho territories under the 1865 Treaty of Aliwal. The Basotho lost two-thirds of their arable land to the Afrikaners, thereby limiting the availability of agricultural land in Leribe and other lowland areas.

¹³¹ NUL, The Treaty of Thaba Bosiu in *Basutoland Records*, 2, (1853-1861).

¹³² NUL, Narratives of Sekonyela's relations in *Basutoland Records*, 2, (1853-1861).

¹³³ NUL, 'Narratives of Sekonyela's relations' in *Basutoland Records*, 2, (1853-1861); for a detailed analytical discussion of Moshoeshe and Sekonyela, see Sanders, *Survival in Two Worlds*, 118-119.

¹³⁴ See T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

Environmentally, the Treaty of Thaba Bosiu and other treaties concluded with British officials during this period followed the Basotho's loss of large tracts of land, agricultural tools such as ploughs and hoes, and livestock in Leribe and other lowland areas. This, in turn, constrained their farming practices. The changing internal and external political structures led to chaos among the Basotho, particularly in the Leribe district. For instance, chiefs like Jonathan Molapo oppressed people who were not his favourites in terms of land allocation or *Maboella*. He allocated land to his family, relatives, and friends at the expense of the ordinary Basotho under his care.¹³⁵ Emile Rolland, as the acting Governor's Agent, reported that 'the Basotho of Leribe look upon the government as their protector against the chiefs, and would be glad to see the powers of the chiefs restrained and their rights recognised, especially in the direction of land rights.'¹³⁶ Some Basotho began occupying land without permission, and when challenged by their ward chiefs, they retorted that, under the Cape Government, all men are equal.¹³⁷

The Cape Government's assertion that land was equal for all created new opportunities that some Basotho sharecroppers quickly exploited. Many returning migrants brought experience from South African farms, where African producers were routinely subjected to low grain prices and restricted marketing channels, which shaped how they understood agricultural policies in Lesotho. Most of the Basotho recognised the expanding grain economy, particularly the demand for wheat and other cereals that offered better returns in the territory of the Basotho.¹³⁸ Scholars such as Bundy, Beinart, and Murray have shown that African cultivators were highly responsive to shifts in regional markets, moving strategically to locations where

¹³⁵ LNA, S9/1/1, Minutes of the Annual Public Meeting held at Maseru, 2 October 1874.

¹³⁶ LNA, L2/1/03, 'Petition of the People of Basutoland enclosed to Rolland 3 July 1880.

¹³⁷ LNA, L2/1/03, 'Petition of the People of Basutoland enclosed to Rolland 3 July 1880.

¹³⁸ DAPA, Leribe Miscellaneous Document Series, 43.

production was more profitable.¹³⁹ In this context, returning sharecroppers began occupying land in Lesotho without seeking the chiefs' permission, positioning themselves to take advantage of favourable prices and growing local demand.¹⁴⁰ Many returned with livestock accumulated during their time away, intensifying pressure on land already in demand, as most of the Basotho in the Leribe district sought to expand economic opportunities shaped by cross-border labour and agricultural markets.

However, the opportunity was constrained by the political events in the district. The succession disputes between the two sons of Molapo, Joel and Jonathan, impacted the livelihoods of the Basotho.¹⁴¹ The disputes affected the Basotho's agricultural systems: crops were burned in the fields, houses were destroyed, and cases of replacement and displacement became the norm in the district.¹⁴² This caused discomfort among the Basotho, who relied on agriculture for their livelihoods. Hence, I argue that local power dynamics affected livelihoods and environmental governance among the Basotho.

Additionally, the Convention of Aliwal North, held in 1869, reduced Basotho landholdings and increased the number of citizens in the territory.¹⁴³ The convention defined the Basotho's territory as it is today. It led most of the Basotho to conquer territories and cross the Caledon River, relocating to present-day Mohale's Hoek, Leribe, and other districts.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹See Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*; Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83; C. Murray, 'Migrant Labour and Changing Family Structure in the Rural Periphery of Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6,2 (1980), 139-156.

¹⁴⁰ LNA, G. Lagden, *The Basutos*, (London: Paternoster Row, 1909), 83-102.

¹⁴¹ For a detailed history of the succession dispute, see MMA, A.M. Sekese, 'Morena Molapo' in *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 15 August 1912.

¹⁴² Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*, 38-44.

¹⁴³ NUL, *The Convention of Aliwal North in 1869*.

¹⁴⁴ G. Lagden, *The Basutos* (London: Paternoster Row 1909), 109.

Considering that the livelihoods of Basotho were centred on agriculture, the increase in population left no ground unturned in the lowlands, which were closer to the Free State border. Yet the lowlands had already been cultivated on a large scale, which accelerated erosion. Even the grazing lands were put under cultivation, and some settlements were to accommodate the returning residents. Thus, the indigenous socio-environmental systems were altered to a larger extent.¹⁴⁵

The indigenous political systems were also altered. The Basotho in Leribe were exposed to a capitalist economy that prioritised individual prosperity over communal prosperity. The communal activities, such as *Matsema*, ordered by the chiefs, lost their significance during this period. The successful Basotho agrarian system also collided with the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley, South Africa, in 1867.¹⁴⁶ Thus, despite territorial disputes and wars, most Basotho thrived in agriculture, growing wheat that had a ready market in the South African mines. However, it should be noted that although some of the Basotho were agriculturally productive in Leribe, others lost their land in 1869 after the last official boundary lines were drawn.¹⁴⁷ Others moved to the mountainous areas, while some went to work in the mines.¹⁴⁸ The mines required a labour force, and many men in their prime from neighbouring states, including Lesotho, went to the mines to seek work. This, in turn, exposed the Basotho in Leribe to new opportunities to sustain livelihoods besides agriculture. The accumulation of wealth by ordinary people undermined the significance of chiefs and the indigenous ways of ensuring food security at this point. Stephen Gill argues that the mines exposed the Basotho to new

¹⁴⁵ Lagden, *The Basutos*, 150.

¹⁴⁶ K. Hart, and P. Padayachee. 'A History of South African Capitalism in National and Global Perspective', *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 81, 1 (2013), 55-85.

¹⁴⁷ NUL, *The Convention of Aliwal North*, 1869.

¹⁴⁸ Conz, 'Wisdom Does not Live in one House', 56.

cultures and luxuries.¹⁴⁹ Following exposure to guns for protection and processed foodstuffs, the Basotho could now afford food security and safety without relying on their chiefs. Thus, the new systems altered the indigenous political institutions.

Following the death of Moshoeshe in 1870, the Basotho faced significant political pressures. In 1871, the territory was put under the Cape Colony.¹⁵⁰ The Basotho did not favour the governance system of the Cape Colony, and they were eventually reannexed by the British in 1884. Towards the end of 1870, the Cape Government superimposed magisterial authority on that of the chiefs.¹⁵¹ The High Commissioner's regulations stated that Moshoeshe had given the territory to the Queen; that land rights were now vested in the High Commissioner, the Governor, his Agents, and Magistrates; and that the administration had the final say in territorial issues, including land allocation and boundaries; chiefs were given delegated powers.¹⁵² Hereafter, the colonial authority started expanding into the territory. In 1874, Thaba Bosiu was divided into two subdistricts: Maseru and Mafeteng.¹⁵³ In 1877, Quithing, a district south of the Orange, was separated from the Cornet Spruit District.¹⁵⁴ These new boundaries also came with magistrates and judicial courts, and the chiefs were no longer in overall control. Nonetheless, the changes in the political systems did not suppress agricultural production. The Basotho were aware of the limitations of their environment under the new realities of land dispossession.

¹⁴⁹ Gill, *A short history of Lesotho*, 120.

¹⁵⁰ Gill, *A short history of Lesotho*, 30.

¹⁵¹ NUL, 'A letter from Basuto Chiefs to James Bowker, (High Commissioner's Agent in Basutoland), 22 December 1870.

¹⁵² LNA, Basutoland High Commissioner Proclamations and Notices to 30 June 1901 and Wodehouse Regulations, 13 May 1870.

¹⁵³ Lesotho National Archives (Hereafter LNA), S9/1/3/3, Griffith to the Proprietors of the *Northern Post*, Aliwal North, 19 July 1877.

¹⁵⁴ LNA, S9/2/3/1 Davies to the Acting Governor's Agent, 1 January 1878.

Additionally, the new boundaries set in the territory under the Cape government affected Leribe. Sanders argues that in Leribe, the indigenous chiefs failed to respect the territorial boundaries introduced by the Cape government.¹⁵⁵ This was so because part of the arable and pasture lands were lost, first under the conversion of Aliwal North. Secondly, under the colonial efforts to govern the Basotho. However, the people in the district still had families to feed and livestock to herd. The people in Leribe were used to the *Maboella* system, which regulated grazing lands. The introduction of district-restricted *Maboella* compelled people to graze their livestock within their own areas rather than sending them to the mountains. This, in turn, created a shortage of pasture lands in the Lowlands because, unlike before, when chiefs and, with a few exceptions, owned cattle, most Basotho now owned cattle.¹⁵⁶ The territorial restrictions slowly began to limit the fields and grass in other parts of the territory from recovering during those seasons.

In response to the new political and ecological developments, land disputes emerged. For instance, the senior chiefs of the northern districts, Molapo and Ramanella, began to dispute boundaries over a valuable reed bed in Leribe.¹⁵⁷ Charles Griffith, the imperial representative to Basutoland, solved this by saying, ‘Moshoeshoe is dead, and his boundary lines too, and thus I rub them out. Now I am going to make a boundary and let any man try to rub it out at his peril.’¹⁵⁸ Although Griffith was fulfilling his administrative role in the above statement, he demonstrated an epistemic and political act of erasure. His words resonate with what Jean and

¹⁵⁵ Sanders, ‘*Throwing Down White Man*’.

¹⁵⁶ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 89.

¹⁵⁷ LNA, S3/5/3/1A, Memorandum showing the boundary of ward chief Ramanella in the District of Leribe, defined by Griffith, 28 November 1878.

¹⁵⁸ LNA, S3/5/3/1A, Memorandum showing the boundary of ward chief Ramanella in the District of Leribe, defined by Griffith, 28 November 1878.

John Comaroff described as ‘colonization of consciousness’, where the colonial state replaced indigenous land tenure systems with European notions of fixed borders and territorial sovereignty.¹⁵⁹

The colonial administration was aware that the increase in population and livestock was challenging to sustain in the lowlands. The population had increased from 180,000 in 1865 to 200,000 in 1873.¹⁶⁰ The colonial officials compiled this report, but they did not intervene to address the land issues. Some Basotho and other indigenous people who had moved to the Cape Colony during the *Lifaqane* period moved to Lesotho after colonial troops defeated the Basotho during the Gun War (1880-81) in the Leribe District and other districts in the territory.¹⁶¹ The people also came with their livestock. Despite population and livestock growth, the territorial boundaries remained unchanged, and the people who returned to the territory during this period had to share the available resources with the Basotho already there to sustain their livelihoods. Thus, adjusting the herding patterns was the only way out. Historian Elizabeth Elderidge, in her book *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth Century Lesotho*, emphasised that the Basotho put as much effort into sustaining their livelihoods both externally and internally.¹⁶² I contend that the Basotho in Leribe continued to adapt to the new political and demographic changes they faced.

¹⁵⁹ Comaroff, and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*.

¹⁶⁰ MMA, The Census Report on Basutoland, 1873.

¹⁶¹ MMA, The Census Report on Basutoland, 1873.

¹⁶² Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 15.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the adaptive agrarian development of the Basotho from the 1800s to 1883. It has provided a context to understand that pre-colonial states were structured before colonial influence. It reveals that the Basotho were heavily dependent on agriculture for sustenance. The chapter also highlighted various levels of inequality and the different strategies employed to manage sociopolitical insecurities. It shows the traditional practices and social norms that governed life patterns. It demonstrates how the Basotho negotiated, resisted, strategised, and interpreted European interventions within their local land and labour systems, which sustained their livelihoods. The chapter explained how relationships and attitudes between the two evolved as the imperial office began implementing policies that impacted their indigenous agrarian and conservation systems. I argue that agricultural development and conservation issues in the territory of the Basotho were shaped within the political discourses of precolonial statecraft. Thus, in the Leribe district, agrarian development and conservation issues can be best understood through the endogenous processes described in the chapters to follow. External and internal political pressures, as well as economic agreements, have shaped Lesotho's agricultural strategies and interventions. In the broader context, this chapter joins ongoing historiographical conversations on the intersection of internal and external politics with agro-environmental interventions in the agrarian history of Lesotho and Africa.

CHAPTER THREE

British Colonial Rule and Agricultural Production in Leribe District c.1884-1929

Introduction

This chapter examines how British rule from 1884 affected agrarian development in Lesotho. It primarily focuses on how governance policies, land tenure, and the position of chiefs affected agriculture. The end of Cape Rule in 1883 witnessed the commencement of British administration of Basutoland. Following a protracted armed unrest between the Afrikaners and the Sotho people in the 1860s and early 1880s, the Cape government eventually relinquished the territory to the British. In 1884, the British government appointed Sir Marshal Clarke as the territory's Resident Commissioner. The territory experienced indirect rule and lacked financial support from the imperial government, which affected its agrarian policy. Unexpected environmental misfortunes, such as droughts, bovine diseases, locust invasions, and frosts, further exacerbated the plight of peasants during this period. By 1929, the global economic downturn further constrained peasant efforts to thrive in a market-based economy. This chapter examines this new colonial posture and how peasants interacted with colonial authorities as they negotiated survival within their agrarian-based livelihoods between 1884 and 1929. In discussing these themes and aspects, the chapter is divided into four sections. The first section examines the period of political transition. The second section discusses the changes in land and agriculture policy. Section three examines peasant reactions to prevailing modes of power, and the last section investigates colonial interventions in Agrarian Policy between 1900 and 1929. Drawing on reports, letters, diaries, and court records of colonial officials, traders, chiefs, and their subordinates, the chapter illuminates the position Africans occupied amid internal and external socio-political discomforts. It highlights the complex interplay of agriculture, local traditions, and colonial policies. The chapter argues that a combination of policy failures by British administrators and ecological catastrophes disrupted peasant agrarian development at

the turn of the millennium. Global economic fluctuations hindered the development of peasant agriculture, particularly in export-oriented livestock production. However, the Basotho resisted and negotiated changes to sustain livelihoods as they depended on agriculture for sustenance.

The period of political transition, c. 1884

British rule in Basutoland provided new roles for chiefs, which affected land tenure systems and, ultimately, local agrarian systems. Broadly, British presence in Basutoland should be understood within the broader context of European imperialism. The year 1884 was pivotal in the colonial history of Africa, as it marked the beginning of the continent's colonial partition following the Berlin Conference.¹ While the territory was not discussed at the conference, the framework for the partition of the continent among the European powers eventually led to the formalisation of British control in Basutoland. The British Imperial government sought to safeguard the country's regional political and economic interests against the Afrikaners. This demonstrates the extent to which global forces interacted with local circumstances during the colonial period. The previous chapter has shown how Basotho lands had become a contested territory between the British and the Afrikaners. Most of the existing literature suggests that the annexation was undertaken to curb external threats and internal pressures facing the Basotho.² While it is generally accepted that Britain's administration of Basutoland was centered on restoring order amid internal chaos, the new administrative structure had far-reaching effects on land and agricultural regimes.

¹ For a detailed analysis of the Berlin Conference and its effects on Africa, see G.M. Munene, 'The United States and The Berlin Conference on the Partition of Africa, 1884-1885', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 19 (1990), 73-79.

² Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho Independence*, 20; Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*; Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, 130.

The British administrative rule immediately impacted the role of chiefs and land tenure systems. The colonial state was represented by the Resident Commissioner, who assumed the full responsibility of administering and developing the territory. Sir Marshal Clarke, the first Resident Commissioner, had fundamental objectives: the preservation of internal peace and the security of the border. He was granted the authority to do as he wished in Lesotho by the High Commissioner, Sir Hercules Robinson, who had stated that 'do the best you can with the materials; I will encourage you, do not interfere in their affairs; do not look to me for money or troops; I can give you neither.'³ The Resident Commissioner thus followed a policy of non-interference, introducing the colonial and indigenous governments.

The administration restored the hierarchy of chiefs by giving them the power to conduct and administer Basotho affairs with little attempt at integration or supervision.⁴ Burns Machobane, a historian, argues that the British had no clear policy for governing the territory, and their reign was largely experimental.⁵ Peter Sanders also concurs with Machobane, but added that this arrangement was only provisional and the government was ready to withdraw if there were indications of unrest among the Basotho.⁶ The colonial administration thus adopted a policy that co-opted local leaders into its governance. White administrative officials established relations with senior chiefs, whose inclusion was crucial in formulating colonial policy and ensuring the success of imperial rule.

³ National University of Lesotho (hereafter NUL) 48/509, Circular letter from Marshal Clarke to Robinson, 18 March 1884, Copies enclosed in Robinson to Derby, 8, April 1884 on how to exercise colonial authority in the territory with claims upon her Majesty's Government and Sir Hercules Robinson to Sir Marshal Clarke in G. Lagden, *The Basutos*, Vol. II (London: Hutchinson, 1909), 548.

⁴ D. Kowet, *Land Labour Migration and Politics in Southern Africa: Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland* (Scandinavian, Institute of Southern African Studies, 1978), 91.

⁵ Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*.

⁶ Sanders, '*Throwing Down the White Man*', 258.

In the hierarchy of governance, the Resident Commissioner was based in Maseru and assisted by Assistant Commissioners, each in charge of a district.⁷ The Assistant Resident Commissioners represented the imperial office in every district. However, Clarke believed that chiefs were the best representatives and judges of Basotho affairs and that imperial officials should use chiefs to gain their trust, confidence, and influence.⁸ Although the new political arrangements introduced new relations among the British metropole, colonial agents, and the indigenes, the local leaders were initially not inclined to participate in colonial governance. For instance, it is widely documented that neither Jonathan nor Joel Molapo attended the Pitso (public assembly) in Leribe to welcome the Resident Commissioner in Maseru.⁹

Godfrey Lagden, who later succeeded Clarke as Resident Commissioner, documented that the absence of these leaders was primarily due to their involvement in local politics.¹⁰ He highlighted that senior chiefs, such as Masupha and Ramanella, sought to create independent chiefdoms, in line with Moshoeshoe's vision of a united Basotho kingdom for the Basotho, without submitting to imperial rule.¹¹ Consequently, with the commencement of colonial rule, the colonial administration took advantage of the fragmented nature of traditional rule, as leaders such as Jonathan Molapo of Leribe district secured independent political and socio-economic privileges that had been curtailed under Cape rule. With time, however, he, like many others, became co-opted under the exploitative British system of administration. Thus, many Basotho considered chiefs to be agents of imperial rule. The following section discusses how such conclusions were reached vis-à-vis the enforcement of colonial agrarian policies through chiefs.

⁷ LNA, Colonial Office to Clarke, 30 January 1884.

⁸ LNA, S4/7/1, Clarke to Letsie, 28 August 1886.

⁹ LNA, Colonial Office to Clarke, 30 January 1884.

¹⁰ NUL, G. Lagden, Notes on Basutoland, 30 May 1884.

¹¹ NUL, G. Lagden, Notes on Basutoland, 19 February 1909.

Changes in Land and Agricultural Policy

Literature shows that British officials detached themselves from the Basotho land and agricultural systems during the first decades.¹² However, another piece of evidence suggests that from the outset, British land tenure and agrarian policies had a significant impact on the indigenous population. Basotho land tenure systems had always been dynamic, altered to meet new political, economic, and social circumstances.¹³ The Cape Colony Regulation of 1871 required chiefs to register land allocations at the office of the Governor's Agent. However, with the commencement of British rule, this requirement was nullified.¹⁴ Land allocation was reverted to the customary land law of the Basotho, which emphasised that land is communally owned and governed by the Paramount Chief.¹⁵ Land was awarded to and gained by individuals, either directly in their capacity as family heads or indirectly by their membership in the family group.¹⁶ The previous chapter showed how Moshoeshoe altered the indigenous land tenure system by allowing missionaries to settle in the territory. Thus, the first missionaries engaged with the Basotho's agrarian systems, and the colonial administration also placed itself at the apex of the hierarchy of rights to Basotho territory by introducing most agricultural policies in the territory as reactive measures to Basotho challenges. This trend persisted and significantly impacted Basotho agrarian regimes for a considerable period. Nevertheless, the Basotho continued to exercise their agency as a population that depended on agriculture for sustenance. The colonial administration was not detached from the Basotho's land and agrarian systems.

¹² Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*; Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*.

¹³ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 98.

¹⁴ NUL, *The Little Light of Basutoland*, 2 December 1871.

¹⁵ Sheddric, *Land Tenure*, 7.

¹⁶ Sheddric, *Land Tenure*, 8.

The colonial government thus gained access to Basotho land by allowing chiefs to retain their power to distribute land, which, in turn, enabled imperial officials to gain the chiefs' trust and confidence, as required by the Resident Commissioner. Chiefs and headmen were responsible for allocating land within their areas of jurisdiction for purposes such as building houses, constructing cattle kraals, cultivating crops, and preserving resources, including thatching grass, reeds, and trees.¹⁷ In Leribe District, the dynamics of land allocation were complicated by its higher population density, owing to several factors. Migration was one of those factors. The Basotho who worked in the Cape Colony and Free State returned with their families and livestock following the establishment of the new authority.¹⁸ It is safe to argue that British rule, comparatively, provided greater stability, hence many of the indigenes returned.

Some of the migrants came from the Natal and Transkei territories, but they settled in Leribe, and others went to the Qacha's Nek district.¹⁹ This meant that Zulu and Xhosa people also settled among the Basotho during this period and were governed by Basotho customs. The non-Basotho people considered Leribe and other districts of Lesotho as stable environments following racial discrimination and oppressive colonial administration in South African reserve areas of Transkei, Ciskei, and Natal.²⁰ This way, demand for land increased in the districts as peasants sought access to land through the chiefs. In turn, chiefs saw this as an opportunity to regain the wealth and power they had lost under the Cape Rule.

The customary system was eventually codified as the Laws of Lerotholi, a set of rules governing various aspects of Basotho life, confirmed by Morena e Moholo, Lerotholi, under

¹⁷ Rugege, *Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho*, 249.

¹⁸ Journal des missions evangeliques, 1886 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 478.

¹⁹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report of the Year 1888.

²⁰ F. Wilson and M. Ramphela, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), 116.

the Basutoland National Council when it met for the first time in 1903.²¹ Under the Laws of Lerotholi, arable land was allocated to a person by a chief or headman and reverted to the pool of arable land available for allocation when both the person and his wife had died.²² However, the chief or headman was obliged to prioritise the sons of the deceased (both minors and adults) so that their needs were met. Women had no explicit right to land except that, as widows, they retained the allocation previously made to their deceased husbands.²³ The court cases reported to the district office during this period reveal that after the death of a husband, his land caused conflicts between his relatives and his sons, or with the widow.²⁴ For instance, in 1890, an indigenous male named Simon Likobo, under Chief Jonathan Molapo, died, and his brothers fought with his daughters and widowed wife over the three fields owned by Simon and his household.²⁵ Simon's brothers told his wife and children that they could not own land because they were female.²⁶

Traditional Basotho customs did not allow women to own land.²⁷ Chief Jonathan ruled in favor of the brothers, but Simon's family appealed to the judicial court, which ruled that Simon's wife was the custodian of this land since she was married to Simon and they had children.²⁸ However, each year the brothers disregarded this ruling and continued to fight for this land. There are instances in which Simon's wife reported that they ploughed the fields or harvested her grain, and she appealed to the Assistant Resident Commissioner for help.²⁹ This was so because neither the chief nor the judicial court could assist them. The Assistant Resident

²¹ P. Duncan, *Sotho Laws and Customs* (Moriya: Morija Museum and Archives, 2006).

²² Duncan, *Sotho Laws and Customs*, 60.

²³ Duncan, *Sotho Laws and Customs*, 61.

²⁴ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900.

²⁵ NUL 1245/2A, Likobo Family Feuds, 1891 in Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 34.

²⁶ NUL 1245/2A, Likobo Family Feuds, 1891 in Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 34

²⁷ Duncan, *Sotho Laws and Customs*, 23-24

²⁸ NUL 1245/2A, Likobo Family Feuds, 1891 in Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 61.

²⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Assistant Resident Commissioner to the Resident Commissioner Reports, 18 September 1895.

Commissioner summoned Chief Jonathan to discuss this case, but he never showed up.³⁰ The Assistant Resident Commissioner, in his report to the Resident Commissioner, mentioned that the policemen he sent to Likobo's wife to check on them said they had been chased away from the village for questioning the chief's ruling. The land now belonged to one of Likobo's brothers, who was a friend of the chief.³¹ This concurs with historian Samuel Rugege, who summarises the history of traditional land tenure and its link, under the Laws of Lerotholi, to the chieftaincy. He argued that disloyalty to a chief often resulted in deprivation of the right to live in the chief's area and the right to fields allocated by the same chief.³² Furthermore, a chief could reallocate land from one household to another if he thought it was more than what was deemed necessary for subsistence.

Most of the annual reports from 1886 to 1890 show that people were driven from the lands they lawfully possessed by the chief or by the people he placed there.³³ Neglect or non-utilization of land was also grounds for reallocation. This clearly shows that chiefs wielded immense power and influence in the local politics of the land. In October 1890, the acting Resident Commissioner, Sir Godfrey Lagden, at a National Pisto mentioned how innocent people were aggrieved by the objectionable methods employed by the Paramount Chief and other chiefs, including taking people's properties and cattle for trivial offenses or without trial.³⁴ Therefore, this new land tenure system created a landless class of poor peasants who became detached from the means of production. The selective allocation of land did not just affect peasants. In 1903, the Resident Commissioner, Sir Herbert Sloley, informed the Basutoland National Council that several white officials had been complaining since the 1880s

³⁰ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: no.74/44, Simon Likobo family land dispute, 1891-1895.

³¹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Assistant Resident Commissioner to the Resident Commissioner Reports, 18 September 1895.

³² Rugege, *Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho*.

³³ NUL, Annual Reports for the year 1886-1887 and 1889 -1890.

³⁴ NUL, Acting Resident Commissioner Sir Godfrey Lagden at the National Pitso, October 1890.

that they had been deprived of land by chiefs in the Leribe district.³⁵ The Resident Commissioner did not challenge the chiefs' position because he relied entirely on their authority for the smooth governance of the territory. Hence, this nonchalant and tepid attitude was reinforced by the general lack of coercive powers that other administrators in other territories possessed.

Therefore, the local chiefs continued to use their authority for their own gain at the Basotho's expense. Sometimes it was done to enhance political and economic gain. For instance, in 1904, Chief Jonathan Molapo stated, "We (Chiefs) are depriving the people of their property; we have no law to protect it. If I am pleased with another man's ox, and if I see it as a big one, I take it; and I know that no one will take it away from me. Yes, the other chiefs are also guilty, just as I am."³⁶ This way, Chief Jonathan Molapo ended up with a large herd of cattle and land in the Leribe district as compared to his subjects or junior chiefs. Thus, social differentiation continued among the Basotho even under imperial rule; yet, the ordinary Basotho believed that the colonial government would prioritize their needs over those of the chiefs.

Colonial reports by the British suggested that the chiefs exposed their people to food insecurity by repurposing land tenure systems for their own gain. Such reports may have been framed within the broader scope of relations between British administrators and local authorities at the beginning of colonial rule. Elsewhere, scholars have written on how, from 1890, colonial officials in Southern Rhodesia sought to discredit the authority of chiefs.³⁷ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests that imperial officials justified colonisation by portraying local authority as

³⁵ NUL, Basutoland National Council Report, 1903.

³⁶ Chief Jonathan Molapo quoted in the South African Affairs Commission Report, 26 September 1904, 379.

³⁷ S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'The Dynamics of Epistemological Decolonisation in the 21st century: Towards Epistemic Freedom', *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 40, 1 (2018), 17-22.

despotic.³⁸ In Basutoland, colonial officials believed that the chiefs began using masimo a *lira*, literally ‘fields of the enemies’ (conceived initially as fields to feed the chief’s warriors in time of war), for growing wheat and mealies to sell to traders.³⁹ Customarily, ordinary Basotho cultivated these fields through (*letsema or Matsema*). Instead of using the grain for food security, Chief Jonathan in Leribe and other senior chiefs in Basutoland used it to enhance their economic position. They traded the grain, particularly in the late 19th century, when the diamond mines in Kimberley and gold mines on the Witwatersrand opened markets for Lesotho’s surplus agricultural produce.⁴⁰ Thus, *Matsema* became a contentious topic debated in every Basutoland National Council, but most of its members were Principal Chiefs, who could hardly be considered impartial in the matter.⁴¹ However, due to the policy of non-intervention, colonial officials suggested that they could not intervene, although they did not condone how chiefs exercised their authority.

Machobane supports the notion that the new position of chiefs under British rule became favourable. He maintains that the number of chiefs multiplied as nobles sought revenues that could be extracted from those to whom they allocated land.⁴² This was achieved by the widespread practice of placing relatives in positions of authority. Between 1890 and 1900, in the Leribe, the British administration reported 45 unresolved land dispute cases involving senior chiefs placing their sons in positions of authority.⁴³ Court records indicated that several of these cases were difficult to resolve because many of the chiefs did not appear in white courts to have the matters settled by British administrators. A prominent example is Chief

³⁸Ndlovu-Gatsheni, ‘The Dynamics of Epistemological’, 18.

³⁹ Rugege, *Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho*.

⁴⁰ Rugege, *Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho*, 182.

⁴¹ See Basutoland National Council Reports from 1906 to 1920.

⁴² Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*.

⁴³ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 87.

Jonathan Molapo, who adamantly refused to submit himself to white judicial proceedings.⁴⁴ Therefore, the challenges of legitimacy became pronounced, and it is fair to argue that British rule promoted chaotic claims to chieftaincy, which affected land tenure systems, which became primarily based on rigid paternalism and class-based systems. This invariably affected the livelihoods of the indigenous people of Leribe, as these new systems led to the displacement of the rural peasantry, who lost their land and harvests.

The new land tenure systems also led to conflicts among the chiefs in proximity. Although British-imposed boundaries were imposed, local leaders transgressed them. In some instances, senior chiefs from the Berea district placed chiefs (sons of senior chiefs) in Leribe villages without the consent of the local chief or headmen, and the people from Leribe did the same to boost their revenues.⁴⁵ In both scenarios, they all claimed hereditary rights over the land. Colonial reports suggested that the senior chiefs, such as Jonathan Molapo and Joel Molapo, resolved these cases based on material benefits, which often affected peasants who had nothing to offer in return.⁴⁶ This fell into prevailing motifs that portrayed local chiefs as highly corrupt and paternalistic. The chiefs considered this an opportunity to improve their income, but, like their people, they were also affected by the demands of the capitalist economy.⁴⁷ Inevitably, they found themselves prioritizing personal interests over traditional responsibilities. In this context, it can be argued that the British artificially promoted the autocratic powers of the chiefs during this era.

⁴⁴ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 89.

⁴⁵ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 93.

⁴⁶ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report of the Year 1890/ 1893 and 1895.

⁴⁷ These demands include taxes and certain luxuries of foodstuffs, drinks, and clothes introduced under the capitalistic economy that needed to be maintained, especially by those in positions of power to exhibit authority to the ordinary people.

The Basotho in the Leribe district faced numerous challenges during this period that significantly impacted agriculture. Firstly, the dynastic feuds persisted from 1884 to 1929, having devastating effects on the peasants' livelihoods. Machobane noted that, the dynastic feuds between Joel and Jonathan Molapo had a profound impact on ordinary people. The feuds generated endless disputes over appropriated land and stock, which, for their bulk and complexity, the courts could not genuinely handle. Junior chiefs went out of control, and their seniors were unable to provide the commoners with sufficient protection against them.⁴⁸ While colonial officials were aware of the devastating conditions in the territory, they did not take any measures to protect ordinary people. Therefore, it generally appears that the commencement of British governance led to land disputes and became a period of peasant struggles. The ensuing rural poverty and depeasantisation were artificially promoted by British rule. Thus, the behaviour of chiefs should be understood not as an abandonment of customary obligations. Instead, it may be analysed as a structural incorporation of the indigenes into colonial systems. Several works have focused on the co-option of indigenous leaders into the colonial system of governance.⁴⁹ Although the Basotho do not squarely fit into this rubric, there is room to suggest that colonialism shifted their obligations and detached them from their people.

Basotho Reactions to Prevailing Modes of Power

Since the commencement of British occupation, peasant agriculture has persisted despite many challenges. The completion of the railway line between Cape Town and Kimberley, which

⁴⁸ L.L.B, Machobane, 'The Political Dilemma of Chieftaincy in Colonial Lesotho concerning the administration and court reform of 1938' *TSAS Occasional Paper*,1 (National University of Lesotho, 1986),14.

⁴⁹ J. M. Williams, *Customary Law and Chieftainship in Southern Africa* (Oxford; *Research Encyclopaedia of African History* 2024); E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs, Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (London: Longman, 1972); J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 176.

occurred earlier in 1885, continued to promote wheat production in the Basotho territory throughout the century.⁵⁰ Wheat production, however, did not primarily serve the subsistence needs of the indigenous people. Wheat was not part of their dietary requirements because it was more difficult to process than sorghum and maize. Hence, production was primarily for export. Therefore, the local people's production of wheat emphasised their ability to adapt to the market forces introduced by capitalism.⁵¹ Wheat production was taxed by colonial officials, which in turn provided capital for colonial development. This was in the larger context of the occupation of the territory, since the High Commissioner had declared that the Imperial government would not assume the burden of investing in the territory's development.⁵² The rural economy responded positively by cultivating wheat, and reports suggested abundant production that met the high demands of the Witwatersrand, where gold mining flourished.⁵³ Such production dynamics favoured the landed class, yet the landless became poorer and resorted to wage labour as migrants. However, wheat production did not result in rural prosperity. Selective tariff policies by the Transvaal government imposed a tariff on all grain entering its territory except for that originating in the Free State Region in 1887.⁵⁴ This was meant to promote local wheat production by white farmers. In the end, the Basotho in Leribe were left with the Cape Colony as the external market for their wheat at unfavourable prices.⁵⁵ Therefore, although the Basotho produced wheat in abundance, the market was generally unfavourable. This included grains such as wheat, maize, and sorghum.⁵⁶ The District Commissioner of Leribe, S. Barret, in his 1887 annual report, stated that although the summer crops failed due to an early frost, the district's food supply remained largely unaffected

⁵⁰ MMA, Germond, '*Chronicles of Basutoland*', 480.

⁵¹ Nyambara, "That Place was Wonderful!" African Tenants on Rhodesdale Estate, Colonial Zimbabwe, c.1900-1952', 267-299; Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*.

⁵² Sir Hercules Robinson to Sir Marshal Clarke in G. Lagden, *The Basutos*, Vol. II (London: Hutchinson, 1909), 548.

⁵³ Lagden, *The Basutos*, 549.

⁵⁴ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year 1888.

⁵⁵ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year 1888, 11.

⁵⁶ MMA, *Journal des missions evangeliques*, 1886 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 478.

because of grain reserves from the previous year.⁵⁷ Therefore, peasant production's resilience was evident, but the conditions constrained producers' economic and social mobility.

Volatile export market prices exacerbated rural poverty towards the end of the century. This was evident, particularly among livestock producers. The peasants involved in livestock production, specifically sheep and cattle, were affected because the prices of hides, skin, wool, and mohair declined by 50% due to the regional economic depression of 1888, which also impacted agricultural production prices.⁵⁸ Export crops, such as wheat, were also affected by this market volatility. The Resident Commissioner's annual report of 1888 indicated that, due to funding constraints, it had been impossible to realise the full nominal revenue. Stock and grain are now used to pay hut tax. Some trading establishments have been closed due to a scarcity of funds and a decline in prices. This has led to a widespread economic depression in the territory.⁵⁹ While this economic instability affected the Basotho, it also affected British officials throughout the territory, who relied on tax revenues from the indigenous population in all districts to survive. In response, the Basotho reverted to a barter system to pay taxes and obtain commodities such as cooking oil and soap from traders. The wheat, which was intended for export, was eventually used in barter trade.⁶⁰ This illustrates the precarious nature of relying on export crops for local peasant farmers. A theme that would persist for a long time in the newly British-occupied territory.

The productivity of the landed peasants was also affected by the dynastic feuds that began in the 1890s. For instance, the disputes between Chief Joel Molapo and Matela over their

⁵⁷ NUL, S. Barret, Leribe Assistant Resident Commissioner's Annual Report to the Resident Commissioner in Maseru, 1887.

⁵⁸ NUL, S. Barret, Leribe Assistant Resident Commissioner's Annual Report to the Resident Commissioner in Maseru, 1887.

⁵⁹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1888, 10.

⁶⁰ NUL/312/8A, Leribe Collections: Traders, Diaries 1883- 1903, 45.

respective rights to a piece of land known as Mechachaneng in the Leribe district affected agricultural production.⁶¹ The disagreement led to cyclical processes of land dispossession and cattle raids between the subjects of the two leaders, destabilising output.⁶² The disputes, in many ways, demonstrated how entrenched land issues were due to imperial governance's interference in the territory's local politics. The net effect was to impact rural peasant livelihoods and the trajectory of peasant agriculture through depopulation and depesantisation. Therefore, local politics were also a key factor in local processes of depesantisation, which in some cases led to some peasants becoming wage labourers on the South African mines and farms.

The locust invasions of 1893 were also a significant point in the development of rural peasant agriculture. In 1891, a drought season affected the population so severely that peasants were pressed for food and ultimately consumed their seed supply for the next farming season.⁶³ In 1892, however, the Leribe District received abundant, timely rains compared to previous years, and some peasants managed to plant the remaining seeds they still had time for.⁶⁴ However, the crops were ravaged by locusts during the 1893 cropping season. The local chiefs worked hand in hand with the district officers, mobilised people, and exterminated the locusts.⁶⁵ Despite such attempts, the High Commissioner reported that the locusts had left irreparable damage to the crops.⁶⁶ In neighboring Swaziland, it was also noted that the locusts had had a similar impact on peasant agriculture.⁶⁷ Therefore, rural peasant agrarian development appeared to be bottled up by a constant series of unfortunate events.

⁶¹ Basutoland Annual Report of the year 1890, 9.

⁶² NUL, Sir G. Lagden, Report on Leribe Districts, 1884; NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900.

⁶³ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Years 1892 and 1893, 8.

⁶⁴ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Years 1892 and 1893, 36.

⁶⁵ NUL, H. C. Sloley, Assistant Commissioner, Annual Report for Leribe District, 1893.

⁶⁶ High Commissioner's remarks mentioned by the Resident Commissioner in the Basutoland Annual Report of 1894.

⁶⁷ R. J. Cummings, 'Internal Factors that generate Famine', in H.M. Glantz (eds.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa: Denying Famine a Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Africans responded differently to the negative fortunes in agriculture after the invasions. The primary response was that African males turned to wage labour in the mines of the Barberton area in the Transvaal.⁶⁸ The peasant households that remained in crop production faced significant challenges, particularly due to price volatility in wheat production. However, the price of wheat declined to 11s from 15s per bag.⁶⁹ Conversely, the price of grain rose from 5s to 35s per bag.⁷⁰ This meant that exporting production became costly for peasants who chose to grow wheat. Furthermore, the unequal prices made it difficult for wheat producers to purchase grain for subsistence.

By the end of the 1890s, ecological challenges had significantly impacted the development of peasant agriculture. To secure grain, peasants bartered their cattle for grain or sold them at low prices. As a result, about 3000 cattle were exported to South Africa despite calls by chiefs to encourage a boycott of cattle sales, particularly to white traders.⁷¹ The Paris Evangelist Missionaries described the value of cattle among the Basotho as the country's passive wealth.⁷² Thus, when such incidences of drought occurred, cattle were an essential commodity for barter. Generally, cattle marketing did not grow significantly compared to other territories such as Southern Rhodesia. Historically, cattle ownership was the preserve of the ruling class, and chiefs often loaned subjects through the *Mafisa* system.⁷³ However, by the mid-nineteenth century, cattle ownership had become common among ordinary people, driven by the

⁶⁸ J. S. Crush, *The Struggle for Swazi Labour, 1890-1920* (Kingston: Queens- McGill University Press, 1987).

⁶⁹ Basutoland Colonial Annual Report for the year 1893.

⁷⁰ NUL, Resident Commissioner's Annual Report for the year 1894 to 1895.

⁷¹ NUL/312/8A, Leribe Collections: Traders' Diaries 1883- 1903, and NUL, Basutoland Annual Reports for the years 1889, 9.

⁷² MMA, A. Casalis, Leribe, July 1897 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 472.

⁷³ MMA, A. Casalis, Leribe, July 1897 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 473.

opportunities opened by capitalism and the need to improve social and economic status within the local community.

The wheat exports of the 1870s onwards allowed ordinary Basotho to own cattle, but the cattle meat industry did not flourish under colonial rule. The colonial administration did not invest meaningfully in grain exports due to capital constraints and because Lesotho was not a settler society like Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. The only investments in the sector were the erection of costly perimeter fences to prevent Leribe cattle from venturing into the Free State.⁷⁴

This was after President Brand of the Free State complained about Leribe cattle pasturing in his area.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, peasant cattle production flourished owing to a lack of diseases, and colonial records indicated that although cases of Foot and mouth were recorded, they never reached crisis levels.⁷⁶ The District Commissioner of Leribe attributed the spread of the disease to the mixing of people with South Africans. Hence, the fencing projects minimized such risks.

⁷⁷ Later in October 1896, the rinderpest outbreak, which had engulfed parts of eastern and southern Africa, ravaged approximately 80% of the national herd.⁷⁸ The disease had devastating effects on the livelihoods of Basotho in the Leribe district.⁷⁹ The disease left some of the kraals empty.⁸⁰ Historian Pule Phoofolo suggests that cattle served as investable capital for Basotho, and rinderpest restricted future cattle accumulation.⁸¹ Hence, I concur with Phoofolo that cattle were not merely a subsistence asset. Cattle were a central form of wealth

⁷⁴ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1895, 18.

⁷⁵ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1895, 19.

⁷⁶ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1895, 21.

⁷⁷ NUL, Leribe Collections: Leribe's District Commissioner Report, 1895, 9.

⁷⁸ Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1897 to 1899.

⁷⁹ For a complete account of the effects of Rinderpest in the entire territory and in the Southern African Region see, E.A. Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (London, 1965), C. Van Onselen, 'Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa 1896-97', *Journal of African History*, XIII,3 (1972) and P. Phoofolo, 'Face to Face with Famine: the Basotho and the Rinderpest, 1897-1899', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29,2, (2003), 502-536.

⁸⁰ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report of the Year 1898.

⁸¹ Phoofolo, 'Face to Face with Famine: the Basotho and the Rinderpest', 503.

accumulation, and the decimation of cattle represented a simultaneous collapse of economic security, social standing, and productive capacity for Basotho households.

However, the bovine disease cut across racial boundaries and affected both Africans and Europeans in the territory of the Leribe district and throughout Basutoland. The consequences were uneven among the Basotho, as noted by Phoofolo; for the Basotho whose households depended on cattle as investable cattle or as draught power, the loss of herds precipitated different responses. Some ‘stepped out’ of agrarian production and diversified into wage labour; some ‘hung in’, as they could not migrate and work in the mines and farms in the adjacent territories of South Africa. For Europeans, a similar fate fell on them, too. They also experienced the herd loss. While the imperial administration offered state support to its officials in the district with the limited capital reserves, they managed to get by. However, for the missionaries, it was different, as they relied on local produce for their welfare. One missionary, Germond, in his chronicles of Basutoland, stated that

The missionaries, like other Basutoland Europeans, are finding it extremely difficult to procure food; the housewives no longer know what to put on the table. No vegetables! No meat! No milk! How is one supposed to live? He must content himself with the pittance he has, however bad, without complaining, but not without detriment to his health.⁸²

This suggests the unfavourable conditions in the missionary households. As Germond noted, there were no records of welfare funds for missionaries, and some colonial officials received funds from their fellow colonial officers in South Africa.⁸³ Instead, he continued to share the struggles of the missionaries in Leribe, Morija, and other areas where they wrote their commentaries.

⁸² MMA, Germond, ‘*Chronicles of Basutoland*’, 478.

⁸³ MMA, Germond, ‘*Chronicles of Basutoland*’, 478-482.

On the other hand, the transport industry was also affected by the rinderpest outbreak. Carts and wagons were the dominant modes of transport. Colonial records indicate that Arab and Indian traders maintained a monopoly over transportation because they had alternative forms of draft power, including donkeys, horses, and cattle from South Africa.⁸⁴ Transportation prices became exorbitant, with traders charging between 2 and 3 goats or sheep per load, depending on the weight and size of the produce.⁸⁵ This crisis led to unprecedented reports of stock theft as the indigenes attempted to navigate this precarious position.⁸⁶ The government increased the fine for stock theft from £2 to £5, but trade in the district eventually declined. Some of the Basotho decided to retain their wheat because the profit margins were slim, given the high transport costs and low selling prices.

However, some reports suggest that the effects of these challenges were not severe. Peasants reverted to indigenous cultivation methods, using metal hoes.⁸⁷ The wealthier peasant purchased horses and donkeys to pull the plough. Compared to other districts, Leribe received more rain, and the peasants worked in the fields and cultivated maize.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, several fields were left fallow due to a lack of cows to pull the plough. The harvest was so good that the peasants managed to sell their maize cobs and later their grain to other peasants in the territory.⁸⁹ Annual reports indicate that from 1889 to 1896, very few men from Leribe engaged in migrant labour.⁹⁰ The previous chapter showed that most men were pushed into sustainable livelihoods. Still, this chapter shows that when agricultural yields were higher, men in Leribe

⁸⁴ MMA, *Journals des Missions Evangelique's*, B. Pascal, Report to the Morija, November 1900, Basutoland Annual Report of the Year 1900.

⁸⁵ NUL/312/8A, Leribe Collections: Traders' Diaries 1883- 1903.

⁸⁶ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 163.

⁸⁷ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 167.

⁸⁸ NUL 1245/2A, Appeal Court Cases: Leribe 1890-1900, 167.

⁸⁹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report 1899, 35.

⁹⁰ NUL, Basutoland Annual Reports for the years 1889-1896.

were not keen to participate in wage labour.⁹¹ The recorded number of passes issued for Leribe men declined by over 50%.⁹² Most traders from the Leribe district noted that indigenous men primarily focused on agriculture as their main livelihood, despite unfavourable market forces.⁹³ The proximity of the Leribe district to South Africa enabled men to take up seasonal employment when the mines raised wages.

However, Eldredge stated that most Africans who worked in the mines did so under short-term contracts, typically lasting 3 to 4 months. She argues that Basotho men and women took these short contracts to ensure they were available for ploughing and harvesting.⁹⁴ In the Leribe district, the number of cases appealed or reported to the District Commissioner increased during the planting and harvest seasons, and about 95% of these cases were filed by men.⁹⁵ Therefore, wage labour allowed peasants to diversify their livelihoods, but agriculture remained the basis of the rural economy.

Indeed, after the rinderpest outbreaks, the peasant farmers recorded good fortunes in livestock production. Migrant workers from the mines and farms in South Africa returned home with cattle, sheep, horses, and donkeys to improve their family stocks.⁹⁶ The colonial administration also responded to the disaster by appointing the first Government. In 1905, Otto Henning became the first veterinary officer, later replaced by Frank Verney.⁹⁷ The two encouraged the purchase of better breeds of livestock in all districts. However, reports suggested that while the number of cattle increased, the Basotho were primarily concerned about quantity and focused

⁹¹ For a detailed analysis of the African mining labour conditions, see C. Van Onselen, *Chibharo: African Mine in Southern Rhodesia* (Nottingham: Pluto, 1976).

⁹² NUL, Leribe Collection, LC, 1/ 2, Leribe District Commissioner's Records, 12.

⁹³ NUL/312/8A, Leribe Collections: Traders' Diaries 1883- 1903.

⁹⁴ E. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 78-98.

⁹⁵ NUL/312/8A, Leribe Collections: Traders' Diaries 1883- 1903, 32.

⁹⁶ MMA, F. Christol, Report to Morija, June 1901.

⁹⁷ Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1905-1906, Basutoland Annual Report for the year 1907- 1908 and Basutoland Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture for the year 1934, 3.

more on numbers as they aimed to replace the lost livestock. Other reports suggested that men were more concerned with paying off their debts on the bride price, so much so that they were not primarily concerned with quality. Some farmers turned to sheep and goat keeping after the Rinderpest epidemic. The price range for cattle after the epidemic ranged from 65s to 70s per head.⁹⁸ Sheep prices ranged from 12s to 15s.⁹⁹ This way, some peasants focused on sheep keeping. The export market prices of wool and mohair were better and stable. However, for grain, financial reports show that prices fluctuated with the harvest and demand across the border.¹⁰⁰ Following the rinderpest, rural livelihoods in Leribe and elsewhere improved significantly.

Colonial interventions in Agrarian Policy c.1900-1929

Since taking over the governance of Basutoland in 1884, the British administration had adopted a policy of indirect rule. The previous sections have shown that the imperial government did not finance occupation or colonial administration; therefore, Africans maintained significant control over peasant agrarian development with minimal interference from the colonial administration. However, from 1900 onwards, Showes and Conz reveal that the British administration began to take an active role in issues of peasant agricultural development.¹⁰¹ This was prompted by the adverse climatic and environmental conditions that prevailed during this period.¹⁰² Peasant livelihoods had been affected by a turbulent economic situation in the preceding years, and although there were signs of recovery, significant stagnation in agriculture persisted.¹⁰³ This prompted significant interventions by the colonial administration, despite the British High Commission having made it clear to the Resident Commissioner of Basutoland

⁹⁸ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1916, 23.

⁹⁹ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1916, 26.

¹⁰⁰ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1910-1920.

¹⁰¹ Showes, *Imperial Gullies*; Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

¹⁰² Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83.

¹⁰³ Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*.

that there would be no direct support. Hence, they were to depend on local initiatives to boost the peasant agrarian livelihoods of the Basotho. This section examines these interventions and how Africans responded to the direct influence of the British administration on their peasant agricultural livelihoods.

External influences largely prompted changes in peasant agrarian development. In 1901, British civil engineer William Willcocks was assigned to research the potential for improving white agriculture in the Cape Colony, the Orange River Colony, and the Transvaal through irrigation.¹⁰⁴ This was in response to the drought conditions of the previous years. Willcock visited Basutoland, which was intended to be the water source for the irrigation projects. He made observations and reported that the soil is very friable, and the slopes are severe. Because the rivers have cut deep channels through the hills, the least collection of water by the numerous roads, paths, and cattle tracks scours away the ground and cuts the country up into ravines. The denudation of the country, owing to these ravines, is very serious, and if allowed to continue for as many years in the future as it has during the last thirty years, the loss to the country will be incalculable.¹⁰⁵

Willcocks added that further denudation of the country was aggravated by Basotho building villages on the tops of hills due to overpopulation of the lowlands, which, in turn, caused significant erosion.¹⁰⁶ This report played a significant role in alarming both governments because Basutoland threatened the viability of the irrigation scheme as a vital water source for South Africa.

In the previous decade, reports of soil erosion in the territory had been heard from traders, missionaries, and travellers in the lowlands. However, colonial officials in Lesotho and South Africa ignored the problem. In 1882, one frequent visitor to the mission stations in the lowlands wrote that

there were mere tracks which had been followed from the beginning. But, as it is everywhere composed of sandstone, the sub-soil does not offer sufficient resistance... these roads have been twenty to twenty-five metres wide; nevertheless, when it rains, the wheels sometimes sink to the hub. Bridges are unknown, although most of the rivers are irregular and intermittent

¹⁰⁴ LNA, C0/02, W. Willcocks, Report upon Irrigation in South Africa, 1901.

¹⁰⁵ LNA, C0/02, W. Willcocks, Report upon Irrigation in South Africa, 1901, 25.

¹⁰⁶ LNA, C0/02, W. Willcocks, Report upon Irrigation in South Africa, 1901, 25.25.

watercourses; they are deeply eroded, and their banks are characterized by cavities, which widen the torrent from year to year. One must roll to the bottom of these ravines with a wagon to appreciate the resistance of these coaches and to understand the word jolt, but one is always sure to go down; to climb out on the opposite side, it is sometimes necessary to off-load the wagon, to wield a spade, and if possible, to borrow a supplementary team of two.¹⁰⁷

A similar description had been made by L. Duvoisin in Berea and the PEMS in Morija.¹⁰⁸ The British administration had paid little attention to these conditions because of its non-interventionist policies. However, by 1901, following Willcocks' observations and recommendations, colonial officials were alerted to the dire need to implement measures to curb soil erosion in the territory.

Willcocks emphasised that unless immediate action were taken to arrest denudation, the silt loads in the river catchment areas would increase. This was an essential aspect because Wilcocks thought that further erosion would threaten the success chances of the irrigation scheme. Therefore, to counter river erosion, he recommended planting trees in both damp and dry ravines.¹⁰⁹ The agricultural officers, Verney and Wachter, encouraged peasants to plant willow and poplar trees, thereby preserving the local vegetation.¹¹⁰ It is essential to highlight that these innovations were primarily intended to facilitate the success of the irrigation schemes; therefore, Africans did not immediately see any benefits from them. This was particularly because they were still recovering from drought, rinderpest, and locust outbreaks. Hence, initially, Africans did not participate in tree planting.

¹⁰⁷ H. Kruger, *Travelling Notes*, 1882, in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 407.

¹⁰⁸ MMA, L. Duvoisin, Notes on Berea, 1888 and A. Mabile, Morija, November 1889, in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 418, 419.

¹⁰⁹ Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 27.

¹¹⁰ L.N.A, Basutoland Annual Report of the Year 1902/ 1905 and Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*.

However, by 1911, the imperial government appointed Sir L.F. Wachter as the colonial officer in charge of gully prevention and tree nurseries in each district.¹¹¹ When he inspected Leribe, he observed that the district responded positively to the initiatives, primarily due to its reliance on agriculture.¹¹² Overall, he concluded that the district had rejuvenated the vegetation.¹¹³ Also, one missionary observed that ‘the grass is tall and dense, and the remaining beasts have gained weight. The lowlands had an opportunity to recuperate.’¹¹⁴ Leribe was seen as a success story, and the peasants were perceived as responding positively to tree-planting campaigns. Hundreds of saplings of *Populus canescens* (Grey Poplar), *Robinia pseudoacacia* (Black Locust or False Acacia), and *Pinus radiata* (Monterey Pine) were planted.¹¹⁵ Therefore, the Basotho responded positively to the colonial authorities’ initiatives when they believed it could improve and preserve their environment and livelihoods.

Despite the positive responses from the Basotho in the Leribe district to tree-planting campaigns, climate change affected the results. A combination of low and erratic rainfall, shallow soils, cold winds, and winters with temperatures below freezing, along with occasional heavy snowfalls, made tree growth extremely difficult, resulting in low success rates.¹¹⁶ Showers argues that indigenous trees, such as *moluoane* (wild willow) and *molokoane* (wild olive), as well as shrubs, thrived in this geographical location, where soils, moisture availability, and shelter from extremes favoured growth more than the exotic trees offered by the Department of Agriculture.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, the colonial officials did not factor in the climatic variabilities and imposed Willock’s recommendations on the Basotho.

¹¹¹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1912,7.

¹¹² NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1912, 10.

¹¹³ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1910, 8.

¹¹⁴ Journal des missions evangeliques,1926 in R.C. Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, (Moriya, 1967).

¹¹⁵ D. Ambrose, Basotho Agricultural General Collections 1900- 1950.

¹¹⁶ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1910/ 1912.

¹¹⁷ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*,138.

In 1918, following the end of the First World War, the world faced an economic recession. Colonial governments attempted to boost their economies by extracting natural resources and exploiting African labour to increase production.¹¹⁸ The market prices for agricultural products dropped. Traders paid half the prices for livestock and grain in Leribe because prices were low in South Africa.¹¹⁹ The Basotho found it challenging to meet the tax burden under this recession.¹²⁰ Apart from the hut and poll tax, the Resident Commissioner introduced the Education Levy of £3.¹²¹ Judith Kimble argues that taxes imposed on Africans were only beneficial to the colonial agents in the territory and to the High Commissioner.¹²² She emphasised that the taxes were put to drive the Basotho to the mines and to show the authority of the imperial office in the territory.¹²³ This worked for Basotho in Leribe and beyond. Murray notes that by 1911, roughly 50% of the able-bodied Basotho men were engaged in migrant labour in South Africa.¹²⁴ However, the Basotho in Leribe engaged in contract labour, as did men from Bechuanaland and Swaziland.¹²⁵ This was because the Basotho men still depended on agriculture as the mainstay of their rural economy, but opted for migrant labour to improve their livelihoods. However, producers across Africa also experienced economic downturns that affected their livelihoods.

¹¹⁸ S.S. Berry, 'The food crisis and agrarian change in Africa: a review essay' *African Studies Review*, 27, 2(1984), 59-112, G. Arrighi, 'Labour supplies in historical perspective: a study of the proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia', *The Journal of Development Studies* 6, 3 (1970), 197-234; Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography', 321-343.

¹¹⁹ NUL/312/8C, Leribe Collections: Traders' Diaries, 1929.

¹²⁰ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*.

¹²¹ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 313.

¹²² J. Kimble, 'Labour Migration and Colonial Rule in Southern Africa: The Case of Lesotho', (PhD. thesis, Sussex 1986), 389.

¹²³ Kimble, 'Labour Migration and Colonial Rule in Southern Africa', 389.

¹²⁴ Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*.

¹²⁵ See Great Britain, Financial and Economic Situation of Bechuanaland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs (London: HMSO, 1932) and Great Britain, Financial and Economic Situation of Swaziland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Secretary of State for Dominions Affairs (London: HMSO, 1932).

Additionally, in Basutoland, economic challenges were exacerbated by Ecological conditions that continued to affect the indigenous people. In the Leribe district, severe frost occurred between November 1920 and April 1921.¹²⁶ While Leribe district accounted for about 42% of the country's lowlands, it was significantly affected by frost, and the ecological conditions became an impediment to the success of the tree campaigns.¹²⁷ This was so because the vegetation was exposed, unlike in the highlands, where the mountains shield the fields. When the frost ended, the soil was vulnerable to eroding agents. Several gullies reclaimed were exposed again, and new ones were created. Thus, the land available for cultivation continued to decrease.¹²⁸

The soil condition was also affected by overgrazing. Livestock production had recovered significantly by the 1920s, and despite favourable grazing conditions following earlier rinderpest challenges, overgrazing became a problem among the indigenous people. Most grazing areas became bare from overgrazing, and some footpaths became streams where water flows from the mountains to the rivers.¹²⁹ Thus, a combination of human and natural eroding agents precipitated erosion in the district.¹³⁰ This worsened the topographical conditions in the community, which relied heavily on agriculture for sustenance. Nevertheless, the colonial officials did not enforce conservation measures to mitigate erosion in the district.

In 1921, the Empire launched the British Empire Exhibitions (OBEE) in Britain, inviting agricultural officials from territories to learn about agrarian exhibitions in London. The intention was to teach principal agricultural and veterinary officers the skills necessary to

¹²⁶ R.V. Sayce, 'An Ethno-Geographical Essay on Basutoland', in *Physical Geography* (Pietermaritzburg, Natal University, 1924), 20.

¹²⁷ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1922, 4.

¹²⁸ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1922, 5.

¹²⁹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Agricultural Report for the Year Ended 1923, 14.

¹³⁰ NUL, Basutoland Annual Agricultural Report for the Year Ended 1923, 15.

launch the show, what to expect, and how to enhance their agrarian skills and improve produce in British colonies. Murray, the acting Resident Commissioner, responded to the Secretary of State, saying, 'I do not think that this will be possible for my territory to be represented at the conference.'¹³¹ There is no explanation in the letter to support his decision. Once more, in 1923, the principal agricultural officer, Wachter, turned down an invitation to attend the first International Horticultural Congress in London. His response to the invitation was, 'I do not see any useful purpose in attending such conferences, which are for highly trained people.' The Resident Commissioner J.P. Murray concurred with Wachter's. Murray said, 'such events are for experienced people with friendly environments and governments that are funded'.¹³² It thus became clear that the attitude of British officials in Basutoland was one of despondency about the prevailing ecological and administrative conditions in the country.

In 1927, the British Empire established the Colonial Scientific Research Service (CSRS) in Britain to plan, promote, and develop the agricultural interests of all British territories. The CSRC informed the Secretary of State, based in the Union of South Africa, of their plan regarding Basutoland, and he, in turn, informed the Principal Agricultural Officer, F. Wachter. In response to the Secretary of State, Wachter said, 'I (Wachter) consider this would be of great use to countries where agriculture is on a sound basis; in this territory, the agriculture practised by "natives" is the most primitive.'¹³³ This shows the despondent nature of colonial officials in Basutoland, who viewed Basotho's agrarian development in a position that was not entirely favourable due to adverse ecological conditions and a lack of support, as was the case in other Anglophone territories.

¹³¹ LNA, S3/1/1-3, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, A letter from the Acting Resident Commissioner, J.P. Murray, to the High Commissioner, 11 February 1923.

¹³² LNA, S3/1/1-3, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, A letter from the Acting Resident Commissioner, J.P. Murray, to the Secretary of State, 11 February 1923.

¹³³ LNA, S3/1/1-3, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, A letter from the Agricultural Officer to the High Commissioner, 21 November 1927.

Additionally, patterns of colonial governance in Basutoland were deeply entangled in hierarchies, leading administrators to perceive their territory as consistently marginalised within imperial policy. Historians such as Eldredge, Etherington, and Etherington, in their individual works, have shown that colonial governance in southern Africa was structured through entrenched regional hierarchies that privileged settler-dominated territories and structurally marginalised under-resourced areas.¹³⁴ Thus, in Leribe and in Basutoland as a whole, officials felt that other territories received preferential treatment from the Imperial government. In 1927, Wachter once commented, “the exports of this country (Basutoland) are sold by traders to merchants at the coast, who classify the products (mostly wool and mohair) and export them. Because of this, people living in the Union of South Africa derive most profits from our Basotho exports.”¹³⁵

This complaint from the Principal Agricultural Officer from the country underscores the structural dependency embedded in the economic relationship between Basutoland and the Union of South Africa. While agricultural and labour exports originated in Basutoland, the value chain was controlled from South Africa, meaning that profits were captured outside the territory. Therefore, the quote reveals the asymmetrical regional economy in which Basutoland functioned as a producer of raw materials and labour power, but not as a beneficiary of wealth generated from them. Thus, this stimulated the negative attitude that officials adopted.

This was further evidenced in the same year, when the British Empire Marketing Board consulted the agricultural principal officer of Basutoland on the prospects of export-oriented

¹³⁴For a detailed analysis on imperial hierarchies, see Eldredge, *Power in Colonial Africa: Conflict and Discourse in Lesotho, 1870–1960* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2007); N. Etherington, ‘Postmodernism and South African History’, *New Contree*, 40 (1996), 14; J. Etherington, “Nationalism, Territoriality and National Territorial Belonging”, *Papers: revista de sociologia* (2010), 321-339.

¹³⁵ LNA, S3/1/1-3, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, 7 October 1927.

fruit production. Wachter's responses exposed his negative attitude towards the initiatives. He responded to a questionnaire,

1. I, Wachter, cannot answer any questions concerning fruit growing in the country since no fruits are being grown in Basutoland.
2. The cultivator is uneducated, and any information on agricultural matters is gathered from research work done in South Africa.¹³⁶

Wachter's rejection of the peach fruits growing project in Basutoland should not be read as a technical judgement, but as part of the broader pattern shaped by imperial hierarchies and the political economy of High Commissioner Territories. His responses contradicted early missionary records, which indicated that peach trees had adapted to the soils and most households throughout the territory had grown them.¹³⁷ Such earlier missionary reports indicated that the Basotho in the Leribe district and the territory had already established that the fruit trees were viable. Therefore, the contradiction reflects a deeper tension in which colonial agricultural expertise routinely discounted indigenous ecological knowledge while simultaneously expressing frustration at Basutoland's marginal position in the regional economy.

Similar attitudes were observed when J. Russel, the Director of Rothamsted Experimental Station (RES) in Britain, invited Wachter to learn about soil erosion. He responded, 'I think a proper soil survey in Basutoland would require a highly technical man. I am afraid I am not qualified sufficiently in the subjects necessary to make this work.'¹³⁸ Again, in 1928, the High Commissioner suggested that Elder from Basutoland should represent the High Commission Territories at the Botanical Congress.¹³⁹ However, he turned down the invitation. Murray supported Elder by saying, 'It is only for highly trained Botanists who want to meet and discuss

¹³⁶ LNA, S3/1/1-3, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, 1927.

¹³⁷ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 1861.

¹³⁸ LNA, S3/1/47, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, A letter from the Agricultural Officer, F. Wachter, to the Government Secretary, 5 October 1927.

¹³⁹ LNA, S5/3/1, Agriculture and Veterinary in General, A letter of invitation from the High Commissioner to the A. W. Elder, 27 January 1928.

proposals to stabilise many outstanding matters in Botanical nomenclature.’¹⁴⁰ This disadvantaged Basutoland and the other High Commission Territories because Basutoland officials took a hostile stance towards agricultural development. It is safe to conjecture that this attitude was indeed influenced by colonial officials’ view that the territory’s ecology could not adequately support agriculture.

The situation was worsened by the fact that Africans could not challenge the positions of colonial administrators. Although a Basutoland National Council was launched in 1903 as a consultative forum between the Basotho and the imperial government’s officials, the imperial officials held authority over the Basotho’s external affairs.¹⁴¹ In the structural hierarchy, most of the most powerful positions in the Basutoland National Council were held by elite Basotho, including educated, wealthy individuals, those with specific technical or practical skills, and chiefs.¹⁴² This made it difficult for poor social groups in Leribe and other districts to present their grievances and for broader agrarian development issues to be addressed. In most sessions, the Resident Commissioner and the Principal Agricultural Officer used the platform to instruct Councilors and Chiefs on what to say to their people. It reinforced a top-down approach, leaving Africans with little input in agrarian development. The indigenous people thus continued to face challenges, including land disputes, and by 1927, the number of landless peasants in the district had risen by 18%.¹⁴³ Additionally, due to a 40% increase in population and a decrease in yields, the district could produce only approximately 20% of what it used to grow in maize, sorghum, and wheat.¹⁴⁴ This was mainly because the Council failed to address pertinent agricultural issues in the Leribe district. This reinforced the idea that administrators

¹⁴⁰ NUL, *Leselinyana La Lesotho*, 14 March 1938.

¹⁴¹ NUL, Basutoland National Council Second Session, 23 November 1904.

¹⁴² Basutoland National Council Nineteenth Session, 03 December 1924, 1.

¹⁴³ NUL 130/2A, Leribe Court Cases: Leribe 1900-1929, 83.

¹⁴⁴ NUL 130/2A, Leribe Court Cases: Leribe 1900-1929, 99.

took a negative attitude towards agrarian development. The courts did not resolve the land disputes. Land disputes and unequal land distribution aggravated the rates of poverty in many households, as few of them had support from a migrant worker who could send remittances here and there.¹⁴⁵

Jeeves and Crush demonstrate how remittances became essential for rural survival.¹⁴⁶ They noted that territories such as Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland were incorporated as labour reserves whose social and economic fabric revolved around the circulation of male wages and remittances.¹⁴⁷ In Leribe, remittances were used to pay taxes and purchase ploughs and livestock. Remittances also played a crucial role in reinforcing the dual economy, enabling families, especially women, to meet the household's needs and maintain crop cultivation in the absence of men.¹⁴⁸ This was because Leribe, as an agriculturally productive, densely populated district, supplied a significant number of men to the mines and farms in South Africa.

When it came to export-oriented agriculture, colonial officials showed some interest in the revenues it generated, particularly from wool and mohair exports. In 1922, the Agricultural Department introduced the sheep and goat dipping program.¹⁴⁹ In 1924, the Department hired Basotho agricultural demonstrators to assist with eliminating sheep scab in all districts.¹⁵⁰ The Department also imported Merino sheep and Angora goats, and encouraged the Basotho to purchase them.¹⁵¹ This was so because the colonial officials knew that merino sheep produced the best wool and mohair in the region. In December 1928, the Agricultural Department

¹⁴⁵ NUL 130/2A, Leribe Court Cases: Leribe 1900-1929, 101.

¹⁴⁶ A. Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines' Labour Supply, 1890-1920* (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 1985); J. Crush, *Struggle for Swazi Labour, 1890-1920* (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 1987).

¹⁴⁷ Crush, *Struggle for Swazi Labour, 1890-1920*.

¹⁴⁸ Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy*.

¹⁴⁹ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1921-1929, 14.

¹⁵⁰ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1921-1929, 18.

¹⁵¹ NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1921-1929, 20.

officially launched the sheep-breeding program.¹⁵² There were no records of resistance to this initiative to improve sheep keeping. Nevertheless, unfavourable colonial policies meant that the indigenes continued to live in poor conditions. Most herds were kept as stray stock to avoid colonial taxes and fines from officials.¹⁵³ The Resident Commissioner addressed the matter in the 29th Basutoland National Council meeting as follows:

The buyers have threatened to stop buying mohair from Basutoland. About 2000 to 4000 bales are lying unsold at Port Elizabeth and Durban. This suggests that there is an issue with your mohair, despite it being purchased with cash from you. The fact that it remains unsold represents a loss to the traders. The Bradford manufacturers in England had cabled their buyers in Port Elizabeth, instructing them to stop buying from you. This will affect national revenue and your prosperity as Basotho; £139,000 or more is earned annually from wool and mohair exports. Your mohair was mixed with dung, wire, and strings. The quality has deteriorated; the long, silky mohair that had brought this country an excellent reputation is no longer available.¹⁵⁴

The Resident Commissioner urged the council to talk to the farmers to improve production and educate them about the dangers of being cut out of the export market.

African responses to the Resident Commissioner revealed that mohair producers faced several challenges. For instance, the councillor from Leribe said that most peasants reported it was difficult to supply long mohair because it took longer to keep the sheep unshorn, and they risked having their flocks shaved by others.¹⁵⁵ One peasant said, ‘Someone will shear my goats and sheep if I take too long. What is the use of trying to improve my wool and mohair when thieves constantly steal from me? People are losing interest in quality.’¹⁵⁶ Thus, by the 1920s, agrarian development was affected by poor policies and a negative attitude adopted by colonial officials.

¹⁵² NUL, Leribe District Annual Report 1921-1929, 27.

¹⁵³ MMA, Journal des missions evangeliques, 1925 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 523.

¹⁵⁴ NUL, Basutoland National Council Twenty Fourth Session, 12 October 1929, 4-5.

¹⁵⁵ NUL, Councillor Labane Chokobane in Basutoland National Council Twenty Fourth Session, 12 October 1929, 11.

¹⁵⁶ NUL, Councillor Labane Chokobane in Basutoland National Council Twenty Fourth Session, 12 October 1929, 12.

The situation was affected by recurrent droughts throughout the 1920s. Food insecurity compelled a significant number of indigenous people to take up wage labour in the urban areas of Leribe and Ficksburg (South Africa), as well as on the bordering farms, to support their families.¹⁵⁷ However, it was not easy to survive in the towns, as the missionaries and other European officials were not hiring; most sent their house helpers home due to financial constraints.¹⁵⁸ Transactional sex also became widespread, and cases of adultery rose in the district.¹⁵⁹ Most women argued that they wanted to provide for their children; some were widows who lost their fields to the late husband's family, and some of them had lost their husbands, who had gone to the mines in the 1880s and never came back.¹⁶⁰ It can be argued that environmental conditions altered the Basotho's social norms and values.

However, some peasants adapted by diversifying their agriculture into horticultural crops, such as beans, cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and peas, in response to poor rainfall patterns.¹⁶¹ These crops required less time on the fields and were less prone to locust invasion or other pests than cereal crops. However, middle-class peasants joined forces with the poor and formed cooperatives. Some provided land while others provided seeds and labour. The produce was sold, and profits were distributed among the members. Rugege argued that during the 1920s, co-operatives were more popular in Lesotho than in *Matsema* and that the concept was eventually phased out with the help of educated elites in the territory.¹⁶² This was because the indigenous systems had lost their original purpose of serving the community; only the chiefs

¹⁵⁷ NUL 45/3A Leribe Collections 1920-1930, 26.

¹⁵⁸ MMA, Germond, '*Chronicles of Basutoland*', 501.

¹⁵⁹ NUL 130/2A, Leribe Court Cases: Leribe 1900-1929, 45.

¹⁶⁰ NUL 130/2A, Leribe Court Cases: Leribe 1900-1929, 47.

¹⁶¹ NUL 101/1, Leribe Gardening Cooperatives Reports to the District Commissioner 1927.

¹⁶² Rugege, '*Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho*', 249.

benefited. While this initiative among the Basotho promoted food security, it also contributed to rural stratification and social differentiation.

While some Basotho reverted to cultivating traditional crops rather than cash crops, as prices continued to decline, some peasants focused on sorghum as their main crop. It was easy to maintain. Wheat production declined amid a sustained decline in market prices throughout this decade. This indicates that Basotho agriculture in the Leribe district was now centered more on subsistence than commercial production. The shift from commercial to subsistence-oriented agriculture in Leribe district after 1900 reflected the regional restructuring of the rural economy during imperial rule. While this relates to Bundy's African peasant production, which was a reactive response to land dispossession and imperial discriminatory market policies, in the Leribe and all the other districts in the territory, the dynamics were shaped more by the emergence of a migrant labour system and environmental degradation.¹⁶³ Most men in Leribe increasingly sought wages in the South African mines, and most household agricultural production fell to women, adding to the other roles they had in society, driving production to a more subsistence level. Additionally, in the case of the Basotho, Murray and Beinart concur that colonial policy reinforced this shift through its limited investment in African agriculture, thereby positioning the Leribe district and the entire Basutoland as a labour reserve for the South African industrialized economy. I contend that this transformation revealed the structural adaptations of farmers in the Leribe district to the colonial economy.¹⁶⁴

On the other hand, in African agriculture during the 1900s, Sheddric noted that the immediate objective of Basotho agriculture has always been the production of foodstuffs for direct family

¹⁶³ Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*; NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe Annual Agricultural Returns, 1920-1929.

¹⁶⁴ Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*; Beinart, 'Soil erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83.

consumption, and surplus was only disposed of when conditions permitted trade.¹⁶⁵ Sheddric views Basotho African agricultural output through the imperial administrative lens, which frames African agriculture as inherently subsistence-oriented, while failing to acknowledge that Leribe producers have been part of regional economies and have contributed immensely to the agricultural market.¹⁶⁶ The previous chapter demonstrated how farmers in Leribe responded to the grain export market in the Orange Free State in the nineteenth century. Eldredge and Showers, in their works, also demonstrated that the Basotho were adaptive and market-oriented in agricultural production.¹⁶⁷ Still, structural constraints limited them, especially in commercial agriculture, which was beyond their control in the region. In this context, the Basotho prioritised their livelihoods and produced for subsistence, leading to a decline in agricultural exports from Leribe and other districts.

The 1929 economic recession disturbed other sources of income for Basotho. While their hope was in agriculture, the previous year, the imperial government had awarded itself the right to allocate sites in Basutoland under Proclamation 28, called the Government Reserves Proclamation.¹⁶⁸ Even though colonial officials consulted with chiefs for sites, this practice ultimately undermined the Basotho's rights to the land, laying the foundations for future control and interventions in the Basotho landscape. This proclamation limited the Basotho's ability to support their livelihoods through agricultural production; some designated grazing sites extended into other people's fields. Kate Showers has argued that colonial policies not only reduced the amount of land available for grazing but also, as agriculture and colonial development displaced grazing on the best soils, increasingly relegated livestock to more

¹⁶⁵ Sheddric, *Land Tenure in Basutoland*, 74.

¹⁶⁶ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 56-59.

¹⁶⁷ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*; Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

¹⁶⁸ NUL, S9/13, Government Reserves Proclamation 1928, 56.

marginal lands.¹⁶⁹ The environment was under excessive strain from people and their animals. At this point, very little attention was paid to conservation issues.¹⁷⁰ This was because the agrarian economy was induced into a state of survival.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that British governance of Basutoland did not lead to success in peasant agrarian development. Agriculture was affected by ecological and climatic disasters. Poor land tenure policies were further exacerbated by locust and rinderpest epidemics, which further influenced structural inequality and rural poverty. This, in turn, led to social stratification and the de-peasantisation of classes that were deprived of land. The colonial government responded by increasing the production of export products at the expense of the local peasants and food security. Therefore, a slew of negative policies and economic recessions contributed to the negative position that peasant agriculture found itself in by 1929. However, Africans showed considerable resilience and continued to increase agricultural production under markedly difficult circumstances. The indigenes responded by entering into wage labour and diversifying into horticultural produce.

¹⁶⁹ Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 263-286.

¹⁷⁰ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 329.

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards a New Paradigm: The State, African Agriculture, and Soil Conservation

Discourse in Leribe During the c. 1930-1939

Introduction

The 1930s marked a significant turning point in global debates over peasant agriculture and soil conservation. Stemming from the Great Depression of 1929, which had a devastating impact on the viability of agriculture, and the early 1930s Dust Bowl disaster, environmental conversations regarding soil conservation and agrarian practices became increasingly salient. Within this global context, this chapter discusses the emergence of the soil conservation discourse in Lesotho within the local environmental, socio-political, and economic framework. The new paradigm in this chapter refers to the broader reconfiguration of colonial governance worldwide, as ecological anxieties and scientific expertise converged to produce an ideology of state-led conservation.¹ The chapter examines the circumstances that led to a shift in environmental discussions in Lesotho, focusing particularly on the interplay between the state (and its interpretation of the soil erosion crisis, as well as its layered interests that influenced policy) and peasant communities in Leribe. Utilising archival documents, including reports, diaries, and newspapers, the chapter traces the origins of state interests in soil conservation and the international and local dynamics that shaped their interventions.

This chapter builds on the historiography of Lesotho and Southern Africa. Works by Showers, Konz, and Beinart present conservation as either purely a technical response or an extension of

¹ See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83; Konz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House'; Konz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

imperial coercion.² The chapter intersects both narratives and evaluates how the intersection of local ecological knowledges, colonial scientific discourses, and regional political economies unfolded in the case of Leribe district. It foregrounds the agency of Africans in redefining and shaping conservation agendas. The chapter highlights the regional and international colonial dimensions of policy, which are often treated as national or purely a colonial phenomenon. Hence, the chapter using Leribe contributes to the ongoing debates about the political economy of environmental governance and the making of the colonial state in southern Africa.

The Dust Bowl emerged from prolonged periods of drought, high winds, and excessive farming on the Great Plains. In response to the environmental disaster, soil conservation gained momentum throughout the British Southern and East African territories.³ Soil and economic surveys were conducted, and funding for anti-soil erosion schemes, such as road construction, dam construction, contouring, terracing, furrow diversion, and the planting of grass strips, was introduced, aligning with broader imperial interests. In Lesotho, global changes affected the development of state-led soil conservation and agriculture.

For instance, the 1934 Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Survey and the 1936 Ecological Survey of the Mountain Area of Basutoland marked the beginning of state-led anti-erosion programs, including contour ridging, terracing, and tree planting. Similar state surveys and rural planning initiatives were introduced in South Africa, such as the 1932 Native Affairs Commission, 1936 Land Acts, and provisions for betterment planning, which began in the late 1930s. However, the chapter demonstrates that Africans in the Leribe district showed that the state did not always control African agricultural practices, nor did Africans control their

² See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development'; Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House'; Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

³ Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography', 321-343.

environment. The Basotho in Leribe district questioned and negotiated technocratic rule in agrarian and conservation systems, exhibiting considerable resilience in the face of environmental challenges and new state policies. They adopted and adapted soil conservation schemes to sustain their agricultural production, which they depended on for their livelihoods.

Soil Conservation, Agrarian Change and its effects on Basotho in Leribe District c.1930-1933

Official concern about soil erosion in Basutoland began in the 1930s, despite earlier efforts to garner imperial attention to land degradation. In 1931, the Director of Native Agriculture in South Africa, Russell Thornton, was sent by the High Commissioner to survey Basutoland to assess the feasibility of establishing a pasture experiment station.⁴ After the early on-site conservation works they conducted with Collett in the Herschel district of the Union of South Africa, which appeared to have been progressing successfully. Herschel district had a long history of soil erosion, and most of its residents were Africans. The conservation works undertaken in Herschel included the construction of contour banks and the damming of large gullies.⁵ Hence, the High Commissioner sent Thornton to Basutoland, tasked with enhancing the pasture and evaluating the denudation process, as well as determining how to mitigate soil erosion in the area.⁶ Leribe was part of his tour in the lowland areas of the Territory. Thornton's overall assessment of the territory revealed that Lesotho's soil was the most fertile and well-watered in South Africa. However, sheet and gully erosion was rife throughout the lowlands, and much of the best soil had already washed into the sea. Unless checked, the rest of the soil

⁴ LNA, A letter from the High Commissioner to the Director of Native Agriculture R. Thornton, 2 May 1931.

⁵ Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Conservation', 143-162.

⁶ LNA, A letter from the High Commissioner to the Director of Native Agriculture R. Thornton, 2 May 1931.

was sure to follow.⁷ Thornton reached this conclusion by comparing the less-explored highlands with the densely populated lowlands.

Thornton further highlighted that soil erosion was minor in the highlands, but people were ploughing on steep slopes.⁸ He recommended conducting more demonstration works on gully reclamations and legal land-use proclamations to encourage peasants to fence paddocks, practise rotational grazing, reduce the number of stock per household, and raise awareness of the dangers of ploughing on steep slopes.⁹ Thornton emphasized that collective agriculture was among the most ineffective systems in the world; it stifled individual efforts and reduced the likelihood of successfully implementing proposed agricultural initiatives.¹⁰ Thornton's assessment resonates with broader colonial and Eurocentric perspectives, which were dominated by individual property ownership and market-oriented production.¹¹ In the case of Leribe, collective cultivation ensured food security through concentrated efforts in ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting grain, such as sorghum, in communal fields. The harvested grain had cushioned the land and landless inhabitants of Leribe district since the mid-1850s.¹² Bundy and Beinart contend that the colonial position in African communal agricultural production allowed them to legitimise their intervention in environmental governance through land tenure reforms, soil conservation campaigns, and promotion of wage labour.¹³ Nevertheless, Thornton's suggestions were not well received in Leribe and other districts, as

⁷ NUL, SAB, NTS, Vol. 10163, R. Thornton, Basutoland Report on Pastoral and Agricultural Conditions, 11, May 1931.

⁸ NUL, SAB, NTS, Vol. 10163, R. Thornton, Basutoland Report on Pastoral and Agricultural Conditions, 11, May 1931, 14.

⁹ NUL, SAB, NTS, Vol. 10163, R. Thornton, Basutoland Report on Pastoral and Agricultural Conditions, 11, May 1931, 15.

¹⁰ NUL, SAB, NTS, Vol. 10163, R. Thornton, Basutoland Report on Pastoral and Agricultural Conditions, 11, May 1931, 18.

¹¹ Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83.

¹² MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 115.

¹³ Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*; Beinart, 'Soil Erosion, Conservationism and Ideas about Development', 52-83.

his ideas were parallel to Sesotho customs. Also, the available land for cultivation was limited, and the luxury of privatising other pieces of land for pastures only would make the situation worse for the Basotho in the Leribe district.

The Resident Commissioner J. C. Sturrock disputed Thornton's opinion. He argued that freehold land tenure would do more harm than good in his territory.¹⁴ He argued that privatised agriculture would escalate tensions between the British government in Basutoland and the indigenous government (chiefs) and increase land disputes.¹⁵ This was so because privatized agriculture, by its nature, required individual land ownership for productivity, thereby increasing the unequal distribution of land among peasants and increasing the number of landless peasants. As a result, no one among the Basotho would see the need to participate in soil conservation programs. Conz stresses that the ploughing of the steep slopes in the highlands was, in fact, a clear indication that land was already a problem in the territory.¹⁶ This was a dimension that Thornton overlooked in his report. Perhaps he wanted to push the conservation discourse in South Africa and Lesotho after the soil surveys conducted by H. H. Bennett in Central America, the United States, South America, and Cuba. These case studies represent a break with the previous imperial concerns about commercial agricultural production, which overlooked the area's physical and ecological conditions. This way, I posit that Bennett's book on soil erosion, *Soil Erosion: A National Menace*, published in the previous decade, played a significant role in framing and introducing new colonial policies, such as the soil conservation policies launched during this period.¹⁷ In this book lie the same recommendations for rotational grazing and revegetation proposed by Thornton to Herschel, and now applied in Basutoland, despite the different soil type, climate, and vegetation of this

¹⁴ LNA, S3/1, J. C. Sturrock responses to Thornton, July 1931.

¹⁵ LNA, S3/1, J. C. Sturrock responses to Thornton, July 1931.

¹⁶ Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 291.

¹⁷ H. H. Bennett and W. R. Chapline, *Soil Erosion a National Menace* (US Department of Agriculture, 1928).

territory compared to those used by Bennett. Thus, conservation discussions in the territory were shaped by events elsewhere in Central America, like the Dust Bowl. Therefore, I argue that colonial officials like Thornton used the global framework to justify imperial authority over Africans and their environment by casting Basotho environmental challenges into the transnational scientific discourse, which was essentially a reactive approach focused on control of Africans' land, livestock, and labour. Neither the Basotho nor their chiefs in these conversations about soil erosion and anti-erosion measures went into depth at this point. However, colonial officials mentioned it during the National Council meetings, hoping that the councillors and chiefs would pass the information on to the people.¹⁸

While officials continued discussions about soil erosion, an ecological disaster struck the territory. In 1932, the Basotho were struck by a drought that was infamous for its widespread dust storm, known to the Basotho as *Lerole*.¹⁹ Minimal rainfall was received in Leribe, which almost led to total crop failure. Some chiefs and headmen managed to harvest through the collective efforts of their people, who worked in their fields using the early rains. This was a customary practice known as *letsema* or *Matsema*. Although peasants were not forced to attend *Letsema*, it was difficult for them to miss it. Dating back to the 1830s, *Matsema* was a significant activity that united the Basotho and held political, social, and economic significance for both the chieftaincy and society at large. Thus, by absconding, one was believed to be sending various messages to those in power.

¹⁸ Soil erosion as a subject appeared in the Basutoland National Council Sessions Minutes throughout the 1930s.

¹⁹ LNA, Basutoland National Annual Report, 1933.

The issue of *Matsema* became a topical issue among the Basotho. Thus, it appeared in *Mochochonono*, a newspaper owned by educated Basotho. Most Basotho grievances were published there. In 1932, an article titled ‘Crude Letsema System’ was published. It read,

Formerly, the Letsema system was favoured by both commoners and chiefs; however, the chiefs abused it by employing people without providing them with food for the work they did. It became a curse, and the sooner this curse is removed, the better for all. How can the Basutoland Government expect the Basotho to progress quickly when they are starving? Things are getting worse. This is an enforcement of labour without remuneration. Delinquents are subject to a fine of 10s or more for engaging in this type of employment. The officials in the territory are aware of this injustice but remain silent. Today, Letsema is conducted through stinginess and a tyrannical spirit; forced labour is not rationed or paid for. People are busy all week, but they must labour for some power without food, even on holidays. However, prisoners receive their rations, while the honest citizen is employed and compelled to neglect his work to attend Letsema, not even for a drink or a crumb. Shame! ²⁰

This quote highlights the growing awareness among peasants. This also reveals class differentiation and class struggles in peasant agriculture. It demonstrates that a rift had emerged among the peasants, their chiefs, and the colonial governance system, and how this affected their livelihoods. It also reveals that the people were aware that, as a system, *Letsema* or *Matsema* no longer benefited the peasants but only individuals in power. In this case, the chiefs and the British officials in the territory did not intervene to protect the people. Thus, the article continued as follows: “We must strongly protest, as we do and shall always do, against ways and tactics tending to slavery practised under disguise in the British Territories.”²¹

Peasants realised that formerly, communal farming systems such as the Letsema system existed because there was enough food available, and people in need had the opportunity to fill themselves up after doing some work for the convener.²² It made no difference who the convener was; people were always willing to lend a hand. *Letsema* was a form of mutual assistance provided by several people, giving the convener confidence to complete tasks at

²⁰ LNA, ‘Crude Letsema System’, *Mochochonono*, 6 January 1932, 4.

²¹ LNA, ‘Crude Letsema System’, *Mochochonono*, 6 January 1932, 5.

²² NUL, Leribe Collections, 1930-1940, 19.

lower expenses and in a shorter time. The convener supplied food in the form of meat, beer, and bread to the labourers, and no other pay was needed.²³ It was always considered that the food supply should be ample in the *Letsema* because the workers did not expect any other consideration. However, the standards had shifted, and the educated Basotho thought that the system should be abolished, and each man should work on their fields. Similar sentiments were also expressed in Southern Rhodesia, in the Chiweshe reserve, where men aged 20 to 50 opposed Nhimbe (communal work parties), a concept akin to Letsema.²⁴ Leslie Bessant and Elvis Muringai noted that the parents or older generation clung to Nhimbe for the security it offered them. Still, their children had adopted and adapted to the ‘scientific’ and ‘modern’ agriculture taught by imperial officials, which focused on maximising yields from their fields. They could not afford to waste time on someone else’s field.²⁵ This illustrates that peasants gradually adopted practices that benefited them individually, thereby improving their livelihoods.

Influenced by the articles published in *Mochochonono*, some peasants started questioning the usefulness of *Matsema*. Some argued that had they not participated in Letsema and focused on their fields, their crops might have made it before the dust disaster.²⁶ The traders indicated that very few Basotho harvested grain in Leribe; mostly, it was the chiefs.²⁷ Peasants perceived collectivized farming as exploitative because it primarily benefited the chiefs and landowners. These struggles were further exacerbated by the ecological and economic challenges of the period. The following year, rainfall was extremely low, resulting in very few farmers harvesting grain. In the same year, adverse winter conditions negatively affected productive

²³ NUL, Leribe Collections, 1930-1940, 20.

²⁴ L. Bessant and E. Muringai, ‘Peasant, Businessmen, and Moral Economy in the Chiweshe Reserve, Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930-1968’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 4(2007), 551-592.

²⁵ Bessant and Muringai, ‘Peasant, Businessmen’, 552.

²⁶ NUL, Leribe Collections: Leribe Trader’s Agricultural Notes, 3 August 1932, 9.

²⁷ NUL, Leribe Collections: Leribe Trader’s Agricultural Notes, 3 August 1932, 14.

farmland, pastures, and homesteads. The overall effect of these ecological challenges was that some peasants lost their crops and livestock.

In South Africa, economic conditions were unfavourable following the Great Depression and the droughts of the previous decade. The European economies had not recovered from the economic slump that South Africa relied on for its raw-material markets, such as gold, diamonds, wheat, and wool.²⁸ Thus, this financial downturn negatively affected the mining and agricultural sectors in the region. The demands of minerals and grain requirements fell, and retrenchments were unavoidable for most migrant labourers.²⁹ Hence, people could not turn to migrant labour to support their families, and crop production had also failed, despite their high hopes. Those who were working could not afford to send remittances because wages continued to be reduced in South Africa, ranging from £ 0.45 to £1.50 per month.³⁰ Previously, most mine workers received about £3 per month.³¹ It should be noted that, while conditions were unfavourable across the border, the situation was worse at home due to the ecological conditions. Some families depended on edible greens and roots they gathered from the countryside.³² Hence, this reflects that people suffered despite their resilience; there were instances when, ecologically and economically, livelihoods became difficult for both the Basotho and the colonial officials. Perhaps these challenging conditions prompted the educated peasants to question the existing agricultural patterns. In anticipation of improving their livelihoods in their territory, because they were educated and had been exposed to living and

²⁸ M.I. Tongwane, T.S. Ramotubei and M.E. Moeletsi, Influence of Climate on Conflicts and Migrations in Southern Africa in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries, *Climate*, 10 (2022), 119, <https://www.mdpi.com/2225-1154/10/8/119> accessed, 13 June 2025.

²⁹ A. Minnaar, 'The Effects of the Great Depression (1929–1934) on South African White Agriculture', *South African Journal of Economic History*, 5, 2 (1990), 83–108.

³⁰ <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/9d87548b-9d7d-4b24-a946-77b1cd1779a7/content>, The Witwatersrand: Labour, Townships and Patterns of Protest, accessed 02 June 2025.

³¹ Minnaar, 'The Effects of the Great Depression (1929–1934)', 87.

³² See Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 289.

working conditions in South Africa and knew what was happening elsewhere in the region and abroad.

Additionally, due to the drought, debates about the usefulness of *Letsema* continued. Some considered it a lost cause, while others believed it could save the Basotho.³³ Chiefs continued to call out *Matsema*, but most Basotho argued that it represented forced labour by the chiefs, and that forced, unpaid labour was illegal and unjust, as well as enslaving and encouraging theft, and that it was time for the authorities to investigate the matter and see that only food or remuneration of some sort was to be obtained.³⁴ The educated peasants stimulated these ideas. They prompted other peasants to question the customary systems and fostered resistance among them. This also aligns with Gavin Capps' evaluation of the exploitative nature of customary leaders and systems.³⁵ He argues that the chieftaincy was a distinctive fusion of political and landed power, rooted in the varied forms of exploitation that mediated and expressed Africa's capitalist development under colonial conditions.³⁶ This was pursued through a comparison of how imperial authorities turned to the chieftaincy as a means of addressing the overarching challenge of subjugating African labour to metropolitan and settler capital, while constructing stable systems of colonial domination in British territories.

As mentioned above, Capps' observations on British authorities were also demonstrated in Basutoland. The District Commissioner, in a letter to the Resident Commissioner, revealed the effects of indigenous practices led by traditional leaders in the territory. The District Commissioner said that,

³³ NUL Leribe Collection: District Commissioner Report to the Resident Commissioner, 16 January 1934, 31.

³⁴ NUL Leribe Collection: District Commissioner Report to the Resident Commissioner, 16 January 1934, 33.

³⁵ Capps, *Custom and Exploitation: Rethinking the Origins of the Modern African Chieftaincy in the Political Economy of Colonialism, In Agrarian Marxism* (Routledge, 2019), 117.

³⁶ Capps, *Custom and Exploitation*, 118.

My people insist that it is a horrible shame that the British subjects are forced to work for nothing worse than convicts. The present Letsema system enslaves and interferes with the independence and aspirations of the people. The chiefs like this system because it curbs the influence of the educated class. It is not humiliating enough to work for food. The better-educated class is badly affected by this letsema system. They do not appreciate it, and they ask that justice be served by abolishing the system of forced, unpaid labour.³⁷

While a colonial official wrote the letter, this document reveals that the government was aware of the Basotho's grievances. The numerous complaints by the peasants of Leribe and elsewhere demonstrated the growing spirit of dissatisfaction. Even though it became necessary for the colonial officials to give the Basotho's grievances immediate consideration, the government did not abolish *Matsema*. The peasants continued to express various opinions through *Mochochonono* and other papers. The publications did not bring an immediate remedy, but they helped the Basotho shape their attitudes and perspectives. They observed that seeking official government feedback on matters that did not sit well with them, through petitions, did not guarantee a positive response. However, the government did not always intervene, respond to people's desires, or address every concern raised.

However, while imperial officials opposed indigenous practices, peasants were also questioning the state's involvement in ecological and economic challenges. For instance, after the drought, the peasants expected the government to assist them in coping with the drought and the ensuing financial and ecological hardships. Indeed, the government formed a famine relief programme.³⁸ However, the government controlled the terms and conditions of how the food was distributed and when it was distributed. They offered food to the able-bodied Basotho in exchange for work. This was done to expedite public works, such as road construction and gully reclamation in their areas.³⁹ Despite the focus on able-bodied Basotho, the elderly and

³⁷ NUL Leribe Collections: District Commissioner to the Resident Commissioner, 15 April 1934.

³⁸ LNA, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report for the Year ended 30th September 1933, 12.

³⁹ LNA. J. Qethoha, 'Famine Relief in Basutoland', *Mochochonono*, 20 December 1933, 6.

people with disabilities were also given free mealie meal. This government strategy can be understood in the economic sense. Money was scarce during this period; therefore, it was easier for the government to save the Basotho from hunger and starvation while also undertaking public works, such as road construction and land reclamation programs, which had not been initially budgeted for in the relief program.⁴⁰ Hence, it can be argued that the colonial government was equally exploitative as the indigenous government; it promoted the capitalistic systems of colonialism under the guise of famine relief.

Despite the government's efforts, some members of the Basotho National Council argued that it could do more to help people sustain their livelihoods. The Council represented the concerns of the ordinary people. Hence, it can be argued that most of the Basotho felt neglected by the government at this point. In the quarterly Leribe District Commissioner's reports to the Resident Commissioner, the District Commissioner reported that peasants did less work per week or deliberately made mistakes so that they could be asked to rework the same work for some time and continue to receive rations under the famine relief program.⁴¹ This statement implies that Africans were dishonest, yet the colonial officials believed they were doing them a better service. I posit that this reflects distinctive infusions of technocratic rule into Basotho livelihoods and in peasant resistance to them.

Regarding livestock, the Department of Agriculture continued to emphasise the elimination of poor sheep breeds to boost the wool and mohair industries. The veterinary department stressed the dipping of sheep to prevent disease and the castration of 'bastard' rams to reduce breeding of poor breeds.⁴² However, in Leribe, most peasants continued to keep the (Bastard Persian)

⁴⁰ LNA. J. Qethoha, 'Famine Relief in Basutoland', *Mochochonono*, 20 December 1933, 7.

⁴¹ NUL, Leribe Collection, District Commissioner's Quarterly Report to the Resident Commissioner, 1933, 36.

⁴² LNA, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report for the Year ended 30th September 1933, 5.

sheep to feed their families.⁴³ One of the councillors from Leribe, Labane Chokobane, a member of the Basutoland National Council, argued that because of the drought, this breed had a better chance of survival than the imported rams, and it produced more meat than the other rams, which produced more wool and mohair but less meat.⁴⁴ Other councillors also mentioned that in their districts, peasants with large numbers of livestock also slaughtered their goats and sheep and shared them with others through chiefs and village headmen.⁴⁵ This shows that the Basotho prioritised providing for their families over breeding for export to improve the country's returns from wool and mohair exports.

Sheep were castrated at the dipping posts. This way, it was easy for the dip inspectors to identify the rams and castrates. However, most peasants resorted to not sending their sheep and goats to avoid the castration of their rams. There were reports that most peasants lost their livestock the night or the morning after dipping, and they believed this was another way for the department to eradicate what it considered poor breeds.⁴⁶ Hence, those with preferred breeds dipped their stock, while the rest refrained. However, the principal veterinary officer, Mr Henderson, assured the peasants that 'deadly worms were killing sheep and goats even outside the territory in Transkei and Ciskei, and dipping was the way to kill those worms.'⁴⁷ Thus, it was essential to administer monthly doses to the animals, but this still did not encourage the peasants to dip their stock.⁴⁸ These acts reveal the disagreement between the imperial power and the peasants. Conz stressed that the Basotho understood science and what to expect from the government, having examined their earlier experiences in Qacha's Nek with rinderpest,

⁴³ NUL Leribe Collections 8/1, Leribe Collections 1930-1939, 19.

⁴⁴ NUL, Councillor L. Chokobane in Basutoland National Council, Twenty Sixth Session, 25 October 1933, 12.

⁴⁵ NUL, Councillor L. Chokobane in Basutoland National Council, Twenty Sixth Session, 25 October 1933, 13.

⁴⁶ NUL, Councillor L. Chokobane in Basutoland National Council, Twenty Sixth Session, 25 October 1933, 15.

⁴⁷ NUL, Veterinary Principal Officer, Mr Henderson, Basutoland National Council, Twenty Sixth Session, 30 October 1933, 50.

⁴⁸ NUL, Veterinary Principal Officer, Mr Henderson, Basutoland National Council, Twenty Sixth Session, 30 October 1933, 50

agricultural demonstrations, and sheep scab.⁴⁹ Despite being in the lowland region of the territory, peasants in Leribe also expressed their discontent in various forms, and the government sought new means to persuade them to accept its policies.

The government also loaned 30 lbs. of maize seed to each farmer to ensure a good harvest for the following year.⁵⁰ This was because, in the late summer of 1933, the territory received heavy rainfall. While this was a good initiative for Basotho from the British administration, very few people sowed the seed. Some peasants had lost their cattle, which they used to plough during the drought season. Thus, they consumed the maize seed; others claimed to plough, but reported that their cattle were too weak to plough because pastures had not yet recovered after the dust disaster.⁵¹ Some people argued that the government could have done more than loaning maize seeds to people who had been severely affected by drought.⁵² *Lekhotla la Bafo* (council of the commoners) argued that the drought was a consequence of imperial (British and South African) exploitation of Basotho and their animals. They understood that the colonial power exacerbated the ecological and environmental conditions in Basutoland because they had coerced the Basotho into intensive crop and livestock production to boost the economic position of the peasants and the territory. They argued that the government could use tax revenues and export duty fees to sustain livelihoods.⁵³ While this was a political issue, it served as an eye-opener for the Basotho, revealing that their government prioritised its own interests over theirs. The Basotho Council of Commoners has gained widespread support since its formation in 1923. Its position towards government policies, therefore, influenced the Basotho's response to the soil conservation programs introduced to them.

⁴⁹ Konz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 264.

⁵⁰ Konz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 265.

⁵¹ LNA, W.N. Mohajana, 'Tlala le Komello, Phamong', *Leselinyana*, 8 November 1933.

⁵² LNA, J. Qethoha, 'Famine Relief in Basutoland', *Mochochonono*, 20 December 1933, M. Majara, 'Tlala Lesotho', *Leselinyana*, 18 October 1933.

⁵³ LNA, L.C, 8/1, Leribe Collections 1930-1939.

Although the Basotho experienced internal ecological and economic hardships, similar conditions were also experienced throughout the region. Thus, due to the environmental and financial interdependence between the Union of South Africa and Basutoland, the Union was concerned that the conditions in Basutoland might continue to have cross-border ecological and economic effects, thereby worsening the conditions in South Africa. For instance, the Great Depression affected commodity prices, with wheat, maize, wool, and mohair all dropping.⁵⁴ The drought also had devastating effects on the livelihoods of Basotho. Therefore, they opted to focus on sustenance rather than export agricultural production. South Africa was affected by the choices made by the Basotho, despite their control over external activities. The quality and quantity of wheat, wool, and mohair exported by the Basotho continued to decline.⁵⁵ Hence, it was essential to improve production and explore new avenues for the territory to serve the Union.

Environmental Evaluation of the Lowlands under the Pim and Milligan Financial and Economic Inquiry 1934-1935

The decline in Basutoland's agrarian exports and the decline in the migrant labour force led the Union government to seek ways to revive these sectors. The union relied on Basutoland for products such as wool, mohair, and wheat. It also relied on Basutoland for labour in mines, farms, and domestic work. Thus, in 1934, in response to these economic shocks, the Secretary of Dominion Affairs, the Honourable J.H. Thomas, commissioned Sir Alan Pim to visit

⁵⁴ F. Cooper, 'Peasants, Capitalists, and Historians: A Review Article' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7, 2 (1981), 284-314; W.A. Hofmeyr, 'Agricultural Crisis and Rural Organisation in the Cape: 1929-1933' (1985).

⁵⁵ NUL, Basutoland National Council, Twenty Fourth Session, 12 October 1929, 21, and Basutoland National Council, Twenty Seventh Session, 13 November 1932, 19.

Basutoland to evaluate the territory's financial and economic position.⁵⁶ Pim was an economist, and his knowledge of land and agrarian developments was limited; he was assigned to work with Milligan, who had extensive experience with agricultural affairs in South Africa and India.⁵⁷ This, in turn, led to their evaluations and suggestions differing. However, the overall report, published in 1935, became a template for environmental management in the territory, perhaps because the Basotho's financial and economic position depended on their environment. While several factors identified in the report affected the territory's economic and financial position, this section places particular emphasis on the agricultural and soil erosion issues raised by Pim and Milligan, which prompted colonial officials to address soil erosion in Lesotho as early as 1936.

It is worth noting that neither Milligan nor Pim had experience with the Basotho's livelihoods and the landscape. However, their report became the centrepiece of conservation development programs in the territory. Firstly, Pim, in his report addressed to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Honourable J.H. Thomas, said,

Arriving on October 3rd, we spent a few days gaining a general understanding of the position and scope of our work. We were also able to attend a National Council meeting. On the 7th of October, we commenced our tour by motoring to Butha-Buthe in the northwest of the territory and riding thence, with pack transport, through the mountains of Mokhotlong...Returning by train to Leribe, passing through Maseru, we continued our tour to the southern district headquarters. At all district headquarters, we met representatives of missionaries, traders, and chiefs, in addition to discussing matters with local officials and receiving assistance from them, both individually and collectively, with their knowledge of local conditions and problems.⁵⁸

This illustrates how the survey was laid out; in less than a week, Pim and Milligan gained a perspective on the environmental and ecological problems facing the Basotho. However, the

⁵⁶ NUL, Basutoland National Council, Twenty Fourth Session, 12 October 1929, 21, and Basutoland National Council, Twenty-Ninth Session, 1 October 1933, 5.

⁵⁷ LNA, Sir A. Pim in A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935.

⁵⁸ LNA, A.W. Pim Report to the Secretary of Dominion Affairs Honourable, J.H. Thomas, January 1935, in A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935.

inquiry into Basutoland's financial and economic position took three months to complete.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the general description began with the weekly tour, which was made by car, train, and horseback. This means that the areas toured by Pim and Milligan in Leribe and elsewhere were accessible from main roads, close to horse riding paths, and near train stations. This reflects the biases and limitations of colonial evaluations of landscapes.

At that time, those areas were close to mission stations, government reserves, and senior chiefs' homesteads. As mentioned above, these individuals were consulted and used as representatives of ordinary Basotho and their livelihoods. In his general description of Basutoland's physical characteristics, Pim pointed out that,

...only the central half is fairly even or undulating, affording the country large areas of arable land, in Leribe and beyond to the north, and rocky mountain ridges with fertile valleys between them intersect Mohale's Hoek to the south, a large part of the strip. The greater part of this level is the central areas, which are characterized by comparatively light sandy loam known locally as 'bult', mostly of poor quality, but capable of being converted by cultivation and the use of fertilizers into land comparable to most agricultural land in South Africa.⁶⁰

However, Milligan stated that "the main cause of soil erosion in the lowlands was rapid runoff from the lower slopes of the hills and kopjes; little severe erosion was found, and what was present could easily be addressed."⁶¹ He estimated that about ten percent of the arable land was threatened by existing gullies, and the lowlands, at any rate, had the best arable land.⁶² Milligan emphasized that the imbalance between domesticated animals and the land on which they grazed accelerated erosion.⁶³ In contrast, most missionary documents, in the form of reports and letters, had revealed in previous years that the entire territory was under threat of erosion.⁶⁴ The mission stations before the 1930s were primarily centred in the territory's lowland regions,

⁵⁹ LNA, A.W. Pim Report to the Secretary of Dominion Affairs Honourable J.H. Thomas, January 1935, in A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935. viii.

⁶⁰ LNA, Sir A. Pim in A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 86.

⁶¹ LNA, Milligan, in A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 135.

⁶² LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935.

⁶³ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 136.

⁶⁴ See Missionary letters and reports compiled in R. C. Germond, *Chronicles of Basotho*, 319, 435, 450-453.

but their documents highlighted that the whole territory was under threat. However, they had accessed areas near mission stations and those they passed by while traveling to the Union of South Africa and surrounding trading ports. Hence, this questions the credibility of both sources towards the intensity of the erosion.

While the Pim report acknowledged earlier reports of soil erosion in Basutoland, it encouraged a different tour to assess the Highlands. Milligan stated,

Erosion in Basutoland is no new phenomenon; mention of dongas is to be found in letters written many years ago. However, it is within the memory of the more senior government officers that it has assumed threatening proportions. The question can be conveniently addressed by considering the Lowlands and the Highlands separately, as the problems differ between the two areas.⁶⁵

Hence, the following year, an Ecological Survey of the Mountain Area of Basutoland was done as proposed.⁶⁶ The second survey was ecological, but its primary intention was to explore economic possibilities rather than address environmental concerns for the Basotho. Additionally, the above quotation emphasised that the government had not considered soil erosion and its impact on economic development, despite its prior mention.

Furthermore, Milligan and Pim mentioned that soil erosion in Lesotho affected the main rivers.

Milligan stated that

it was essential to conserve water in Basutoland because its water was not only crucial locally but also to the countryside across its borders to the southwest, and the flow of the two main rivers, the Orange and its tributary, the Caledon, was affected by the activities done in the territory. This indicates that while soil erosion by water occurred in Lesotho, it also affected both the Basotho and their neighbours across the Caledon River.⁶⁷

Milligan also highlighted that the absence of gullies at the centre of the lowlands led to rapid runoff during the rainy season from the lower slopes of the hills and kopjes, as well as from

⁶⁵ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, *Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report*, 1935, 135.

⁶⁶ LNA, R. R. Staples and W.K. Hudson, *An Ecological Survey of the Mountain Area of Basutoland*, 1938.

⁶⁷ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, *Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report*, 1935,140.

roads and their surrounding areas.⁶⁸ By highlighting the environmental and economic consequences of Basotho activities on the Union, the imperial government was laying the foundations for legitimising coercive conservation policies under the guise of improving the territory.

Another challenge mentioned in the report that contributed to accelerated soil erosion in Lesotho was poor drainage systems. The roads were described as responsible for gully erosion because most were dusty and opened with wagons and carts; no engineering was done to promote runoff.⁶⁹ Most of the roads were opened by missionaries and traders, primarily to facilitate travel to the mission stations and the homes of their converts.⁷⁰ Traders created roads wherever possible, enabling them to reach villages to buy, sell, and exchange a range of commodities, livestock, and agricultural products.⁷¹ Other paths described in the report included livestock paths to and from grazing lands to the kraals, peasants' footpaths to and from the villages to water sources, fields, grazing areas, and trading and mission stations, which became sources of run-off during the rainy season. Milligan said, "Road drains have turned into gullies themselves, drainage recourse and contouring is needed, without the construction of extensive contour banks, fresh gullies will be made in adjoining fields and pastures."⁷² Thus, contour ridges became one of the anti-erosion measures Milligan encouraged for peasants in the lowlands. This, in turn, included the Leribe district.

The anti-erosion schemes suggested by Milligan were not new to the Basotho. He stated that

⁶⁸ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 141.

⁶⁹ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 141.

⁷⁰ MMA, French Protestant Missionaries in Southern Africa Commentary in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*.

⁷¹ MMA, H. Kruger, Travel Notes, 1883 in Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland* (Moriya: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1967), 409 and G. Dieterlin, undated letter, in Germond, 'Chronicles of Basutoland', 70.

⁷¹ MMA, Germond, 'Chronicles of Basutoland', 72.

⁷² LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 136.

Anti-erosion works are by no means rare, nor can they even be said to be modern. The history of terracing, for example, is lost in antiquity. Hill cultivation all over the world is almost universally carried on through contour terraces- the soil otherwise would have long disappeared into the ocean. In many countries, especially where rice is grown, even the gentler slopes are terraced.⁷³

This concurs with Konz's argument that state-led conservation methods were not new to the Basotho; peasants in the highland region, who farmed on steep slopes, used terracing and stone bunds to protect the soil from being washed away by water.⁷⁴ However, Milligan addressed the local terraces, giving credit to the terraces made elsewhere. This demonstrated the racial undertone, underpinned by superiority, rather than the environmental realities at stake.

While Milligan acknowledged that contouring and terracing were traditional methods of controlling soil erosion, he stressed that Europeans practised them more effectively than Africans.⁷⁵ He highlighted that in Europe, countries that practised hill cultivation had inhabitants who were among the world's most renowned agriculturalists. These hardworking and industrious people possessed a sound hereditary knowledge of hill cultivation.⁷⁶ Here, Milligan suggested that Europeans were the most skilled and hardworking agriculturalists in the world. He described the Basotho as follows: 'an ignorant and casual population that does not know how to deal with such questions individually (as reflected in interviews conducted with Basotho during the survey), yet lacks any real communal sense, except for the family and the clan. Protective public works are in their case the only hope for the threatened areas.'⁷⁷ Pim and Milligan did not consider that the Basotho were once the major producers and exporters of grain in the late 19th Century. It was the Africans who were producing the wheat crop, competing against the white farmers in the Orange Free State.⁷⁸ This demonstrates the intensive

⁷³ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 137.

⁷⁴ Konz, 'Wisdom does not live in one Household' 265.

⁷⁵ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 137.

⁷⁶ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 138.

⁷⁷ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 139.

⁷⁸ MMA, Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*, 140.

efforts put in by peasants in agriculture. However, because of land shortages among the Basotho, terracing and contouring on hillslopes seemed a waste of land, as the population depended on agriculture for sustenance. The report did not factor in land scarcity among the Basotho as a factor that hindered agrarian production or as a factor that caused some Basotho to plough on steep slopes. These factors differentiated the African and European hill cultivators mentioned in the report, as their ecological and political circumstances were not detailed.

Even though Pim and Milligan insisted that a separate survey should be conducted to enquire about the highlands, they made suggestions for the highland regions of the territory. They suggested that mountain paths and tracks endangered the valleys (found in the lowland parts of Leribe district), particularly when breaks were formed in the overall vegetation cover due to overgrazing in the mountain areas. This, in turn, led to accelerated soil erosion as the breaks became channels for water to flow, washing away the soil. The report stated that the breaks gradually eroded the soil upward.⁷⁹ It added that similar results were observed in the cultivated fields, where definite banks formed between the lands and the pastures above.⁸⁰ The report also emphasized that, unless prompt action was taken, soil erosion could become uncontrollable in the mountainous areas.⁸¹ Thus, the report concluded that the landscape was not safe from erosion, from the lowlands to the mountains, albeit at different rates and with varying effects. It also highlights that soil erosion in Lesotho cannot be tamed but must be accommodated and managed, as the indigenous people of the landscape have been doing since the 1800s. Hence, this analysis, to some extent, highlights that the ordinary Basotho possessed some skills in managing their environment and sustaining livelihoods through agriculture.

⁷⁹ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 141.

⁸⁰ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 141.

⁸¹ LNA, A. Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 143.

The report also encouraged pasture management through fencing and destocking to reduce soil erosion in both the Lowlands and the Highlands. It highlighted that accelerated erosion rates could be reduced by reducing the number of livestock. Rotational grazing was also mentioned to reduce grass disappearance, leaving the area with a few bitter Karoo bushes.⁸² Therefore, according to the report, if stock owners reduced the number of their livestock and the size of their grazing areas, the most eroded regions would recover, and their livestock could graze in areas with better pastures. However, the authors did not consider that, in some districts, such as Leribe, implementing such measures was not easy because both the lowlands and the mountain areas of the district were densely populated with villages. Some people had already migrated to the highland districts in search of land for settlement, cultivation, and livestock grazing. Additionally, the ecological and topographical conditions were not considered in the report. The presence of a few *Karoo* bushes was not due to erosion; instead, the environment was more conducive to grass growth than to tree growth, which explains the few bushes. Thus, the conservation measures were overly structured and failed to account for the ecological, demographic, and topographical realities of the Basotho. This highlights the top-down and coercive nature of colonial officials in environmental governance. It was centred on politics, power, and control over the peasants and the landscape. In Showers' book, *Imperial Gullies: Soil Erosion and Conservation in Lesotho*, she stressed that "landscapes are libraries, meaning they must be read and understood."⁸³ The colonial administration utilised the inaccurate landscape readings by Pim and Milligan in Lesotho to inform its soil conservation policies. This section argues that while soil erosion caused anxieties among peasants and the colonial power, the proposed environmental measures had broader dynamics that reflected social and political control rather than ecological management.

⁸² LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 144.

⁸³ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 1.

Introduction of State-led Anti-erosion Programmes and Basotho Responses, 1936-1939

Building on the previous section, this section focuses on the implementation of Pim and Milligan's suggestion in Lesotho, with particular attention to the responses of Leribe peasants. Firstly, in 1936, the Colonial Office in London provided loans to the British administrative offices in its colonies to fund conservation projects. Lesotho received £160,233 from the Colonial Welfare and Development Fund office to support soil conservation work, while Kenya received £39,000 and South Africa received £25,000 for soil conservation programs.⁸⁴ The distribution of funds demonstrated how the imperial power sought to exert control in Basutoland by investing a larger amount than in Kenya and South Africa, where it had autonomy. In response to soil erosion and degradation, the British administration in Lesotho implemented its first national programs under the leadership of R.W. Thornton, head of the Department of Agriculture. Thornton had experience in conservation work; he was responsible for soil conservation in the Hershel district (Transkei) and other locations in South Africa.⁸⁵ Thornton worked with Engineer L.H. Collett in South Africa. Collett was responsible for the employment and implementation of the anti-erosion works. Thus, the High Commissioner, impressed by their work in the Union, sent them to Basutoland to do similar work together in Basutoland.

In the previous chapter, it was demonstrated that British officials in Basutoland declined invitations to host agricultural programs in Britain's territories, arguing that such programs were intended for funded territories with experienced personnel, which Basutoland lacked. Thus, in 1936, funding was provided, and Thornton and Collett, with experience, were

⁸⁴ NUL, S319/01, Welfare Development Fund for African British Territories.

⁸⁵ LNA, Pim and S. Milligan, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935, 145.

instructed to head the anti-erosion schemes in Basutoland. The imperial government considered Thornton and Collett as bearers of technical expertise that they did not recognise in indigenous agrarian and conservation practices. They introduced anti-erosion schemes, such as contour ridges, terraces, fencing, and destocking.⁸⁶ However, from a soil scientist's perspective, Showers argues that the government launched a single program under different names.⁸⁷ To her, contour banks, ridge terraces, and narrow-based terraces, as described in the Basutoland Annual Agricultural Reports and the Department of Agriculture Annual Reports, all referred to soil built up into ridges on the contour across fields.⁸⁸ However, this was the first time the territory was funded to improve itself. This way, perhaps, Showers' observations and conclusions that the anti-erosion schemes were 'ill-conceived' may have been too harsh for the British Basutoland officials, who were not experienced in leading funded initiatives. The whole administration depended on Thornton and Collett, who had experience outside the territory. Nevertheless, the conservation works began.

The anti-erosion schemes were top-down measures that prioritized state interventions to combat erosion, often with imperial interests in the Leribe district and elsewhere in the territory.⁸⁹ They did not consider the fundamental economic and ecological realities of Africans. Thus, this disturbed the Basotho when they heard about the funding and the anti-erosion schemes. Earlier in this chapter, the educated individuals within Leribe and beyond had pleaded with the colonial officials through newspaper articles, writing to the District Commissioner and the Resident Commissioner, in anticipation that their grievances would be addressed. However, nothing was done in response to ease the livelihoods of the Basotho. Hence, they found the new policies and the funding poured into the territory to be amiss. The

⁸⁶ NUL, Basutoland Agricultural Report for the Year Ended September 1936,3.

⁸⁷ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

⁸⁸ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 156.

⁸⁹ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

Basotho expressed their concerns in *Mochochonono* about soil erosion and the need for financing. Even, traders discussed this matter among themselves and with their colleagues in the Union through letters. One trader wrote that,

The people have been restless since they heard about the anti-erosion scheme; they seem not to understand that these conservation programmes will help them improve their environment. Most of them believe that they are being joined to the Union of South Africa. Here in Leribe, most men are restless, and whenever they meet, this is the key topic of discussion. They cannot imagine themselves as part of the Union of South Africa. They take pride in being Basotho, and nothing else seems to matter. Unless this matter is addressed, the Basotho will not be comfortable participating in the work.⁹⁰

This reveals the Basotho's fears about funded programs. This letter also allows for the argument that the producers were aware of the government's intervention and were not eager to participate in state-led initiatives without understanding the benefits to the imperial government and the effects of the policies and programs on the ordinary Basotho and their livelihoods.

On the other hand, Africans did not completely oppose conservation measures, but they opposed the technocratic and coercive ways in which they were imposed.⁹¹ Hence, for the Basotho, the programme's exclusive nature meant they were slowly being absorbed into the Union of South Africa. This was because, in other British territories where the imperial power invested, it exercised direct rule, as seen in Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa.⁹² The Basotho were aware of such dynamics, and it caused unrest in the communities of the Leribe district and beyond.

In response, the imperial administration attempted to frame and alleviate Basotho concerns through the newspapers. This was not a new phenomenon in the British Empire; the imperial

⁹⁰ NUL Leribe Collections, A letter from P. Roger to R. Karl, dated 20 March 1936.

⁹¹ See Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 143; Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Conservation', 143-162.

⁹² For a detailed analysis of how conservation unfolded in the British imperial territories above, see Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Conservation', 143-162.

officials in Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland also used the press to translate, justify, and contain policy decisions that generated discomfort and uneasiness between the state and African policies and practices.⁹³ In the case of the Basotho, in April 1936, an article was published titled '*Help for Protectories, Money for Soil Erosion*'. The article reads,

Our contemporaries have been discussing the £35,000 and their incorporation into the Union. It is not publicly known how much of the funding will be allocated to Basutoland. It is generally understood that the Union intends to put the territory under our government and pay pound for pound to the Basutoland government in this matter. The imperial government is reported to have allocated £15,000 from the Colonial Development Fund for agricultural development, including anti-erosion work, tree planting, stock improvement, and other related activities, to be spent over five years. However, it is more likely to take ten years to complete the program, as the administration had intended. However, the home government is neither able nor prepared to commit itself to more than five years in this matter. Now, with the welcome and generous assistance of the Union Government, such works should go on to the gratification and satisfaction of all concerned. At the same time, those in Basutoland who have hitherto looked up on the Union with repugnant eyes should have reason for readjusting their outlook.⁹⁴

However, this article did not calm the Basotho. It increased their anxiety. They saw the imperial investments in the territory as instruments to change the land use, power, and agrarian traditions of the Basotho.

African readers in the territory did not passively engage with the information disseminated by imperial officials to calm public anxieties. The Basotho also communicated through letters, petitions, and public commentaries submitted to local newspapers, using these as communicative spaces to articulate their concerns, challenge official narratives, and present alternatives and interpretations of agricultural and conservation reforms. Thus, in May 1936, an article was written titled '*Money for Soil Erosion: Union's Help for Soil Erosion Must Be Fully Explained*'.⁹⁵ It reads as follows,

Soil erosion has become the greatest menace not only in Basutoland but throughout the Union of South Africa. Following this most recent situation, the Union

⁹³ Maravanyika, 'Soil Conservation and the White Agrarian Environment in Colonial Zimbabwe'; Mulwafu, 'Soil Erosion and State Intervention into Estate Production in the Shire Highlands', 22-43.

⁹⁴ NUL, *Help for Protectories, Money for Soil Erosion*, *Mochochonono*, 11 April 1936.

⁹⁵ NUL, *Money for Soil Erosion: Union's Help for Soil Erosion Must Be Fully Explained*, *Mochochonono*, 16 May 1936, 6.

government has voluntarily decided to provide financial assistance to its territories. In this way, it may seem easy to eradicate the notorious menace of soil erosion. However, it has become increasingly complex for us (the Basotho) to undertake extensive operations to prevent soil erosion in trust, as our territory has been in a lamentable financial position for some time, without assistance from the Union. The question is, why now? We have no cause to doubt the sincerity of the Union Government in the matter, except that the Union Government is a government of clever men, some of whom are recognised as among the leading politicians of the world. Men who might utilize the least opportunity to turn the tables. So, yes, news and reports suggest that we are suspicious that the Union is purchasing rights to incorporate us in a disguised form, and this is indeed true.⁹⁶

This shows that Africans believed the anti-erosion schemes were a masked new form of dispossession and governance used by Europeans against them, following their experiences with the Missionaries and the Cape Government.⁹⁷ Erosion had been part of the Basotho's environmental problems as early as the 1800s, and the local administration had taken steps to address it without external assistance.⁹⁸ However, this was reported to British officials through accounts from missionaries and traders. Hence, imperial assistance towards soil erosion was seen as a hidden political agenda. However, this did not stop the government from implementing the conservation schemes. This aligns with the approach taken in other British territories, which involved implementing conservation programs without coercion.

In addition to the above, in the Leribe district, colonial conservation was politically mediated and reinforced racialised hierarchies, as evidenced by the reproduction and reinforcement of tools, techniques, and labour power. At the national level, Thornton, as the director of agricultural affairs, ordered tractors and other machinery, tools, and trained agents to teach Africans the practical aspects of conservation methods in Basutoland.⁹⁹ The official report for the years 1936 to 1940 reveals that most of Thornton's agents were white officers who did not

⁹⁶ NUL, Money for Soil Erosion: Union's Help for Soil Erosion Must Be Fully Explained, *Mochochonono*, 16 May 1936, 8.

⁹⁷ For a detailed analysis, see Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds*.

⁹⁸ For the early missionary accounts on soil erosion in the territory of Basotho, see Germond, *Chronicles of Basutoland*.

⁹⁹ NUL, FCO 141/872, A Report from R. Thornton to the Resident Commissioner, E. O. Richards, 20 November 1937.

speak Sesotho.¹⁰⁰ The agricultural officer sent agents out to the districts with machinery to conduct conservation work with the Basotho. However, the areas to work on were determined by district officers who were not trained ecological personnel. As a result, conservation projects often left Africans responsible for the most onerous execution tasks.¹⁰¹ This uneven technical distribution of resources and expertise produced forms of dependency, legitimised the bureaucratic authority of agricultural departments, and rendered local ecological knowledge invisible or subordinate to imported methods. Hereafter, the material politics of conservation therefore worked alongside fiscal and institutional marginalisation to ensure that the Basotho within Leribe and other districts in Basutoland remained an extraction and labour-supplying zone rather than a beneficiary of the value created by the state.

The district officers were in Lesotho for administrative work, not for the environmental reclamation programs. There is no mention of a *Pitso* (public meeting) held by the state in the territory to explain the conservation programs, but the Chiefs and their subjects were expected to conform.¹⁰² The chiefs and village heads were expected to ensure that the conservation structures were protected once construction teams left their areas. This way, the first contours and terraces were constructed at the Paramount Chief's village of Matsieng, government reserves, and extended to other lowland villages. The peasants from Leribe also witnessed these works, some as employees and others as observers. At this point, the Basotho were already seeing the Indigenous government as agents of the British administration. Thus, this approach to implementing conservation programs violated the Basotho's indigenous social and political

¹⁰⁰ NUL, Colonial Annual Reports from 1936 to 1940 and Department of Agriculture Annual Reports from the year 1936 to 1939.

¹⁰¹ NUL, Basutoland National Council Proceedings Session, 1938, 67.

¹⁰² NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1936, 5.

customs. The Basotho considered soil conservation to be a British administrative work, and the soil conservation structures to belong to the government that had built them.¹⁰³

The implementation of conservation programs in Southern Africa was quite similar and aligned with imperial interests. In Nyasaland (Shire Highlands), Mulwafu argues that soil conservation measures were harsh and carried out without coercion.¹⁰⁴ This was also the case in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, where concerns about soil erosion initially arose on white settler farms. However, measures to combat erosion were imposed in African reserves without consulting Africans to understand their environmental concerns. Basutoland was no exception; soil conservation measures were also forced on them. In response, Africans in Lesotho used covert strategies to deal with the changes imposed on them and their landscape.

In Leribe and elsewhere in the territory, the conservation work was carried out by the peasants. They worked under European supervision and were paid 9d per day.¹⁰⁵ On behalf of the peasants in Leribe district, Councillor Chokobane lamented in the Basutoland National Council that,

I understand that the people working on the soil erosion are paid 9d a day. This wage is very low. No person can maintain their family with it. His Majesty has provided funds for the work in Basutoland. I request that their salaries be increased so that they can support their families. I particularly request that those who are really in danger of being sent to GOAL for non-payment of tax be given the work, that is, the people whose cattle are being seized because they cannot pay tax. I suggest that they should be considered for this work.¹⁰⁶

At that time, the Basotho were required to pay a £1 tax; some were also subject to an education tax of £3 for each child, and others had to pay a poll tax.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, 9d was less than a shilling, and this did not encourage the Basotho to work. It took them longer to raise a pound

¹⁰³ Shower, *Imperial Gullies*, 181.

¹⁰⁴ Mulwafu, 'Soil Erosion and State Intervention into Estate Production in the Shire Highlands', 22-43.

¹⁰⁵ LNA, Basutoland Agricultural Report for the Year ended 1938.

¹⁰⁶ NUL, Councillor L. Chokobane in the Basutoland National Council, Thirty Second Session, 28 October 1937.

¹⁰⁷ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended, 1929 and Basutoland National Council Session Thirty Second Session, 1937.

under this scheme. Thus, this concurs with Meghir and Phillips' work in microeconomics and micro-econometrics of labour supply and taxes.¹⁰⁸ They stressed the interconnectedness of public policy, employment, and wages, emphasizing that, by their nature, taxes are designed to encourage individuals to enter the labour supply.¹⁰⁹

Equally, the imperial government wanted to drive the Basotho into wage labour in the adjacent territories of the Union of South Africa. Scholars such as Colin Bundy and Van Onselen have shown that low wages were not incidental but fundamental to the governance of African labour in twentieth-century southern Africa.¹¹⁰ In separate works, Bundy and Van Onselen demonstrated that colonial administrations systematically depressed African wages to secure a cheap, pliable workforce for both state projects and regional capitalist enterprises. Hence, it did not make sense to increase wages locally, as the taxes had initially been increased to encourage Africans to enter wage labour outside the territory. In response, the Resident Commissioner said that he had discussed the matter with the High Commissioner. The High Commissioner said, 'The 9d is an encouragement to do the work, not a way to fight poverty. I think the wage is better than working for nothing. The Basotho have a saying: "Little is better than nothing." In the past, they were working for their chiefs and the King without pay. Why complain today when they are being paid 9d?'¹¹¹ This demonstrates that the High Commissioner was aware of the Basotho complaints mentioned earlier in this chapter, although he did not respond to the matter at the time. However, he used the complaints to justify the

¹⁰⁸ C. Meghir and D. Phillips, 'Labour supply and Taxes: Dimensions of Tax Design, *The Mirrlees Review* (2010), 202-74.

¹⁰⁹ Meghir and D. Phillips, 'Labour supply and Taxes', 225.

¹¹⁰ Bundy, 'The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry', 388; C. van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

¹¹¹ NUL, High Commissioner's Response to the Resident Commissioner in Basutoland National Council Thirty Second Session, 3 November 1937, 49.

current situation. This reflects that colonial policies were designed to serve the interests of the imperial power.

In addition to inadequate remuneration, the colonial authority mandated that conservation work conform to the Matsieng standard. Matsieng was the village homestead of the Paramount Chief, and conservation work began. The colonial administration ensured that the technical expertise and labour required for the work to succeed were provided. However, the same efforts were not extended to other villages and districts, such as Leribe, and both the imperial officials and the chieftaincy expected a one-size-fits-all approach that ignored distinct soil types and gradients. This reflects how the state prioritised bureaucratic uniformity over local ecological realities and African agency. Showers stated that, the engineering approach used in the construction of contour banks or terraces across fields to slow the overland flow of water and increase infiltration, and the installation of diversion ditches on the very slopes to reduce the strain on the counter banks below, all resulted in waterways or drainage ways.¹¹² The drainage ways created more gullies as the soil continued to be washed away into the rivers and streams. However, neither Thornton nor Collett was a soil scientist, but they led the anti-erosion schemes. This also shows that the schemes were too structured, that neither the state nor the Basotho paid attention to the similarities or differences, and that the state did not attempt to explain them to the Basotho. Perhaps the state sought to minimize anti-erosion costs while appearing to do a great deal for the colonial office in London.

The Basotho opposed the supervision of conservation work by Europeans. Most Africans read this structure as an extension of colonial state authority rather than an environmental necessity. For instance, the Basotho in Leribe district resisted conservation initiatives that reflected

¹¹² Shower, *Imperial Gullies*, 165.

unequal supervisory arrangements, which empowered European officials over African landscapes and labour. The Agricultural Demonstrators instructed the Basotho in constructing contour ridges, furrows, and terraces, but Europeans supervised the work. In response to this arrangement, the Basotho raised their concerns through the chiefs and councillors who were part of the Basutoland National Council, which represented them to the imperial government. Thus, one councillor from Leribe district said

A Soil Erosion supervisor should have a horse, not a motor car, within a 5 km radius of town. A motor car should only be used when it must go beyond 5km. This could save us a lot of money. They say that using a vehicle requires a lot of petrol, even when it is not necessary. The agricultural officer is responsible for the whole scheme; he gives us orders on where and how to work. He shows us where the contours should be. We do not see the need for the other man, called the foreman. He does nothing; he seems to know nothing, and he does not even want to hold a spade to show us how to work. All he does is sit and move around in a car.¹¹³

Other councillors in the meeting suggested that an African Foreman should replace the European supervisor.¹¹⁴ In 1939, a similar issue was raised, highlighting that the government had not addressed it. However, this reveals that Africans continued to express political agency during the first phase of the anti-erosion works. This underscores a more profound rejection of the racial and authoritarian structures of imperial governance. They believed that African men would be equally capable of doing the job and at a lower cost, for the greater good of their nation. In the Leribe district, peasants worked on contour ridges, made furrows, and terraced fields near the main roads, where supervisors could see.¹¹⁵ This was because inspectors only inspected areas easily accessible from their resident camps.¹¹⁶ Some peasants demanded that similar support given to the Paramount chief and his village in Matsieng should be extended to the rest of the Basotho.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ NUL, Councillor Goliath Malebanye in Basutoland National Council Session, 22 November 1937, 6.

¹¹⁴ NUL, Basutoland National Council Session, 22 November 1937, 7.

¹¹⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections 1930-1939, 29.

¹¹⁶ NUL, Basutoland National Council Thirty Fourth Session, 15 November 1938, 28.

¹¹⁷ NUL, Councillor Qhobela Joele, in Basutoland National Council Session, 1937.

Several Africans were fined for non-compliance with conservation schemes. Some of the farmers were fined in the district of Leribe, Berea, and Maseru for ploughing without terracing, and some for the absence of contours between their fields.¹¹⁸ Most of the peasants who practised proper conservation works as instructed were left with about an acre and a half to plough.¹¹⁹ This made it difficult for people who depended on agricultural produce to sustain their livelihoods and maintain the required contour measurements. They were aware they could not eliminate contours, so they trimmed them to enlarge their agricultural fields.¹²⁰ By 1938, tractors were used to construct contour banks. This way, less manual labour was required from the Basotho, and most focused on their gardens, growing cash crops such as potatoes, beans, and peas.¹²¹ For the government, it meant fewer costs for conservation programs; only drivers and inspectors were paid. In 1939, the agricultural department reported that the maintenance of contour ridges and older terrace systems was relatively small.¹²² This shows that the Basotho were no longer as actively involved in the scheme as the government expected. While this demonstrates the implementation of state-led conservation measures in Leribe without coercion, it also highlights the peasants' resistance to the schemes.

In livestock production, a clash arose between conservation measures and the government's objectives. Thornton encouraged destocking and fencing. On the other hand, the government imported livestock to improve the national herd. For instance, between 1937 and 1939, the government imported 66 Stud bulls, 56 Stud Afrikaner, and 10 Stud Sussex bulls, and several Merino sheep and goats. The traders were also importing cattle that they had purchased in the African reserves, such as Transkei and Ciskei. This, in turn, made it difficult to make both

¹¹⁸ N.U.L, Court Records for the year 1936/7.

¹¹⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections 1930-1939, 17.

¹²⁰ NUL, Leribe Collections 1930-1939, 29.

¹²¹ NUL, Leribe Collections 1930-1939, 31.

¹²² N.U.L. Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1940.

programs successful in the territory. Firstly, the government program opened the territory to the importation of indigenous breeds by traders, and the Chamber of Commerce protected the traders. They could get loans from the government that African traders could not except for a few, like Thomas Mofolo.¹²³ In Leribe, traders were seen at the Ficksburg bridge driving cattle into the territory that the government insisted on getting rid of.¹²⁴ However, whenever peasants did so, their bulls were castrated, but the ones brought in by traders were not.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, it became challenging to reduce the number of cattle, as peasants preferred purchasing them from traders whose prices were lower and had no terms, unlike the expensive breeds brought in by the government.¹²⁶ Some argued that the local breeds could withstand the climatic conditions in Basutoland because they had been better adapted in the past than the Sussex and other breeds that had died during droughts and rinderpest.¹²⁷ As a result, there was pressure on pastures, and most peasants found fencing expensive. The government fenced only a few grazing lands, which were restricted government plots in Leribe as well as in other districts.

While the Ecological Survey Report of the Mountain areas, published in 1938, mentioned that the lowland pastures had improved, many complaints were made to the Basutoland National Council from Leribe.¹²⁸ One of the peasants said, ‘We come to the council to express our views; this is our country, left to us by our fathers. We cannot live like Europeans. As our population increases, so do our cattle and our villages. When the chief says Do not plough, do not graze on steep slopes, de-stock, what must we do then? Rearrange our villages to make room for pasturage or live like the San!’¹²⁹ This quote reveals the tensions that flared between the

¹²³ For a detailed analysis of Basotho traders, see Maliche, *Commerce as Politics*.

¹²⁴ NUL, Leribe Collections, 1930-1939, 56.

¹²⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections, 1930-1939, 57.

¹²⁶ The livestock imported by the government was given only to people recommended by the Agricultural Demonstrators and Inspectors. If one was selected and failed to meet the requirements, the livestock was repossessed and given to another person with the required qualifications.

¹²⁷ NUL, Leribe Collections, 1930-1939, 56.

¹²⁸ LNA, R. R. Staples and W.K. Hudson, *An Ecological Survey of the Mountain Area of Basutoland*, 1938.

¹²⁹ NUL, Talimo Joele in Basutoland National Council Session, 1938, 67.

peasants and the state over their conservation schemes. Although colonial official reports reveal the successful implementation of the anti-erosion schemes, the Basotho found the practices unfavourable to their customs. This concurs with Conz's observations that, in some instances, conservation schemes conflicted and sometimes conformed with traditional customs.¹³⁰ Hence, while colonial reports reveal responses that demonstrate Africans' resistance and reluctance to conservation schemes, I posit that the Basotho were equally concerned about soil erosion as the officials; however, both groups failed to analyse the conservation schemes through broader ecological and political lenses. This was because, in the past, indigenous initiatives to address ecological problems had not been sustainable for the environment.

However, both the Basotho and the government also faced setbacks beyond their control in combating soil erosion. The agricultural department stated that the territory experienced heavy storms in 1938 and 1939.¹³¹ The storms damaged the newly constructed contour ridges and terraces. Heavy rains also followed the severe storms.¹³² Thus, it became difficult for both parties to maintain and appreciate the efforts made to control soil erosion in Lesotho. The unprecedented weather conditions revealed the limits of colonial modernist planning and the illusion that humans could fully control the environment through technical design. The heavy rains in Leribe and in other districts showed how local ecologies continued to unsettle state schemes and exposed the fragility of imperial authority. Yet, these setbacks did not end state interventions, inspiring the colonial administration to continue recasting environmental control even when the methods contradicted power, knowledge, and local practices.

¹³⁰ Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 46.

¹³¹ NUL, Basutoland Agricultural Annual Report for the Year ended 1939, 23.

¹³² NUL, Basutoland Agricultural Annual Report for the Year ended 1939, 24.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that soil erosion and soil conservation development in Lesotho were not considered within the environmental context of the Basotho landscape, but rather within the context of global, regional, and economic structures and forces that surrounded it. Africans were not passive victims of imperial soil conservation policies and programs. As the literature on resistance to betterment schemes shows, in rural communities of South Africa, in Leribe, people challenged and reworked state interventions aimed at reforming land use and grazing restrictions. Africans resisted the conservation paradigm through everyday acts of invasion, forming alliances with sympathetic chiefs, altering measurements of contour ridges, cutting fences, and other forms of open defiance. While the world underwent environmental and economic transformations, the Basotho continued to adjust and adapt to the changes without disrupting the colonial relationship between them and the British administration, both within their territory and beyond. They covertly altered the anti-erosion campaigns to suit their own environmental needs and to maintain political relations with the imperial power. Yet, rather than abandoning or consulting with Africans, the state responded to contestations by reformulating its agenda into a ‘new conservation paradigm’ during this period, combining scientific expertise and developmental ambitions to reassert control over land and people. This way, the development of soil conservation in the Leribe district was as much about the politics of domination and resistance as it was about environmental management. The chapter highlights the shifts in patterns of colonial governance, particularly in local agrarian and conservation issues affecting the Basotho, as well as the emergence of peasant awareness, resistance, and negotiations. The chapter posits that, in Basutoland, the soil conservation discourse, although environmental in nature, provided the colonial administration with an opportunity to reframe power and deploy new techniques to control land use and management.

CHAPTER FIVE

Changes from Above: Power Dynamics, Agrarian Change and African Agency c.1940-1949

Introduction

The 1940s were marked by various political factors that shaped and reshaped agricultural and conservation practices. First, the appointment of the first female Regent, Mantšebo, as Paramount Chieftainess in Basutoland since the establishment of the Basotho Kingdom by Moshoeshoe had a significant impact on the social and political structures of the community in Leribe District. This, in turn, had a ripple effect on the agrarian and conservation practices. The Regent was sworn into power to stand in for her stepson, who was the rightful heir to the throne, but he was too young when the Paramount Chief died. Her reign coincided with the peak of state-led agricultural and soil conservation practices, as well as World War II, which began in 1939 and continued until 1945. World War II was followed by the “Second Colonial Occupation”, a new approach used by Britain and other imperial powers from 1946 onwards. The imperial powers invested significant funds in their colonies to support the improvement and development of their territories. These global and local political shifts significantly affected how the agricultural and conservation practices unfolded in Leribe District. This chapter reveals how people in Leribe District experienced new constraints and possibilities in their agrarian livelihoods following shifts in global and local political ideologies. The first section discusses the appointment of a female Regent Mantšebo in 1941. It highlights the contestations that emerged towards her appointment and her reign. It examines how shifts in power affected the daily agrarian and conservation practices of communities in the Leribe district. The second section discusses the effects of the ‘Second Colonial Occupation’ in Leribe District. It demonstrates how global, local politics, and economic fluctuations (re)shaped people in Leribe

through relations of power, gender, production (crop and animal husbandry), and conservation. Overall, this chapter argues that the Basotho acted with creativity and deliberation in their relations with those in power, and that agrarian development and conservation issues were shaped by politics, gender, global events, colonial statecraft, and peasant responses, rather than solely by environmental concerns. The chapter resonates with the scholarship, which stresses that international and national shifts have ripple effects on local agrarian livelihoods.

Politics of Succession: Mantšebo's contested path to power

Scholars such as Epprecht, Eldredge, Murray, and Machobane share different perspectives on the appointment of the female regent in Basutoland and her reign.¹ Machobane examines the political history of the Basotho, emphasising that the appointment of Chieftainess Mantšebo as regent was part of the imperial effort to further weaken traditional leadership by supporting a woman to act as a regent for a position that men had held for decades.² Machobane highlighted that it was no coincidence that a female regent was appointed a few years after the imperial government introduced chieftainship reforms (1938), which reduced chiefs' powers.³ He argued that without the support of the colonial administration, Mantšebo could not have ascended to power, and the Basotho could not have allowed such radical political transformation in the Chieftaincy.⁴ Eldredge concurs with Machobane; she posits that the British preferred a female regent because they considered her weak and controllable, making it easier to push imperial interests in the territory.⁵ Aerni-Flessner, Murray, and Sanders also portrayed the Chieftainess as a weak leader due to her failures to unite the Basotho during her reign,

¹ Epprecht, 'Women's Conservatism and the Politics of Gender in Late Colonial Lesotho'; Eldredge, *Power in Colonial Africa: Conflict and Discourse in Lesotho*; Murray and Sanders, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho*; Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*.

² Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*.

³ Machobane, *Government and Change Lesotho*, 191.

⁴ Machobane, *Government and Change Lesotho*, 193.

⁵ Eldredge, *Power in Colonial Africa: Conflict and Discourse in Lesotho*.

particularly in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶ They highlighted the murder crisis (people being murdered for rituals to secure chieftainship positions) that happened in the territory as a sign of poor leadership.⁷ However, Epprecht and Phooхло appraise Mantšebo as a successful female leader who stood up for the Basotho when she felt that the imperial government was taking advantage of her and her people.⁸ This section builds on these perspectives and explores the intersections of gender, chieftaincy, and colonial governance with special attention to Leribe District in the 1940s. It reveals how these intersections and interactions were reflected in agricultural and conservation schemes in the Leribe District.

Mantšebo's reign was marked by distinctive moments in various sectors, but I am more concerned with the changes in politics and agriculture in Leribe District. I acknowledge the interconnectedness of these two with every other institution in the lives of the Basotho. However, to understand those dynamics, the accession of the Regent Mantšebo to power needs to be examined at the national level and then in Leribe, the primary case study of this dissertation. Regent Mantšebo rose to power when the imperial officers intensified their efforts on soil conservation schemes, which began in 1936, as discussed in the previous chapter, following Sir Alan Pim's suggestions. Pim also suggested that unchecked chieftaincy contributed to the chaotic situation in the territory; thus, a Native Administration Proclamation was introduced in 1938, which streamlined the chieftaincy structure and placed authority in the colonial administration and the Paramount Chief.⁹ The High Commissioner had the power to

⁶ J. Aerni-Flessner, 'If We Govern Ourselves, Whose Sons are it to Govern Us?' Youth, Independence and the 1960s in Lesotho' (PhD Thesis, Washington University of Saint Louis, 2011); C. Murray and P. Sanders, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 163.

⁷ Murray and Sanders, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho*, 163.

⁸ Epprecht, 'Women's Conservatism and the Politics of Gender in Late Colonial Lesotho', 35; T. M. Phohlo, 'Gendered Consciousness as Watershed of Masculinity: Men's Journeys with Manhood in Lesotho' (PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, 2011), 68-69.

⁹ NUL, Sir Alan Pim, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935; NUL, Native Administration Proclamation, 1938.

recognise and derecognise a chief. However, his power was vested in the Resident Commissioner's office of the territory. The Resident Commissioner was to work with the Paramount Chief at the chieftaincy's discretion. Hereafter, the imperial administration assumed control over chieftaincy, with the right to withhold or consent to a chieftaincy appointment, and its office gained authority over all chiefs in Basutoland.¹⁰ It should be noted that this occurred during the reign of Paramount Chief Griffith, from 1939 to 1940, until his passing. By 1939, the Basotho nation had a new monarch, contrary to the conclusions of Machobane that chieftaincy became weak under the reign. This new system gave the colonial state autonomy over Basotho political and social affairs.

The colonial administration exercised the statutory powers it had to appoint candidates of its own choice to the highest chieftaincy office in the territory after the death of the Paramount Chief in 1940. There was a need for a successor to the throne. This disturbed the Principal Chiefs, the Basutoland National Council, and the colonial administrators about what was to follow. When Seeiso Griffith became the Paramount Chief after the death of his father, Letsie, there were controversies between him and his half-brother Bereng Constantinus Griffith in 1939. However, Seeiso died ten months after he assumed the role of Paramount Chief.¹¹ His son, Bereng Constantine Seeiso, was too young to reign after his father. Bereng believed he was destined to become the Paramount Chief. Despite Bereng's assumption being customarily logical, Mohau noted that his hostile behaviour towards colonial officials led to their discreet manipulation of former Seeiso's councillors and members of the royal council, thereby frustrating Bereng's appointment as Regent.¹² On the other hand, Seeiso's principal councillor,

¹⁰ N.L. Mohau, *Colonial Rule and the Transformation of Chieftaincy in Southern Africa: A Case Study on Lesotho* (Mafikeng Campus: North-West University, 2007).

¹¹ LNA, S1/239, Chieftaincy Affairs, 14.

¹² Mohau, *Colonial Rule and the Transformation of Chieftaincy*, 11.

Gabasheane, who had run the office of the paramountcy when Seeiso was seriously ill, assumed that he was the rightful Regent.¹³ I argue that, even before Mantšebo was mentioned in the equation, the throne was already causing tension between these two men. As a result, both his uncle and the principal chief wanted the position. The Resident Commissioner, Sir Richard, instructed the government secretary, Sir How, to intervene on behalf of the colonial administration.¹⁴ He then held and chaired a three-day meeting at the royal house before a decision was reached on who should be the regent. People voted and Mantšebo won with 44 votes.¹⁵ Hereafter, Chieftainess Mantšebo became the Regent in 1941.

The same year, the Regent introduced a legal framework for soil conservation. Mantšebo signed Order 1/26, which stressed regulations for terracing, furrowing, and the maintenance of grass and buffer strips.¹⁶ The Demonstrators from the Department of Agriculture were encouraged to work with the chiefs and their people to promote the Paramount Chieftainess' Order. The Order stressed that,

Rotational village grazing areas should be divided into two sections: one for summer grazing and the other for winter grazing. The Northern sweet grass slopes should be grazed in winter, and the Southern or sour grass slopes should be grazed in summer. The Bitter Karoo areas should not be grazed until they have recovered after a period of rest. Sweet veld areas should not be burnt, but sour veld areas may occasionally need to be burnt if grazing cannot keep the grass down during the summer months. Chiefs should organize alternative grazing of sweet and sour veld and implement a rotational system to ensure stock is evenly distributed.¹⁷

These regulations, although new in terms of being officialised by the Regent, were borrowed from the Pim's Report, and some of them were passed in the amended laws of Lerotholi's previous decade. However, politically, Mantšebo had to demonstrate that, as a new leader, she

¹³ Machobane, *Government and Change in Lesotho*, 197.

¹⁴ NUL, A letter from the Resident Commissioner E.C. Richards to the Government's Secretary Sir S.W. How, 1941.

¹⁵ NUL, Regency Case Verdict, 1943.

¹⁶ NUL, Order 26/1, Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1941.

¹⁷ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1941, 6.

conformed with imperial policies in the territory, despite divisions within the Basutoland National Council over some soil conservation campaigns. Likewise, her regulations also sent a message to her people and to the Basutoland National Council. This reveals that in some instances, those in power shared divergent views on conservation policy and practice. There was no unanimous agreement between the state and the chieftaincy, nor among the principal chiefs themselves, on the formulation of policies and regulations. Primarily, Beinart, Driver, Showers, and Mulwafu emphasise conservation policies as a tool for control and the exercise of power.¹⁸ However, this highlights that although power (local and colonial authority) pervades everyday rural governance, it was not uniform; it had many nuances and therefore took on different meanings and effects for various social groups in the territory.

The order, like other colonial policies, was a top-down measure made without considering the realities on the ground or the effect it would have. At this point, most Basotho in the Leribe and other Lowlands districts were complaining about a shortage of pastures and arable land.¹⁹ Yet, the government continued to tighten the policies by further dividing the available land into grazing sections. This measure affected peasants who had large herds in the Leribe District and other districts. However, for people without cattle, this measure proved successful because the Demonstrators faced no resistance as they taught their programs in villages where people had few or no stock. For the people in the mountainous areas of the Leribe district, this did not affect them because they were more invested in sheep and wool production. Driver highlighted that in the mountainous regions, pastures were available, unlike in the Leribe district and other lowland areas.²⁰ Thus, in 1942, the agricultural report, the Director of Agriculture Thornton

¹⁸ Beinart, 'Introduction: the Politics of Colonial Conservation', 143-162; Driver, 'The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland Conservation'; Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Mulwafu, 'Soil Erosion and State Intervention into Estate Production in the Shire Highlands', 25-43.

¹⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections 31/1, Land Issues, 1940-1960, 15.

²⁰ Driver, 'The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland'.

reported that, 'the highlanders are not a problem with rotational grazing as compared to the lowlanders.'²¹ However, he also highlighted that,

In the mountains, most Basotho plough across the slope, promoting water runoff, which cuts through higher slopes, cultivated areas, and spreads over adjoining grassland, and alters grass strips as water runs through on the contours, disturbing the whole effort of combating erosion in the territory, as all the soils end up in the Caledon River but the Paramount Chief stressed that steep lands in the mountains and semi-mountainous areas are not to be ploughed.²²

Thornton's report did not consider the ecological and topographical disparities within the territory. People's responses to the new conservation practices varied depending on their location: the highlands or the lowlands. The topography in the mountainous region had little flat, arable land, so when people moved to the mountains, they adjusted and adapted to the environment. As a result, they had to cultivate on steep slopes to sustain their agrarian livelihoods. However, Thornton deliberately ignored this factor in his evaluation of conservation practices in the territory, despite having been administering the Agricultural Department for some time. Thus, his omission of ecological and topographical factors in the success and limitations of conservation schemes in Basutoland cannot be considered a mistake but an intentional effort to portray Africans as resistant to conservation efforts aimed at improving their environment in Leribe District and throughout Basutoland.

On the other hand, the Regency was still an issue in the royal house. The half-brother of the late Paramount Chief Seeiso, Bereng, contested the appointment of Mantšebo as regent. He appealed the decision made by the chieftaincy council to the judicial court. The case dragged on for two years, and it became known as the Regency case in the territory.²³ In 1943, the judicial court ruled in favour of Mantšebo. Justice Lansdowne ruled using the Proclamation

²¹ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942.

²² Driver, *The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland*, 10.

²³ LNA, S1/239, Chieftaincy Affairs, 17.

No.1 of 1938, and its amended Proclamation No.12 of 1942, which stated that the Acting Paramount Chief may be appointed and recognised without any precedent or qualification.²⁴ He also added that no custom was mandatory even if it was highlighted under the Laws of Lerotholi.²⁵ This allowed Mantšebo to reject the levirate marriage (Sesotho customs permitted the brother of the deceased man to marry his widow and assume all his duties). This changed inheritance, as it meant that women now had rights to their husbands' land, livestock, and other belongings, which the deceased husband's brother had previously inherited. While this was happening in Matsieng, the entire territory was following up on the chieftaincy case, and the ordinary people, especially women in Leribe, were concerned, as there were cases in the previous decades where women with female children ended up losing their husband's wealth and land to the male relative(s) of their husband. This, in turn, had turned most female-headed households into landless peasants. So, the outcome of this case was a cause for concern for them, as it could pave the way forward on the issues of inheritance and how it marginalises women. Mantšebo's rejection of the levirate marriage dismissed the chances of Seeiso's brother becoming a regent. The levirate marriage would have given Bereng, Seeiso's half-brother, another opportunity to contest the Regency as the husband of the chieftainess; he could have assumed his brother's role, including becoming the Paramount Chief. Thus, the amendments to the Laws of Lerotholi and the chieftaincy reforms introduced by the colonial officials enabled the High Court to confirm Chieftainess Mantšebo as the recognised regent by the imperial authority in 1943.

However, amidst this chaos, the imperial authority encouraged high grain productivity for the war effort. The state increased its investment in wheat breeding. It imported strong-growing

²⁴ NUL, Regency Case Verdict, 1943.

²⁵ NUL, Regency Case Verdict, 1943.

wheat varieties of high milling quality that adapted to local conditions.²⁶ From a selection of 160 different types of grain, the Talberg-Garnet and Talberg Reward were the most promising types.²⁷ Leribe and other lowland districts were encouraged to increase their winter wheat production.²⁸ In Leribe, records show increased acreage of grain planted in May and June 1942 and 1943.²⁹ The same selection process was applied to different types of maize and sorghum to achieve the same goal of identifying good strains. The government issued £15,000 for the purchase of seeds for wheat, maize, beans, and vegetables.³⁰ The output of spring-sown crops also increased, achieved through the cooperation of the Basotho with the Demonstrators. However, this only benefited farmers who had land in the district. The government was primarily concerned with increasing food production for export, rather than prioritizing the welfare of the people in the territory. As Nkhoma argues in the case of Malawi, the colonial campaign for the peasants to grow more foodstuffs during the Second World War was a ‘marriage of convenience’.³¹ In Leribe, the initiative to increase food production was met with harsh weather conditions. The spring had been promising, but it was followed by a dry summer, which affected the summer-sown crops in Leribe and other lowland districts.³² Thus, unprecedented weather conditions had an uncontrollable effect on the state and peasants’ efforts to increase crop production.

Large-scale tree planting was encouraged by the Department of Agriculture to ensure the availability of wood in the territory. Due to the topographical conditions in the territory, most

²⁶ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 2.

²⁷ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 3.

²⁸ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 3.

²⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections, 19.

³⁰ NUL, Basutoland Colonial Annual Report 1941, 2.

³¹ B. Nkhoma, World War II, ‘Global Food Crisis and the Grow-More-Food Campaign in Malawi, 1939–1959’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 49, 5 (2021), 940-963.

³² NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1941, 5.

peasants used cow dung as a source of fuel. However, as part of efforts to improve soil fertility, the department insisted on using cow dung as manure, not as a source of fuel. Most people found it challenging to participate in the manorial campaign without a substitute for fuel in the Leribe District. Thus, to address the issue of fuel, the new Director of Agriculture, Mr. Leckie, said, ‘the most significant problem the Department faces is the raising and maintenance of soil fertility throughout Basutoland. For this purpose, a large-scale tree-planting campaign has been launched to ensure a steady supply of wood to replace the manure currently used as fuel. Small farms are also being established, on which an attractive farming system can be demonstrated alongside proper land management.’³³ The initiative was good, but tree planting had been one of the oldest state-led initiatives, and people were no longer interested in it. Most of the trees did not survive the weather conditions, except for the peach and willow trees. Thus, it was difficult for the Department to convince the Basotho to continue tree planting during this period. This suggests that peasants were not opposed to conservation programmes; instead, they chose to participate in those that seemed to improve their livelihoods.

In livestock production, universal inoculation and dosing of cattle and sheep was launched in 1942. Inoculation was carried out free of charge by the Agricultural Department and the Basutoland Mounted Police, except in cases involving traders and livestock speculators importing and exporting cattle, for which a charge of 10s per 100 was made.³⁴ The dip solution was made available in the districts for dipping flocks, but peasants had to pay for their own flocks.³⁵ However, the number of stocks per peasant varied, but the cost of a dip was the same for everyone. Those with small stocks argued that they should dip first because if those with

³³ NUL, Director of Agriculture, Mr. Leckie, in the Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942.

³⁴ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 18.

³⁵ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 4.

large stocks dip first, the dipping solution will be less effective, as the person in charge of the dipping post did not change the dipping solution after dipping large numbers of sheep.³⁶ This matter was debated in the Basutoland National Council during the previous decade and continued to appear in their debates throughout the 1940s. The Resident Commissioner concluded that, 'the dipping solution is available for all in the trading stores. I insist that those of you who are against communal dipping should purchase their own dipping solution at the trading store and dip your sheep and goats privately. Encourage your people to dip their stock to reduce the death rate due to internal parasites, as is happening elsewhere.'³⁷ Although the government emphasised that the annual decline in livestock was due to internal parasites and encouraged dipping, the death rates remained high. Most people in Leribe District and other districts continued to doubt the effectiveness of the dipping practice. Some argued that this practice was another way the imperial government impoverished the Basotho by killing their sheep. In response, most farmers stopped taking their flocks to the dip. However, most men in their prime years were out of the district, either working in the mines or having joined the war. Hence, there is a possibility that the young boys or older men in the territory might have mixed the doses otherwise, resulting in the continuous death of livestock.

The Director of Agriculture emphasised the importance of wool classing schemes. The peasants were taught to classify their wool without the assistance of Demonstrators or Wool Inspectors from the Department of Agriculture.³⁸ John Klein noted that following the enormous demand for wool textiles, the government needed to establish control over the industry during the war, as it depended on foreign supplies; hence, it launched the British Wool Commission.³⁹ Wool

³⁶ NUL, Leribe Collections: Livestock 1940-1945.

³⁷ NUL, Resident Commissioner's address in the Basutoland National Council Report 1942.

³⁸ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1942, 18.

³⁹ J.W. Klein, *Wool During World War II*, (1948), 3 accessed 16 August 2025, https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=_HowAAAAYAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=british+wool+co

was needed for the wool war uniforms, blankets, and other items. In Britain, as the cost of living rose, so did the cost of domestic wool. By 1942, domestic farm prices had increased by 80 percent.⁴⁰ Thus, it became cheaper to import more wool than to negotiate with the domestic wool producers. As a result, the cost of wool increased in British territories to encourage them to sell. This, in turn, encouraged the peasants in the wool industry to improve their classification of wool in Leribe. Even reports about using unorthodox means to earn more money vanished. However, only a few individuals benefited from Leribe; wool production was most popular in the mountainous region.⁴¹ In contrast, in other British territories, such as Southern Rhodesia, the imperial government deliberately reduced market prices for certain African produce, such as maize, to help settler farmers recover from the economic depression of the 1930s.⁴² The fluctuations in prices within the British Empire demonstrate the imperial country's strategic operations in procuring raw materials.

New opportunities for the Basotho continued to emerge during the war period. Due to the demand for food supply during the war, prices for basic commodities like meat, mealie meal, and cooking oil increased. Consequently, the demand for beef to support British soldiers in the war made cattle highly marketable.⁴³ One historian, Ettinger, stressed that with the advent of World War II, beef prices in South Africa rose at a rate even faster than inflation, following the removal of the weight embargo for High Commissioner Territories, which had previously

mmission+ww2&ots=DautgPLGiN&sig=9bMwNyl3u CZ3QFo70DsH-RFwZsQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=british%20wool%20commission%20ww2&f=false

⁴⁰ Klein, *Wool During World War II*, 10.

⁴¹ Konz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

⁴² V. M. Gwande and A. Mlombo, 'Cooperation and Competition: South Africa and Southern Rhodesia During and After the Second World War', *Journal of African Military History*, 7, 1-2 (2003), 76-98; S. Ncube, 'Imperial Markets: The Anglo-Rhodesian Tobacco Trade in the Aftermath of World War II', in *Tobacco in Global Perspective, 1780-1960: Trade, Knowledge, and Labour* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 105.

⁴³ N. Samasuwo, 'Food Production and War Supplies: Rhodesia's Beef Industry During the Second World War, 1939-1945', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29,2 (2003), 487-502.

been in effect.⁴⁴ Hereafter, during the wartime period, the European traders purchased cattle for £3 to meet the demand for beef in the Union of South Africa.⁴⁵ The High Commissioner had also issued a notice in 1941 stating that Hedrick had opened a port of entry for Basutoland cattle and small stock.⁴⁶ This, in turn, made most peasants sell their cattle. However, most peasants did not replace their cattle; they used the money for sustenance. Women headed several households; men had joined the war or were working in South Africa's mines and industries in the Leribe District. Hence, most of the money was spent on purchasing basic commodities, which were costly due to high global demand for food.⁴⁷ The imperial officials also limited the Basotho's ability to restock. The importation of cattle from the Union of South Africa continued to be a problem, as the veterinary officers and police force at the border insisted on better breeds to improve the national herd.⁴⁸ The cost of these breeds was expensive for most peasants. Those who replaced their cattle bought local breeds from Transkei and Ciskei, which were imported as small cows; hence, the prices were affordable. The government protected European traders in the territory, facilitating the export and import of goods from the Union of South Africa. Hence, it was difficult for the Agricultural Department to eliminate African breeds as they had intended. On the other hand, most of the grazing lands in the Leribe district had recovered by 1946, as most people had no cattle. Some fields were not ploughed as women preferred buying grain due to the shortage of workforce in their households. While these dynamics were the Basotho's ways of coping with the circumstances at hand, the

⁴⁴ For a detailed analysis of fluctuation of cattle prices between South Africa and the High Commissioner Territories, see S. Ettinger, *South Africa's Weight Restrictions on Cattle Exports from Bechuanaland, 1924 to 1941*, accessed on 12 May 2025, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA052550590_662.

⁴⁵ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1941; Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1943; Department of Agriculture 1945.

⁴⁶ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1941, 10.

⁴⁷ For a detailed analysis of World War II commodity price fluctuations, see H. Rockoff, 'Indirect Price Increases and Real Wages during World War II', *Explorations in Economic History*, 15,4 (1978), 407; D.E. Hathaway, H. S. Houthakker and J.A. Schnittker, 'Food prices and inflation', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 1 (1974), 63-116; Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*.

⁴⁸ NUL, Basutoland National Council Proceedings, 1944.

government considered it a positive response to conservation efforts. Thus, Leribe was mentioned as one of the districts doing well in land reclamation works.

On the contrary, after the appointment of Chieftainess Mantšebo as Regent, it made it possible for other women to act as regents for their sons who were the rightful heirs to become chiefs but were too young when their fathers passed on. This happened almost everywhere, including Leribe. These women included Mamakhabane Boshokane Peete, Makopoi Api, Mamohlalefi Bereng Sekhonyana, and Mamathe Masupha.⁴⁹ This was a new era for women; previously, they were considered minors under Sesotho customs and therefore could not assume positions of leadership in the Basotho society.⁵⁰ Hereafter, I can say that they had a chance to occupy positions of power just like men. This made some men uncomfortable, as evidenced by several court records in Leribe District, where men did not comply with this change. Julius Molapo's case is one of many examples from the judicial court that reveal how men felt about women serving as Regents. When he was summoned and tried at the judicial court in Hlotse, in the Leribe District, for not going to the ward chieftainess court when she summoned him after his cattle grazing on grass strips,

In our history, from Moshoeshe to Griffith, I have never heard of any woman telling men what to do. Your Honour (Magistrate), this is a first of its kind. How will other men see me if I allow a woman to summon me? I cannot speak about my wife and children. Yes, I am at fault here, but I would rather be called by the judicial court and pay the fine; I cannot submit to a woman. I will be a disgrace to Moshoeshe and all the Basotho men who lived before me. It is not our tradition. With your permission, Your Honour, allow me to say this without fear. I do not intend to disrespect your office, but I believe women should not lead men. This is our culture.⁵¹

⁴⁹ MMA, Special Collections, 'Chieftainess in Basutoland 1941 to 1966', 11.

⁵⁰ Rugege, 'Chieftaincy and Society in Lesotho'; T. Quinlan, 'Marena a Lesotho: Chiefs, Politics and Culture in Lesotho' (PhD thesis, University of Capetown, 1995).

⁵¹ NUL, Leribe Collections (hereafter LC) Box 13, 1/31, Julius Molapo court case, 15 July 1945.

This illustrates how men perceived women who took on chieftaincy duties in their sons' place. Steven Gill argues that in Sotho society, women were regarded as minors; they could not participate in the critical affairs of governance and were not entitled to possess wealth.⁵² Thus, the new system altered the Basotho customs and offered women new opportunities in society. This, in turn, made some men uncomfortable, as it ran parallel to the patriarchal systems of the Basotho that they were accustomed to. This affected the conservation practices, such as managing the grazing lands that the government was trying to achieve in Leribe and beyond, as men focused on the issues of gender relations rather than the environmental governance that women in positions of power were trying to maintain on behalf of the imperial government in Leribe and other areas in the territory of Basutoland.

However, the government did not make any policies in response to the shifts in gender roles and their effects on the patriarchal society of Leribe. Thus, even when the Paramount Chieftainess exploited men, the colonial administration looked the other way because it aligned with the imperial interests. In continuing her husband's war support, Mantšebo encouraged the Basotho men to continue joining the army in all districts. Apart from the 'Native' Military Corps, which began in 1940, there was also the South African Defence Force, a non-European army service that later evolved into the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps, formed during the reign of Mantšebo.⁵³ At a National Meeting (Pitso) in Maseru, the Regent encouraged the soldiers to represent the Basotho in the Second World War, and she disapproved of the men who were scared to enlist in the army.⁵⁴ The chieftainess also visited Leribe and other districts to draw men towards the war effort. By the end of this decade, 21,463 men had joined the

⁵² Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, 27.

⁵³ M. N. Ntabeni, 'The Impact of the Second World War on Basotho Women: Welfare and Survival 1940-1946', *Lesotho Social Sciences Review* 13, 1, 2 (2009), 68-86.

⁵⁴ NUL, *Leselinyana*, 6 January 1943.

Auxiliary Pioneer Corps, and 2,000 more in military contingents under the Native Military Corps.⁵⁵ While this showed support to the British, it deprived the households in Leribe of male labour; however, at this point, men were also needed for the conservation work programmes. Some were already working in South Africa, and adding the above numbers, I posit that the economically active men continued to be absent from society. Historians like Christopher Konz and Kate Showers noted that during this period, most of the conservation works, like terracing, tree planting, and furrowing, were done by young boys, women, and older men who were not fit enough to enlist in the army or contribute to migrant labour to the Union of South Africa.⁵⁶ The Department of Agriculture's annual reports revealed that most of the conservation works, like furrowing and terracing, were affected by heavy rains and hailstorms in Leribe and Maseru.⁵⁷ Therefore, I argue that the Regent served the interests of the imperial powers at the expense of the Basotho and their environment.

The conscription of Basotho men for the war disrupted Basotho customs. Unlike with migrant labour, where people worked on short contracts and could visit home occasionally, the war was different. They could only communicate through letters; others did not even send letters to their families in the Leribe District. In most of the letters, men who joined the army wrote, 'Chief, I received a letter saying that my wife disappeared, and her whereabouts are unknown. My children are left alone.'⁵⁸ This was a tragedy for many families because of the war since 1941. One soldier from the Leribe District expressed himself in one of the letters as follows: 'Today I am in the army. At home, I have left my mother... Today, our mothers who are our dependents

⁵⁵ M.N. Ntabeni, 'Mantšebo Seeiso' in E.K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates (eds), *Dictionary of African Biography*, 321.

⁵⁶ Konz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*; Showers, *Imperial Gullies*.

⁵⁷ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1943, 3; Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1944, 5.

⁵⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections, Letters addressed to Chief Letsie Matsoene of Leribe and Butha-Buthe from his people conscripted in the army from 1941- 1943.

have been neglected during this war...the wife only gets 22shillings and 6pence a month. Can she possibly buy a blanket and bring the family food? What would my mother get? What a tragedy!’⁵⁹ This information may explain why women, including those in Leribe, deserted their families or left with their children to seek opportunities in the Union of South Africa, aiming to improve their standard of living.

In crop production, men mostly did the ploughing, and women assisted with planting and weeding.⁶⁰ However, during the war, in Leribe District, most women and young boys had to take on the full workload, including the entire fieldwork, in households where men had joined the war. Thus, during the period from October to April, less effort was devoted to conservation work due to a general labour shortage in the Leribe district and, more broadly, across the entire territory.⁶¹ The government did not take any action to alleviate the grievances of men in war by subsidising their dependents in cash or kind, particularly in the absence of the family heads in the district.

Despite the concerns of men in the war and their families, the Regent promoted taxation of all men in the territory to contribute to the war financially. Mantšebo ensured that both Basotho and European taxpayers in the territory paid tax.⁶² Thus, the ordinary Basotho paid 10 shillings, the Basotho employed in the Union of South Africa paid £1, the headmen £2, the subchiefs £3, and the Principal Chiefs paid £5.⁶³ There was no exception; however, in Leribe, most ordinary men could not afford to pay taxes because they were unemployed or unable to work due to age

⁵⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections, A letter from K.E. Ntsane to Chief Letsie Matsoene.

⁶⁰ NUL, Leribe Collections; Leribe Agriculture Report, 1944.

⁶¹ NUL, Leribe Collections, 1941-1960.

⁶² NUL, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 6 January 1943,1.

⁶³ NUL, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 10 March 1943,3.

or health conditions. There were records of some men who contributed individual amounts ranging from £200 to £500.⁶⁴ Since these figures were published in newspapers, it is difficult to determine whether people contributed such quantities or if it was simply propaganda to encourage financial support for the war through taxes or pledges. The available data did not reveal any individual pledges from Leribe towards the war effort.⁶⁵ This suggests the absence of men in the Leribe district. Additionally, it reflects the limited labour force available for agrarian and conservation work. However, the government was more concerned with showing loyalty to Britain than with addressing the economic and social concerns of its people in the district or in the territory at large.

On the contrary, the Chieftainess also considered the interests of her people. She complied with various Basotho political customs within her control. As mentioned in the first chapter, the Basotho custom stresses that a chief is a chief by the people and for the people (*Morena ke Morena ka batho le ka lebaka la batho ba hae*). Mantšebo followed that custom; she allowed the Paramouncy to be under the jurisdiction of the Basutoland National Council in 1944 during the national council meeting.⁶⁶ She declared that, “I (Mantšebo), as the Paramount Chief of the Basotho, confirm that the Paramouncy should consult the National Council before issuing Proclamations or making rules that affect the livelihoods of Basotho and the administration of Basotho.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ NUL, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 15 July 1943, 6.

⁶⁵ *Leselinyana la Lesotho* only mentions other districts between 1943 and 1945.

⁶⁶ NUL, Basutoland National Council Session, 1944, 87.

⁶⁷ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1941; Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1944

This demonstrates that, on paper, the Chieftainess was still answerable to the indigenous aristocracy, and she wanted it to continue as it had under Moshoeshoe. However, in practice, the colonial state had autonomy over the chieftaincy. Agricultural and conservation practices continued to be imposed from above at the expense of the Basotho. However, the Basutoland National Council presented the people's grievances, such as shortages of arable and pastureland in the district. However, nothing was done to address this; instead, greater emphasis was placed on producing for the war effort, despite the environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by most households in Leribe and throughout Basutoland.⁶⁸

The effects of the 'Second Colonial Occupation' in Leribe District, 1945-1949

Most historians, such as Ukelina, Ismail, and Nkhoma, have examined this period from an economic perspective, focusing on the financial investments made by imperial powers in their territories.⁶⁹ Imperial powers took a different approach to exercising authority in their territories. Britain invested in colonial development and welfare projects, including agriculture, infrastructure, and health.⁷⁰ Most scholars refer to this interventionist approach as the 'second colonial occupation'.⁷¹ Thompson argues that the alleged second colonial occupation embedded in development and welfare to achieve liberation for the colonial territories is not different from the first colonial conquest.⁷² He emphasised that colonial struggles remained unchanged in both the first and second occupations, as they were fundamentally driven by the

⁶⁸ B.U. Ukelina, *The Second Colonial Occupation: Development Planning, Agriculture, and the Legacies of British Rule in Nigeria* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2017); S. H. Ismail, "'Second Colonial Occupation": The United States and British Malaya 1945-1949', *Asian Culture and History*, 4, 1 (2012), 29; Nkhoma, World War II, 'Global Food Crisis and the Grow-More-Food', 940-963; A. Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa: The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (East African Publishers, 1997).

⁶⁹ Ukelina, *The Second Colonial Occupation: Development Planning, Agriculture*; Ismail, "'Second Colonial Occupation": The United States and British, 29; Nkhoma, World War II, 'Global Food Crisis and the Grow-More-Food'; Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*.

⁷⁰ A.K. Thompson, 'Occupation, Decolonisation and Reciprocal Violence, or History Responds to Occupy's Anti-Colonial Critics', *Protest Camps in International Context*, (2017), 179-198.

⁷¹ Thompson, 'Occupation, Decolonisation and Reciprocal Violence', 180.

⁷² Thompson, 'Occupation, Decolonisation and Reciprocal Violence', 181.

political interests of those in power.⁷³ Hence, in theory and in practice, Thompson considers politics carried out whether in conquest or liberation as all presuppose and demand occupation.⁷⁴ In the case of Basutoland, Aerni-Flessner, with Thompson, argues that the state considered the Colonial Development and Welfare (CDW) Act during and after the Second World War as a way to ‘reinvigorate colonialism and promote it even more heavily’ through reforms and development projects.⁷⁵ Conz also adds that the colonial shift in agricultural policy and priorities during this period came from the intersection of ecological change, scientific trends, and politics.⁷⁶ This section builds on these perspectives to examine the state-led reforms, peasant-state relations, and their impacts on agriculture and conservation practices in Leribe after the war. It reveals that, indeed, the war had consequences, but there were other contributing factors to the ecological and economic decline in Leribe and the territory at large. The aftermath of the war brought its own set of inherited and newly emerging limitations and opportunities for the state, the Basotho, and, in turn, the environment. They were political, social, economic, and environmental.

In 1945, the Basotho in the Leribe district celebrated the end of the war, anticipating that their living conditions would change. The district had also contributed to an armed force of over 20,000 men from the virile members of its population, and it had made substantial material assistance in both cash and kind.⁷⁷ Most people were happy that their family members were returning home; others were relieved that the coercive contributions to the war were over, whether in the form of service or in kind. However, most people celebrated the war’s end.

⁷³ Thompson, ‘Occupation, Decolonisation and Reciprocal Violence’ 183.

⁷⁴ Thompson, ‘Occupation, Decolonisation and Reciprocal Violence, 185.

⁷⁵ Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho*.

⁷⁶ Conz, ‘Origins and Pathways of Agricultural Demonstration, 247.

⁷⁷ P. Thy, ‘Letters from Home: Southern African Pioneers in the British Pioneer Corps During WW2’, *Publications of the PSGSA*, 61.

However, the downside was that the imperial administration had no demobilization policy; as a result, ex-servicemen were only given meagre deferred pay and gratuity, which they spent in local shops.⁷⁸ They were returned to their homes at a time when the country was undergoing significant changes in land and political governance.

In 1946, the colonial administration launched a ten-year development plan following the second grant from the Colonial Development Fund. The central plan aimed to develop agriculture and soil conservation through various initiatives, including anti-erosion works, demonstrations, experimental stations, machinery provision, a range of crops and vegetable seeds, fertilizers, and livestock breeding.⁷⁹ In Leribe district, most of the works required a manual labour force for them to be successful. These works included the maintenance of ridges, contours, and furrows, as well as ploughing and weeding at the experimental station for wheat, maize, and other crops.⁸⁰ Although the government had funding, it kept costs to a minimum by maintaining that Africans were doing the conservation schemes for their country, and the 9d was just a token of appreciation for their work, not a wage.⁸¹ Even in construction and other development programs, Basotho were paid the same amount in the Leribe district. Yet, people were aware that the territory had received funding through newspapers like *Naledi* and *Mochochonono*.⁸² Still, it appeared to be for official use and not for the people in the Leribe district or the Basotho in the territory. Therefore, this raises questions about the intended goals of development and the welfare of territories, when peasants and state relations remained

⁷⁸ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1946, 26.

⁷⁹ Many development programmes were done in other sectors. For other projects, Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho*, 35-36.

⁸⁰ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1946, 3-5.

⁸¹ NUL, The Resident Commissioner's address on soil conservation work raised in the Basutoland National Council meeting, 1946.

⁸² NUL, Thaba tsa Leribe, *Mochochonono*, 16 September 1946; Colonial Development Fund, *Naledi*, 18 September 1946, 3.

exploitative under the new regime. Thus, I concur with Showers that the primary concern of the Basutoland administration was to keep anti-erosion work costs to a minimum.⁸³ This, in turn, made most men struggle to adapt to their previous roles as ordinary Basotho men and join in the anti-erosion works, which were the work available. Ex-servicemen's refusal to participate in conservation programmes in the Leribe district damaged the morale of those already involved. This slowed down the conservation work, such as land reclamation and gully refilling, that people were working on.

Although the end of the war, women believed that male labour was now available in the territory to reduce the burden of ploughing fields, herding of livestock, and other quotidian responsibilities of Basotho men; the men had different plans for themselves in the Leribe district. Some ex-servicemen had acquired new skills, hoping to use them at home. Some learned road construction together with European Engineers in Northern Italy; others were ordained as ministers who worked with chaplains as regimental majors, sergeants, and corporals, providing translations, conflict mediation, and welfare services.⁸⁴ However, there was no demand for such services in the district. They resented the imperial government because it was unable to address their grievances regarding the postwar welfare they sought. Thus, conforming to what Sabben-clare noted, '...and the army to the African has been a vast educational machine, are most unlikely to be willing to accept their old material standards of life.'⁸⁵ While agricultural cooperatives and conservation programs were the available opportunities for African veterans to join in Leribe, they resented them. Most of the thriving

⁸³ Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 280.

⁸⁴ A. Jackson, *Distant Drums. The Role of Colonies in British Imperial Warfare* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010); A. Jackson, *Botswana 1939-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).

⁸⁵ E.E. Sabben-clare, 'African Troops in Asia', *African Affairs*, 44, 174(1945), 157.

agrarian associations and cooperatives were owned by women, though men in the Leribe District owned some.⁸⁶

Women in Leribe District collaborated and created vegetable gardens, utilising various seeds provided by the government as part of the ten-year development plan.⁸⁷ Through these collective gardens, women earned income. Some capitalised on this income and purchased agricultural equipment such as harrows and ploughs to improve their household agricultural production.⁸⁸ This was because some women were widows and had lost some of their essential agrarian tools to the male relatives of their deceased husbands.⁸⁹ Hereafter, some women could afford to hire labour, using either the plough or money to get people to help them work their fields during the ploughing season. Most of the hired people were landless peasants in the district who survived by providing labour to those with access to land and government inputs. Other individuals formed burial societies, contributing money to build a reserve fund for women in the Leribe District. In some instances, funds could be borrowed and returned to members with interest in times of need.⁹⁰ I posit that the 'Second Colonial Occupation' had a positive effect on some women in the Leribe District.

Additionally, as part of the development projects, the Catholic and Evangelical churches in the Leribe District also provided women with church associations where they learned practical skills such as sewing, knitting, cooking, and baking. This gave women some financial independence that men in the district did not have, and they embraced the opportunities.

⁸⁶ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1946; Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1949.

⁸⁷ NUL, Leribe Collections, Agricultural Cooperatives, 1945-1950, 43.

⁸⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections, Agricultural Cooperatives, 1945-1950, 48.

⁸⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Agricultural Cooperatives, 1945-1950, 56.

⁹⁰ Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*.

However, several men complained that their women spend most of their time at the association, societies, and cooperatives, leaving households and children unattended.⁹¹ Although rural livelihoods appeared to be changing as women learned alternative livelihoods, this shift promoted communal agricultural output at the expense of individual household yields, as neither men nor women paid attention to their personal fields as they had in the past. Women prioritised cooperatives, while men prioritised migrant workers over agriculture after the war, as agricultural production in the district declined in both yield and practical application.⁹² The new opportunities enabled people to access alternative forms of income, which they could use to purchase grain and other household necessities without the fieldwork that most of these women's socio-economic groups had undertaken before the war.

On the other hand, the Basotho men in Leribe district who had returned from the war considered themselves veterans and believed they had to acquire certain privileges based on that status, as the imperial government was employing European ex-servicemen as assistants or supervisors in various departments. The Basotho veterans began to air their grievances through newspapers such as *Leselinyana la Lesotho*. In one article, one ex-serviceman said,

The world war is over, and we have achieved the victory we sought. But unfortunately, the same triumph brings us tragedy and hardships that we have never known before the war. We spend the day doing conservation work, such as terracing, contour ridging, and planting grass, which means the government does not recognise our efforts. We labour like ordinary men who have not participated in the war in the Middle East and in Italy. We provided the same service to the Empire, and yet they consider the white men superior to us.⁹³

This revealed the grievances of the Basotho veterans to the government. It also shows that these men considered themselves a distinct social group among the Basotho, which explains the difficulty they had in accepting that the war was over and that they had to continue with their

⁹¹ NUL, *Leselinyana La Lesotho*, 10 December 1946,9.

⁹²NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1945, 34.

⁹³ NUL, *Leselinyana La Lesotho*, 14, September 1947.

agrarian livelihoods. This indicates that social differentiation existed among the Basotho themselves. I argue that, despite their belief in a homogeneous state, the Basotho continued to divide themselves into distinct social classes, apart from chiefs and subjects, educated and uneducated peasants, landowners, and landless peasants. A new social group had also emerged: Basotho veterans. Some of the men demanded land from their village chiefs. Others were reported to be ploughing on other people's fields, and in response to the chief, they argued that they had the right to land more than the people who had not gone to the war. This added to the land disputes already in the district, slowing agricultural practices and conservation work.

Some of the veterans lost their land after the war. In Leribe, the African Pioneer Corps reported several cases to the police, finding that their fields had been trimmed or were owned by other villagers. Most of them blamed the government for the conservation programs and new agricultural methods it insisted on, which caused these social and economic disparities in the district.⁹⁴ Some men found themselves without land and livestock, and yet they were no longer fit for migrant labour.⁹⁵ Some lost their families, their wives migrated to the Union of South Africa with their children in search of employment, and never returned to Leribe. This affected most men who had joined the war, as other men teased them, suggesting that they thought those who had not joined the army were weak. They stayed, and they still had their families, land, and livestock, unlike them.⁹⁶ Therefore, I argue that the war had various effects on Basotho veterans and their families.

⁹⁴ NUL, Leribe Collections, The Police Force Report to the District Commissioner, 16 February 1948.

⁹⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections, District Commissioner's Report to the Resident Commissioner, 18 May 1948.

⁹⁶ LNA, African Pioneer Corps Collection, 41.

In 1948, most farmers in the Leribe district harvested maize and grain owing to the excellent weather. To relieve the storage pressure in the district, the government purchased and exported some of the grain for use in the Bechuanaland Protectorate.⁹⁷ There was a shortage of bags in Leribe and other Lowland districts following the bumper harvest. The shortage of bags provided an opportunity for women to construct traditional woven grass storage 'bins' in the villages for the local storage of grain, either for consumption or for which there was no means of transport to the market.⁹⁸ While others in the district responded well to the new economic circumstances, despite their social status, the ex-soldiers continued to push for land reform and government recognition to improve their lives. This also reveals that the state and society in the Leribe district were not always in conflict; in some instances, they worked together and yielded better results. However, the results of the interactions were not uniform; some appreciated the state's efforts during this period, while others despised them.

Some people in the Leribe district were also affected by the creation of the National Treasury in 1946. The Resident Commissioner, Sir Arden-Clarke, created the National Treasury in agreement with some Basutoland National Council members from Leribe and other districts, who believed that some chiefs were abusing their role as agents of the state in collecting hut tax on behalf of the assistant District Commissioner, who, in turn, was paid annual gratuities based on the percentage of the yearly collection.⁹⁹ However, reports continued that chiefs were mobilising resources for themselves and not for the government in Leribe district. Some council members were against the idea since its proposal in 1942, but the National Treasury was eventually created in 1946. The National Treasury was responsible for collecting taxes

⁹⁷ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1948, 9.

⁹⁸ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1948, 10.

⁹⁹ LNA, Basutoland Annual Report, 1933, 6.

from African taxpayers in the territory, collecting court fines and fees, and paying gazetted chiefs (chiefs recognised by the High Commissioner/ Resident Commissioner's Office).¹⁰⁰ The National Treasury caused unrest among the chiefs and the people as reforms continued in a way that undermined Basotho customs and gave the colonial administration in the district greater power.

The Basutoland National Treasury tapped the sources of revenue that formerly supported the chieftaincy's economic independence in the Leribe district. Previously, chiefs had the right to allocate land, collect taxes, and impose fines in their areas of jurisdiction. However, the establishment of the National Treasury denied the chiefs the privilege of accumulating wealth for themselves by collecting taxes and penalties. Also, as of Proclamation 61 of 1938, Section 3 (1), "a man no longer becomes a chief in the eyes of the British administration until he is declared by the High Commissioner in the Government Gazette." This way, the imperial government exerted direct control over Basotho affairs. In 1946, the National Treasury paid only the gazetted senior chiefs; gazetted junior chiefs had chiefly duties but were not paid. The number of indigenous senior chiefs who could hold courts was reduced from 1340 to 117 under the National Treasury committee.¹⁰¹ This structural inequality was deliberately designed to divide and conquer the Basotho by fostering social differentiation in their political system. The National Treasury granted the imperial administration greater access and control over the Basotho economy and political system in Leribe and other districts. The colonial administrators recognised that, without capital accumulation, the chiefs would appear weak to their people and lose influence. The other group of chiefs, who were salaried employees, had no choice but

¹⁰⁰ M. Bulane, The Political Economy of Lesotho Fiscal Policy, *African Journal of Business Management*, 18,9 (2024), 159.

¹⁰¹ Bulane, The Political Economy of Lesotho Fiscal Policy, 160.

to serve their employer's interests. In this case, support the conservation schemes, despite some of them being unfavourable to the Basotho and their environment in the Leribe district. This, in turn, made it difficult for the gazetted chiefs in the Leribe District to stand up for their people who had no land or sought recognition or compensation for their services in the war.

Following the chieftainship reforms under the National Treasury, there was an increase in *Liretlo* known as 'medicine murder' cases. Officially, seventeen murder cases were recorded in the annual report.¹⁰² However, in Leribe, the Captain of Police, Captain Williams, revealed that several cases had been reported.¹⁰³ However, he complained that people were taking longer to report these cases. Even the translations were slow, such that by the time the official reports are made, it will be difficult to rescue the missing persons. They recorded the cases of the missing young boys and girls as a sign that they were used for medicinal murder by chiefs who were trying to restore their power after the reforms.¹⁰⁴ By 1948, the annual report and newspapers stated that the numbers had increased to almost 40 cases.¹⁰⁵ In various newspapers like *Moeletsi oa Lesotho* and *Leselinyana*, there were reports of the Regent Mantšebo's involvement in medicinal murder between 1946 and 1949.¹⁰⁶ However, there was no tangible evidence to make a case against her except that ritual murders also happened in her Mokhotlong ward. Murray and Sanders argued that of the two murder cases linked to Mantšebo, her daughter Ntšebo and chief Matlere Lerotholi in Mokhotlong ward were regarded as accomplices.¹⁰⁷ However, there was no evidence to convict them. This disrupted the daily

¹⁰² NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1946, 14.

¹⁰³ NUL, Leribe Collections, Captain R.M. Williams, head of the Leribe Police force, Report to the District Commissioner, 1946.

¹⁰⁴ NUL, Leribe Collections, Captain R.M. Williams, head of the Leribe Police force, Report to the District Commissioner, 1946.

¹⁰⁵ LNA, Basutoland Annual Report 1948, 12; *Basutoland News*, 31 May 1948, 1; *The Friend*, 14 August 1948, 3.

¹⁰⁶ LNA, *Moeletsi oa Basotho*, 14 June 1946, 2; *Moeletsi oa Basotho*, 10 October 1948, 3; *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, 12 October 1949, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Murray and Sanders, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho*, 163.

routines in the district, as families were afraid to send their children to water sources, grazing areas, or fields without adult supervision. This slowed down conservation work in the district, as most people did not feel safe, and some individuals went missing on their way to and from work.¹⁰⁸

Besides, the Treasury curtailed the chiefs' powers and reduced the likelihood that veterans would consider the mines a better option than their current situation in the district. The office of the agent for the High Commission Territories taxed the Basotho mine workers in the Union of South Africa.¹⁰⁹ Thus, most men in the Leribe district opposed migration, having experienced socio-economic losses after the war. As ex-servicemen, they preferred to work in their fields, on conservation projects, and in construction.¹¹⁰ This was because some individual farmers who were ploughing sorghum were harvesting more grain than the wheat or maize farmers. Most people preferred sorghum as a dietary starch to wheat and maize.¹¹¹ As a result, sorghum producers had a ready local market and could control sorghum prices locally, as the state was interested in wheat and maize for export.¹¹² This, in turn, led the former soldiers to continue the land dispossession in the district.¹¹³ This caused instability in Leribe as the retired service members continued to push for recognition from the government to improve their livelihoods.

In response, the government introduced a loan scheme for veterans in Leribe district using part of the development funds it got from Britain. However, the scheme had terms and conditions

¹⁰⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections, Liretlo Cases, Leribe Police Force Report, 1948.

¹⁰⁹ NUL, *Mochochonono* 13 September 1947, 3.

¹¹⁰ NUL, *Mochochonono* 13 September 1947, 4.

¹¹¹ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1948, 26.

¹¹² NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe Financial Report for the Year Ended 1949, 4.

¹¹³ NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe Police Force Report, 1949.

that disqualified most former service members. The government issued a form with terms and conditions that most Basotho men could not read or understand, making it difficult for them to fully understand the requirements for obtaining the loan. Some of the men thought it was a pension form for compensation for their service. The form required them to produce a medical report to determine whether they qualified for the loan scheme.¹¹⁴ Most ex-servicemen completed the forms, signing with an 'x,' and returned them in anticipation of receiving payments. Only to realise later, the scheme demanded that 'release of funds was determined by comparison with the physical and mental standard of a normal healthy person of the same age and sex.'¹¹⁵ This was done to evaluate their capacity to use the loans to invest in agricultural inputs and machinery in support of development and welfare objectives. However, only 240 ex-servicemen qualified for the loan scheme throughout the territory, and only 40 from Leribe got the loan.¹¹⁶ Most of the loan scheme funds were later directed to European traders to boost their businesses in foodstuffs, machinery, and livestock, rather than being offered to other ordinary people in the Leribe district, such as women and the youth, to invest in agriculture and increase household crop yields.¹¹⁷ I argue that imperial policies were designed to benefit the imperial power at the expense of Africans, as evidenced by the Loan Scheme.

While the Basotho faced numerous challenges after the war, the King rewarded the territory for the services and funds it offered to Britain during the war. The efforts of people not on the front line were recognised through the Order of the British Empire (OBE), created during

¹¹⁴ NUL, African Pioneer Corps Collections: African Pioneer Corps (Loan Scheme).

¹¹⁵ NUL, African Pioneer Corps Collections: African Pioneer Corps (Loan Scheme), 3.

¹¹⁶ NUL, African Pioneer Corps Collections, 5.

¹¹⁷ NUL, *Mochochonono*, 18 March 1947.

World War I.¹¹⁸ Thus, in 1947, after World War II, King George VI and his family visited Mantšebo in Basutoland and awarded her the Order of the British Empire.¹¹⁹ The King said,

Today, I congratulate you (Mantšebo) on the good relations that have subsisted between us and the way you have demonstrated your loyalty and love. During the recent war, you came to my assistance when many and powerful enemies beset me. I thank your soldiers for their service and sacrifices, and for their help during that time of great danger. I also want to thank you for the help you all provided in so many ways during that difficult time. Your answer to the call, when the whole future of the British Empire was at stake, will never be forgotten.¹²⁰

Some of the Basotho in Leribe District were pleased about this achievement, as Britain recognised their war efforts, and having the King and his family in their kingdom was such an honour. However, the veterans wished they were also honoured in a way that would change their livelihoods. Others feared that this was another way for the imperial government to control the Basotho and incorporate them under the Union of South Africa. The people in Leribe feared that another change in political governance would affect their land tenure system, which was already in jeopardy.

The situation faced by Africans in South Africa in 1948 led people in Leribe to question their future, as many European officials governed them in the district. Following the 1948 “anti-native policy” in the Union of South Africa under Dr Malan, the Paramount Chieftainess feared that the same fate might befall her people.¹²¹ Thus, in 1949, the regent wrote a petition to the members of the Basutoland National Council, requesting that the British Government remove South African white men from administrative positions in her territory. She claimed that, except for the following posts, Resident Commissioner, Government Secretary, Heads of

¹¹⁸ T. Harper, The Order of the British Empire after the British Empire, *Canadian Journal of History*, 52, 3 (2017), 509-32.

¹¹⁹ DAPA, *Basutoland News*, ‘The Royal Family in Basutoland’, 20 July 1947.

¹²⁰ NUL, His Majesty’s Speech to the Regent Paramount Chief and Basotho, Basutoland Greatest Pisto, 12 March 1947.

¹²¹ T.M.O. Ntsane-Mosebo, ‘The Regency of Paramount Chieftainess Mantšebo Amelia Seeiso 1941-1960’, (MA Dissertation, National University of Lesotho, 2021), 66-67.

Departments, District Commissioners, and Police officers, the first preference should be given to Basotho in all services.¹²² She emphasized That Assistants to Senior Officials in public works should be Mosotho.¹²³ Mantšebo insisted that equal salaries should be paid to European and African government officials who held the same qualifications and showed the same capabilities.¹²⁴ This way, the Regent tried to dismiss all the possible ways in which power could be transferred to the Union of South Africa. However, she also knew that she could not do away with the British; thus, she specifically pointed out that the top positions continue to be held by Europeans, despite the Regent's effort to calm the fears of Basotho, the people in Leribe still expected her to do more to improve or develop them and the territory.

On the other hand, reports about anti-erosion works in Leribe and other Lowland districts revealed a decline in progress between 1948 and 1949. The reports indicated that

a large proportion of the arable land in the territory is relatively inaccessible to wheeled transport, and therefore, to mechanical means of construction of erosion control works. As an alternative, strips six feet wide are surveyed along the contour at six-foot vertical intervals through all cultivated lands, and these are allowed to revert to their natural vegetation cover. However, soils are exhausted mainly because the water's absorptive capacity is very low, and 'runoff' is high on the steeper slopes, which affects the graded terrace banks that are constructed by mechanical means. However, on the gentler slopes, buffer strips are used in conjunction with terrace banks to check erosion.¹²⁵

The reports on the unsuccessful anti-erosion works do not consider the political, social, and economic circumstances surrounding the Basotho at the time, which I have discussed in the previous paragraphs. The same reports reveal that the Basotho were responding well to government initiatives, such as gardening cooperatives in which peasants grew a variety of vegetables, including cabbage, tomatoes, and carrots. The territory had about 13,280 gardens

¹²² LNA, National Council Resolutions, 1949,75.

¹²³ LNA, National Council Resolutions, 1949,75.

¹²⁴ LNA, National Council Resolutions, 1949,75.

¹²⁵ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1948; Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1949, 3.

cultivated with the assistance of demonstrators.¹²⁶ I argue that the peasants maximised their efforts in programs they saw as opportunities to improve their livelihoods, and anti-erosion works were not serving that purpose, hence the decline in progress.

In crop production, the peasants harvested enough grain following the good rains received in 1949 in Leribe District. The government issued permits to producers to export their grain to the Union of South Africa. Between 1948 and 1949, 46,000 bags of maize, 84,000 bags of wheat, 55,000 bags of peas, and 91,000 bags of sorghum were exported.¹²⁷ Peasants from Leribe also sold their grain. The government received approximately £294,000 from the export of these agricultural products to the Union of South Africa.¹²⁸ While the last two years of the decade were a success for the Basotho in crop production in the district, the landless peasants continued to languish in poverty and starvation. This was because the agricultural development schemes were centred on seed distribution, marketing, and the improvement of breeds for peasants who already had access to land and livestock. However, most people in the district and elsewhere in the territory struggled to access land and livestock, given the circumstances they faced during and after the war. This, in turn, rendered the state's efforts insignificant, and most peasants resented the government for its continuous, unfavourable top-down measures.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how political variations at the global, regional, and local levels affected peasants' livelihoods. It showed the interconnectivity among power, gender, politics, and the environment in Basotho agrarian livelihoods. The chapter revealed how changes from

¹²⁶ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1949, 6.

¹²⁷ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1949, 8.

¹²⁸ NUL, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1949, 8.

above are portrayed as policies to serve the peasants and their environments, but are, in fact, the practices and ideas of those in power to achieve their aims. For instance, the Basotho faced several challenges, including chieftainship reforms, the Second World War, the National Treasury, and the ecological variations, all of which were beyond their control. However, they questioned, resisted, and adapted to changes. Overall, the chapter argues that decisions made by the state in conservation, crop, and animal production, and political governance during the colonial period were made in an authoritarian manner. Hence, they added to the difficulties peasants were already facing, perpetuating resentment, resistance, and the need for change.

CHAPTER SIX

The End of Colonial Rule: Agrarian and Conservation Practices of Basotho in Leribe

c.1950-1966

Introduction

The period from the 1950s to the end of colonial rule is primarily known for the rise of nationalism, resistance, and political mobilisation in the broader African colonial history. Less is said about agriculture and soil conservation practices; however, for Lesotho, the Leribe district demonstrates that, despite various levels of political struggles, the people continued to rely on agriculture. The colonial administration focused on promoting technical and mechanized operations to prevent soil erosion, improve conservation methods, and enhance agricultural production through the ‘rational’ utilisation of soil and vegetation. This chapter reveals the complex dynamics that occurred as these changes were implemented in the Leribe district. It highlights the continuities and transformations in Basotho agrarian and conservation practices, as well as the relations between the state and peasants, as policies were altered in response to modernisation and development, and the implementation of welfare programmes for the Basotho. The first section discusses the programmes and policies introduced by the state, including mechanized group farming, the establishment of crop and livestock experimental plots, increased food production, and financial assistance to productive enterprises. This section emphasises the contradictory behaviour of colonial officials in policymaking. It also stresses increased social differentiation, exacerbated disputes among chiefs, chiefs and their people, state officials and the people, and selective compliance by the villagers in implementing these schemes. The second section discusses the establishment of Machobane’s mass agricultural college in Leribe and its impact on farming and conservation practices in the district. James Machobane was a visionary farmer from Nqechane, Leribe

district. He sought to integrate modern agricultural practices with traditional African methods to increase food production for people experiencing poverty, particularly women, in the Leribe district and throughout the territory. The section reveals that people's responses to the state development schemes and Machobane's agricultural schemes varied across social groups. Some demonstrated considerable resilience, while others adopted and adapted to Machobane's skills to improve crop productivity, food security, and livelihoods until independence. Therefore, I argue that Africans were innovative and adaptable to the internal and social pressures that affected their agrarian and conservation systems, despite external and internal socio-economic and political shifts.

Agricultural and Conservation Programmes under the modernization and development policy of the 1950s

This section builds on the work of various scholars who have examined this period in relation to development, agriculture, soil erosion, and conservation in Lesotho. A political historian, Aerni-Flessner, emphasised that the government's significant efforts in the 1950s were centred on improving rural agriculture and increasing rural household income.¹ The programmes were modelled under the Betterment of Schemes of South Africa. The 'Betterment Scheme' was established to transform land-use patterns in reserves by dividing grazing and arable areas, establishing homesteads in village-like settlements, and implementing soil conservation, afforestation, veld reclamation, and other development initiatives outlined by the colonial government.² The Basotho responses to the projects were mixed, "in larger part because of the ambiguous legacy of earlier efforts."³ Showers and Epprecht stress that, although funding was

¹ Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho*, 82.

² P.A. McAllister, Resistance to 'Betterment' in the Transkei: A Case Study from Willowvale District, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 2 (1989), 346.

³ McAllister, 'Resistance to 'Betterment' in the Transkei', 347.

from Britain, the local administrations had the autonomy to develop their own policies and practices, as they were considered experts in the territories and what was needed to lead the people towards self-rule.⁴ Showers further argues that the development projects continued to be imposed on the Basotho and their environment, just as other policies have since colonial intervention in the territory.⁵ Epprecht added an unpopular dimension to the scholars' understanding of the colonial schemes of this period, arguing that gender was central to imperial authority during this time.⁶ The above scholars reveal the continuity of colonialism's coercive nature despite shifts in the ideology of improving and developing British territories.

In a broader sense, it gives colonial authority agency over Africans. However, other scholars, such as Conz, Eldredge, and Driver, acknowledge that the policies were imposed; they further argue that the Africans were not passive victims of the colonial governance systems.⁷ Eldredge considered the Basotho's resistance, negotiations, and adaptations as survival strategies for confronting colonialism and protecting their identity and environment against external forces.⁸ Driver noted that Basotho responses to the conservation and development policies and projects of the 1950s and 1960s were linked to the widespread spread of national anti-colonial movements. He further argues that the people were resisting colonial interventions that conflicted with their quotidian agricultural practices and land tenure systems.⁹ Although Conz concurs with Driver, he further contends that the Basotho applied their indigenous knowledge to the new policies introduced to them and applied selective compliance in navigating and

⁴ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 60; Epprecht, *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad'*, 121.

⁵ Showers, *'Imperial Gullies'*, 212.

⁶ Epprecht, *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad'*, 122.

⁷ See Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*; Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*; Driver, *'The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland'*.

⁸ Eldredge, *'A South African Kingdom'*, 22.

⁹ Driver, *'The Theory and Politics of Mountain'*, 18.

negotiating the coercive policies and practices of development.¹⁰ Building on these dynamics, this section examines the extent to which the Basotho in the Leribe district influenced everyday agrarian regimes and soil conservation practices during the political and socio-economic transformations implemented by the colonial administration in an ecologically and topographically challenging environment. Most of the policies that were introduced or revised during this period altered the land tenure systems of the Basotho in the Leribe district. The policies promoted land dispossession, gender inequality, social differentiation, and promoted poverty and malnutrition. The policies also offered the Basotho in Leribe new opportunities by allowing Africans to own trade licences, occupy managerial posts, and apply for financial assistance to grow their businesses and cooperatives. Mature, unmarried women were allowed to own land and businesses as part of the development projects.¹¹

In crop production, the government began the decade by shifting its position on subsidies. The government subsidy scheme for transporting manure to the field ended in 1950. This affected most farmers who could afford to hire government scotch carts. However, the initiative was for the government to make a profit from it, yet very few farmers could afford to pay the 8d per load of manure transported to the field. Kate Showers emphasized that the end of the program led to a sharp drop-off in manure application to the fields.¹² In Leribe, the programme ended with most farmers from villages headed by an ungazetted chief having not experienced the service.¹³ In the previous chapter, the government ceased subsidizing seeds for vegetables and grain, and they were made available in packets for a fee. The changes combined reveal that the

¹⁰ Konz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*, 25.

¹¹ Epprecht, *This Matter of Women is Getting very Bad*, 123.

¹² Epprecht, *This Matter of Women is Getting very Bad*, 123.

¹³ NUL, Leribe Collections, Mehopung Matsoku (chief) in Leribe District Council Minutes of Meeting, 8 July 1954.

colonial government limited the Basotho's opportunities to improve their livelihoods by withdrawing and commercialising crucial inputs farmers needed to increase productivity.

After ending subsidies for manure transportation, the government encouraged the use of fertilizers in crop fields. The fertilizers could only be afforded by the same farmers who could hire a scotch cart to ferry manure. The Department of Agriculture highlighted that most fertilizers were purchased in the Leribe district.¹⁴ The traders provided the farmers with short-term credit; this option was available only in the north and northwestern districts of Leribe, where entrepreneurs had a better chance of being paid after harvest because the rains were more reliable in these areas than elsewhere in the territory. This highlights the limitations of the colonial administration's mechanization programmes, which were capitalistically oriented and excluded many people from participating, as they had no land or capital to participate actively at that time.¹⁵ Thus, with the political knowledge they gained from other Basotho who worked in Ficksburg, South Africa, or in the urban centres of Leribe or Maseru, the people from rural Leribe believed that the government was promoting poverty and malnutrition rather than ending them, as they claimed.¹⁶ The landless Basotho continued to struggle, and the only way they could participate in this system was by offering labour on others' farms in exchange for financial assistance or grain. This way, poor households became poorer as other households improved their production, and the government expanded its offerings to enhance their welfare and livelihoods.

¹⁴ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1956, 13.

¹⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections, Land disputes, 1950-1960.

¹⁶ NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe District Council Minutes of Meeting, 23 September 1955.

The results of the 1949 survey, which evaluated the territory's livestock and agricultural potential, were published in 1950. The survey found that continued soil erosion in the territory, combined with the lack of improved agricultural and soil conservation practices, could lead to the territory's economic ruin.¹⁷ Thus, the government encouraged the Basotho to continue with soil conservation works as part of the development schemes. The Paramount chief issued a Circular (No. 1A) in 1951, calling upon all chiefs and people to assist in soil conservation works. People from Leribe responded positively to the order. In 1953, Peete wrote to all chiefs on behalf of the Paramount Chief. He said,

I have been most pleased to hear a report by the Director of Livestock and Agriculture Services that in Leribe District the chief and the people have responded admirably to that call of mine by helping to mark the grass strips with their oxen in their lands which has resulted in the speeding up and the completing of this aspect of soil conservation work in that district in a comparatively short time. The work done in the Leribe district alone is reported to be equivalent to the job done in all other districts of Basutoland combined, at a cost one-quarter that of all other districts together.¹⁸

This demonstrates the idea that villagers in Leribe sometimes adopted new conservation methods that seemed beneficial to them as agriculturalists. Some people in the district had witnessed the benefits of buffer strips, such as reduced water runoff in their fields. However, this information was passed on by the agricultural officials, who, in turn, conducted inspections of conservation works in areas near the residences of colonial officials, areas near the chiefs' homes, and other public areas that were easily visible. Showers pointed out that the climatic conditions in different regions outside the lowlands made it impossible for the 'grass-based technologies' to work.¹⁹ For instance, in the foothills, heavy rains often caused flooding of the grass, and in the mountainous zones, the cold, snowy winters hindered its growth, making it difficult for the grass to survive.²⁰ The Department of Agriculture also revealed that the heavy

¹⁷ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 9.

¹⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections, Acting Paramount Chief, Peete, Circular No.12 of 1953.

¹⁹ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 55.

²⁰ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 56.

rains at the beginning of 1950 caused severe erosion in Leribe and other areas, requiring unusual effort to repair. This highlights that many factors were at play in the successes or failures of conservation work.

This can also be seen as a propaganda campaign by the Department of Agriculture, aimed at encouraging people to work in their districts by highlighting the success of another district. This is because conservation works continued in Leribe district, as elsewhere in the territory, even after the authorities' appraisal. Also, the 1953 circular ended as follows,

The time limit remaining before us is now very short, as the funds allocated to us are about to run out. If we are to complete all the work by March 1956, everyone must assist in this effort, as the people of Leribe have done. Each chief should contact the Agricultural and Livestock officer of their district, who will provide guidance and brief them on the areas with their technical staff, enabling people to mark their land with their oxen.²¹

This also had to do with the allocated funds and the colonial officials' uneven distribution of them for development projects. The colonial authorities wanted the work completed on a limited budget and encouraged the chiefs and their people to do so. However, the annual reports did not reveal the coercive approaches used by those in positions of power to achieve results with minimal expenditure.²² They highlighted the number of acres successfully worked on under conservation practices. Thus, Epprecht argues that improvement or betterment schemes were carried out on a low budget; the work was done close to official camps to facilitate their free movement, but the Basotho complained about the poor roads, gullies, bridges, and bridle paths that affected their mobility from villages to trading centres.²³ Building on this argument, I contend that the people of Leribe's participation in conservation efforts was a bargaining means of survival in an economy oriented towards capitalism, where agriculture remained the

²¹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Acting Paramount Chief, Peete, Circular No.12 of 1953.

²² NUL, Basutoland Annual Report for the Year Ended 1953; Basutoland Department of Agriculture Report, 1953; Basutoland Department of Agriculture Report, 1954.

²³ Epprecht, *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad'*, 127.

primary activity. As a lowland district, the people needed buffer strips to control runoff more than anywhere else in the territory.

Due to these social and economic disparities, some of the Basotho in Leribe found it easier to resonate with Lefela's radical campaigns against the government and chiefs, and they supported him. Josiel Lefela was the leader of the council of commoners, *Lekhotla la Bafo* (LLB). Although LLB was formed in 1919 in Leribe to address the social and economic grievances of the ordinary people against the chief and the state, it gained momentum in the 1950s as most people in the district continued to feel marginalised by the authorities and their policies. Conz stressed that Lefela's primary objectives were to achieve sovereignty from British governance, restore traditional chieftainship, and promote schemes designed to protect Basotho political, economic, and cultural institutions from colonial subjugation.²⁴ Leaders like Lefela learnt about the new international power structure that emerged after World War II through his travels and communication with other people in British territories who shared his vision in the Leribe district and beyond.²⁵ Lefela evaluated the conditions in Leribe and the entire territory, which were influenced by the colonial authority and the chiefs. He emphasised that various social groups within the territory encountered different challenges, a situation also observed in other countries, notably among fellow Africans in South African reserves such as Transkei and Ciskei. Lefela was also aware that the problems of land dispossession and exploitation of Africans by colonial officials were not just a regional issue. Countries on the other side of the continent, such as Kenya and Ghana, were experiencing similar struggles to

²⁴ Conz, 'Wisdom Does Not Live in One House', 185; R. Weisfelder, 'Early Voices of Protest in Basutoland: The Progressive Association and Lekhotla la Bafo', *African Studies Review*, 17, 2 (1974), 397-409.

²⁵For a detailed analysis on Lefela and Lekhotla La Bafo, see L. Gore, 'Towards a historical understanding of the Lekhotla la Bafo- the anatomy of a people's struggle in Lesotho' 1913- 1957' (Honors Dissertation, National University of Lesotho, 1989)

those of other peasants in some Asian and Latin American regions.²⁶ This information shaped his radical resistance to the government's reforms and programmes implemented during the last years of colonialism, as well as to the actions the government had taken in the previous decades.

Lefela's strength as a leader of the council of commoners lay in his ability to recognize the real problems earlier than most Basotho and to confront the Basotho peasants, understanding their needs in real-time. However, other members of LLB, such as Ntsu Mokhehle, a teacher and activist, were frustrated by the slow pace of reforms and eventually formed parties like the Basutoland African Congress Party (BAC), founded in 1952. BAC was joined by other teachers, nurses, and veterans, who found it inconceivable to question the legitimacy of the prevailing power in Lesotho but demanded equal pay and the removal of the colour bar by the state officials.²⁷ Lefela, on the other hand, continued to attack the chiefs for their "shameless robbery of the people's meagre means of existence to destroy the movement of the people."²⁸ Thus, Lefela defied authority and drew the world's attention to the appalling situation in which those in power did not prioritise the Basotho.²⁹

Lefela was aware that the struggles waged in Lesotho were an integral part of the global revolutionary struggle of the oppressed and exploited people. Therefore, one can argue that it was based on this understanding that he took the time to correspond and show fraternal solidarity with several international organizations, such as the League Against Imperialism and

²⁶ LNA, S3/22/2/4, Lekhotla La Bafo's Programme of Action initiated by Lefela, Part VII, 25 August 1952

²⁷ R. Weisfelder, *Political Contention in Lesotho, 1952-1965* (Roma: Institute for Southern African Studies, 1999), 4-5.

²⁸ LNA, S3/22/2/4, Lefela's letter to the British High Commissioner in Maseru, entitled 'the grievances of the people', 8 October 1950.

²⁹ LNA, S3/22/2/4, Lekhotla La Bafo's Programme of Action initiated by Lefela, Part VII, 25 August 1952.

for National Independence, the International Peasants' Council, the South African Communist Party, and others.³⁰ His ideas provided the new political members from South Africa with a significant basis for outlining the politics and behaviour of the latter movement, the transformation of the Basutoland African Congress into the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) in 1958.³¹ The BCP campaigned using the same objectives as the LLB.

The same year, at a general meeting, Lefela referred to the authorities as “a group of corrupted people corrupting the lives of Basotho in the guise of promoting their welfare under their guardianship.”³² This line of thought spread among men, youth, and women, and it spread throughout the district and beyond to other parts of the territory. The government had also introduced pest control and weed programmes in the district. This was done to improve crop yields, unaffected by cutworms and other pests that disturbed crops.³³ The weed control chemicals were given to the demonstrators to teach and distribute, in collaboration with the chiefs.³⁴ Nevertheless, the programme was not successful in the district because the substances were unevenly distributed among farmers. Some villagers in Leribe complained that only chiefs and subchiefs had access to the information.³⁵ In contrast, some farmers noted that only those in good relations with the chiefs or demonstrators received weed control chemicals.³⁶ The Basotho's responses to the scheme indicate that they were referring to Lefela's ideas for change in resource management. This includes access to, distribution of, and ownership of land and agricultural inputs.

³⁰ Weisfelder, *Political Contention in Lesotho*, 8.

³¹ The Basutoland Congress Party was a party that supported the national, secular education system and constitutional reforms. Apart from its old members, the BCP was also joined by Protestant Church members, and it also gained support from the Basutoland Progressive Association.

³² LNA, S3/22/2/4, Lekhotla La Bafo's Programme of Action initiated by Lefela, Part VII, 25 August 1952.

³³ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1951, 5.

³⁴ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1951, 7.

³⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections, District Commissioner's Minutes on Khanyane and Morotoaneng 1955, 3.

³⁶ NUL, Leribe Collections, District Commissioner's Minutes on Khanyane and Morotoaneng 1955, 4.

On the other hand, the Agricultural Demonstrators reported that the use of weed control chemicals reduced soil fertility and increased the soil's susceptibility to erosion, as these chemicals broke down into fine particles that promoted erosion, compared to when farmers did not use them.³⁷ However, scholars such as Showers, Schmitz, and Rooyani stress that the soils in Leribe are naturally prone to erosion, even without human intervention.³⁸ However, the officials in the Agricultural Department did not take such details into account when they launched the scheme. This further strained the soil and reduced the annual crop harvest in the district. In livestock production, most cattle lost weight because farmers could no longer graze their herds in crop fields, fearing the weed chemicals used during the farming season would harm the animals. There were no records of agricultural demonstrators teaching people the pros and cons of grazing animals in weed-treated fields; instead, reports only mentioned encouragement in annual reports and newspapers.³⁹

Additionally, the weed control scheme was incompatible with the organization's other policies aimed at improving livestock and grazing lands. The Basotho grazing and crop fields were not far apart, as people fleeing the unfavourable living conditions in the mines and farms of the Free State increased in number. Driver stresses that the white farmers' attitudes in the Union of South Africa towards Africans changed in the mid-1950s, following the development of apartheid ideology; they resented Africans occupying land amongst them.⁴⁰ This way, some Africans took refuge in Leribe. Reports were made to the District Commissioner by some

³⁷ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1951, 25.

³⁸ Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 26; Schmitz and Rooyani, *Lesotho: Geology, Geomorphology, Soils*, 20.

³⁹ NUL, *Lithaba tsa Lilemo, Mochochonono*, 13 October 1956; Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1955; Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1956.

⁴⁰ Driver, *The Theory and Politics of Mountain*, 12.

Basotho that certain chiefs were accepting bribes from migrants and allocating grazing lands to them, thereby depriving the local people and their livestock of access to these lands due to their greed.⁴¹ Thus, most farmers in Leribe District were deprived of the luxury of rotating grazing lands, and in some villages, the Basotho ended up grazing their stock in their crop fields to avoid disputes over grazing land. Thus, the Weed Control programme in 1956 exposed some livestock to danger in Leribe District. Similarly, in Ha Tsilo (Maseru), Showers argues that while this program was beneficial for farmers to plough during the winter season, it was not compatible with Basotho customs of grazing stock on stover and weed growth during winter, which is why some farmers did not adopt it.⁴² This demonstrates that even elsewhere in the Leribe district, farmers chose what to engage in and what not to, weighing the results. Overall, the government development schemes were top-down, coercive measures that prioritised the needs of the government over those of the local people and their environment. This, in turn, led the government to halt the scheme in the district by 1960 and to relocate it to Maseru, where further experiments were conducted on government-selected agricultural plots to identify suitable chemicals for all lowland soils.⁴³

Despite the failure of weed control, the Basotho continued to experience social and economic differentiation in villages. However, most people could not air their grievances to the government; thus, individuals like Lefela became a mouthpiece for voicing the Basotho's grievances and articulating their interests to the government.⁴⁴ The environmental, social, and economic discontent of the ordinary Basotho and the authorities was circulated through the papers and word of mouth. The Basotho who worked in the urban centres of Leribe and

⁴¹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Land Disputes Reports to the District Commissioner 1950-1960.

⁴² Showers, *'Imperial Gullies'*, 194.

⁴³ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1961, 18.

⁴⁴ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1961, 19.

Ficksburg, as well as in other areas of South Africa, had access to information about what was happening elsewhere in the region and internationally, in a way that every Mosotho could understand and relate to the prevailing circumstances.⁴⁵ For instance, migrant workers who worked across various spaces in South Africa were exposed to new notions of struggle against their exploiters. They had witnessed strikes, boycotts, and other forms of resistance noted by James Scott in his works on peasants' resistance.⁴⁶ However, the Basotho did not engage in violent revolt against the colonial regime. Such experiences exposed the Basotho and encouraged them to establish channels for progressive public opinion through newspapers and rallies, as well as through the government-established platforms, including men's associations and cooperatives.

Additionally, the younger generation and ex-combatants in Leribe district who had failed to prosper as they had expected after the war despised the imperial government and wanted it gone.⁴⁷ Others who had worked in the Union of South Africa for a long time and had lost their land and livestock could not be absorbed into the new system of development and agricultural change in their villages, such as Nqechane and Molapo in Leribe, because they had no land or livestock to work with to improve their livelihoods.⁴⁸ They were enthusiastic about politics and the possibility of change in the political sphere. Gill highlighted that by supporting the rising political groups, most rural Basotho believed that a shift in political leadership could improve their lives.⁴⁹ This way, political movements grew, and new ones emerged in the late 1950s in

⁴⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections 1950-1960, 79.

⁴⁶ J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁴⁷ Newspapers like *Mochochonono* published several articles about Youth and Ex-soldiers' complaints on governance throughout the 1950s.

⁴⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections 1950-1960, 81.

⁴⁹ Gill, *A Short History of Lesotho*, 127.

response to people's discontent with the government's agricultural and conservation initiatives in the Leribe district and throughout Basutoland.

New members joined *Lekhotla la Bafo* following Lefela's continuous campaigns against the colonial administration in Leribe and in other districts throughout the territory. These members were imbued with a new brand of Pan-African militancy, which began to redirect the movement of the oppressed in Lesotho onto a definite conceptual political framework.⁵⁰ The new members advocated for progressive and qualitative development of the resistance movements in the territory. Initially, the people in Leribe were interested in learning new ideas from the LLB newcomers, as they had been familiar with LLB for some time. The LLB leader, Lefela, had campaigned for common land in Lesotho for the benefit of all in Leribe and other districts.⁵¹ Lefela also told the Basotho in Leribe that "common land without the chiefs being in control of the allocation was essential for the social development of all the Basotho people."⁵² He made this statement in response to the reforms and programmes launched by the government from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. Lefela evaluated the programs as beneficial to some but not all Basotho, despite the emphasis that the programs were intended to improve the social standards of all Basotho through mechanized agriculture and improved seeds.

In 1955, Agricultural Demonstrators insisted that for better results in meadow strips and grass strips, fences were necessary; otherwise, the whole effort would be lost.⁵³ In response, the government encouraged the people to fence the work areas. The Chamber of Commerce

⁵⁰ LNA, S3/21/1, Lekhotla La Bafo Minutes of Meetings, 1950-1955.

⁵¹ LNA, S3/21/1, Lekhotla La Bafo Minutes of Meetings, 1950-1955; NUL, Lefela's speech in *Mochochonono*, 18 November 1950.

⁵² LNA, S3/21/1, Lekhotla La Bafo Minutes of Meetings, 1950-1955, 21.

⁵³ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1955, 24.

provided traders with loans to import the fence for sale in the district, but most of the traders were Europeans.⁵⁴ This demoralized some Basotho from purchasing the fences, as they saw the program as a means of extracting money from the Basotho and enriching the government, even though they believed all programs were supposed to benefit and improve their livelihoods.⁵⁵ However, most people could not afford the fences. Some did not see the need to fence their areas because they had no arable land that could be affected by excess rainfall. As in 1950, it still had no impact on their households, as they were already struggling with poverty. However, in 1958, the Department of Agriculture reported that people were resisting the initiative to fence in the Leribe district and other districts.⁵⁶ The state did not consider the economic and social status of most households; only chiefs and other wealthy individuals could afford to fence their fields or grazing land, similar to the government's approach to its experimental plots.

The sudden shift in colonial priorities in the late 1950s unsettled the ordinary people in Leribe District and the entire territory. Imperial officials of the Union of South Africa and Basutoland continued to discuss the viability of hydrological projects throughout the last decade of colonial rule.⁵⁷ The Regent Chieftainess Mantsebo allowed engineers from the Free State to evaluate the landscape and assess the feasibility of a dual project between the two territories, anticipating that it could lead to the development of the territory.⁵⁸ However, most of the Basotho saw it as another attempt by the Union of South Africa to incorporate their territory into the Union. Also, ordinary people without land in Leribe were concerned that their chances of getting land would

⁵⁴ LNA, S5/1/23, Traders 1950-1963, 23.

⁵⁵ NUL, Leribe Collections 1957, 13.

⁵⁶ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture, 1958, 15.

⁵⁷ R. K. Hitchcock, 'The Lesotho Highlands Water Project: Water, Culture, and Environmental Change', in B.R. Johnston, *et al* (eds.) *Water, Cultural Diversity, and Global Environmental Change*, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 319–38.

⁵⁸ Hitchcock, 'The Lesotho Highlands Water Project', 338.

decrease if Basutoland were incorporated into the Union of South Africa, should the projects be successful.⁵⁹ This led both landless Basotho and farmers to join forces against the government, as they feared being incorporated into the Union of South Africa, despite the social inequality. The Leribe District Commissioner, in his letter to the Resident Commissioner, said,

I understand that discussions on the hydrological project are progressing following the Paramount Chief's approval to conduct a feasibility assessment. However, here in Leribe, the situation has been chaotic since people began discussing this matter, with both the chiefs and their subjects spending most of their time debating it, thereby neglecting their work on government experimental plots and anti-erosion schemes. I propose that the matter be addressed at a national Pitso with urgency to explain to the Basotho that the intention is not to limit the possibility of independence, but to encourage it, through supporting activities such as this hydrological project.⁶⁰

This letter highlights that the government was aware of the implications of some of its projects and of the attitudes the Basotho demonstrated, both overtly and covertly; it noticed and communicated about them. Nevertheless, their interests remained capitalistic; the water projects were intended to benefit the Free State, rather than the Basotho in the Leribe district or throughout the territory where the surveys were conducted. Most people in the district viewed the project as a government abuse of CDW funds, as it funded schemes with no tangible benefits to the ordinary Basotho.⁶¹ This, in turn, resonated with the political agendas of various groups, and people in rural Leribe followed these groups in large numbers, just as in urban areas.

The effects of Machobane and his work within Leribe District, 1957-1966

The establishment of the Machobane Mass Agricultural College in Leribe in 1957 has garnered considerable attention in the field of agricultural development among historians and other disciplines. Most of the literature focuses on James Machobane as an individual and his

⁵⁹ NUL, *Mochochonono*, 16 September 1955; Leribe Collection 1950-1960.

⁶⁰ NUL, Leribe Collections, A letter from the District Commissioner to the Resident Commissioner, 17 July 1955.

⁶¹ NUL, *Mochochonono*, 16 September 1955.

contribution to agrarian development during the colonial era. It considers his role in the state's agricultural development after independence. Historians like Robertson, Driver, Showers, and Conz emphasise Machobane's efforts to drive hunger through a new regime of intensive agriculture known as '*Mantsa Tlala*'.⁶² This section builds on their works, focusing on Machobane's work within the Leribe district rather than his contributions to Basotho agriculture at the national and regional levels. It assesses the effects of his school and agricultural practices across different social groups in the Leribe district. This section posits that Machobane's work was a reactionary response to the situation in Leribe District at the end of the 1950s. Machobane farming practices were designed for women and people with limited land and inputs. However, like the colonial government's agricultural and conservation schemes, Machobane's farming practices were not a universal fit for all Basotho in the district; they offered new possibilities for some farmers but continued to marginalize the landless Basotho in the territory. This, in turn, caused the responses of these social groups to vary in the district, as they did elsewhere in the territory.

Works by Robertson and Conz have provided an extensive biography of Machobane and his family.⁶³ I will not dwell on that; I intend to focus on his work and the agricultural dynamics that prevailed in Leribe at that time. James Machobane and his family were from Nqechane in Leribe District. Machobane was one of the 'well-off' people in the district, and the government and other people highly regarded him. When the government allowed the Basotho to obtain trade licenses and supported the rise of African entrepreneurs under the Betterment schemes, in Leribe, Machobane was among the first Basotho to get a trading license, own a truck, and

⁶² For a detailed analysis of Machobane's life in Leribe and in South Africa see, Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 99-121; Driver, 'The Theory and Politics of Mountain Rangeland'; Showers, *Imperial Gullies*; Conz, 'Stick to Thy Hillock?' 221-254; Conz, *Environment, Knowledge, and Injustice in Lesotho*.

⁶³ Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 99-121.

open a café and a bakery in the district.⁶⁴ I posit that this gave Machobane a comparative advantage over others, enabling him to accumulate a significant number of livestock, access to arable and grazing land, inputs, and other necessities essential for agricultural development. Robertson stressed that Machobane's scheme aimed to squeeze the largest and most reliable yields from the limited available resources by cultivating as many crops as time and space permitted. In contrast to "Orthodox" agriculture, which puts each crop in its own field, he proposed to pack as many as five crops into a single plot.⁶⁵ This way, Machobane called his system "Rotative Intercropping of the Most Intensive Order".⁶⁶ He requested that the government provide a loan for agricultural inputs, including seeds and fertilizers. The government had previously undertaken these programs, and the overall outcome was very unsuccessful. Most farmers failed to repay due to drought, misuse of inputs, pests, and diseases that affected crops and livestock, which were essential for productivity. Thus, by the beginning of the decade, most subsidy programs had been discontinued. However, the products remained available for purchase in trading stores and other facilities within the district. Hence, several officials from the Department of Agriculture opposed his idea. They saw Machobane's ideas as undermining their efforts over the past decades.

However, the Registrar of Cooperatives, Mr. Young-John, supported Machobane's initiative, and he helped him secure funding from the government and abroad.⁶⁷ Perhaps because Mr Young-John had witnessed some cooperatives doing well in Nqechane, Ha Molapo, and other villages in Leribe since the 1930s, these cooperatives had boosted agricultural output in the district by producing a single crop or vegetable on small plots of land.⁶⁸ He had seen household

⁶⁴ Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 102.

⁶⁵ Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 102 103.

⁶⁶ Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 103.

⁶⁷ NUL, 121A, Leribe Collections, Machobane's Farming System, 13.

⁶⁸ NUL, Mr Young-John in Basutoland National Council Session, 21 February 1958, 42.

incomes of members improving through cooperative efforts. Mr Young-John believed that the same work ethic could be done at the household level for subsistence, and people like Machobane were already demonstrating the possibilities of such a scheme.⁶⁹ In 1959, Machobane was awarded a grant by the Ford Foundation because the Americans understood his initiative.⁷⁰ The grant enabled Machobane to attract other international funding and awards for his agricultural college.⁷¹ This enabled Machobane to enrol more female students from Nqechane and nearby villages, with a notable majority.⁷² This highlights that women in Leribe continued to take up any opportunities made available to them to improve their livelihood. Some women were widows, while others were mature women who had never been married but owned small pieces of land and were willing to explore the new initiative. This contrasts with women who received remittances from their husbands or were already part of cooperative groups in the territory.

On the other hand, most chiefs were against Machobane's agricultural regime. The gazetted chiefs, who were government employees, wanted to maintain their loyalty to the government by not supporting Machobane.⁷³ Like other imperial officials, some chiefs in the Leribe district and beyond saw Machobane's work as a threat to the government and their positions as chiefs.⁷⁴ This was so because at this point, the government had the authority to place or remove a person from the chieftainship position as they saw fit. This way, some chiefs saw Machobane as a political activist rather than someone seeking to improve household agricultural output.⁷⁵ Aerni-Flessner argued that the colonial authority and chiefs were concerned that Machobane's

⁶⁹ NUL, Mr Young-John in Basutoland National Council Session, 21 February 1958, 42.

⁷⁰ NUL, 'Ntate James Machobane Mantsa Tlala' in *Mochochonono*, April 1959.

⁷¹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1960, 8.

⁷² NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1960, 9.

⁷³ NUL, Chief of Leribe, Chief Motsoene in Basutoland National Council Session, 1960.

⁷⁴ NUL, Leribe Collection, Traders Tales, 1955-1965.

⁷⁵ NUL, Basutoland National Council Session, 1962.

agricultural school could develop into a vast political following that could undermine the government's authority.⁷⁶ By the 1960s, as the politicization of Basotho across the territory increased, they had turned hostile against the scheme and the college.⁷⁷ Again, the idea of an independent nation became a reality for some people in Leribe, especially political party leaders and other individuals, when Ghana gained independence in 1957. The political shift not only reinforced but also generally awakened most people in Basutoland and other African countries to demand their freedom and national sovereignty.

Machobane's agricultural initiative, which involved growing crops year-round on small plots of land, was not effective for all Basotho in the Leribe district. He taught people to combine all their labour, seeds, fertilizers, and manure on a single plot of land and practice 'Rotative Intercropping of the Most Intensive Order'.⁷⁸ This was a reactive response to the existing patterns of intercropping in the district and the yields produced. He wanted the people to use their land throughout all seasons. However, for seeds and fertilizers, his followers still depended on the government and advanced capital to purchase other necessities for their plots, to make the initiative a success. In the 1958 Department of Agriculture annual report, the head of the Department stated that,

The department has shown keen interest in Machobane and his system and has laid out a trial plot in accordance with his system at the Experiment Farm. At present, there seems to be little reason to believe that intercropping will increase food yields. The department has also granted an advance to certain farmers in the same area who will farm under departmental advice, allowing for a comparison of results obtained from the two systems.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Aerni- Flessner, '*Dreams for Lesotho*', 72.

⁷⁷ Aerni- Flessner, '*Dreams for Lesotho*', 73.

⁷⁸ Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 103.

⁷⁹ NUL, Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1958, 16; Robertson, 'Popular Scientist: James Jacob Machobane', 111.

The government provided seeds, insecticides, fertilizers, and £10 to each student who brought the best crops in the Leribe District.⁸⁰ Some peasants could not afford to maintain crops in their fields for the entire year for several reasons. First, household sizes varied; some households had many members, while others had few. Some of Machobane's followers were still members of cooperatives and needed to continue producing there because they gained income to support their households. While they had accepted a new system, they could not let go of another initiative that had proved successful for several years since the government introduced it. In short, the villages were keeping their options open; in case Machobane's system failed, they had an alternative plan, as a population that depended on agriculture for survival. Thus, this divided attention, and labour made it impossible for the initiative to succeed for all households and villages that took part in the scheme.

Additionally, Machobane's scheme relied on family labour, and because he encouraged year-round agricultural productivity, his system strained small families' labour force.⁸¹ Most women still relied on men to till the land, who could only be available during the spring season to do the work. Eldredge stated that most Basotho men took up contracts for three to four months in the mines and industries in the Union of South Africa to make themselves available for the cropping season back home.⁸² This reveals that, while migrant labour was essential to the Basotho in the Leribe district, providing them with income to support their families, most of these men still believed that agriculture was the mainstay of their economy. Therefore, they made themselves more available in the villages, which came at the expense of their wage labour during the ploughing season. This also explains why most people who enrolled at the mass

⁸⁰ NUL, Leribe Collection, Traders Tales, 1955-1965, 78-80.

⁸¹ NUL, Basutoland Annual Report, 1964, 9.

⁸² Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 189.

agricultural school were women, as most men were working in South Africa's mines. Some were employed in urban centres such as Leribe and Maseru, where they worked on construction or other development projects.⁸³ On the other hand, large families could not afford to allocate everything to small portions for subsistence. Most families preferred to grow sorghum and maize because these crops contributed significantly to the Basotho's quotidian diet. Thus, most households continued using the agricultural methods they were used to, despite Machobane's emphasis that this could end hunger and starvation among the Basotho of Leribe and elsewhere in the territory.

Other villagers in Leribe were landless. Thus, Machobane's initiatives were not relevant to their livelihood. The landless could not distinguish between Machobane's agricultural scheme and the government's because both marginalised them. They believed that the betterment schemes were intended to benefit all the Basotho and redistribute resources, such as land, so that the landless Basotho could also have a place to work.⁸⁴ This, in turn, made them more active in the political movements pushing for independence, especially among the district's youth, who saw no future in agriculture as they witnessed some of their parents' or guardians' living conditions deteriorate. Food insecurity and a lack of support from the government and their village chiefs, considering that *Matsema* was abolished in 1950, led them to desire political independence, anticipating that rural livelihoods could be improved.

The Department of Agriculture continued to implement initiatives in Leribe District, despite Machobane launching his school and teaching his agricultural scheme. The Department of

⁸³ Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom*, 190.

⁸⁴ NUL, Leribe Collections, Complaints from Khabo Village to the Resident Commissioner in Leribe Collections, 1950-1960.

Agriculture selected plots to experiment with crop production and yields, with and without fertilizers, as part of the district's mechanized agriculture and development plans in 1962.⁸⁵ The crops farmed on these experimental stations included beans, maize, potatoes, and sorghum.⁸⁶ The Agricultural Demonstrators used nitrogen, phosphate, and potash in an NKK trial on potatoes and sorghum.⁸⁷ They worked with individuals selected by the chiefs. Although this program was made to evaluate the most productive crops under mechanised agriculture, it continued to differentiate the Basotho. Most Basotho from Kuini and Molapo villages in Leribe District complained that the chiefs prioritised their relatives over ordinary villagers in the program.⁸⁸ Women also complained that they were being left out. In one of the District Council meetings, one chieftainess from Kuini said, 'I commend my government for its efforts to enhance food production in our nation through experimental plots. However, on several occasions, it has come to my attention that the chiefs and subchiefs here (in Leribe) are selecting men to perform this kind of work.'⁸⁹ This captures the sense that the chiefs and Agricultural demonstrators chose men to work on the plots. In response to the chieftainess, the chief of Leribe, Chief Letsie Motsoene, said, "Women are thriving in their homemaking programs; you have not heard us complain."⁹⁰ Chief Motsoene revealed that the chiefs and the government still respected the patriarchal systems of the Basotho, which confined women to household chores and taught them skills that benefited household welfare in feminine ways. At the same time, men learned skills that enabled them to generate household income. However, other houses were single headed with women. Thus, they found it significant to have the

⁸⁵ NUL, MOA 43/126, Report on Crop Research in Lesotho 1965- 1968, Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Marketing, Maseru, 1968, 19

⁸⁶ NUL, MOA 43/126, Report on Crop Research in Lesotho 1965- 1968, Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Marketing, Maseru, 1968, 20

⁸⁷ NUL, MOA 43/126, Report on Crop Research in Lesotho 1965- 1968, Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Marketing, Maseru, 1968, 22.

⁸⁸ NUL, Leribe Collections, Complaints from Kuini and Molapo Villages in Leribe District Council Meeting Minutes, 1963.

⁸⁹ NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe Council Meeting Minutes, 17 November 1963, 7.

⁹⁰ NUL, Leribe Collections, Leribe Council Meeting Minutes, 17 November 1963, 8.

opportunity to acquire skills that promoted agricultural output, as agriculture was the mainstay of their household economies.

The programmes were also affected by ecological factors, such as the changes in rainfall patterns from 1964 to 1966, which affected production. For instance, the summer rains were low in Leribe. It was generally less than 20 inches.⁹¹ This affected the yields produced at the research centres and government experimental plots because irrigation depended on rainfall. The use of nitrogen, phosphate, and potash on trial crops exacerbated crop failure following the low rainfall. Following this, a drought occurred in the district, affecting crop growth due to seasonal variations in rainfall amount and distribution. However, the little rain received not only affected the crops at the research centre but also all farmers in Leribe. On the other hand, cooperative farmers who managed their plots near rivers achieved higher yields. This, in turn, led them to trade their grain at high prices, as most Basotho in the district had failed to harvest their crops. It was only from late summer 1965 to April 1966 that rains improved, and the yields were promising for all farmers in Leribe and other lowland districts such as Maseru and Teyateyaneng.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter argues that while the history of agriculture and soil conservation in Leribe is best understood within the chronological context of the colonial state's policies and practices, the people also acted independently. The Basotho in Leribe district demonstrated that Africans continued to resist, adapt to, and adopt agricultural and conservation practices

⁹¹ NUL, MOA 43/126, Report on Crop Research in Lesotho 1965- 1968, Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperatives and Marketing, Maseru, 1968.

introduced by the government throughout colonial rule. People like Machobane reveal how Africans were not passive victims of state policies. Machobane reflected on how people from Leribe employed selective compliance in relation to any form of change, whether state-initiated or Basotho-initiated development schemes, from 1950 to 1966. They neither adopted the schemes in their entirety nor rejected them wholesale. Other factors, such as unpredictable weather conditions, land shortages, soil infertility, lack of capital, land dispossession, and population growth, often limited the full potential of the people from Leribe to develop and improve their agricultural and conservation practices. The state's conservation policies deepened, promoted social differentiation, and altered indigenous land governance, gender roles, and customary authority over time, rather than preserving the land from further degradation. This, in turn, led the Basotho in Leribe to achieve independence rooted in colonial systems that were extractive and exploitative. This chapter suggests that conservation, like any other state-led policy, is more of a reactive measure than a proactive response, enabling power, control, and injustice in rural livelihoods while failing to consider ecology as the core of environmental governance. Thus, the chapter demonstrates the importance of politics in agrarian and conservation transformations. It reflects the web of relations between peasants' livelihoods and the political systems of their community. Moreover, it reveals the fluid, complex, and varied tensions, ambiguities, challenges, and opportunities in the development of African rural livelihoods and their environments. Overall, it argues that both agrarian changes and political dynamics play a role in transforming agrarian and conservation systems, and that these systems, in turn, shape each other. Still, there are limitations, especially in environments that are naturally topographically and ecologically challenging, such as those found in Leribe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: Looking back to see ahead

This dissertation explored the historical trajectories of agriculture, soil conservation, and environmental governance in the Leribe district of Lesotho from the c.1800s to 1966. The 1800s revealed how indigenous groups distributed, accessed, and utilised natural resources. The period also highlights the interconnectedness of environmental governance with power, politics, economics, gender, and ecology. By tracing the interplay among these factors, as well as with capitalism and colonial interventions, over a long period, this study showed that environmental governance was not a new phenomenon in Africa. The period from 1800 to 1966 captures the transformation from precolonial practices of collective land use to the rise of the conservationist colonial state and ultimately to the continuities that shaped independence governance in Lesotho. It emphasised that environmental governance was deeply entangled with the political economy of rule, including the making and contestations of authority, as well as the everyday struggles of rural livelihoods.

The above claims were made through an exploration and investigation of how precolonial and colonial societies managed natural resources, including soil, water, and forests, in the region. The study has demonstrated the measures that those in positions of authority used to control the ecology, environment, and their people before colonial rule. It highlighted how the chiefdoms interacted with missionaries, traders, and other Europeans who arrived before the establishment of colonial rule. The dissertation also explored the effects of those interactions on Africans and their environments, and how colonial authority conceptualised and

implemented soil conservation policies, and how soil conservation policies and practices were received, negotiated, or resisted by Africans in Leribe District. It also included the roles that chiefs, households, and gendered labour structures play in mediating state objectives. These questions were addressed through integrated theoretical frameworks, including political ecology, socio-environmental history, the sustainable livelihoods approach, and the concept of ‘stepping up, hanging in, and stepping up’ This concept enhances the understanding of the historical processes that Africans experienced under different government systems in relation to their daily interaction with the environment and ecology, particularly in Leribe district in an attempt to use the past to understand future possibilities and constraints that can emerge in setting new paradigms and interests in environmental governance, development of agro-based rural communities of Leribe, Lesotho, Southern Africa and beyond both in academics and in practice.

Additionally, this study also provided a multidimensional understanding of environmental governance, encompassing structural, ecological, social, and experimental practices, thereby illuminating the interplay between the state, households, and environmental processes. Political ecology situates conservation discourse within power relations, highlighting the negotiations and resistance that occur in the Leribe district.¹ At the same time, political economy links interventions to the broader economic structures, such as migration, remittances, and household dependence.² Socio-environmental history anchors these processes in temporal depth by tracing continuity and change over decades. The sustainable livelihoods approach elucidates household strategies, resilience, and adaptation to environmental challenges. Lastly, ‘stepping

¹ Watts, ‘Political Ecology’, 257-274; Greenberg and Thomas, ‘Political Ecology’, 1-12.

² Rudel and Roberts, ‘Political Economy of the Environment’, 221-238; Blaikie, *The Political Economy of soil Erosion in Developing Countries*; Botterweg, et al., ‘Erosion Control Under Different Political and Economic Conditions’, 31-40.

up, hanging in and stepping out' captures differentiated trajectories and agency in response to ecological and structural pressures from within the territory, regionally and internationally, that Africans encountered over time as people who depended on agriculture as the mainstay of their economy.

By situating Leribe district within the broader Southern African and imperial context, this study demonstrated that Lesotho's environmental and agricultural history cannot be understood in isolation from social, political, and economic forces. The long historical lens employed in this dissertation highlighted the continuities of environmental governance and the transformations wrought by colonial intervention, labour migration, demographic pressures, and evolving livelihood strategies. This study emphasised that African agency was evident as farmers, chiefs, and households actively interpreted, adapted to, or resisted policies within their social and ecological environments throughout the substantive chapters.

The pre-colonial society was organised through complex social and ecological arrangements that governed the use, access, and distribution of natural resources between people and their animals among the Sotho people who stayed in parts of the Leribe district and the wider southern African societies that shared similar arrangements, as demonstrated in the second chapter.³ Land tenure systems among the Sotho were mediated through chiefly authority, identical to those in Tswana society, as emphasised by the Paris Evangelist Missionaries in Chapter Two.⁴ Household size, lineage, and labour availability were the most significant factors the chiefs considered when allocating land to their people. The societies in the region

³ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 10.

⁴ MMA, Casalis, *The Basutos*, 11.

were primarily engaged in trade and subsistence agriculture. However, when the need arose, they traded grain for iron and copper with other societies that had access to these resources, which were scarce in their area. This enabled the Sotho people to gain access to tools that allowed them to practice crop farming and raise other domesticated animals. At the subsistence level, the available resources appeared to be balanced with the local demography. In terms of labour, women were central to most of the agricultural labour required in crop farming. While men cleared the fields, ploughed the land, and managed livestock, women performed most of the fieldwork, including planting, weeding, harvesting, and storing grain such as sorghum and other crops, as demonstrated in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two also highlighted that African pre-colonial societies were not static. The social, economic, and political arrangements governing the people and their environment were dynamic and adaptive, incorporating local knowledge of topography, erosion risks, and land. They were also exposed to ecological challenges, such as droughts, unprecedented weather events, and diverse soil types, which, in turn, influenced their cultivation patterns and the crops they cultivated, as demonstrated in Chapter Two. Thus, the chapter challenged narratives that portrayed African agriculture as unproductive and environmentally unsustainable before the advent of colonial rule, as well as those that portray colonial interventions as destructive to indigenous agricultural practices and conservation systems. This study emphasised that environmental degradation issues, dating back to the 1800s, were shaped from the outset by context, mediated by social organization, labour allocation, and local ecological knowledge among Africans themselves, followed by missionaries, travellers, and colonial officials, as illustrated in Chapter Three.

On many accounts, this study demonstrated that Africans exercised their agency in response to various internal and external political dynamics and interventions. Chapters two and three demonstrated African agency in relation to the environment, the state, and market forces. The indigenes found ways to circumvent the changes in their political, economic, demographic, social, and environmental issues. Firstly, the chieftaincy “stepped up” to the political challenges they were facing by forming alliances within and outside to protect chiefdoms (Chapter Two). Africans also responded positively to the regional economic opportunities in agricultural production and wage labour. Most Basotho, while they took advantage of these opportunities, remained tied to their local customs and practices, as agriculture was the mainstay of their economy. Most Africans purchased ploughs, cattle, and other necessities that improved their agricultural production, as they observed Europeans doing on the farms in the Orange Free State, where Africans provided labour in ploughing wheat and other crops, which Europeans supplied to the regional market (Chapters Two and Three). Some Africans ‘stepped out’ of the agricultural system by taking up migrant labour, as it appeared more lucrative than what they faced in the district, including unequal land distribution by the chiefs, land dispossession, taxation, social differentiation, and unending land disputes. Hence, they ‘stepped out’ and made non-agricultural opportunities sustain their livelihoods. While these opportunities improved the livelihoods of Africans, they deepened social and economic cleavages in the community. Ordinary people had a chance to accumulate property through access to capital; they could purchase and own cattle, the most valuable form of wealth in African society. This accumulation of wealth from below created tensions between the chiefs and the people. Ordinary people challenged the chieftaincy and rebelled against traditional customs such as *Matsema* and *Maboella*. The state, on the other hand, did little to stop these dynamics because Africans had stepped up to the demands of the capitalist economy, which, in turn, promoted individualism over collective accumulation of property or resources.

In terms of gender roles, the capitalistic systems had implications on the patriarchal system that governed the political, social, and economic institutions of Africans in Lesotho. Chapters one and two demonstrated that patriarchal norms structured Sotho social, political, and economic life, shaping access to labour and authority. Men held the political and financial positions in society, such as chieftaincy, trade, rainmaking ceremonies, and organized the defence forces and strategies. They headed households, opened and cleared agricultural fields, and were responsible for livestock. On the other hand, women, in addition to being responsible for the reproductive system of society, were also responsible for the daily household chores. They ploughed, weeded, winnowed, and harvested crops on the land that men cleared. The combined forces of capitalism profoundly reshaped these established forms of household organisation and environmental management.

The discovery of minerals in South Africa opened new avenues for men to accumulate wealth, prompting many to shift from labour-intensive agricultural production to migrant labour when farming alone could no longer sustain their households. This transition marked a significant reconfiguration of gendered responsibilities; women increasingly shouldered the burden of agricultural production while also seeking new opportunities. In chapter four, women ‘step up’ through local cooperatives, markets, and chieftaincy authority. Thus, the speed at which men responded to the mineral-driven labour market and agricultural market was the same as that with which women repositioned themselves within the changing agrarian economy, demonstrating that Africans were not passive recipients of colonial interventions and governance. Instead, the Basotho men and women from the Leribe district chose strategically when to ‘step up, hang in, or step out’ of livelihood activities, thereby maximising their

economic and social advantage. Thus, Chapter Five demonstrated how women stepped up, held on, and ‘stepped out’ of the agro-based and patriarchal demands of their society.

This study emphasised that African societies were not homogeneous, and neither were the women in these societies or regions; they fell into different social groups, stemming from the families they came from or married into. Some women whose households had previously been marginalised were revitalised as their husbands transitioned into the capitalist economy; they improved their livelihoods by using remittances to supplement what agriculture alone could not provide in the Leribe district. In times of drought, most households could afford to buy food for their families with remittances sent by their male counterparts. However, not all women were in this position; others were widows, and some had female children only. Yet, during the first decades when society was exposed to capitalism, it favoured male labour over female labour. This, in turn, led to female-headed households lagging in both economic and social terms. Social inequality and differentiation became more visible than before when societies engaged in collective action to ensure that no one was left behind. This does not mean that the precolonial society was egalitarian, but the differences were not as significant as they became during the colonial period. Some households accumulated more capital, land, and livestock, while others became landless, relying on others’ capital and livestock to support their livelihoods. These changes put most women in this position to be ‘hanging in’; they could neither ‘step up’ nor ‘step out’ at this moment.

Additionally, such changes in property ownership among Africans in Lesotho caused pressure on the environment. This was due to a tremendous increase in livestock and population in the territory, resulting from people’s exposure to the capitalist system. Although it offered

opportunities, it also imposed limitations on everyday agrarian livelihoods. The environment could not keep up with the demands of people, the excessive tilling of the land to meet the demand for grain, both internally and externally, exhausted the land and made it more susceptible to erosion than before.⁵ The influx of wagons and scotch carts entering and leaving the territory, transporting grain and people to the mines and farms, also accelerated erosion and contributed to the development of gullies.⁶ However, both the state and the people were concerned about profit-making through excessive extraction from the land. Here, people faced ecological challenges such as drought, famine, heavy rains, storms, and snow, which constrained the agricultural outputs that the state and people expected from the Leribe district. Hence, this study contributes to the existing scholarship that argues that environments and ecologies are not open spaces waiting to be filled; they exercise agency beyond human control.

Furthermore, the government and the people tried to combat the environmental crisis during the 1930s, but to no avail. The Great Dust Bowl was an ecological and environmental disaster that happened in America but had global effects.⁷ In the Leribe district of Lesotho, the people experienced a drought, and a dust disaster was named *Lerole*, as highlighted in Chapter Four. It should be noted that, although this was an ecological disaster, the local topographical conditions, characterised by highly erodible, flat soils, exacerbated the dust disaster in the territory of the Basotho. However, the state responded to the micro-situation using macro lenses. It canvassed the whole of Lesotho in line with global environmental approaches to mitigating the ecological disaster in Lesotho. The state applied conservation policies and practices proposed in America without considering the ecological and environmental

⁵ Showers, *Imperial Gullies*, 83.

⁶ Showers, 'Soil Erosion in the Kingdom of Lesotho', 263-286.

⁷ Anderson, 'Depression, Dust Bowl, Demography', 321-343.

differences noted in Chapter Four. Owing to the highly erosive topography in Lesotho, it became “an essential site” for recognising and defining the erosion problem in Southern Africa.⁸ It should be noted that most conservation initiatives to combat erosion in Lesotho were first tested in some South African districts, such as Herschel, under the supervision of the head of the Agricultural Department in the Native Affairs Department of South Africa, Russell Thornton, during the late 1920s.⁹ Thornton became the head of conservation works in Basutoland in the 1930s and, for the majority of the colonial era, effectively encouraged the people of Leribe and elsewhere in the territory to undertake the same works as those in the Herschel district (Chapter Four). This revealed the technocratic approach to conservation that the state exercised in some instances.

In the 1930s, as happened in other British territories, the state became more aggressive and coercive in its agricultural and conservation policies towards Africans, introducing measures that constrained African livelihoods. The 1930s marked the first decade in which the colonial administration in Lesotho received direct financial support from the imperial government. Before this, the administration primarily relied on internal revenue generated through taxation, agricultural production, and remittances from migrant labour. Thus, this explains why their interests were centred more on output than on environmental issues, and that is why their policies before 1930 focused on improving agricultural and livestock production, investing in breeding programs, and subsidizing farmers with seeds and imported sheep suitable for producing quality wool and mohair, as demonstrated in chapter three. However, in Chapter Four Britain’s decision to provide financial support was shaped by the economic rationale outlined in the Pim and Milligan *Economic Survey*, alongside insights from the *Ecological*

⁸ Beinart, ‘Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 143.

⁹ Beinart, ‘Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation’, 144.

Survey of the Mountain Areas of Basutoland conducted by Staples and Hudson, both of which recommended targeted intervention to address local economic and environmental challenges.¹⁰

The government conservation schemes included the construction of terraces, contour ridges, and the planting of trees, among other initiatives. Most of the work required manual labour, but people were accustomed to their everyday means of survival, both agricultural and non-agricultural. This, in turn, led to variations in responses to government interventions.

The farmers stepped up to the conservation schemes that improved their agricultural practices. In Leribe district, where most of the land was flat and susceptible to erosion, farmers took time to build terraces in their fields. They planted grass strips because they had witnessed the challenges of lacking terraces or contour banks during heavy rains, when their crops and topsoil were washed away. On the other hand, the farmers in Leribe altered measurements as discussed in chapter four, just like the farmers in adjacent territories of South Africa, such as those in Ciskei, who also felt that the constructed banks, ridges, and terraces did not respect the boundaries of the former agricultural fields, and this also reduced the available arable land leading to them playing around with the measurements suggested by colonial officials, chiefs and Demonstrators.¹¹ These similarities in African responses to conservation reveal the exclusive nature of state conservation policies and practices in rural communities. Thus, both communities responded alike in turn. I contend that state policies, whether in environmental governance, sustainable development, or other initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods in rural communities, whether agro-based or not, should be community-inclusive in policy

¹⁰ NUL, A. Pim, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland Report, 1935; R.R. Staples and W.K. Hudson, *An Ecological Survey of the Mountain Area of Basutoland*, 1936.

¹¹ Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation', 144.

planning and implementation, considering past experiences and the outcomes of community exclusion in efforts to mitigate environmental crises.

Chapter Five emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental governance with political, social, and economic issues. The Second World War had profound effects on conservation practices that imperial governments had promoted in the 1930s. The demand for labour and food supplies for the war shifted the government's attention from conserving to extensive production. Again, such political and economic shifts had different effects on different social groups. There was forced conscription of Basotho men under Regent Mantšebo, who encouraged men to join the army to demonstrate loyalty to Britain during several Pitsos held in the territory during the war period. In response, most economically active men left the territory to either join the war or migrate to South Africa to work in the mines, farms, and industries. This, in turn, gave some women a comparative advantage. Some women were able to occupy positions formerly held by men in conservation work; others became heads of households in the absence of men and continued agricultural production, with or without support from men outside the territory. On the contrary, some women step out of the agrarian system by migrating to urban area and the Union of South Africa in search of alternative means to sustain their livelihoods. Some joined cooperatives, where they learned domestic science, which in turn improved household incomes. Other women remained marginalised, neither 'stepping up nor stepping out'. They continued to 'hang in' the hope that the government or chiefs would intervene to improve their economic and social conditions. Many of them had no land to cultivate or held land without the necessary inputs, while others were entirely landless and lacked alternative sources of income. Their constrained circumstances not only limited their own livelihood options but also contributed to the persistence of chronic poverty within the communities of the Leribe district.

Additionally, the aftermath of the war brought further changes to the Basotho's agrarian livelihoods. Britain shifted its political goal towards the development and modernisation of their colonial territories. Most historians consider the period after the Second World War as the 'Second Colonial Occupation'. Most British territories received development funds through the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. Although the imperial government sought to develop the people and their territories, the interventions carried out in Leribe and other districts in Lesotho, as well as in other British African territories, proved otherwise. The people who benefited from the initiatives made after 1945 were progressive farmers, who had access to livestock, capital, and land. Some were part of government-funded cooperatives. In Leribe district, Machobane attempted to adapt to the new colonial order by establishing a farming system that incorporated both modern and scientific agricultural methods and indigenous practices, using limited land and resources, with the expectation that it would also eradicate poverty. However, like the state efforts, Machobane's intervention was also centred on people who already had access to land, livestock, inputs, and capital, further marginalizing those without land in the district and the territory at large, as demonstrated in Chapter Six.

On the other hand, the government and the chiefs viewed internal efforts by individuals like Machobane to improve rural agricultural livelihoods as potential sources of emerging political activists aiming to take over the government. This judgment overshadowed those in power, revealing the weaknesses of their interventions in addressing environmental issues and developing the territory. Thus, this, in turn, limited the possibilities of eradicating poverty and food insecurity in the district and beyond. Unfortunately, such footprints have not been swept away in the post-colonial era, where local community efforts to engage those in power toward what the agro-based community desires to improve their livelihoods, environments, and ecologies often result in similar issues emerging. This way, understanding Leribe's historical

context informs contemporary policy and sustainable development, cautioning against technocratic approaches divorced from social realities. Hence, I argue that efforts should be made to look back to see forward, especially by policymakers, developers, and other academics who may want to further explore these issues, especially in recent times of more complex environmental and ecological crises, such as climate change, and environmental degradation that agro-based communities struggle with daily.

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