INTRODUCTION

The ancestors of the Sotho people entered the area south of the Limpopo River in several migrations. In time, they became dispersed over the vast interior plateau between the eastern escarpment and the arid western regions and formed four subgroups ó the Tswana, North Sotho, South Sotho and East Sotho.

Those who settled in the western regions preferred to be called Batswana (Tswana) while those living in the southern regions called themselves Basotho. The Sothos living in the northern areas also preferred the name Basotho but were sometimes referred to as Pedi. However, not all the North Sotho use this name. The East Sotho people lived in the Lowveld area of the Northern Province but lost their distinguishing characteristics and, in time, became assimilated into the present-day North Sotho Group.

The South Sotho or Basotho people settled in the area that was to become known first as Basutoland and later as Lesotho.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Basotho people trace their history back to the 1800s when the unrest caused in KwaZulu-Natal by Shaka, the Zulu king, spilt over into the interior of the country. While Shaka was expanding his empire, the fighting caused waves of refugees to flee into the interior of the country seeking shelter and a new homeland. The Sotho people were also affected, resulting in chiefdoms being disbanded, fields being destroyed and famines breaking out.

During this turbulent time, Moshoeshoe, one of the South Sotho chiefs, employed great military skill and strategy to hold back the advancing Zulu hordes. He collected a large number of followers by offering food and water and a place to stay to the refugees that came his way. Moshoeshoe and his people became well versed in the strategy of retreating into the flat-topped mountains of Lesotho from where they could defend themselves and wait out attacks from rival groups. By 1831, his strategy had worked so well that he had become the undisputed ruler of the Basotho nation and some of the other Sotho groups became his allies.

Moshoeshoe was a far-sighted leader and, through wisdom and diplomacy, created a common cultural base and political identity for the newly formed Basotho nation which he had welded together from his own Sotho people and the refugees. Instead of destroying old beliefs and customs, he sought to merge the different ways and create a new common identity.

As Moshoeshoe came into increasing contact with white traders, he realised the strong impact that the western culture was exerting on Africa and sent some of his sons to Cape Town to receive a western education. He also invited the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society to establish a mission station in what was then known as Basutoland.
However, as increasing numbers of white settlers began to farm in the area, Moshoeshoe became concerned and appealed to Queen Victoria of Great Britain for protection. Protection was granted in 1848 but fresh problems arose six years later when Basutoland was annexed by the Cape Colony. Moshoeshoe again appealed to the Queen and in 1868, Basutoland was proclaimed a separate British territory and the Basotho people became British subjects.

Moshoeshoe left behind a legacy of a united nation with a strong national identity and a military record of never having been defeated by any other tribe, not even by the mighty Zulu nation. To this day his descendants sit on the royal throne. The present king, Letsie III, was crowned in 1997.

A strong influence on modern Basotho society has been the fact that most of the men became labourers in the mining and production industries in South Africa. The economic necessities of life caused social disruption among these people and resulted in them having to adapt to many westernised social and political structures.
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Despite the overall unity of the Basotho people, they nevertheless strongly identify themselves with individual clans. All Basotho belong to a clan and members share a clan name that associates them with a specific animal totem or an ancestor. According to Basotho legend, people first evolved from a mythical marsh. They left the marsh in groups to form clans (liboko), each of which was assigned a different animal god as its protector. These totems were sacred and were treated as gods. The clan name was passed on through the father.

Each village (motse) formed a basic unit of administrative control. The number of inhabitants could vary greatly and most of the male inhabitants would be related through the paternal line. However it could also happen that non-related members lived in the same village.

The layout of the traditional village adhered to certain basic principles, personal choice and the topography of the land. The chief’s home would be in the centre of the village with that of his principal wife next to him and the homes of his other wives arranged in order of seniority around his. The court was immediately in front of the chief’s home and next to that were the cattle kraal and stables.
The daily life of the villagers followed a certain routine and there was a strict division between the tasks done by men and those done by women. The family rose at sunrise to breakfast on maize meal with boiled or sour milk and, occasionally, meat. The household members would usually eat together but when visitors were present, the men would eat before the women and children.
The men would then assemble in a specific area in the village (called the lekhotla) to discuss issues of interest, participate in a trial or help make a judgement in cases brought before the chief.
Work consisted mainly of tending cattle and farming the land. In earlier times it used to be the responsibility of the women to farm the land but after the introduction of cattle-drawn ploughs to the communities, the men took over this task. On the whole, the men performed fewer tasks than the women and their time was spent mostly with the cattle.

Women had to do all the household chores as well as take care of the crops and they were often busy from sunrise to sunset. The elder daughters helped their mothers with tasks such as grinding the corn. During quieter periods, the women would see to the restoration of their homes. Their precious leisure time was usually spent visiting family and friends.

Children had certain set responsibilities from a very young age. Girls helped their mothers and the boys tended first the goats and then, as they got older, the cattle.
Music and dance have always been an inextricable part of Basotho life. Many of their rituals and social activities were accompanied by song and dance. Three dances; the mokorotlo, the mohobelo and the mokhibo were performed regularly. On special occasions, to honour their chief, the men performed the mokorotlo. This entailed a rhythmical backward and forward swinging action accompanied by the stamping of feet. The lead singer sang in a high-pitched voice while the others accompanied him in a deep throaty refrain. From time to time, one dancer would break away from the group and dance in front of the chief, miming a battle attack. The others would encourage him by calling him by his dancing name.

The mohobelo dance was purely for entertainment and amusement and usually took place in the evening. It required great energy and stamina and was also danced by the men.

Women performed the mokhibo dance on their knees, their hands and bodies gently swaying up and down. A choir standing behind them usually accompanied them with clapping and singing.

The Basotho used a variety of music instruments such as the morupa, a small drum usually played during the initiation rites of young girls, the lekoko that consisted of a roll of hardened cow hide that when beaten with sticks, produced a dull thumping sound and the lesiba that produced a strangely haunting sound. The thome, a bow with horsehair or thin wire stretched across it, was attached to a calabash, which acted as a resonator. The player plucked the string or picked at it with a stick.
SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Initiation

In older Basotho society, the necessary education to prepare the initiates for adulthood took place during the initiation rites. As with other groups practising initiation, boys who had not gone through initiation could not take part in certain activities and were not considered men. Great mystery surrounded the initiation process and boys did not know what to expect. It took place in a lodge (mophato), which was built in a secluded spot in the mountains.

The initiation was started with three days of rites and a feast at which the boys’ parents and relatives gathered. On the third day, a black bull was killed and the boys ate chunks of meat cut from its right foreleg and shoulder. This meat was coated with medicines. After the feasting, the boys were led away to the area where the lodge would be built.

At sunrise the next day, the boys would be led one by one to an isolated spot where they would be circumcised by specially trained men. The boys were then left in the bush to recover after having been given powerful narcotics made from plant extracts.

The men in charge of the initiation process would build a lodge in which the boys would, for the next three months, learn songs, dances, the history of their nation and the rules of acceptable behaviour. Chastity, honesty, reliability, courage, humility and respect for parents, elders and the chief were stressed. Boys were also warned not to commit adultery. Physical and emotional courage was also tested.

One the final day of initiation, clay pots used to store food were smashed and the lodge burnt down to symbolise the transition from the old to the new. An elaborate ceremony then followed at which the chief welcomed the initiates back to the village.

Girls between the ages of 15 to 20 were also initiated, although not in the same way. Girls’ initiation rites had to be completed before marriage, since these were believed to enhance their fertility.

As Christian missionaries gained more influence in the Basotho society, their objections to initiation were adhered to and initiation was abolished, except by some groups living high in the mountains.

Today, however, initiation has regained popularity and many young people are again undergoing this process. The old ways have been adapted to modern circumstances, the major difference being that the initiation course now takes place over a much shorter period.
Courtship and marriage

Ancestry and family connections were important to the social structure of the Basotho and are one of the reasons why arranged marriages used to be a common occurrence.

The courtship process would start with the boy’s father proposing to the girl’s parents. If the girl’s parents agree to the proposal, they would present the boy’s father with a calabash of water. The boy himself would then visit the girl in the company of a few of his friends. If she is satisfied with the idea of having him as her future husband, she would give him a scarf as a present. Custom also dictated that she should offer him food, which he would have to reject to prove that he came out of love and not out of hunger.

Traditional marriages were confirmed by the transfer of bohali (bride wealth) from the man’s family to that of the bride. This signified that the woman had now become part of the man’s clan and that their children would be born with his name. The bohali was usually fixed at 20 cattle, 1 horse and 10 sheep or goats but payment was rarely made in full and usually amounted to only 10 cattle. Any payment after this helped strengthen the bonds between the two families.

In the past, the wedding ceremony was held shortly after the marriage was arranged. A more recently developed custom is that the wedding only takes place after the couple has run away or after the man and his friends have abducted the girl of his choice. The girl is then welcomed at the man’s home as if the wedding had taken place. A feast is held and the girl’s family send her trousseau after her. The groom acknowledges that he has had sexual relations with the woman when he sends the first instalment of six cattle or an equivalent amount of money. This does not however entitle him to acknowledge any of their children under his clan name until he has paid over the balance of the bohali.
BELIEF SYSTEM

Traditional beliefs have been modified over time owing to the relatively early influence of missionaries and their Christian teachings on the Basotho.

The early Basotho believed that man has two elements, the corporeal body (mele) or flesh (nama) and the incorporeal spirit (moea, also means wind) or shadow (seriti). The body is only a temporary vessel and is subject to destruction and decay. Only the spirit is immortal and indestructible. The spirit infiltrates and fills the whole body but may leave the body at night, while the person is sleeping. This phenomenon is experienced as dreaming. Witches and wizards were able to force their spirits to leave their bodies at will and could also direct their activities.

The Basotho believed that the spirit leaves the body after death but still hovers nearby. If the dead person’s tongue is cut out or a peg is driven through the head, the spirit can be turned into a ghost. Medicine men who wanted to make strong medicine often used this method. To prevent the vulnerable spirit from being harmed, the dead body was therefore treated with medicines and a vigil was kept over the body until the burial. After the funeral, the spirit was free to depart for the spirit world in the sky or to the mythical marsh where all Basotho life started.

The Basotho’s practice of ancestral worship was based on the belief that spirits could be either good or evil. The ancestral spirits were good to their people and each family group was under the direct influence of its own ancestors. The ancestors of the chief protected the whole tribe. The ancestors were believed to have a direct influence on the everyday lives of the people, for instance in such matters as illness. It was believed that the ancestors would sometimes induce illness in people to cause their death because they wished to have company in the afterlife. Contacting the spirits with the help of the traditional healer (ngaka), and the restoration of good relations could cure these illnesses.
Traditional healers were very influential in traditional Basotho society and they diagnosed and treated various diseases, helped people with their personal problems and prevented bad things from happening. To be able to fulfil his/her duties, the ngaka used medicines made from animal and plant material. The selaoli, on the other hand, threw bones and, depending on their position, decided what had caused the illness and how to treat it. This approach necessitated the use of magic and making contact with the spirits. Sacrifices and the observance of certain taboos were means of making peace with the spirits and causing illness to depart. A senohe was honoured as a person who was able to see what others could not and this gift enabled him/her to establish the causes of illness and to foretell future events.