

**Religion of the Ancient Basotho with  
Special Reference to  
"Water Snake"**

**by:**

**Francis L.C. Rakotsoane**

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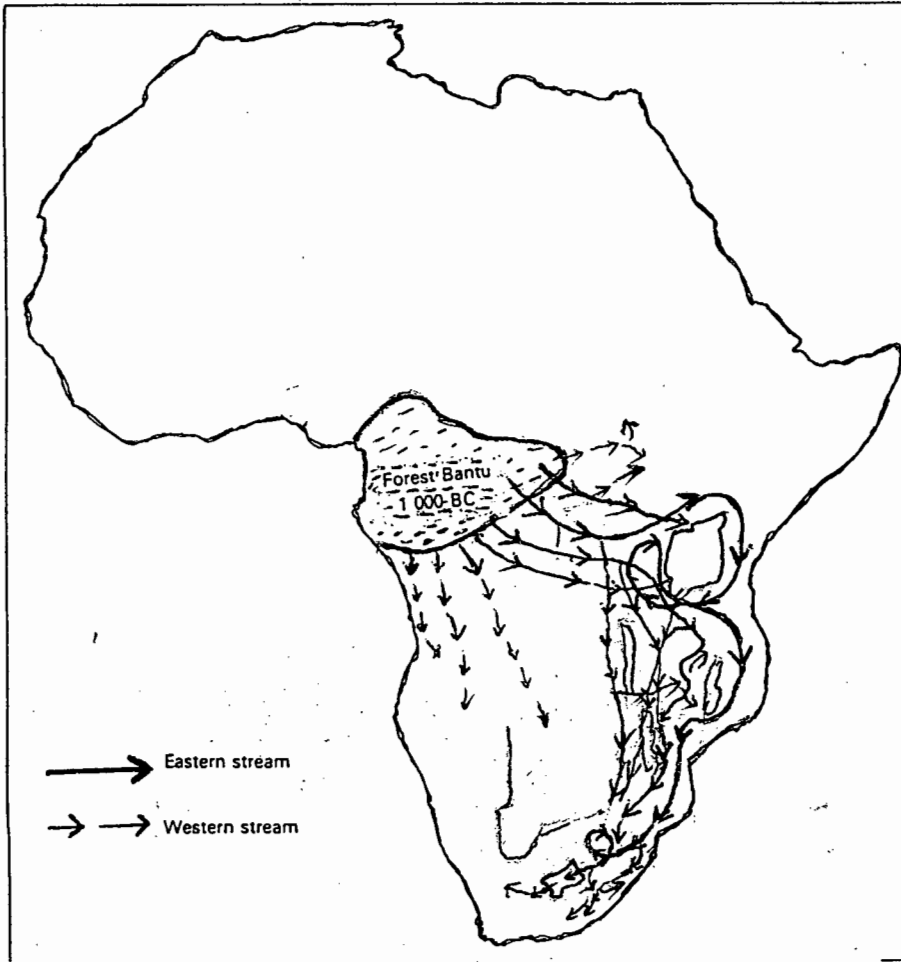
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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my former teacher, Rev. Dr. Lapointe at St. Augustine Major Seminary for making me aware of this most interesting, yet a challenging part of African traditional heritage.



**MAP 1. MIGRATION OF BANTU-SPEAKING PEOPLES**

## Abstract

It still remains the case that there has been very little attention given to African Traditional Religion in Southern Africa by both Western and African authors. It is not an easy area to research for it no longer exists in its undisturbed coherent form, but only as preserved in fragmented bits of culture. This thesis attempts some reconstruction of Basotho religion just prior to their settlement in Lesotho and the arrival of the Christian traditions. It makes use of whatever sources are available both written and oral including interviews in the field. It also employs Cumpsty's theory of religion to raise some questions about what might be expected given what is known of the pre-history of the people.

Through a critical analysis of various Basotho cultural elements, oral prayers, sayings, beliefs, songs, rites of passage and other customs, a picture of early Basotho religion begins to emerge focused around the Supreme Being, Water Snake, and his different manifestations.

It seems that we are looking at a group who had never been settled until they came to Lesotho, although they may have remained in particular places for considerable periods of time. On the other hand they were probable not, as some other groups were, consciously migrating, looking for a place of their own. It may well be this situation which is reflected in the constant prioritizing of the high god (Water Snake) in their dealings with the ancestors, and even their direct dealings with Water Snake, while at the same time other aspects of transcendence do not become emphasized.

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## Introduction

The ancient Basotho, like most other Africans, had a monistic world-view, which was a closed system of cause and effect. Because of this, they excluded chance in reality, hence everything that happened was understood to have its own specific cause within the same system. Like the rest of Africans, they also had the symbolized life-world perspective to maintain the coherence of the cosmos to which they belonged.

This is a kind of perspective in which, as Professor Cumpsty explains it, important aspects of the life-world are separated out in order to give them a symbolic content or relationship. This makes it possible for such aspects to be reintegrated at a level beyond that of their actually experienced relationships. These various aspects may be personified, (such as, for instance, when people address the sun as their creator), or given characters and whims of beasts, or they may, at times, be conceived as vital forces, which, are regarded as neither personal nor impersonal (cf. Cumpsty, 1991:276).

This is the kind of perspective that gives rise to a personal-impersonal nature of the Supreme Being. The real is neither strongly personal nor strongly impersonal. As a vital force it may be more manifest in ancestors than in kings, more manifest in animals than in inanimate objects etc. It would seem that in the case of the ancient Basotho, such a vital force was more manifest in *Khanyapa*. This *Khanyapa* is said to be a very huge snake-like beast which is believed to inhabit big lakes, rivers and seas. It seems to have very special relationship with almost all the Bantu-speaking peoples. However, such relationship is blurred by the secrecy in which it is shrouded. Xhosas and other Southern African tribes call it *Inchanti* or *Mamlambo*. African traditional healers, especially, *sangomas*, have very special relationship with this kind of beast. We shall refer to it as

Water Snake or its Sesotho equivalent *noha ea metsi*. This focus of vital force is understandable, if we take into consideration the fact that their greatest chronic problem at the western part of Lake Victoria, which place they inhabited for quite sometime, was drought. It is reported by Iliffe that the concern of the Bantu speaking people of this area in their prayers was always a desire for rain and fertility (1989:29). Now, for it to rain, there has to be clouds or mist. In the tropical areas such mist is seen in gorges or above the surface of lakes and rivers. Seemingly, since such rivers were inhabited by, among other creatures, beasts such as the one mentioned above, these people regarded it as the cause of clouds (mist), that is, the giver of rain.

My purpose with this piece of work is to discuss the pre-Christian religion of the Basotho, which for a long time, has been given very little attention if not simply ignored. This attitude has led some people into thinking that, prior to the period of the missionaries, Basotho never had any religion of their own. I am aware that some authors have written something in this area. Appreciable as their work is to me, I am nevertheless, not fully in agreement with many of them and it is also my feeling that because of writing from their own different backgrounds (e.g. historians, missionaries, anthropologists, linguisticians etc.), they have not engaged deeply enough with the topic. Here I am referring to people like Casalis, Molema, Guma, Ellenberger, Lamla, Matsela, Segoete, Gill, Sekese, Motlamelle, Kuckertz, Hammond-Tooke who deserve our gratitude for they have paved the way and have set the basis for further research into this topic. Indeed, Casalis, Molema, Segoete, Sekese, Guma, Ellenberger and Matsela have contributed much to preserve our cultural heritage.

Some, who have gone deeper into religion, such as Lapointe, Manyeli, Setiloane, Pula, Makara, and Maboe, have not been objective enough in their treatment of the

topic, mainly because of their apologetic approach to it. Makara and Maboe are typical examples of this trend, especially, in their attempt to establish the existence of some allusions to the Holy Trinity in Basotho culture prior to the period of the missionaries. Setiloane has done good work, but he put Bapeli, Batswana and Basotho together in the same basket, unaware that it is not everything that these people share in common. There are some remarkable differences in the way they view things. It is because of this mistake that Setiloane can rightly be accused of turning the religion of the Basotho into a mere Spiritism. His approach creates a lot of inconvenience when one tries to understand and analyze the religious life of the ancient Basotho.

We have to be also aware that prior to the phenomenon of *Bothuela* (a form of spiritism), which is quite a recent cultural element imported from other cultures, Basotho did not speak of spirits or spiritual beings. I am not aware of any traces of spirits or spiritual beings even in the secret songs (*likoma*) which are one of the main sources of Basotho cultural heritage. It is therefore most likely that the concept of spirit among Basotho came with the phenomenon of *Bothuela*. I cannot find any instance outside *Bothuela* where the ancient Mosotho ever spoke of spirits. This casts a cloud of doubt over Mbiti's generalizing statement that there are no physical representations of God by African peoples and his rushed conclusion that they therefore consider him to be a Spiritual Being (1983:34).

Manyeli, though he has done a good job and raises very interesting considerations, has been let down by his failure to find a better and convenient etymology of the word *Molimo* as a proper Sesotho name for God. Because of this he has separated God from ancestors (*Balimo*) by placing him in the sky while the ancestors remain underneath. In Sesotho culture, the king does not live separately from his subjects but he lives among them and from him they receive orders and guidance.

Pula and Lapointe, on the other hand, although they do not always agree with each other, have established, according to my judgement, the right track which can safely be followed by those who want to take their discoveries further. I should, however, remark

that Pula is very much opposed to the idea that *Molimo* can be responsible for human death, an idea which is opposed in my thesis. The only person therefore, whose understanding I share almost completely is Lapointe.

To achieve the purpose of this work, various Basotho cultural elements as found in limited available written material and in a wide variety of oral traditional literature received from different people, will be critically analyzed. There is, as we shall see, much evidence from the sources which are likely to be the oldest, that for the ancient Basotho the high god *Molimo* was most often in mind when the *Balimo* were addressed, and that they even addressed (in the prayers) and dealt with *Molimo* directly as Water Snake (for example when they put the entrails and dung in the water courses). Nevertheless *Molimo* remains very much with the *Balimo* and very immanent. Also, the myths seem to remain closed. There was clearly a tendency toward transcendence but the situation does seem to fall between the extremes of the settled and the consciously migrating. Which according to Cumpsty would tend to confirm our view of their pre-Lesotho history as one which would generate this consciousness.

It has not been our concern in this thesis to investigate what happened after settlement, for example, whether the emphasis on the high god shifted to the ancestors, rather we have sought material likely to have the earliest connections. In any case the situation was confused by the arrival of Christianity at the very moment of settlement. Perhaps only now in the pressure for inculturation are the roots of a settled monistic tradition seeking reexpression within the received dualistic tradition.

The whole work will be divided into five chapters. The first two will deal with the Basotho's settlement in Southern Africa and African religious thought in general respectively. The former is meant to place our topic in its cultural context while the latter serves to justify our method of approach. The last three chapters deal directly with the topic under its major themes: Supreme Being, ancestors and prayer.

## Chapter One: Basotho's Settlement in Southern Africa

### 1.1 The Pre-History

Basotho are part of the Bantu-speaking people found in Southern Africa and who are believed to have come from the eastern part of Africa (Tanzania). It is said that before they moved to Tanzania, the Bantu-speaking peoples lived in Cameroon (Legum, 1961:269). Thus Cameroon is taken as the original place of all the Bantu-speaking peoples. As to why they emigrated, there seems to be no clear reasons given. Therefore we may only infer that they somehow experienced some chronic problems of some kind in one way or another. These "Bantu-speaking, iron-using cultivators who came from the west during the centuries immediately before and after the birth of Christ . . . were settled in the modern Bukoba district west of Lake Victoria by about 500BC" (Ilfie, op. cit. p. 7). It is said that people living here measured out their lives in famines. The whole region was characterised by scarcity of water, due less to low rainfall than to its irregularity.

It is reported that the whole country of Tanzania was full of rainmakers whose function was to pray for rain and fertility. Thus Iliffe writes:

Over large areas of the western plateau a single rainmaking tradition appears to have existed . . .

Four areas possessed territorial shrines, normally in caves associated with water, where hereditary priests sacrificed for rain and fertility to a god (often symbolized by a python) whose authority extended over all who lived in the region, whatever their ethnic identity . . . Heads of descent groups made annual pilgrimages for rain and fertility medicines, bringing black beasts, the colour of rain clouds. The god communicated by possessing a resident medium. Further west, on the face of the escarpment above the Kilombero, was the shrine of Chanzi, 'the beginner', again apparently associated with some subterranean water movement interpreted by priests. (Ibid. pp. 29-30)

The above quotation, already manifests parallels with the Water Snake in the religion of the ancient Basotho. As we shall see later, this is more or less the way the ancient Basotho also prayed for rain and fertility. Even the pattern of their words of prayer reflect some similarities. For instance in the western plateau where the Bantu-

speaking peoples lived, in praying, a Nyamwezi chief poured beer on his predecessor's grave with the following words of accompaniment:

Here is your water  
 Give me rain! Let it rain!  
 Why have you abandoned me?  
 Are you not still my master?  
 I inherited the office from you.  
 It was not stolen.  
 Yet you have abandoned me.  
 If you continue to abandon me, so that there is not rain  
 in the land, the people will depart.  
 See, here is your goat, and is your sheep! (Ibid. p. 28)

This kind of prayer reflects much similarity with the one which the Basotho recited in a more or less similar situation in terms of both form and content. It reads thus:

O! New ancestor, pray the old one  
 Father see how thin I have become  
 I am thin, and my neck is like a string.  
 Can I state that I have masters, being thus?  
 Can I claim to be the child of ancestor, being thus? (Laydevant, 1952:22)

I do not think such similarities can be a mere coincidence. There is more than an accident here. This to me implies a common origin that these people share.

There is much that the people of Tanzania have in common with the Basotho. For instance, consider the following quotation from Iliffe about the people of Tanzania:

The most important spirit in Buhaya was Wamara, (lord of the underworld and supposedly the last Chwezi king). Other spirits included heroes (notably Lyangombe, Wamara's herdsman), nature spirits (Mukasa, the spirit of Lake Victoria and Irungu, lord of the bush), and dead Hinda kings. Possession was restricted to priest-mediums who served each spirit at sanctuaries scattered through the country, but each clan had a patron spirit and its ancestors were believed to live in Wamara's underworld kingdom and to return to communicate with their descendants. (op. cit. p. 31)

The questions of Wamara, his underworld which is regarded as the ancestors' home, and patron ancestors also feature in the religion of the ancient Basotho as we shall see later. There is also strong evidence for this position in both the Basotho oral traditions

and their style of life which reflects some similarities between the Basotho and other Bantu speaking peoples of Tanzania (*Tankanyika*). Among their secret songs (*likoma*) of the initiation school, the Basotho have the following one:

Dinku dia Ila,  
Dinku tsa Leboya,  
Di batla dikonyana,  
Dikonyana tsa tsona.

The sheep are bleating  
The sheep of the North  
They want lambs  
Their own lambs.

The sheep referred to in this song have been interpreted as fathers or leaders of the Basotho nation (lambs) who are in the North, whose set patterns of life should be followed faithfully by the initiates (Matsela, 1990:56). The "northern" theory would find support in Laydevant's view that:

. . . the Bantu race, from which the Basotho and the Batswana descend, is the result of the mixture of Hamitic people from Asia and Negroes from Central Africa. They were both herders and cultivators. They brought with them kaffir-corn, sugar cane and a kind of long-horned beasts . . . (1952:2)

Evidence concerning the relationship between the Basotho and the Arabs, is found in the songs of girls at the initiation school. The following is one of such songs:

Re bana ba Ramasoahile  
Ba phokojoe e khoaba  
Tanyane 'a tanya  
Tank'a boliba  
Moriri eka bolele metsing

We are the children of the  
Swahili father  
Of the black and grey fox  
The one who plays sex  
At lake Tanka  
His hair is like algae.



Tanka (*Tanga*) is a bay found in the eastern part of Tanzania. Swahili itself is a language which is almost universally understood in this country, and is very widely spoken. It is also a lingua franca for international African conferences in both East and Central Africa (Legum, op. cit.). The algae-like hair is a long and shiny hair. When he speaks of this type of hair, Laydevant says:

Certain fables related by the old Basotho women allude to people of a strange race . . . when they comb the long and shiny hair of the girl Tselane, long and shiny hair like that of the mealies, and whose parents travel in ambulating houses tied to animals' tails . . . (op. cit. p. 4)

Tanyane (*Motanyane*) is a disguised woman (or perhaps a man) who tampers with the genitals of the initiates during circumcision. This is done in water, especially lakes or deep pools (*malibeng*). This is one of the reasons why *Motanyane* is called the child of waters (*ngoan'a metsi*) in some songs. The name *Motanyane* itself is a diminutive form of *Motanyi* which itself is derived from the verb *tanya* which means to copulate. Therefore *Motanyi* is the one who copulates. This ritual occurs even today in Lesotho where girls are still circumcised. This is explained by Manyeli in the following way:

The second ceremony, which formed the essential part of the initiation, was called the ceremony of *Malibeng*. It took place at the river or at a near dam from which the mythical person was said to emerge. It was also called the ceremony of *Motanyane* (another name of the mythical person). At dawn, the neophytes went to the river, where they were ordered to stand or kneel while matrons sprinkled them with water as long as they wanted. After this bathing ceremony, the neophytes were ordered to lie down. They prepared themselves to meet *Motanyane* whom they were not allowed to see nor to look at . . . While this mythical actor emerged from the water, as the neophytes were told, assisting women shouted and yelled in order to frighten them. (1992:75)

As we shall see sometime later, the human actor here is only a representational figure. The real *Motanyane* is the water snake that we will be speaking about. Apparently, he is the giver of fertility. By being in contact with the neophytes he transmits this fertility into them as this ceremony prepares them for marriage. This explains why prayers for both fertility and rain were addressed to this water snake by the ancient Basotho. If we can take this song in its literal sense, there is no doubt that it alludes to the sexual intercourse that took place between early Basotho women and the Arab people.

According to the Basotho teaching, secret songs (*likoma*) contain the whole truth about the history of the Basotho nation. When a person is considered to be a man of truth and integrity, he is said to be the Mosotho of the secret song, *ke Mosotho oa' manneteakoma*, meaning he is a man who sticks to what is true. Therefore whatever we get out of such songs needs our serious attention.

While they were on the shores of the great lakes, and after the beginning of their slow migration towards the south, these Bantu-speaking peoples were in contact with the strangers coming from the Red Sea or from the Persian Gulf and sailing down the East Africa coast (Laydevant, op. cit. p. 3). According to Laydevant, the Bantu-speaking peoples were very much culturally influenced by these strangers. In his words he explains this in the following way:

The first visitors whose influence had any importance on the eastern coast were very likely the Assyrians who, according to Hollingsworth (History of the East Coast of Africa) introduced the cult of the horn. All the native tribes of South Africa and more so, the Basotho have a great veneration for the horn, and for the medicines contained therein. This veneration is manifested chiefly in the principal circumstances of life: birth, initiation rites, wartime, starting of a new village. When it appears, the baby must wear around its neck a tiny horn containing protective medicines of babyhood. When the adolescent takes part in initiation ceremonies, when the young warrior leaves for battle, he is anointed with medicine from the horn preciously kept in a special place by the chief. When a new village is founded by a chief, his traditional doctor prepares the locality by planting sticks dipped in the powerful medicine from the horn. It is to strengthen the magical power of the horn that, periodically, the natives perform ritual murders. (Ibid.)

The similarity between the Basotho and Assyrians is also observed in some of the traditional attire of women during initiation. At initiation, the Basotho girls tie straw veils around their heads to cover their faces. They also put on heavy grass ropes wound around their loins. According to Laydevant, this manner of dressing is referred to in the Dictionary of the Bible (Vigouroux) in connection with a certain Assyrian woman spoken of therein (Ibid. p. 3).

According to Ellenberger, even some words in Sesotho reflect some semitic influence. For instance, the Basotho women who wear traditional dress, wear under it round the loins a girdle of twisted grass (*tsikitlane*) known as *thethana*. He suggests that

the word *thethana* may be derived from the Hebrew word *thanah* (a fig tree), of the leaves of which Adam and Eve made themselves aprons (1969:15).

It may be taken for certain, then, that all the Bantu tribes come from one common source. The differences which exist between them today, in respect of type and language, may be attributed to various causes: such, for example, as intercourse with other peoples, Bushmen, Hottentots, etc., as well as to circumstance and environment. But all have in the main, the same usages and customs; the same form of government, the same or similar weapons, and many similar superstitions, such as the worship of ancestors. (Ibid. p. xx)

From the region of the Great Lakes of East Africa, the Bantu-speakers slowly moved down towards south along the coast of Mozambique and crossed Zambezi River and Limpopo River to enter South Africa between 200AD and 300AD (Hall, 1996:118-9). See Map 1 for their possible route and geographical distribution below the equator line. It is reported that in 1904 a certain Mosotho, Benjamin confirmed that they did cross the Zambezi in bark canoes (Laydevant, 1952:2). Even in their stories the Basotho often speak of the place called *Mosi-oa-thunya* (smoke-puffing place). This is believed to be Victoria Falls.

It is also maintained by Ellenberger that these Bantu peoples sojourned in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) for at least two centuries.

It was during the sojourning in Rhodesia that they threw off the numerous offshoots which in course of time came to occupy the whole of South Africa as far south as Keiskama River. These clans became in time important tribes, known to us by the names of Amagwamba, Amathonga, Amashona, Amazulu, Amaswazi, Amahlubi, Amangwani, Amazizi, Amabaca, Amabele, Amapondo, Amapondomise, Amaxosa, Amatamba, Amagcaleka etc. (op. cit. p. xix)

Around 1600, the Caldon River was being settled by the Fokeng, and by the end of the century the northern stretches of this rich and fertile valley were inhabited by the Koena. A number of Sothonised Nkuni groups who, together with the Fokeng, had first settled the area such as the Phetla, the Polane and the Phuthi, inhabited the far south and central Lowlands of present day Lesotho (Ibid.).

During the period 1400 to 1700, the present northern and eastern Free State, as well as western Lesotho, were a region settled by the southern Sotho who were divided into

many clans and chiefdoms. These peoples enjoyed a relative stability and thus their culture flourished (Gill, 1993:16-25).

After this time, two of the guiding lights of the Southern Sotho, namely, Mohlomi and Moshoeshoe were born. Mohlomi the famous doctor who displayed wisdom in everything that he did and who was also the diviner of the Koena clan, was born about 1720 in what we presently call the eastern Free State. Moshoeshoe who was a disciple (client) of Mohlomi, was born about 1786 at Menkhoaneng which is situated in the northern present Lesotho. This man, though he was born into a minor chiefly family, made a name for himself because of his courage, foresight and other outstanding leadership qualities (Ibid.).

### 1.1.1 Period of Upheavals

From the time that Tshaka ascended the Zulu throne until the flight of Moselekatse northward, the whole of Southern Africa was thrown into upheavals (*lifaqane* which have no known parallels in its history) for about thirty years. Whole tribes were exterminated, on one side, by Tshaka's Zulu mighty armies (*impis*), and on the other, by the Matebele hordes of Moselekatse. It was a concrete application of the law of the jungle: the survival of the fittest. Some of these tribes were partially extirpated, and so they ran helter skelter or at times united again to fight to the end. These feeble and vulnerable combinations were in every case defeated and brutally massacred wherever they faced the fighting. Tshaka dispersed all other smaller tribes who were settled on the Quahlamba or Drakensberg Mountains. They then wandered and ran hither and thither with only one concern - the saving of their lives (Molema, 1920:58-67). Some of these destitutes and scattered elements were collected into small tribes by their former and newly emerging leaders. All these tribes, together with all those who had survived the spear of Tshaka, formed a mass of wandering humanity. But because of being distinct and ununited, they were often times victims of both Tshaka and Moselekatse.

### 1.1.2 Wider Unification Process

Moshoeshoe, one of the greatest and outstanding of African leaders, but about whom African authors are silent, deemed it pertinent at that particular moment in time to collect all scattered remnants of tribes to build out of them a unified strong nation. He

incorporated with them also all those peoples who had escaped Tshaka's atrocious and bloody yoke.

In this way, Moshoeshoe had founded a relatively stable nation of Basotho. He also established the Basutoland which prior to this time was a region inhabited by a few Bushman tribes such as the Bataung, and the Baphuthi of Monaheng, who were a direct offshoot from the Bakoena (the crocodile people).

He welcomed all those tribes who voluntarily expressed their will and desire to join him whether of Bechoana or of Zulu stock. He welded all into one Basotho. As the Bechoana element predominated, it absorbed the lesser Zulu and other elements with some modifications here and there. In this way, a new language, which, in fact, was a modified Sechwana, was born, and this was then called Sesotho (Molema, op. cit.). Therefore in summary form, to borrow the words of Gill, Basotho are:

. . . peoples united under Moshoeshoe I during the first half of the 19th century (singular = Mosotho). Basotho generally speak the language Sesotho (although some speak Sephuthi, Xhosa or Zulu as mother tongue). Sesotho is also used by large numbers of Southern Sotho speakers in the Orange Free State and the southern Transvaal. In other words, Sesotho = Southern Sotho. Sesotho may also be used to distinguish the ways and customs of the Basotho from that of other peoples. Thus, we can talk of the relationship between Sesotho and Christianity. Basotho inhabit the country of Lesotho which Europeans called Basutoland. Present-day Lesotho is generally divided into three main regions: (a) the Lowlands, a very fertile belt of land which follows the Caldon River along the western border – this is where most of Lesotho's people live; (b) Foothills, an intermediate zone which is excellent for both crops farming and herding; and (c) the Maluti or mountainous area which covers two-thirds of Lesotho, is more sparsely populated, and is primarily used for grazing. (op. cit. p. xiii)

He established strong ties with Mohlomi who acted like a counsellor to a young Moshoeshoe. This old man was always a faithful adviser and sincere friend of Moshoeshoe. He is the one who reinforced the love of peace in Moshoeshoe's heart. This love grew so strong in Moshoeshoe that he finally called peace his sister. Thus peace (*Khotso*) was given all priority by Moshoeshoe and his people. In fact to the present day, "Peace! Rain! Plenty!" (*Khotso! Pula! Nala!*) has remained the motto of the Basotho nation. Whenever an important figure finishes his speech, his closing words are always *Khotso! Pula! Nala!* Also, when they greet, the Basotho normally say *Khotso!*. Both

Moshoeshoe and Mohlomi assisted the forces which promoted an amalgamation of their society into bigger political units. It was due to their efforts that their kingdom withstood the turbulent times of the great upheavals.

### 1.1.3 Moshoeshoe Leaves Butha-Buthe for Thaba-Bosiu

Moshoeshoe lived near Butha-Buthe, Menkhoaneng in the northern part of the present Lesotho. He survived by making raids on his neighbours to capture for himself their cattle (Lapointe, 1986:18-24). He was also often times attacked by the Tlokoa of 'Manthatisi, a Sotho group from the area of modern day Harrismith which had been displaced by the Ngwane of Matoane and the Hlubi of Mpangazitha (other Bantu tribes of the region). Although Moshoeshoe was not defeated, he became aware of his nation's vulnerability to further possible attacks. He therefore decided to leave Butha-Buthe for security purposes. This was done after Moshoeshoe's brother, Mohale, had suggested Thaba-Bosiu as the best new place of refuge and defence. In June, Moshoeshoe and his people set out on a journey to their new fortress. It took them two days to reach the place.

Due to severe famine, and troubles of the time, a new phenomenon came to the fore. This was the problem of people who had become man-eaters because of the scarcity of food and absence of time to cultivate the soil due to the then prevailing instability. It was during the journey to Thaba-Bosiu that the cannibals of whom Rakotsoane was chief, captured Peete, Moshoeshoe's grandfather and ate him near Malimong. Cannibalism is described by Laydevant in the following way:

If one is to believe the fables, which are very ancient, it seems that cannibalism was held in horror by the old Basotho. However, there was a period when this practice was quite in vogue, more so between 1824-1830, when Basutoland and the neighbouring countries were totally devastated by invasion from Natal; Ellenberger estimates that, at that time, about 6 000 people indulged in eating human flesh.

There are many ways of killing a cat; so also the cannibals or *Malimo* had many ways of killing human game. According to Minnie Martin, one method consisted in bleeding the victim by cutting the upper lip and one phalange of the small finger of each hand. Blood was considered as choice food and was collected in calabashes or other vessels made of clay. Another method used, as related in 1909 by an old man of 90 years by name of Fako, consisted in shaving the hair off the head of the victim. Then a rope made of hair was placed around his neck and tightened. Cuts were then made along

the scalp and the blood was precious collected as it dripped from these wounds. Just as the victim lost consciousness, a sudden jerk on the rope broke the nape of neck, and the meats were ready to be cut up and cooked. (1952:20)

On Thaba-Bosiu Moshoeshoe established his headquarters and because of the relative stability of the place, his followers started cultivating the surrounding plains. Within no time, many other destitute tribes from all sides joined him attracted by the security of his natural fortress and his willingness to treat fairly with them. It is on this mountain where Moshoeshoe displayed his astute diplomacy and his ability to intelligently adapt to new life situations. This tactful leader, recognising the futility of open resistance to the marauding Tshaka's armies, kept Tshaka and his successor Dingaan at bay by offering them gifts as a sign of acknowledging their might over him (Spence, 1968:8-9). Of course, he was following in Mohlomi's footsteps, his great advisor who had taught him that:

It is better to thrash the corn than to sharpen the spear. When thou shalt sit in judgement, let thy decisions be just. The law knows no one as a poor man. Conscience is the faithful monitor of man; she invariably shows him what is his duty. If he does well, she smiles upon him; if he does evil, she torments him. This inward guide takes us under her guidance when we leave the womb, and she accompanies us to the entrance of the tomb. (Gill, op. cit. p. 60)

It is said that at this time, Moshoeshoe was also able to start his policy of clemency towards the cannibals. He gave them fields, animals and security, and thus persuading them to give up their habits and rejoin the community. It is also reported that Moshoeshoe's people wanted to kill these people, particularly Rakotsoane, who had killed Moshoeshoe's grandfather. But it is said that Moshoeshoe could not allow this to happen as he regarded them as the grave (walking grave) of his grandfather. To do so, would be to unearth his grandfather's grave, and this was equal to committing a sacrilege. Instead, he had them all brought before him, and performed on their bellies some of the burial rituals such as smearing them (bellies) with the contents of the stomach of a sacrificial ox.

#### 1.1.4 New Threats

On the mountain, Moshoeshoe and his people did not enjoy peace for long, for no sooner had the prospects begun to brighten for the emerging Basotho nation than a new and dangerous adversary appeared on the horizon. Different new communities composed of remnants of the Khoi and San, as well as Xhosa, Whites and persons of mixed blood emerged. As early as the 19th century, the Southern Tswana and Sotho groups like the Hoja and Taung were adversely affected by the existence of these new mixed communities. In the late 1820's Moshoeshoe became another victim of this new force. These mixed communities joined with the Kora and started to raid cattle from Moshoeshoe's subordinates. Although they never directly attacked Thaba-Bosiu, they remained a threat to the Basotho.

Another threat to the Basotho nation was Mzilikazi (Moselekatse) who together with his powerful Ndebele nation envied Moshoeshoe's wealth. This man had decimated the Tswana chiefdoms in the south western Transvaal. In 1831, he attacked Thaba-Bosiu, but he failed in his attempts to scale it. As a solace to the defeated Mzilikazi, Moshoeshoe sent him a gift of cattle. After this humiliating gesture, Mzilikazi never took courage to face Moshoeshoe again (Gill, op. cit. p. 75).

#### 1.1.5 The Arrival of the Missionaries

It was obvious during his nine years at Thaba-Bosiu that Moshoeshoe had overcome all obstacles to his attempts to unite the many clans, both Sotho and Nguni, into one nation. In spite of all his remarkable achievements and developments of his nation, the great chief was looking for something more. He wanted more for his people than peaceful co-existence with their neighbours and adequate grazing areas. He had heard of the missionaries and the benefits his nation might receive from them, especially in the field of education. In 1833, this dynamic leader invited three members of the Paris Evangelical Mission to settle in his Kingdom. Spence summarises the contents of his invitation in the following way:

You behold our miseries . . . this country used to be full of inhabitants. Wars have devastated it. Multitudes have perished. Others have sought refuge in strange lands. I have remained almost alone on this rock. I was told that you would be able to help us: you are promising us to do so. It is all I wish to know. Remain amongst us. (op. cit.)



In this way missionaries came to Lesotho and were wholeheartedly welcomed by Moshoeshoe at Thaba-Bosiu in June 1833. These missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) were: Thomas Arbousset, Eugene Casalis and Constant Gosellin. They had come to southern Africa to help the London Missionary Society (LMS).

The PEMS missionaries were later followed by the missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). These were: Bishop Francis Allard, Father Joseph Gerard and Brother Pierre Bernard of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.). They were gladly accepted by Moshoeshoe in 1862, February with the following words:

I have chosen a site which may be suitable for your work . . . I want you to be near my residence so that I may be able to hear from you and to know your doctrine. (Lesotho Catholic Directory, 1988:8-9)

This chosen site was in Roma valley, Tloutle. The PEMS missionaries on the other hand, had already established themselves at Makhoarane in Morija.

Having gone this far with a short survey of the historical events, we now move on to our main topic: Water Snake and its supremacy in the Religion of the ancient Basotho. But before that, we shall say a word on the historical background of the African religious thought in order to place our topic in its cultural context as well as to justify our method of approach which will focus more on cultural elements for evidence in connection with what we will be arguing for.

## Chapter Two: Tracing African Religious Thought: Methodology

For a long time African Religion was given very little attention if not ignored altogether. Among those who failed to recognise it, were missionaries and Western explorers in whose reports and accounts, often times Africans were referred to as mere heathens (Thorpe, 1994:1-7). Or as Mudimbe provocatively puts it, were defined as being immersed in nature, bad by essence, superstitious, impulsive, submitted to passions and incapable of reasoning by such missionaries as Roelens (1994:128). To great European philosophers such as David Hume, for instance, Africans were nothing more than mere savage beasts. Those who despised them, but did not doubt their humanity as such, described them as manifestations of humanity in its primal and barbaric form.

Even in incidences where it could observably manifest itself, African Religion was always treated with great suspicion or indifference, being regarded as a stumbling-block for social and religious development, and as such, a major pastoral problem for Christianity (cf. Kwenda, 1994:7-8). To others, it remained paganism, heathenism, idolatry, fetishism etc. (Idowu, 1976:108-135). As if it was not yet enough, some still perceived it as some form of Satanism standing in the way of the salvation of the African people (cf. Moffat). There were, however, some few incidences where it was given attention by the missionaries. This, however, was an attention in the debased sense of the word, for it was only to serve Christianity. This is what the processes such as inculturation, adaptation, and contextualization seemed to be all about. They existed not to treat African Religion as a religion in its own right, but to exploit it by drawing the best they could get out of it to enrich Christianity.

Because of such a state of affairs, African Religion has only survived as mere bits and pieces scattered in various 'stubborn' cultural elements. It is no longer that coherent whole which used to permeate all aspects of African daily life. My intention in this work is to trace those 'lucky' cultural elements, which can be regarded as containing genuine African Religious Thought.

I say 'genuine' because of my awareness that, due to the current world interest in African Religion and the readiness to acknowledge the existence of such religion today, people have come up with all sorts of nonsense which they label African Religion. The

fact that African Religion was never written down, does not, and should not, suggest to anybody that they go around hunting out and gathering together all sorts of rubbish and strange ideas and label them African Religion.

## **2.1 Religion in General**

### **2.1.1 Two Human Drives**

Cumpsty asserts that there are:

. . . two human drives, the one for physical and therefore material survival and fulfilment, the other for identity generation and its securing. Religion is about both drives, people frequently turn to religion when physical and material well-being is threatened but it is more about the drive for identity. The ultimate case in which there is sacrifice of the former for the latter is, of course, the martyr. (n.d.:6)

Because there is hardly any nation whose material and physical well-being has not been threatened, in one way or another, there could hardly be any nation which is absolutely devoid of religious consciousness. It is from this perspective that I tend to believe that even the least developed of the nations of the world should have its own religion if one really understands what religion is all about. What is religion? We presently wish to look at the what religion is and the form that it can take.

### **2.1.2 A Definition of Religion**

A way to start our discussion is to begin with a definition that sets some boundaries and helps us to focus on religion's basic features. Generally speaking, religion is a phenomenon which one finds it very difficult to define, because, although a universal and unique phenomenon, each person tends to define it in terms of his personal religious experience. Thus for instance, subjectively considered from a Catholic point of view, religion is:

. . . a virtue that leads man to render to God the homage that is due to him; as an objective manner of behaviour and concrete manifestation of virtue, it comprises belief in one God, personal and infinite in his attributes, an attitude of absolute respect and submission, exterior acts that express this belief and this attitude in worship, and, as required by all exterior human activity, institutions to regulate that activity. (Wallace, 1977:185)

For other social scientists such as sociologists and anthropologists, for example, these notions are widened to include among other things, more or less pragmatically, such cultural elements as rites, beliefs, myths, rituals, and institutions that occupy, in a group, the place that is reserved for religion.

To work towards an adequate definition we need to identify some basic principles for determining whether a definition is adequate or not. These are the following:

- a definition should be applicable to concrete cases, that is, to a wide range of traditions ordinarily regarded as religions in their own right.
- a definition should also neither be too inclusive nor too exclusive.
- a definition should reflect neither biases nor ethnocentrism.

So far as one may observe in various available written materials on religion, central to a number of definitions, has always been the idea of belief in God. This tendency overlooks the fact that belief in God or gods has not been a central issue in such religious traditions as Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, and Taoism. Central to an adequate definition, therefore, should be that which accommodates both theistic traditions and nontheistic traditions. Now the question is what is that? How do we find it? Why should anyone wish to embrace a religion? The immediate reason is that he or she wants to belong to it and through it to what is really real. It is from the idea of belonging as the main paradigm that the form that religion can take will flow. The central core of religious experience is that of belonging.

Professor Cumpsty, in his book, *Religion as Belonging*, puts this thus:

. . . the activity in which I understand the individual to be engaged when being religious, is the quest for, realization or maintenance of, a sense of belonging to the ultimately-real. That sense of belonging requires both a feeling for, and understanding of, the nature of the ultimately-real and a mode of belonging thereto. The mode of belonging will vary in both its cognitive and affective elements as the perceived nature of the ultimately-real varies. (1991:161)

We borrow his insights and define religions as: the quest for, realization or maintenance of a sense of belonging to the ultimately-real in a more or less stable manner. The ultimately-real, as he puts it, should be understood as that to which the individual most feels the need to belong in order that life might have meaning, security, warmth, or be otherwise enriched (Ibid. p. 159). This is, in fact, a very moderate

definition in that it takes into consideration those traditions in which the ultimately-real is conceived of as a God or group of gods or spirits personally involved in human life as well as those traditions in which the ultimately-real is conceived of as an impersonal power, a process, a state of being or an eternal truth capable of influencing human existence. Such quest, has to be more or less stable in order to distinguish religion from a mere emotional short-lived desire for something and also to show (at least in principle) that religion is a life-long commitment.

## **2.2 African Religious Thought**

### **2.2.1 Historical Background**

#### **2.2.1.1 *Missionaries approach***

Most early accounts by European travellers and missionaries reveal without doubt the cultural bias their authors had against African Cultures. The following report by Samuel Barker is a proof to this:

Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its punny world. (Ray, 1976:3)

Generally speaking, a considerable number of missionaries from Europe failed to see anything positive in African Cultures. Thus their attitude was of a total rejection and exclusion to such cultures. African Religion being the basis for African Cultures, was the one that suffered most. It was labelled all sorts of pejorative names one could think of (Parrinder, 1974:13-17). To mention but a few, one finds such names as animism, totemism, superstition, magic, fetishism etc. (cf. Mbiti, 1986:16-18). Everything possible was made to get rid of this religion which was considered a serious threat to Christianity.

#### **a) The Reaction of the Locals**

Consequent to these misrepresentations of African Religion, was a loss of popularity of this religion among some of the newly converted local people. Understandably, this had to happen: no one in his good senses could continue associating himself with what was

considered 'barbaric', 'savage', 'primitive', 'backward' and 'satanic'. It had been deceitfully instilled in them, a wrong perception that being human, meant doing away with one's own roots. In fact, as Mudimbe reports it, being civilized meant a total denunciation of the old and a noticeable absorption of more than just a mere handful of the new (op. cit. pp. 125-129).

#### **b) The Aftermath**

Without any doubt, these negative attitudes of the educated locals and their colonial masters had an adverse impact upon African Religion. It was denied its status as religion in its own right. Consequently, it only survived as bits and pieces scattered haphazardly in different cultural practices, especially, those which were firmly rooted enough to resist any external pressure.

Ever since then, many attempts have been made by scholars, both African and European to resuscitate and put together these bits and pieces of African Religion so as to be able to come up with what can be taken as a genuine African Religious Thought.

### **2.2.2 The Cause for Search**

Today what one observes is an extensive research on a vast number of African Cultural elements. It would be interesting to have a closer look at some of the causes for such a search.

#### **2.2.2.1 African reflections on dark memories**

Having reflected on dark memories of their existential history, many Africans, especially those who were fortunate enough to have access to some of the written reports about 'primitive' Africans, could not remain silent. The way they had been presented to the world was no longer to remain unchallenged. They felt it their moral duty not only to refute misinformation about Africans, but to actually tell the world who they were. Thus the works of such Africans as Nyamati; Kakame; Mbiti; Danquah; Idowu and Okot p'Bitek in religion can correctly be viewed as African responses to Western scholarship (cf. Ray, op. cit. pp. 14-15).

It was their general feeling that they had been deprived of their identity (Ruch and Anyanwu, 1981:185). Of the three factors, namely slavery, colonialism and racialism, all

of which led to this feeling, racialism was the most pernicious and could rightly be taken as the source of the other two. It was because of it that Europeans felt a moral justification to reduce black people of Africa to slavery. It was again due to it that they felt a right or even a duty to civilize them through the process of colonization.

#### **2.2.2.2 *Shift of interest***

What remains obvious today to any careful observer, is that there is a shift of academic interest from Europe to Africa. Written materials on African issues are just countless to mention. The naturalness of the African continent seems to have made it not only the centre of attraction for tourists, but also the focus for innumerable academic researches by scholars from all over the world. Its mysteries, peculiarities and wonders have undoubtedly become a real fascination to the outside world.

### **2.2.3 Preservation of the African Religious Thought**

My intention with this part is a consideration of each of the cultural elements.

#### **2.2.3.1 *Rites and rituals***

From the moment of conception to the moment of death, African life is coloured with a series of rites and rituals. Rituals are understood to be a way of communicating with the divine primarily for the purposes of changing the human situation (cf. Ray, op. cit. p. 78). They are a means of communicating something of religious importance, through word, symbol and action (Mbiti, op. cit. p. 126). Through them the living and the dead remain in constant contact. Through them religious ideas and convictions are perpetuated and passed on from one generation to another.

Even the language used in their performance proves beyond doubt their religious nature. For instance, when Basotho perform the ritual of praying for rain the following are some of the words recited to accompany such an action:

Molimo hear as we pray  
 Molimo (God), Light and Saviour  
 Molimo whose hands have *maroba*  
 The palms of the Saviour are white  
 They are white due to creating babies  
 The Saviour, you who splashes deep waters  
 Splash them into rain  
 For the rain renews nations  
 Nations from you at creation place  
 Nations which will return to you  
 Amen! (Matsela, 1990:15).

Regarding the rites, the main area where one finds such expressed religious sentiments, is that of the rites of passage whose object is to create fixed and meaningful transformation in the life cycle ecological and temporal cycle as well as in the accession of individuals to higher social status. Of special importance here are initiation and marriage rites. It is in initiation where young people are taught how to relate to the ancestors, and it is in marriage where they apply what they have learnt in initiation school.

#### 2.2.3.2 *Sacred places*

Some places in Africa have been set aside as holy places. For the respect of such places, people or animals taking refuge in them cannot be interfered with as that is regarded as a serious offence against the gods or God. People regard them as holy and sacred centres where they meet their divinities. Thus they find them conducive for offering sacrifices and prayers. These may be rocks, caves, hills, mountains, trees, rivers or even some artificial shelters. Mbiti tells us that such places are quite common in Nigeria and Uganda (op. cit. p. 19).



In Lesotho one may make a special reference to the famous Thaba Bosiu which is often times nicknamed Mt. Zion of Basotho in connection with their history as a nation.

### 2.2.3.3 *Art*

One of the common means by which Africans all over the continent have conveyed their religious sentiments is artistic work. Even today statues and portraits of gods and ancestors are found in a good number. Such works are a rich representation of African religious imagination. They reveal something of their conception of divinities. These are religious symbols which help to communicate and strengthen the religious ideas (Ibid. p. 22).

Of such artistic work, one also finds music of highest piety as well as inspirational poems and praises composed by highly esteemed national heroes and religious leaders. The following poetic words addressed to Tano, the great god of the Ashanti, are a witness to this fact:

The stream crosses the path,  
The path crosses the stream;  
Which of them is the elder?  
Did we not cut a path long ago  
and meet this stream?  
The stream had its origin long, long ago.  
The stream had its origin in the Creation,  
He created things.  
Pure pure Tano  
If you have gone elsewhere, come  
And we shall seek a path for  
you. (Parrinder, op. cit. p. 50)

The same is true with the following poetic words directed to ancestors by the ancient Basotho:

Ancestor hear as we pray  
 We always pray, we are not beginning  
 New Ancestor, pray to the old one  
 New Ancestor keep away the sorcerers . . . (Lapointe, 1993:170)

#### 2.2.3.4 *Wise sayings*

One of the richest of the African heritage, that has been passed on from one generation to another, is their wisdom sayings. These warnings and morality-laden ideas and principles are grounded on religious beliefs that speak about God, ancestors, spirits, the world, man, nature of the whole universe and interrelatedness that characterizes the various elements that constitute it.

Thus Sesotho wisdom saying 'one's parent is one's God', does not only tell us the important role played by parents in the upbringing of their children, but it also tells us something about the image of God who is to Basotho like a parent to his children. Similarly, their saying, 'a cow is a god with wet nose' does not only reveal the importance of such an animal in the life of Mosotho, but also the significance and functional role played by belief in God.

#### 2.2.3.5 *Myths, folktales and legends*

If one would speak of anything typical of Africans, then whether one likes it or not, one will surely speak of myths, folktales and legends. As Africans could neither read nor write, these were very important sources of information and efficient means of getting the

message across. Every African nation, as Mbiti correctly maintains, has a plenitude of these (op. cit. p. 26).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Africans is their love for stories. Myths about gods, spirits and the origin of things are too many to enumerate. Parrinder reports, for example, that a German Scholar, Baumann, analyzed some 2,500 African myths for theology and cosmology (op. cit. p. 40).

Among such myths one finds one which seems to be common to the majority of Africans. This myth is an attempt to explain why God and the sky are so far away. Often times in such myths, a woman is blamed for having brought the idyllic state to an end. For instance, the Magi of Nigeria hold that in the past the sky was so close to the earth, that it could be touched. It is said that God provided everything for man and people did not have to work. But one day a woman put out a dirty calabash and infected the finger of one of the sky children, and God in his anger, retired to his present distance (Ibid.).

Common to Africans also is the myth of origin of man. Very often the place of origin is located somewhere in the east. The same is also true with those myths concerned with the origin of death. That is, they are commonly shared.

#### **2.2.3.6 *Beliefs and customs***

Each and every nation in Africa has its own set of beliefs and customs which cover all areas of life. These beliefs which form an essential part of African Religion are handed down from one generation to another. People's daily life is very much influenced by such beliefs. They are like principles of life.

These beliefs can also be seen as forming the basis for many of the African Customs. This is particularly true of both marriage and death customs. When young

people are united by marriage, they are not only introduced to the living members of their families alone, but also to the living dead of their families whose protection will be needed most by the young family. Likewise, the way Africans bury their dead is absolutely determined by their beliefs in life after death. For instance, it is customary in African Villages to bury the dead together with some of his basic earthly needs such as various seeds and tools. This is in fact, a manifestation of belief in life's continuity after death.

#### 2.2.3.7 *Healing practices*

In an African context, an ability to heal is a gift from ancestors who are ever concerned about the well-being of the living. As Parrinder correctly asserts, ancestors are the ones who give new medicines and reveal new forms of treatment to healers (op. cit. p. 61).

African healers range from herbalists to a more advanced and complex group of diviners. It is particularly in the latter where religious aspect of the African healing practice can easily be observed. Even the language which a diviner uses to communicate with his divining set is said to be the language of ancestors (*Balimo*). The divining set facilitates efficient communication between the divinities (ancestors) who know even the hidden secrets and the diviner who acts as an interpreter of the language of ancestors to the sick (cf. Segoete, 1981:43).

The oral traditions maintain by and large that in Africa, the basis for medicine is religion. The invocation of ancestors in connection with medicine seems to be universal in Africa. As pioneers and teachers of such practice, ancestors are given their due honour by so invoking their names. This is also due to the fact that African diviners in particular and all African healers in general deal with the crisis not only by treating physical

symptoms, but by probing more deeply to find the underlying human and supernatural causes, hence their appeal to the inspiration of a high authority (Ancestors).

As can be seen from the whole discussion, with colonial masters waging vigorous campaigns against African Cultures, African Religion had a hard time to survive. Fighting against such cultures was in fact, fighting against African religion which permeated every aspect of culture. Even though African religion had persisted for thousands of years it has to be acknowledged that in later times as something overt and coherent it seemed to have reached a stage of near extinction.

In spite of it being under a zeige for a long time, however, and contrary to what seems to be Metuh's sceptical and pessimistic views (1981:167-174) about its future, there seems to be some prospects for this religion.

However, one thing is for sure, as long as rituals, art, African wisdom literature, myths and legends, beliefs and customs, and healing practices remain part of African Culture, African Religion is here to stay. For these are nothing else but the outward expressions and signs of the deeply rooted African religious heritage and conviction. These are the reservoirs of African Religious thought. Only those who disassociate religion from daily life will fail to recognise its existence.

Lastly and most importantly, it has to be carefully noted that Africans believe that there are certain things that constitute the ontological make-up of humankind. These are the things that humanbeing is born with and cannot be gotten rid of without doing away with the very essence of humanity. Religion is one of such essential elements in African life. To separate being human from being a religious is not only to be ignorant about reality, but is to be guilty of absurdity.

#### 2.2.4 African Traditional Religion and Magic

One has to acknowledge the important role played by magic in African religion. It would, be equally fallacious to equate the two or to treat them as mutually exclusive entities. In fact, the significance of such practice in understanding African peoples is something worth noting. O'donohue must have been aware of this fact when he said:

The fact that the people of Africa for the most part still believe in magic, as they believe in the activity of spirits, undoubtedly isolates them culturally from people living in other parts of the world who find it very difficult to enter with sympathy into what are to them strange and incomprehensible beliefs. Magic has become unknown territory to the scientific world; but, as a prominent feature of the life of the people of Africa, it must receive serious attention in any attempts to understand African philosophy. (1981:27)

As seen from the point of view of anthropology, magic and religion as ways of handling the supernatural, are complementary to each other. While religion sets up desirable personal relations with the supernatural world, magic employs techniques of controlling and manipulating that world.

They both have as the general assumption the idea that there is always a hidden dimension to human life which is more important than what appears on the surface. The reality of such dimension is the inspiration of both magic and religion. It is however, important to note that the difference between the two is so profound that it would be more fallacious to regard magic as pre-religion than it would be, if regarded as pre-science.

Firstly, religion concerns itself with the ultimate truth and goodness. It deals with reality as a whole and takes interest in human beings as morally perfectible beings. Secondly, religious faith, which, as a matter of fact is more a quest than a finding, is something inseparable from the moral struggle (Ibid. p. 37). Only the pure in heart shall

see God (Mt. 5:8). The search for ultimate truth and the pursuit of moral perfection are what forms the very basis of religion.

On the other hand, magic as such, does not concern itself with ultimate dimension, be it in reality as a whole or in human life. Its primary concern, as it seeks success, not truth, is to satisfy the material needs of the person concerned here and now. Whether this is done at the expense of other community members or not, is often times none of the magician's concern. Hence the relevance of O'donohue's remark that magical practices tend to be "characterised by unabashed self-seeking, be the cost to others what it may" (op. cit. p. 39). Such remark, however, needs some modification as it tends to overlook the positive aspect of magic.

Magic, indeed, plays a very important role in people's life. Because of it being an endeavour to offer total explanations and also because of the atmosphere of mystery which surrounds it, magic is to be more precisely understood in relation to religion than to science. In fact the two are complementary ways of dealing with the supernatural or the holy. As religion establishes relationships between the sacred or the supernatural and man, magic enables man to taste the fruits and benefits of such relationship by coercing the supernatural into responding to the needs of man.

It therefore follows that without magic, African religion becomes inoperative and sterile, while on the other hand magic, without religion as its foundation becomes a baseless surmise. This already points to the fact that any attempt to eliminate the practice of magic in Africa, is in fact, a waste of time as long as African religion exists. Those who regarded it as an obstacle to intellectual, moral and social development, as well s a main cause of the present woes of Africa, have tried but all in vain. Early missionaries attempts

to eradicate it among Tswana people, for instance, were a total fiasco (Camoraff, 1991:206-210).

On the whole, therefore, the importance of magic in African life can neither be overlooked nor trivialized. This, however, should not be understood as denying the reality of the malevolent use of magic. But, the point is, we cannot condemn the whole phenomenon just because of a few 'upside down people' who abuse it. In fact, such negative magic should be understood as deriving its power from satan who is the principle of all evil. Hence we may look at witchcraft in Africa, as nothing else than some form of African satanism. On the other hand, the type of magical powers that is possessed by African healers such as diviners and which is used for the good of the society, cannot for sure be attributed to Devil. How can satan fight against satan? (Mk. 3:23). Only God who is the principle of all goodness should be the sole source of such powers in the final analysis.

With this we now move on to our discussion on the Water Snake as the Supreme Being in the religion of the ancient Basotho.

To start with, let us first clarify certain points on the choice of a paradigm as this will enable us understand our topic better.

Cumpsty argues as follows:

Why a particular paradigm is chosen or comes to dominance within a culture may be accidental, but there seems to be evidence for predisposing conditions. For example, in relation to the events of biblical history leading up to the Sinai covenant, the condition which pressed the group toward choosing the bifurcation in reality itself was a socio-cultural disturbance which led to geographic migration and thence to a sense of a lost past and a future hope.

It seems that when the important thing about time becomes some future event, rather than natural cycles, people put their god where their hope is. That is, they place the full availability of the divine in that future time when experience will be fully acceptable and affirmable as that to which they would belong ultimately. Because this



ultimately real already exists, it is also modelled as being presently "above" or otherwise spatially removed. For such a model to be satisfactory, it must include the expectation that this and that which transcends it, will come together at that future time. (Cumpsty, 1991:175)

Elsewhere he includes cultural migration:

. . . people undergoing geographical or cultural migration tend to move in the direction of transcendence and the Secular World Affirming paradigm. They, as it were, put their God where their hope is, that is, out in front or above. (Cumpsty, 1995:11)

In Southern Africa both the Vakovango and the Vahvenda, in their different ways, went through a long period of conscious migration looking for a land of their own. Whereas Israel believed its ancestors to have been led by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day, the Vakovango were led by an Eagle, a manifestation of the high god Karunga or Nyambi, and the Vahvenda by a Drum given by the high god Mali. A sense of linear time linked with a sense of transcendence produces open ended myths whereas in settled situations they tend to be closed, the hero figure being driven away or killed to start the beneficial cycle again (Diaz, 1992).

The reverse of Cumpsty's point is that when a people "arrive" and go back to settled conditions, then they are likely to return to a sense of cyclical time and lose transcendence and, therefore, to a concentration on ancestors or other aspects of a monistic universe, the high god falling into the background of attention. Many in ancient Israel, it seems, sought to return to the Ba'als and allow Yahweh, the god of the migration era, to fall into the background. The Vahvenda say they can no longer hear Mali in the thunder. The Vakovango, on the other hand, have retained a sense of

openness to the future because for other reasons, not least the rainfall cycle, they were not able to gain a settled sense.

The history that we tried to trace for Basotho ancestors indicates a situation between that of conscious migration and of settlement. Always moving on, seeking to survive, but spending quite long periods in places along the way, but never consciously looking for any particular imagined place, it was not until they came to the coast and the south and therefore into conflict with those already settled there, that under Moshoeshoe they became established in their present home. At that moment in time we note the relative willingness, compared to the AmaZulu, with which they embraced Christianity in its various forms, suggesting that some sense of transcendence was not foreign to them.

The remaining question concerns the relative importance of ancestors and of a high god in their religious consciousness, and it is to investigate that question that we now turn.

Due to a serious scarcity of the written material on the subject, most of the material used here has been collected in an oral form from elderly people some of whom still practise this religion. Certain groups of people such as traditional healers and people from traditional initiation schools both young and old were also consulted. Different sources of written material were used particularly to trace the origin of the Basotho and some of their unique practices.

Due to the secrecy in which most of the oral information was/is shrouded, it was almost impossible to formulate any formal questionnaire as that would scare informants. I therefore rather adopted an informal way of getting my information by engaging in informal discussion with them, but at the same time having a set of questions in mind which structured the information received rather than guided the interview. The oral information used here has been collected over a period of two years with some breaks

in between due to adverse climatic conditions and other academic engagements. The areas targeted were remote rural areas as found in different corners of Lesotho where people are still leading traditional life.

## Chapter Three: Water Snake and its Supremacy

### 3.1 The Name "Molimo" and its Signification

#### 3.1.1 Etymology

Among those who have written on the religion of the ancient Basotho, several have made an attempt to trace the etymology of the word *Molimo*. Unfortunately, none of the proposed hypotheses is without problems. The word appears in almost all traditional prayer formulas which were known to the Basotho before their contact with the white missionaries. In almost all cases this word appears to be an indirect object of the words of prayer. That is to say, in these prayers ancestors (*balimo*) are the direct object of the words of prayer for they are asked to pass the prayers of the living to him who is their leader (*Molimo*). The following prayers bear witness to this:

- 1) Oh! New Molimo, pray the Old One  
 Father, see how thin I have become.  
 I am thin, and my neck is like a string.  
 Can I state that I have masters, being thus?  
 Can I claim to be the child of Molimo being thus? (cf. Laydevant, op. cit. p. 22)
- 2) I am a child of Molimo,  
 Yet I am thin!  
 Oh! New Molimo pray the Old One,  
 Pray Nkopane of Mathunya  
 Pray Mohlomi of Matsie (ibid.)
- 3) Oh! New Molimo pray the Old One,  
 Pray for us to the Old One Jere,  
 The one who bears people's faults;  
 Molimo of light Saviour

Molimo with warm hands  
 The hands are white of the Saviour.  
 They are white due to creating babies.  
 The one who splashes,  
 Splashes water into rain (*keleli*),  
 For rain renews nations  
 Nations from creation place  
 Nations that will return to creation place.  
 Amen! (*Leseli*) (cf. Matsela, 1990:14-16)

- 4) Oh! Molimo hear us we pray:  
 New Molimo pray the Old One,  
 Pray him who splashes water, Saviour,  
 Saviour with warm hands,  
 Hands that give rain,  
 Hands that give blood,  
 Blood of rains,  
 Hands that are tired due to creating us,  
 Tired of creating babies  
 Amen! (*ibid.*)
- 5) Oh! Molimo hear us we pray!  
 Molimo of light, Saviour  
 Molimo with warm hands  
 Hands are white of the Saviour  
 They are white due to creating babies.  
 You who splashes water, the saviour,  
 Splash water into rain  
 For rain renews nations  
 Nations from you at creation place,  
 Nations which will return to you.  
 Amen! (*ibid.*)
- 6) Oh! Molimo hear us we pray:  
 New Molimo pray the Old One,  
 Pray for us to the great one Jere:  
 The one who bears people's faults;  
 Molimo of light, Saviour  
 Molimo with warm hands,  
 Hands are warm for he loves us,

Hands are white of the Saviour  
 They are white due to creating babies.  
 You who splashes water, the Saviour,  
 Splash water into rain  
 For it is by rain that you renew nations,  
 Nations from you at creation place,  
 Nations that will return to you.  
 Amen! (ibid.)

- 7) Oh! Molimo hear us we pray:  
 New Molimo pray the Old One  
 Whose hands give rain.  
 Give us rain,  
 Give us drops of rain  
 So that we may dig root crops  
 And *lioelioetla* (some wild root plants)  
 in the veld  
 Amen! (ibid.)

Before going any further, I must state that the translations in all these prayers are purely mine. I am therefore responsible for any lack of precision or misinterpretation. For the original Sesotho text, I will refer the reader to the references given above, especially Z.A. Matsela. One thing to be aware of about all these prayers, (in their original language, Sesotho) is that both the "New Molimo" and the "Old One" are at times presented in impersonal terms. That is, the word "Molimo", is accompanied by impersonal rather than personal pronouns. For instance, in the following lines:

*Molimo o mocha rapela oa khale. Re rapelle ho o noholo jere*, the two underlined pronouns make the word "Molimo" fall grammatically under class 3 nouns, which is a class of objects not of human beings. For the word to fall under class 1, which will make it a personal noun, the two pronouns will have to be replaced by pronoun "e". It is important to be aware that the words "root crops" as used in the above prayer seem to re-echo what

we said earlier in the historical settlement of the Bantu peoples, that they originated in the tropical forest areas of Cameroon before 1000BC where they were hunter-gatherers and cultivators of some root crops. It is equally important to realize that almost all these prayers seem to focus on rain and fertility. According to what we have seen in the historical part, these were a particularly basic concern of the people living around the Great Lakes of East Africa. And the giver of such things was, as we have seen, the Water Snake whose abode was the underworld. The prayers appear to be indirectly addressed to the Old One (probably the Water Snake). Perhaps the only exception to this style of praying is the following prayer of Barolong:

Molimo of our fathers  
 I lie down without food,  
 I lie down hungry  
 Though others have eaten  
 And lie down full.  
 Even if it is but a polecat  
 Or a little rock rabbit  
 Give me and I shall rejoice  
 I cry to you Molimo  
 Father of my ancestors (Ellenberger, 1969:240)

Even here, rain seems to be indirectly the main concern as under normal circumstances we expect hunger only where there is no rain to water crops.

Some people believe that the word "Molimo" is derived from the root *ema* or *ima* which means to stand. But this, from a grammatical point of view is wrong because it does not follow the normal rules of the formation of nouns in Sesotho. Normally, when forming personal nouns using such verbs as *ema*, *nka*, *rapela*, *rala* etc., the vowel "a" at the end of each of the given verbs is replaced by the vowel "i" so that we have *emi* for *ema*, *nki* for *nka*, *rapeli* for *rapela* and *rali* for *rala*. To these newly formed words, we then add the

prefix "mo", so that we finally have the following personal nouns: *Moemi*, *monki*, *morapeli* and *moralii*. Now our word, "Molimo", as it can be seen, has nothing to do with *moemi*. That is, one cannot see how *moemi* could come to be "Molimo". We may therefore conclude with Manyeli that the word "Molimo" cannot be derivative noun from the verb *ema* (op. cit. pp. 41-42).

Still on our word "Molimo", there are some people who because of the existing similarities between the Basotho cultural elements and the Jewish culture see this word as coming from the Hebrew word "Elim" which means gods. Of such people is Laydevant (Ibid.). However, this also poses a big problem, especially, when it comes to how nouns are grammatically formed from other nouns in Sesotho. To form another personal noun from "Elim", we have to add prefix *mo* so that we have *moelim*. However since all nouns with the exception of those ending with "ng", in Sesotho have to end with a vowel, we then add "o" to *moelim* so that we finally have *moelimo* as our new word. Now, it becomes difficult to see the relationship between "Molimo" and "Moelimo" as long as the letter "e" is missing in the former. Therefore this is a very artificial derivation which, as Manyeli has done, has to be rejected (Ibid.).

Furthermore, the concept of the Supreme Being as perceived by the Basotho is quite different from that of the Hebrews. If ever the word "Molimo" was derived from "Elim", under normal circumstances, one would expect that the reality signified by both words (Elim and Molimo) would be the same, at least in terms of where such reality is found. But this is not the case. For the Basotho "Molimo" as the Supreme Being, lives with ancestors, not in the sky or heaven (above) but in the underworld just as the Bantu-speaking peoples of Tanzania (where the Basotho come from) believed that Wamara (equivalent of Molimo) lived with their ancestors in his underworld kingdom (cf. Iliffe, op.



cit. p. 31). On the other hand, for the Jews God (Supreme Being) lives in heaven (in the sky), and for them the underworld is a sheol which cannot be inhabited by God, but only by those who are doomed (Isaiah 66:24).

Another hypothesis concerning the etymology of the word "Molimo", is that the word comes from the word *holimo*. In this trend we find such people as Casalis, Maboe, Manyeli, Moffat, Lamla and many others. The word *holimo* means "above", "in the sky". Therefore when the personal prefix *mo* is added to it, a new personal name is formed, and this is "Moholimo" which will then mean the one above, in the sky. According to the above mentioned authors, the word "Molimo" is the contraction of the word "Moholimo" and it still carries the same idea, that of being high, sky-divinity, the one who lives on high (Manyeli, op. cit. p. 43).

This is a very awkward way of contraction and as Lapointe rightly remarks, we unfortunately find no other word in Sesotho contracted the same way (1986:44-5). From this point of view it then appears to be a rather artificial form of contraction, not a natural one. This can be clarified in the following way: if instead of the personal prefix *mo*, we add a non-personal prefix *le* to the same word *holimo*, we form a new word *leholimo* which means the sky. When this word is contracted the same way as "Moholimo", a new personal name is formed, and this is *lelimo*, which means cannibal. Now, cannibal and the sky are totally different entities which are not even related at all. This inconvenience can only be understood as pointing to the fact that "Molimo" does not derive from the word *holimo*.

The error of the argument here lies in the fact that these authors have taken for granted that the word *holimo* or *leholimo* is an equivalent of the word "heaven". This is not true. For the ancient Basotho, the word *holimo* or *leholimo* meant the sky. Even today

Basotho still call the sky *holimo* or *leholimo*. The missionaries brought with them the general presupposition that the Supreme Being lived in the sky above, and because for Basotho the sky was called *leholimo* or *holimo* they immediately used *leholimo* to mean heaven which according to them was God's abode. It is not therefore surprising that they were so quick to draw such a conclusion by associating "Molimo" with *holimo*. Anyway, they cannot be blamed for this since they were ignorant of the way Basotho understood their God. It is nevertheless provoking, and indeed, absurd that even today some Basotho (the academics for that matter) are still perpetuating the same error.

For the ancient Basotho, (as for many people with a monistic world view) "Molimo" was a Supreme Being, above ancestors in status, but who was staying together with ancestors. Ancestors were considered to be the closest circle to him. This is why they were taken as mediators between the living and "Molimo". Up to this point, it looks like all the proposed hypotheses on the etymology of the word "Molimo" cannot be accepted. I therefore wish to propose another hypothesis which I think, unlike all the others, will lead us to a better understanding of the pre-Christian notion of the Supreme Being among Basotho.

To start with, I would like to have a look at two of the well known myths of the ancient Basotho. These are the myths of *Kholumo-lumo* (a mythical giant ferocious beast) and that of *Limo* (man-eating man). In the first myth, we are told that this extraordinarily huge beast swallowed all the people of the village together with all their animals. It is, however, said that one pregnant woman who had hidden at an outlet of the kraal survived and later on gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Senkatana. As this boy grew up, he kept on asking his mother about what had happened to the people and animals. The mother told him the whole story. One day when he was mature enough he

took his weapons and set on a journey to go and face the monster. As he approached, the monster, which could not move away due to the heaviness of its victims, tried to attack him using its long tongue from a distance. But the brave young man kept on cutting it short until he finally reached the monster.

He took out his knife and opened the belly of the monster and thereby delivering all the people and their animals. As an expression of their gratitude, they gave him animals and made him their king. Later on, however, due to jealousy, they killed him. And the myth is closed.

In our earlier discussion on the Bantu-speaking peoples of the western part of Lake Victoria, we said that one of their most severe chronic problems was drought. We have also seen that rain was often, if not always, the concern of the ancient Basotho in their prayers. Taking all these into account there is less doubt that the monster (*Kholumolumo*) spoken of in this myth is the famine that plagued the whole region as the result of the drought thus killing both people and their animals. That at a certain stage in the course of their existential history the Basotho did have death as their main problem, is something that we deduce from the second myth. That is, the myth of *Limo*.

Thus goes the myth: Once upon a time there was a man called *Limo*. *Limo* lived on human flesh. He had a big bag (*khetsi*) in which he kept his victims. He always had it on his shoulders wherever he went. All victims were kept alive in this bag and were only slaughtered when *Limo* reached his home. This man was very much feared by all people because of his notoriety and wretchedness (Jacottet, 1983:81-2).

It is said that one day after *Limo* had captured a victim by the name of Tselane, he arrived at a certain village where he asked for one day's accommodation from one of the villagers since he could not see his way due to darkness. The villager who had given him

accommodation was the aunt of the *Limo's* victim. *Limo* was not aware of this. While *Limo* was busy taking a meal in one of the huts, the aunt identified her niece's finger through the hole in the bag of *Limo*. She immediately took the niece out of the bag and then filled it with all sorts of biting and stinging creatures such as bees, wasps and scorpions. The following day *Limo* took his bag and left for home. Having arrived at home, he locked himself in his hut and threw the key away so that he could not be disturbed when he ate the delicious meal in the bag. When he opened the bag, all the creatures got out and ferociously attacked him until he finally died.

Taking into consideration what we said in connection with the first myth, there is less doubt that here we are being presented with a personified "death" which, of course, resulted from the famine and ultimately from the drought. That is to say, we have to perceive *Limo* as being death itself. Perhaps the big bag here represents the grave.

Bearing in mind all that we have just said above, I would like to think that our word *Molimo* comes from the word *Limo* which means death as we have said above. Thus the name *Molimo* means the one who brings about death (*limo*) just as the name *Mochai* means the one who brings about yield (in the fields). Indeed, there is no one more worthy of the name than he who has control over life.

The word *Molimo* in this context should not be confused with *Molimo* as used to refer to any of the ancestors (*Balimo*). In fact, the word *Balimo* means those who belong to *Molimo* (*Ba Molimo*). Written as one word this becomes *Balimo* which is a contraction of *Bamolimo*. We have other names in Sesotho contracted the same way. For instance, Basotho are at times called *Bashoeshoe*, a contracted form of *Bamoshoeshoe*. In their singular forms these words (*Balimo* and *Bashoeshoe*) are written as *Molimo* (meaning any

of those belonging to Molimo [Supreme Being]), and *Moshoeshoe* (referring to any of Moshoeshoe's people and not to the king himself) respectively.

The plural form of *Molimo* can either be *Balimo* or *Melimo* depending on the language used. *Melimo* as the plural form of *Molimo* is mainly used in poetic language such as the one used in this traditional prayer below:

. . . Liatla litšoeu tsa Rammoloki.  
 Li khathetse ke ho re bopa  
 Hlabang tse tšoeu le nehe melimo!  
 Le tle le bone ha melimo e thaba . . . (Lapointe, 1986:43)

*Balimo* as a plural form is used in day to day language such as in the following saying: *Ke fa Balimo ba heso* (I sacrifice to my Ancestors). This on the other hand, implies that the word *Molimo* may either be a personal or impersonal noun depending on whether the context in which it has been used is poetic or an ordinary saying. When used poetically, it takes the plural form *Melimo*, and the plural form *Balimo* in ordinary language. We have quite a number of Sesotho names that change their grammatical classes in this way because of being used either poetically or ordinarily. For example, the following words: *nku* (sheep), and *khomo* (cow), ordinarily have their plural forms as *linku* and *likhomo* respectively. The same words at times, especially in poetic sayings have *manku* and *makhomo* as their plural forms respectively.

### 3.1.2 Technical Meaning

#### 3.1.2.1 *Popular view*

Right from the time of the earliest missionaries in Lesotho, it has been, and still is a popular view that *Molimo* means Sky-Divinity, whom the missionaries called God. That was/is the position of such people as Casalis, Ellenberger, Manyeli, Lamla and Maboe as we saw in the beginning of this paper. To affirm this position many bring in such names as *Sekhele*, *Jere*, *Rammoloki*, *Raseapara-lome*, *Tlhahla-Macholo* and many others which, as they say, also mean God in the same sense of the Sky-Divinity. Now, the question is is it really correct to maintain such perception, when it is so obvious (at least from what we have seen about the prayer for rain) that the name *Tlhahla-macholo* refers to the water snake? Not at all. Our task in this section will be to show why it is wrong.

#### 3.1.2.2 *Critical view*

While we acknowledge the fact that the word *Molimo* was already in existence, when the first missionaries arrived in Lesotho, we regard as a baseless surmise, any suggestion that the word referred to the Sky-Divinity. Although, the name was common to both the Supreme Being and ancestors, it was never originally used equivocally nor univocally when attributed to both. But due to its meaning which evolved with time, it came to be predicated properly and intrinsically of both analogates (Supreme Being and ancestors), but primarily of the Supreme Being. In the following words of the prayers that we have already seen, "New Molimo pray the Old One (Molimo)", "New Molimo" refers to one of the ancestors. "The Old One" as used in this context refers to the Supreme Being. However, there are some times when the same phrase (the Old One) is used to refer to

one of the famous national ancestors. In such a case the names of the ancestors to which it refers are also mentioned. Such is the case with the following prayer:

New Molimo pray the Old One  
Pray Nkopane of Mathunya  
Pray Mohlomi of Matsie . . .

In this prayer it is clear that the Old One (Old Molimo) who is to be prayed to by the new one, is Nkopane, or Mohlomi both of whom are well known for their contribution to the nation of Lesotho, especially Mohlomi who, as we have seen, was the closest friend of Moshoeshoe.

The same name (Molimo) is again used to refer to someone who is far above any of the known ancestors in terms of status. This is seen in the following prayer:

Molimo a mocha rapela oa khale  
Re rapelle ho o moholo Jere  
Molimo a k'u utloe rea rapela . . .  
Liatla li tšoeu tsa Rammoloki  
Liatla li tšoeu ke ho bopa masea.  
Tlhahla-macholo  
Hlahla-metsi oa etsa keleli  
Hoba keleli e nchafatsa lichaba  
Lichaba li tsoang ho wena 'Mopong  
Lichaba li tlang ho khutlela meahong  
Leseli!

New Molimo pray the Old One  
Pray for us to the Old One, Jere  
Molimo hear us we pray . . .  
Hands are white of the Saviour  
Hands are white due to creating babies.  
You who splashes deep pools  
Splash water into rain  
For rain renews the nations  
Nations coming from you  
Nations that will return to you  
Amen!

The "old one" to whom the "new one" is requested to pray in this prayer is described as Jere, Rammoloki who is also called Tihahla-macholo. When one looks at it closely and also compares it with other prayers which were said in the same context, this prayer seems to present the Old Molimo (Jere or Tihahla-Macholo) as the Water Snake. This becomes even clearer in the secret songs as we shall see as we continue.

If we can take the two lines that I have underlined above as being synonymously parallel and also acknowledge the fact that this is a prayer for rain, then there is less doubt that we are here dealing with Water Snake as the giver of rain. We should also keep in mind what we said about the people of the Great Lakes of East Africa, who also regarded Water Snake as the giver of rain. According to the words of the prayer above, the Old One (old Molimo) is called *Tlhahla-Macholo*, that is, the one who splashes *macholo*. What are these *macholo*? The answer to this question lies in the second line of those which I said are synonymously parallel. That is, *Hlahla-metsi oa etsa keleli* (splash water into rain). Basing ourselves on that, we can then take *macholo* as meaning a deep water or pool (*maliba*) which is the place believed to be inhabited by water snakes such as *Mokebe*, *Fito*, *Tlatla-metsi*, *Mamlambo* and *Koena*. In other words, *Tlhahla-macholo* (the old Molimo) is asked to provide rain by turning water in the pools into rain (*keleli*) since rain sustains life. This should also be compared with what Parrinder says about the Bantu people:

But most of the Bantu believe in natural and local spirits, which may be those of the departed, of "dissociated spirits, often vague and shadowy in character, but nonetheless terrifying and dangerous to the traveller". There are spirits of mountains and forests, of pools and streams, of trees and other local objects. There are numerous animal spirits and sacred snakes which may assist in rain-making. (1976:43-4)



In one of the prayers that were used in the same context (praying for rain), this old Molimo (Jere or Tlhahla-macholo) is called Soloane. The prayer reads thus:

Soloane ee, re batla pula!  
 Helele! Pula e kae?  
 Morena re fe pula  
 Helele! Soloane, pula e kae?  
 Re sala kamehla re nyoriloe,  
 Le likhomo li nyoriloe,  
 Soloane, pula e kae?

Oh! Soloane we seek rain!  
 Hail! Where is rain?  
 Chief, please give us rain.  
 Hail, Soloane! Where is rain?  
 Everyday we remain thirsty,  
 And the cattle too are thirsty.  
 Soloane, where is rain? (cf. Guma, 1980:114)

This Soloane is also said to live in deep pools. We get this from the following secret song (*koma*):

Koana har'a letša  
 Morena oa teng  
 Koena patalali  
 Ka thoko ho letša  
 Tšeng la Soloane  
 Le sola le sa je  
 Ho ti'o je bo-Fito (Lapointe, 1993:177)

At bottom in the lake,  
 The chief of the place,  
 Big crocodile,  
 Beside the lake  
 The lake of Soloane  
 Which only causes rash and does not eat,  
 So that only bo-Fito (other water  
 inhabitants including Fito) could eat.

The word *Soloane* comes from the verb *sola* (to cause a rash or bruise-like marks all over the body). *Soloane* in this context then means the one who causes such rash or allergy on the body. It was generally believed (even today) by the Basotho that water snake had this effect on people's bodies, especially those crossing rivers or going to the wells to draw water at night in Lesotho. "People believe in spirits in streams that have to be propitiated by those who wish to cross them or build over them. These spirits are much feared by people who go to draw water at dusk when the naiads are liable to seize the unwary" (Parrinder, 1976:50).

In the song above, *Soloane* is portrayed as having his own lake which does not destroy (eat), but only causes rash. Unlike other water-inhabitants (*bo-Fito*), who eat people (destroy), *Soloane* is more peaceful in that he does not destroy (eat). It is probably from this lake of *Soloane* (*Hlhahla-macholo*), which is characterised by peace, where nations come and to which they return. The rain from him renews the nations. This reminds us that in Sesotho culture, there was a time when a newly born baby was exposed naked in the soft rain so that its whole body could be soaked by the rain. The belief behind such practice was that the child would grow up as fully human (renewed) in everything. It was believed that any child whose parents failed to perform this rite was likely to become a thief, a person without any sense of morality. Since all children (even today in some places of Lesotho) had to undergo this rite, this was like renewing the whole nation, building a society of responsible and morally good people.

It seems that this Snake is also charged with the work of creation. This is at least, what is suggested by the following words of the prayer we have already seen:

Hands are white of the Saviour

The hands are white due to creating babies . . .

Nations coming from you  
 Nations that will return to you.

To understand these words, we should remember what we said about the origin of the Basotho in the previous pages. The ancient Basotho used to say *Ngoana o tsoa letšeng* – a child comes from the lake or *Ngoana o tsoa lehlakeng* – a child comes from the place of reeds. The place of reeds as it was believed, was Ntsoana-Tsatsi. It is at Ntsoana-Tsatsi where we find the lake spoken of in the above lines. It therefore makes sense to call this place the place of creation since all children born come from here. It is also said in the quoted words of prayer that people return to this place when they leave the land of the living. This, seems to be the reason why the dead had to face the east in his grave. It also seems that the reason for placing on the head of the dead person some portion of the stomach (*Ntloan'a Lehlanya*) and some chime of the slaughtered ox of *Phelehetso* on the grave was a signal to the water snake (who likes cattle dung), who would then be called by the smell of the dung from both "Ntloan'a-Lehlanya" and the chime that someone had passed away. Apparently, it was believed as the last words of the quoted prayer suggest, that on encountering the dead, this snake would then take him home (*'Mopong*) not as a dead person, but as a living ancestor.

That Water Snake could bring back to life a dead person, is manifested in countless myths of Basotho. A typical example in this case is the myth of *Mosimoli le Mosimotsana* (Jacottet, 1983:87-91) in which Mosimoli was brought back to life by Water Snake after she had been killed by her mother. Likewise, there are many Basotho myths which present this water snake as being in full control of water. Of such myths we may mention that of *Bulane le Senkepeng* where Masilo gives his younger sister to *Noha ea Metsi*, who

is referred to as *mong'a metsi*, (the owner of the water) (1985:77-79). He also gives water during times of drought (Ibid.).

It is my belief also that some of the practices of the ancient Basotho such as the prohibition of young lads and maidens to eat the *Matsela-nokoana* (meat that comes from distant places across the river) and the prohibition to do washing or hang washed clothes during the middle part of the day, have something to do with the water snake. One thing we should remember concerning the washing is that in those early times, Basotho did not have any baths or big basins that could be used for washing. Consequently, washing was done in rivers and streams with flowing waters. People were allowed to do this either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, and were never allowed to do it in the middle of the day (Sechefo, n.d.:27). It was also believed that bathing or washing of clothes done during the middle part of the day could bring about hailstone upon the crops.

For me this suggests that doing such works in the middle of the day was somehow provocative to that being which inhabited rivers and streams. I have no problem of identifying this with the water snake we have been speaking about. Above all, who else could be provoked by such works done in the water except him who inhabited waters? This becomes even more understandable if we take into consideration the fact that the ancient Basotho believed that this water snake sometimes came out of the water, especially during the day to roam about in the sun disguised under different forms. For instance, he would appear as a goat, calf, young man, foal etc. It therefore seems that to work at this time disturbed him. Hence the reason why instead of giving rain, he gave hailstone as an expression of his anger against those disturbing him. Compare what we have just said above with this:

. . . the Mende of Sierra Leone believe in nature spirits or genii which are associated with rivers and forests. The genie may appear in human form and white colour, and seek to entrap the unwary traveller. As a water sprite, she may be a siren with beautiful hair, like the Lorelei, and equally dangerous to those whom she fascinates. As forest sprite a genie may appear as an old white man with a white beard seeking to befog travellers with his questions and make them lose their way in the bush. (Parrinder, 1976:44)

All we have been saying about the water snake is summarized in the following way by Lapointe:

. . . this *Noha ea Metsi* is mentioned (with different names as we said) in countless *litšomo* in which it sometimes plays the role of reviving children murdered by bad mothers (or jealous siblings, a twin brother for example) and gives them back to their fathers after being given or promised many heads of cattle. It is also described as giving water, especially after times of drought. When there is thunder accompanied by violent wind and rain, the Basotho say that it is changing home (*ea falla*) or emigrating. It also seems to be believed as the creator of children, being the inhabitant of the lake from which children are coming. (1995:23)

Besides the name *Molimo*, (*or oa khale*) which is a common name applying to both the water snake and individual ancestors, other names used in referring to this water snake were: *Jere*, *Tlhahla-macholo*, *Rammoloki*, *Soloane*, *Tsitoe*, *Setsohatsana* (such as in the myth of *Linanabolele*), *Motanyane* etc. These names as they appear in many prayers and secret songs, seem to refer always to the water snake. They are his proper names which seem to be so sacred and holy that they are never used to refer to anybody else other than himself. This can only be understood as pointing to the supremacy and prominence of this being over ancestors who, as the words of the prayers reveal, were subordinate to him. From this, it becomes very obvious that the God of Basotho was not the Sky-Divinity as many people have thought, but was him who occupied the underworld and controlled all life and waters, *Noha ea metsi*.

In some cases the name *molimo*, especially in proverbial sayings was used to refer to some animals. For instance, *Khomo ke Molimo o nko e metsi* (Matsela, 1982:66). In this case this name *molimo* is predicated of *khomo* (cow) by analogy of improper proportionality in which case it is extrinsic to *khomo*. It (cow) was called molimo in as far as its importance was somehow comparable to that of Molimo in the life of man. This was the most important animal in the life of the ancient Mosotho. It was used: to accompany the dead, to pay for lobola (*bohali*) and debts, to plough fields, to appease ancestors, to provide milk, hides, shields, shoes and many other domestic needs. Like Molimo it united people of different races, clans, tribes and families through intermarriages thus making them one big nation.

## Chapter Four: Ancestors: Councillors of Molimo

### 4.1 Basotho's Notion of Death

Death was not looked at as a total annihilation, but rather a transition from one world to another. As Guma rightly remarks, the idea of death as the end of life was never accepted (op. cit. p. 8). This fact is manifested in some of the myths. For instance, in the myth of *Mosimoli le Mosimotsana*, Mosimoli was mysteriously brought back to life after death (Jacottet, 1985:91). It was never said a person was dead. That could only be said of animals. A person was said to have passed away, gone home or to have emigrated. Because of this understanding of the human death, a whole burial rite had to be properly observed to ensure the passage of the departed into the land of his ancestors (Matsela, 1990:90-101). In fact, death to them, as Kwenda would put it, was the gateway to the glory and wholeness of Ancestorhood (op. cit. p. 4).

Due to the absence of spades in these early days, the grave was not as deep as it is today. It was nothing more than a round hole, a few feet deep. The only available tool for this was a small iron rod called *kepa* or at times clumsy, bluntly pointed sticks of the wild olive tree. The graveyard was as far as possible located out of the sight of the people so as not to frighten them.

During these days men and boys did not sit down heavily on the ground. They always sat in a squatting position so as to be able to leap up instantly at any call of alarm. So too the dead were not laid stretched out in the grave, but were buried in a squatting position so as to be able to rise up instantly in case a need to do so arose. The departed was wound up in an ox skin, bound with ropes of the *moli* grass and was then lowered

down gently into the grave and supported on all sides with the ground dug out to keep him firm. He was placed sitting up in such a way that half his body faced the east so that the rising sun might cast its rays on his right cheek. Some of the binding ropes about the head were then cut through with a knife so that the covering of the face could be slightly opened to avoid suffocation.

A few grains of various seeds such as kaffir corn, maize, sugar cane, pumpkin and a tuft of ordinary dog grass twisted into a tiny ring were put beside the dead in the grave, together with some of his earthly tools. After this, the ground was thrown in as far as the head. A certain portion of the stomach of the slaughtered ox known as *ntloan'a lehlanya* was put on the head of the dead person. A small flat stone was then placed directly above the centre of the head, and sand was then used to fill up the whole grave. A heap of stones was built over the grave and a higher stone was then planted at one end of the grave to mark the head (Sechefo, n.d.: 4-12).

On returning home after the burial, all the people who had handled the corpse or touched anything about the grave had to wash their hands immediately outside the hut of the deceased with water mixed with the slimy juice of wild aloes from the mountain. All the tools used were also cleaned with this water. Most probably the aloe here signified the bitterness of death as experienced by the living. It was a sign to the ancestors that they should spare the lives of all the participants in the funeral. This was because things like graves were associated with misfortune. A person who happened to either sit or stand on the grave unconsciously had to have his or her feet passed slightly over a brisk fire of grass to scorch off the misfortune (Ibid.). After the burial all the participants were given *joala* (beer). This was meant to reduce the grief as well as to control the lamentations of those who could not control their emotions.



The mourning period was not only observed by the relatives of the deceased but by the whole village or even in some cases, the region. The day immediately following the burial was a day of obligation to abstain from all field work such as ploughing, hoeing, reaping etc. It was believed that any failure to do this would cause hailstorms over the crops of the villagers. Thus offenders were liable to penalties before the courts. All the family and nearest relatives of the deceased gathered together at his former abode for the hair-cutting, beginning with the immediate heir and proceeding to the least of the family or clan. All the hair clipped was collected and buried in the ground or concealed under a heavy stone. This was most probably to indicate their common sorrow as the concerned family or clan towards their deceased (Sechefo, n.d.: 8-10).

According to the worldview of the time, each death was believed to have its own cause. With this we now look at diverse causes of human death as perceived by the ancient Mosotho.

#### **4.1.1 Causes of Human Death**

##### **4.1.1.1 *Natural causes***

It was very rare that Basotho could accept human death as a natural phenomenon. Thus for every death occurrence whose cause was not known, blame had to be put on some members of the community who were then suspected of witchcraft. This was especially true of all untimely deaths. That death was hardly ever taken as a natural phenomenon is confirmed by the following proverb: *lekoko la motho ha le thakhisoe faatse*. This proverb simply means that for each human death there should always be someone responsible for its occurrence.

#### 4.1.1.2 *Unnatural causes*

By unnatural causes here is meant not those causes which brought about a natural death (e.g. a death due to old age), nor is meant supernatural causes such as *Molimo* or *Balimo*. But what is meant are causes which cause shocking and unexpected deaths. Among such causes were fear, witchcraft and a curse (Pula, 1988:37-54).

Among the three, the most feared was witchcraft or sorcery. It was regarded by many Basotho to be the most active cause in the deaths that they witnessed daily in their villages. In many instances, old people especially women, were the ones blamed for witchcraft. It was very rare that young people would be blamed for this. Even sickness was often times believed to have been implanted into another person by a witch. Thus the ancient Mosotho spent a lot of his animals paying traditional doctors whom he consulted whenever he suspected witchcraft in either death or sickness (Ibid.).

The other two causes, that is, fear and curse, were not very common. There were, however, some instances in the course of the history of Basotho where fear and curse were recorded to have resulted in a death. According to the mentality of the ancient Basotho, a mere feeling of fear that one would die or had done something wrong which might result in his loss of life, could in actual fact bring about a sudden death of the person concerned. Pula has some accounts of deaths that came about due to fear (Ibid. pp. 43-44).

As we have seen, Basotho as a nation were hierarchically organized. It was generally believed that the higher one was in the hierarchy, the more he or she was listened to by ancestors. It was therefore a common belief that if those higher in the hierarchy pronounced a curse upon those lower in the hierarchy, they (lower) were likely to incur death as the result of such a curse. This on the other hand explains why in those days no

argument could be raised by a young person against his elders. He had to swallow all from his elders without either questioning or complaining.

#### **4.1.1.3 Supernatural causes**

Besides natural and unnatural causes of death, Basotho also believed in the supernatural causes of human death. Under this category we find both *Molimo* and *Balimo*. It was believed that the dissatisfaction of either *Molimo* or *Balimo* might be a cause for one's death since they had all power over the living. Therefore to satisfy *Balimo* who would in turn calm down the anger of their master (*Molimo*), Basotho offered countless sacrifices, which ranged from simple beer brewing to the shedding of blood of the domestic animals such as chicken, sheep, goat or an ox, in their day to day life (Sekese, 1988:21-27).

It should however be noted that the supernatural causes of human death especially *Molimo*, differed from all other causes in that they were at the same time the givers of new life in the world of *Balimo*. Their action was more like a calling or fetching than killing. With this we now discuss the belief in the life after death as manifested by the ancient Mosotho.

### **4.1.2 Belief in Life after Death**

#### **4.1.2.1 Death is not the end**

The ancient Basotho like Christians, believed in the life after death. It is however, worth mentioning that their understanding of life after death differed greatly from that of Christians. As we have already seen in the previous pages, a person was never said to

be dead. It was rather said that he had slept, passed away, gone home, departed, rested or left. This way of speaking of death was not just a mere euphemism, but was already a manifestation of their belief in the life after death.

This belief was also reflected in the way they buried their dead. Objects which the dead used during his life, which were thought to be necessary to him for making a living, were buried with him (Segoete, 1981:51-52). The accompanying words at funerals such as "go in peace to prepare a home for us" were also a clear indication of the existence of this belief among Basotho.

#### 4.1.2.2 *Mode of life after death*

Whereas for Christians life after death is seen as quite different from life before death, for Basotho life after death seems to be a perpetuation of life before death in terms of material needs. The various seeds given in the grave to the departed man signified that he, as an emigrant, had gone to dwell and to cultivate crops in some other land which seemingly was not different from the world of the living concerning ways of making one's living. Apparently, the dead were thought to live in villages in the manner more or less similar to the life on earth. This to me seems to be the meaning behind burying the dead together with some of the things that they primarily used on earth for their livelihood. They seemingly had the same kind of social organization under the leadership of Molimo and they pursued the same occupation such as cattle raising and agriculture. The dog grass which was understood as growing only in places that were inhabited by people was a sign that the deceased was going to dwell in some permanent home as a member (*motho*), not spirit among other members. The weapons were most probably meant for self-defence on the way to the world of *Balimo*. This already suggests

that the way to the world of *Balimo* was not all that smooth. This fact is also reflected in those myths that speak of the underworld. Often times a visitor to this world is reported to have struggled very hard to reach his or her destination. Typical of such myths is the myth of *Linanabolele* in which we are told of a young lady who struggled very hard to make her way to the underworld.

In these myths, whenever a person travelling to that world was about to lose hope, there always appeared a certain personage who comes to his or her rescue by helping him or her to reach that world safely. This personage is very weird in that she does not have a normal number of organs, especially those organs which go in pairs. For instance, instead of two, she will have one eye, one ear, one leg, one arm etc. At times one of the smaller creatures such as a frog may appear to give directions to the person. Maybe this is a clue to us that those who were not strong enough (e.g. women) to defend themselves against enemies on their way to the world of *Balimo* were not left to their own. Otherwise the world of *Balimo* itself was understood to be a peaceful land which needed no weapons.

## 4.2 The Role of Ancestors

Generally speaking, the living were very much afraid of the dead, particularly when they dreamt about them. But the dead who were feared most were the *lithotsela* (*the lingering dead*), who because of the malicious and evil life which they had led on earth had not been able to reach the land of the ancestors and so continued their evil influences against the living by haunting them, especially at night.

Associated with such fear of the dead was a respect which was shown in every aspect of life because of their new status, ancestors, which brought them closer to Molimo

than the living were to him. Thus every family, clan, tribe and the nation as a whole was under the influence and the immediate protection of its ancestors, who were taken as mediators between the living and Molimo. Due to the role they played in the life of the living, ancestors were either looked on as intercessors, protectors or guarantors of morality.

#### 4.2.1 Intercessors

Being the closest circle to Molimo, ancestors acted as mediators between him and the living. They prayed for the needs of the living and passed the prayers of the living on to Molimo. This was the reason why many of the traditional prayer formulas began with the words: *new Molimo pray to the old one*.

#### 4.2.2 Protectors

Apart from being intercessors, ancestors were also the protectors of the living against all perils of life. As long as one was under the protection of his ancestors, he felt secured and protected against such calamities as droughts, hunger, poverty, lightning and all other sorts of problems in life. It was because of such existing relationship between the living and the dead that in Sesotho when one was plagued by all sorts of misfortunes in life, people used to say that his ancestors had turned against him or that his ancestors were with him in such cases as when one had mysteriously survived a serious danger.

Because of their belief in the protection of the ancestors, different levels within a wider general social organization such as families, clans, tribes, had their own individual patron ancestors (Lapointe, 1993:168-170).

### 4.2.3 Guarantors of Morality

One of the important roles of ancestors in the life of the living was the enforcement of morality. With morality here I mean living in accordance with demands, norms, customs, traditions, manners and expectations of one's society.

To ensure the faithfulness of the living to any of the above mentioned cultural elements, ancestors punished all social deviants. The usual means of punishment was a series of misfortunes that befell the culprit. Sometimes the punishment was so severe as to include even death.

## 4.3 The World of Ancestors

According to what we saw in the myth of the origin, the ancient Basotho believed that they came from Ntsoana-Tsatsi, a place located in the east and to which they returned when they died (Mojapelo & Semata, 1994:4). This was why the dead were placed facing the eastern direction in their graves. So if the dead went to Ntsoana-Tsatsi after their death this place should be the world of ancestors for it was also understood that people died not to become anything different but to start a new life in the world of ancestors. This we saw when we discussed the burial rites.

The way the ancient Basotho lived this myth revealed the location of Ntsoana-Tsatsi as a place underneath. For instance, in sacrificing to Balimo, Mosotho used to say *ke fa ba-faatse*. The word *ba-faatse* was another name for ancestors hence the meaning here was that he was offering that which he offered to his ancestors underneath. It was also a common practice among Basotho whenever *joala* (beer) was brewed, to pour some of it on the floor (fireplace) as a gift to the ancestors who were believed to be mysteriously drinking it. That there was another world underneath seems to have been a common

belief of Basotho. We hear of such a world in their myths (e.g. myth of *linanabolele*) and in quite a number of their secret songs such as the following one:

Saka la Balimo  
 Ha le na monyako  
 Le le chitja feela.  
 Bitsang lingaka  
 Li tlo le pota  
 Tsa re li sa pota  
 Li sa pota hang,  
 Ka hare ho lona  
 Ha ema petsana  
 Ea sepata-hlooho.

Guma translates this in the following way:

The kraal of ancestors  
 Has no door: It is merely round.  
 Call witchdoctors  
 To come and doctor it  
 While they were doing so,  
 Having gone round it once,  
 Inside it  
 There arose a foal  
 Of the hidden head. (op. cit. p. 124)

This kraal which is said to have no door is the lake (*most probably the lake of Ntsoana-Tsatsi*). The arising foal is the owner of the lake (*that is, Noha ea Metsi, Water Snake*). We should here remember that it was the belief of the ancient Basotho that at times this Water Snake appeared as a foal, especially during the day to disguise himself.

That the foal spoken of here is the Water Snake is shown by the following song of the initiation:



Tsela khahloloha  
 Baeti re ete,  
 Re etele tshosi.  
 Tshosi ke Monyohe  
 Ke monyohe rethe! . . . (Ibid. p. 125)

Road (water) separate (or open)  
 That we travellers might visit  
 Visit *tshosi*  
 Tshosi is *Monyohe* (Water Snake)  
 He is *Monyohe rethe!* . . .

In these verses the travellers (maybe the departed) ask the water of the lake to open the way for them, because they want to visit or see Monyohe who seems to be the owner of the place of their visitation. Now in the myths, Monyohe is presented as *Noha ea Metsi* (Water Snake) who gives water during times of drought (Jacottet, 1985:77-79). Therefore the foal spoken of here is the Water Snake who as we have said, seems to be Molimo of the ancient Basotho.

This world was thought of as being more or less like the world of the living in that its people live in villages built on mountains just like in the world of the living. This is confirmed by the following last part of the secret song which has been quoted above:

Ea iketsa thaba  
 Thaba ea bolula  
 Ea bolula metse  
 Metse-metse ela  
 Ke ea bomalome  
 Hase ea borare. (Ibid. p. 124)

It (foal) turned itself into a mountain,  
 A mountain of to settle,  
 Of to settle villages.  
 Those many villages yonder,  
 Belong to the uncles.  
 And not to the fathers.

The last sentence of this song to me implies that uncles have more power (maybe they are headmen) in these villages, they have more say and responsibility. Perhaps this is why one's maternal uncle (*malome*) was and is still such an important figure in the life of Mosotho. He (*malome*) was an integral part in every important or grave matter concerning the well-being of the family of his married sister. He had to be kept informed about every important event that concerned his sister, nephews and nieces. It was believed that if he was not treated accordingly by the family of his sister, he would complain to the departed ancestors who would in turn neglect the welfare of the family (sister's family). He was believed to have power to either impose misfortune or bring fortune on the family of his sister (Sechefo, n.d.: 21). Such influence of the uncles can be understood as deriving from the fact that they are in charge of the villages in the world of the ancestors as has been indicated above.

The place of the ancestors was thought of as a place of peace, rain and prosperity (cf. Guma, op. cit. p. 8). That Ntsoana-Tsatsi was seen as the world of peace can be deduced from the fact that according to the understanding of Basotho, no evil people were allowed to enter the world of the ancestors. The end of such people (trouble makers) was to become wandering ghosts which had no place to rest nor anything to do except to haunt the living. The reeds which are said to be plentiful in Ntsoana-Tsatsi (Ibid. p. 4) are a clear indication that this is the world of rain since reeds normally flourish in swamps. If it is the world of peace and rain, then it becomes automatically clear that it is also the world of plenty, since people can only cultivate the land when they have stability and the land can produce something only when it is watered. Seemingly Moshoeshoe wanted to have a land like this when he adopted as his motto *Khotso*

(peace), *Pula* (rain), *Nala* (plenty) which since then has remained the motto of the Basotho.

As we have already said, Molimo, who according to the perception of the Basotho was like a chief to his people, could not live separately from his subjects just like earthly chiefs. It goes without saying therefore that he also had Ntsoana-Tsatsi as his abode. This already suggests that it has been a big mistake to use an equivalent of *heaven* the word *leholimo* instead of *Ntsoana-Tsatsi* which according to what we have seen, seems to be the world of both Molimo and his people (*Balimo*) and the world where people have not only originated from, but will also return to after their death. Let us now see the mode of communication between the world of ancestors and the world of the living.

#### **4.4 Mode of Communication between the Living and Ancestors**

There were basically two main ways through which Balimo kept contact with the living. These were dreams and *lingaka* (traditional healers).

##### **4.4.1 Dreams**

Dreams were one of the main means through which ancestors communicated with the living. It was in such dreams that ancestors could express their demands to the living or expose their dissatisfaction when one of the living happened to violate the norms and customs of the family, clan or the tribe. The words of the ancestors were taken heed of and everything possible had to be done by the living in order to cool down their anger or else a severe punishment was likely to follow in case their words were ignored (Lapointe, 1986:p. 41).

If a sick person in the family dreamt about his deceased relatives, that was taken as a sign that they (ancestors) wanted to fetch him. That is, it was an indication that he would die soon. The sick who in the course of his illness was thus heavily assailed by apprehensions of death, hallucinations and illusions, dreaming incessantly about the dead was technically said to have *maroko*. Under such situation, the best the living could do for their sick in order to change the decision of the ancestors was to slaughter a sheep which was normally killed at sunset (this time seems to be convenient for ancestors). After the sick man had been stripped of his garment, the gall of the sheep was poured over his body (Sechefo, n.d.:15). This was most probably a sign to show how distasteful the situation was to the sick and his family:

It is said that all the relatives present at the occasion had to place their hands upon the sick, uttering some words such as the following:

May thou speedily recover,  
 O thou *Mokoena, Mofokeng, Motaung* etc.  
 (According to the clan of the sick).  
 We pray that thou may have a good sleep. (Ibid.)

It is also said that, as a sign that the sick would recover the beast had to pass water (urinate) and dung immediately before it died. The contrary was taken as a sign that their prayers had been in vain.

#### 4.4.2 Lingaka (traditional healers)

Apart from dreams, another important means of communication between ancestors and the living were *lingaka*. As we have already seen, one of the significant roles of ancestors in the lives of the living was to offer protection to the living against all sorts of

enemies and undesirable experiences in life. To ensure such protection, certain individuals within the society emerged through the influence of ancestors. They were generally believed to get their inspiration and appointment from ancestors (Segoete, op. cit. p. 43).

These people were called *lingaka* and their main task was to protect and guard the living against such things as witchcraft and sicknesses. Although it was understood that they all received their information and inspiration from ancestors, they were of different kinds. Among them we had *Lilaoli* and *Linohe*. *Lilaoli* were those who used *litaola* (divining bones) in their divination. *Linohe* were those who could divine without *litaola*.

Setiloane describes *Senohe* (singular form of *linohe*) in the following way:

He touches the inquirer, or in the latter's absence, a piece of his clothing and *balimo*, with whom he is in close and constant contact, communicates to him the required information. Enquiries are of the same nature as those for which a *selaoli* is consulted, except that a *senoge* is consulted on more serious occasions encompassing a wider social circle than just the family or single persons. (op. cit. pp. 46-47)

These *lingaka* were addressed as *Bana ba hlooho ea Balimo*, meaning they knew what actually was supposed to be known by ancestors alone and not by an ordinary human being. Such people were consulted even in cases of warfare so as to tell who would win the fight between the fighters. They were also believed to have power which surpassed that of the witches and so were able to free the sick from any form of bewitchment (Pula, 1988:34).

## Chapter Five: The Ancient Basotho and Prayer

As we have already seen, the ancient Mosotho was aware of the existence of someone much greater than any of the ancestors who could rightly be taken as the author of life. He was equally conscious of the necessity to be on good terms with him in order that he might lead a happy life with a promising future, more especially after death. So, one of the ways that he adopted to communicate with him was prayer. This is what we presently wish to look at.

The ancient Mosotho understood prayer as a way of making an appeal for the intervention of *Molimo* through the mediation of his ancestors in whatever situation he found insurmountable in life (Segoete, op. cit. pp. 42-43). He also regarded prayer as an expression of his gratitude for all good things he had achieved in life all of which were believed to have been granted by the ancestors (Manyeli, op. cit. p. 51).

He again and most importantly, looked at prayer as a way of keeping fellowship with his ancestors. He considered his intimacy with ancestors as a sure guarantee for enduring protection against all forms of misfortune in his life. Living without ensuring any contact with his ancestors as he understood, was accountable for all misfortunes in life (Matsela, 1990:11-22).

The object of the prayer of the ancient Mosotho could be divided into two: the direct or immediate object and also indirect or mediate object. The ancestors were the immediate object of the prayer while *Molimo* on the other hand was taken as the mediate object of the prayer. Just as he could only meet his chief through the mediation of the chief's councillors, so he believed he could not meet *Molimo* without the mediation of the

ancestors (councillors of *Molimo*). This understanding is reflected in most if not all traditional prayer formulas which normally begin with the following words: *Molimo o mocha rapela oa khale*. What we see in these words is the request put forward by the living to the new ancestor (*Molimo o mocha*) that he may pass their prayer to Molimo who in this context is addressed as the old one (*oa khale*).

According to the Basotho's conception of the ancestors, they were concerned with a person's daily life from birth to death. If in life, one happened to experience a series of misfortunes, people used to say, *O furalletsoe ke Balimo*, meaning that his ancestors have turned against him, hence the reason why he is being haunted by all sorts of evils (problems in life). Thus communion with the ancestors meant protection against all problems in life on the side of the one maintaining such communion with them.

Generally speaking, the ancient Mosotho used prayer as a way of expressing his gratitude, petition or winning the favour of his ancestors against all the problems of his life. Among such problems were drought, witchcraft, wars, poverty, infertility in women and all sorts of misfortunes as experienced in life (Pula, op. cit. p. 333).

## 5.1 Different Modes of Prayer

As we shall see the ancient Mosotho employed quite a number of ways to approach his deity in prayer. These ranged from a speculative form of prayer or oral traditional prayers to more practical or action-oriented prayers which were offerings of sacrifices and joint prayer expeditions.

### 5.1.1 Oral Traditional Prayers

These were poetically arranged words of petition or supplication directly addressed to the ancestors, but indirectly addressed to *Molimo* as the supreme being. Some of these prayers were used nationally while others were used by individual clans, families or people. This categorisation depended more on what was being prayed for and its extent or magnitude. If what was being prayed for concerned only a particular clan or family, then the addressees in such prayers were the ancestors of that particular clan or family. For example, the following is a prayer of an individual person who is in misery:

New ancestor, invoke the old one.  
 Father, look at me thin as I am;  
 I am thin, my neck is only a thread.  
 Can I affirm that I have masters, in this condition!  
 Can I proclaim that I am the son of an ancestor, in this condition! (Lapointe, 1986:42)

But if that for which prayer was said concerned the whole country, then, the addressees in such prayer were famous national men. The following introductory formula has been taken from one of such prayers:

New ancestors invoke the old one;  
 Pray to *Nkopane* of *Mathunya*  
 Pray to *Mohlomi* of *Matsie*. (Ibid.)

*Nkopane* and *Mohlomi* were highly esteemed by all the ancient Basotho because of their outstanding contribution to the well-being of the Basotho nation during their earthly life. It was therefore believed that they would continue their contribution to the welfare of the nation from their new world of the ancestors and were thus taken as national protectors – national ancestors. Strictly speaking, these were the ancestors of Bakoena clan, but as Bakoena held leadership position in the social organisation of Basotho, their



influence did not end with their death regarding matters of the national interest, but it continued even beyond death.

There was another prayer which the family of the sick had to direct to his or her ancestors who were suspected of being behind his or her sickness. It reads thus:

Fie! why is so and so (one of the ancestors of the sick person) quarrelling so much, my people?

Oh! Our ancestors, bear with us.

You our brother (or sister) as we impose our hands on you, today, we say: sleep well.

Oh! Recover, that when we come back tomorrow we will find you eating, standing and walking; that these dreams (about ancestors) may stop troubling you as we leave you! Please, get better! (Sekese, op. cit. pp. 28-29)

To make these words more meaningful and concrete, a beast was at the same time slaughtered as a means to appease the ancestors. All this was done in the evening. Apart from these family or tribal prayers, there were many other national prayers such as those we have seen at the beginning of Chapter Three.

### **5.1.2 Sacrifices**

Another way of praying to one's ancestors which was extensively used by the ancient Basotho was the offering of sacrifices. This method of prayer has been, and still is the one mostly used by a vast majority of Basotho. I would like to note right from the outset, that a sacrifice was and is always a feast or celebration, not only for the family concerned, but also for all villagers, invited and uninvited, this included even strangers from other villages or areas. We will now look at the motives for such sacrifices.

### 5.1.2.1 *Motives*

The motives for these sacrifices were of diverse nature. There were motives of fear, of satisfaction as well as the motives of petition. As we have already seen, the ancient Basotho believed that their ancestors had an immediate influence on their lives. It was also their understanding that ancestors could turn one's life into a mere misery in cases where the living did not show any regard to them. The opposite was true in cases where they were given due concern and regard. Therefore, any misfortune that would befall either the society as a whole or an individual member, and whose cause was not known, was believed to have been caused by the dissatisfaction of the ancestors. This mentality created fear and the attitude of supplication and prayer for forgiveness by way of sacrifices to one's ancestors. These sacrifices had overlapping motives: motives of fear and of satisfaction.

Besides these as we have said earlier, other motives were of petition whereby one would offer sacrifices to pray for such things as a happy death, rain, peace etc. Apart from this, other sacrifices were offered in thanksgiving. For example, after a child had been born, a few days later or months, even years at times, depending on the capability of the family concerned, an animal was offered to the ancestors as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the gift of the newly born child. This was because they believed, a child was a gift from the ancestors.

Another special thanksgiving was done after each harvest by the ancient Basotho: After the grains had been threshed out on the threshing ground, some small quantity of the grains was left in a shallow hole dug at the centre of the threshing ground as a gift to the ancestors who were supposedly the givers of the good harvest. Such sacrifice was technically called *phabalimo*, meaning a gift to ancestors. Still on sacrifices were *joala ba*

*leoa* (harvest festival) or the first beer brewed after the first harvest which was a sign of the harvester's gratitude for the generosity shown by the ancestors in the harvest, and also *joala ba lipitsa* (literally, the beer of pots). This was the beer brewed not long after the burial ceremony. The purpose here was to remove any possibility of misfortune, likely to occur in connection with the use of all the pots used during the time of the burial. We should here remember that it was the belief of the ancient Basotho that anything used during the burial had to be cleaned in a special way before it could be used or else its use was likely to bring bad luck to the user.

#### 5.1.2.2 *Ministers*

Under normal circumstances the ordinary ministers of these sacrifices were the heads of the families concerned. These were men since in Sesotho culture each man was considered the head of his family. In cases where the head of the family was no longer alive, any of the elderly people of the extended family was assigned the task. In special cases, which needed the intervention of traditional healers, such healers normally worked as ministers also (cf. Manyeli, *op. cit.* p. 52).

Apart from the individual ministers, the ancient Basotho had collective ministers for such sacrifices as those offered during famine, epidemic or war (*Ibid.*) which concerned the whole village or nation as such.

#### 5.1.2.3 *Victims*

These ranged from simple birds to mammals. It is said that birds were chosen very seldom while mammals were frequently used as the preferred type of victims. These

mammal-type victims included, sheep, goats and cattle (Ibid.). In some of the instances, wild animals killed in public expeditions were used as victims in these sacrifices.

### 5.1.3 Joint Prayer Expeditions

Another way of presenting petitions to the deity was by making campaigns for joint prayer expeditions. But unlike other modes of prayer, these methods of prayer were mainly and primarily used in cases where the problem for which such prayers were offered was regarded as affecting the whole nation, region or village. The situations which called for these expeditions were severe drought and infertility among women. The expeditions we are speaking about here are: *molutsoane*, *lesokoana* and *molula* feast. We shall now consider them one by one.

#### 5.1.3.1 *Molutsoane expedition*

In an exceptionally dry season, it was customary for the chief to summon all his men for *molutsoane* (hunt-meeting) in the mountains. Early in the morning, all cattle of the place were driven into the veld by these men summoned by the chief. They climbed to the tops of the hills, cliffs and mountains, searching for living creatures in every hole, den or cave, killing all of them and smashing old pots and even broken ones. This is explained by Ellenberger in the following way:

A beast of certain colour would first be sacrificed, and early in the morning, the people would start driving the cattle before them to the top of the mountain. It was customary to show their discontent by destroying all the shrubs they happened to come across, to throw stones into dried pools and water-courses, and to kill all the game that came within reach. but it was forbidden to return with any game without first disembowelling the animals and throwing the entrails into a water-course. Towards midday they would return to the village, the cattle driven pell-mell in front, and the women waiting and repeating many times the following or similar prayer:

O *Soloane*! We seek rain!  
 Oh! Where is the rain?  
 Lord, give us rain.  
 We remain always thirsty,  
 The cattle too are thirsty.  
*Soloane*, where is the rain? (1969:253)

It is said that one of the victims of the day during this expedition had to be a human being, preferably, a young unmarried man or any of those who could not bear children. It is asserted that such a man had to be secretly chosen by the chief and the traditional doctor before the expedition could be carried out. This fact is alluded to in one of the circumcision songs which stresses the importance of rain in one's life. This is the song:

Koana tlaase tau lia rora,  
 Li rora li ja khomo e tšoana,  
 Khomo e tšoana nyopa  
 Nyopa li sa tsoaleng  
 Ere li tla tsoala  
 Ho ke ho ne pula  
 Pulana li nang  
 Li na melubela  
 Melubel'a Tlotsi  
 Tlotsi ke Sekhele. (Laydevant n.d.: 28-29)

Down there, the lions roar  
 They roar so, eating the black cow.  
 The black cow which is barren  
 The barren that cannot reproduce  
 Unless it rains first  
 Little rains falling  
 Rain abundantly  
 Heavy rain of *Tlotsi* (one who causes wet)  
*Tlotsi* is *Sekhele* (Protector).

The symbolic and nebulous terms of this song are probably an allusion to *Molutsoane* expedition. The black cow spoken of here is probably the human victim who has been sacrificed while the roaring lions in the lake (*tlaase*) are other water inhabitants (e.g. *Fito*) which now feed on the victim. The little rains are the victim's blood, which, once shed, will bring about heavy rains (*melubela*).

Maybe at this juncture one would like to know the purpose of emptying the bowels into the rivulets and rivers. To find out the purpose let us first look at this prayer that was connected with the expedition:

Oho Molimo a k'u utloe rea rapela,  
 Molimo oa Leseli oa Rammoloki,  
 Molimo o liatla li maroba;  
 Liatla li tsoeu tsa Rammoloki,  
 Li soeufetse ke ho bopa masea.  
 Tlhahla-macholo Rammoloki,  
 Hlahla metsi u a etse keleli,  
 Hoba keleli e nchafatsa lichaba,  
 Lichaba li tsoang ho uena 'Mopong  
 Lichaba li ea boela ho uena Meahong  
 Leseli. (Matsela, 1990:15)

Oh! *Molimo* hear us we pray  
*Molimo*, Light and Saviour  
*Molimo* whose hands have *maroba*  
 The palms (hands) of the Saviour are white  
 They are white due to creating babies  
 The Saviour, you who splashes deep waters  
 Splashes them into drop (rain)  
 For the drop renews the nations  
 Nations from you at creation place  
 Nations which will return to you at creation place.  
 Amen.

In this prayer I have translated the word *Rammoloki* as "Saviour". There are reasons for this. This word can mean two things: Firstly, it can be taken as meaning the father of (*Ra*) the saviour (*'Moloki*). In this way *'Moloki* might be taken as Jesus Christ and *Rammoloki*, God the Father. But this cannot, of course, be true since the ancient Basotho did not know Jesus nor any of the three persons of the Trinity. Secondly, it may be taken as meaning the one who is fond of saving, who likes to save others. This is for instance, like *Rabasali*. The word *Rabasali* as used here does not mean the father of (*Ra*) *basali* (women). But it means the one who loves women too much. In the same way, *Rammoloki* as used here does not mean the father of *'Moloki*, but it rather means the one who is fond of saving his people from all life perils.

Some people especially those who take the word "Saviour" (*Rammoloki*) as referring to Jesus have translated the word *maroba* as "wounds" that Jesus bore on his hands. Again this cannot be true since the ancient Basotho did not know Jesus. Another reason why we cannot take this word to mean wounds is that it is also used in reference to other people than the "Saviour". Let us look at the following example:

Molimo o mocha rapela oa Khale.  
 Molimonyana u tumela baloi,  
 Tumela ba shoeleng khale-khale,  
 Bana ba Ntate ba liatla li maroba  
 Liatla li tsoeu . . . . (Lapointe, 1986:43)

In this prayer, the one who has *maroba* is no longer the Saviour, but those who died long ago (*Ba shoeleng khale*). Now, if the word means "wounds" where have they got their wounds from? This inconvenience can only be understood as pointing to fact that the word *maroba* means something else than wounds. Unfortunately, we cannot presently tell what this word means. But the fact that we do not know what it means does not in any

way suggest that we have to attribute irrelevant meanings to it. The word *Tlhahla-macholo* as has been used in this prayer refers to Water Snake, the giver of rain as we have already seen in the previous page. The ancient Mosotho identified the presence of water with that of the water snake. According to their belief this snake inhabited big lakes and all natural water sources (underground). They also believed that the movement of this snake in these deep lakes (*macholo*) caused spattering or splashing (*hlahla*) of water, thus turning it into rain (*keleli*). Heavy storms or tornadoes were explained by the ancient Basotho as having been caused by the emigrating angry water snake. It was also their belief that this snake liked fresh cattle dung (*bolokoe*). From this we can infer that the reason for emptying the bowels of all animals killed during the *Molutsoane* expedition into the rivulets and rivers was to entice him (snake) into action through the smell of the cattle dung (from the bowels). That is, as the water flowed, it carried along with it all the dung to dump it into different lakes down the rivers and streams.

Even today some people, especially the old ones still believe that rain is caused by *Noha ea Metsi*. For instance, it has been a common saying in Lesotho among many people, that the severe drought that has recently stricken the country is due to the disturbance done to *Noha ea Metsi* by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. They also say the same thing if by coincidence it does not rain during the construction of a bridge over any of the big rivers. That is, they say that it does not rain because *Noha ea Metsi* has been disturbed by the construction.

Should the *Molutsoane* fail to bring the badly wanted rain, the great doctor *morokapula* (rain-maker), was consulted. In this case, the chief or the head of the clan was required to undergo the *lefehlo* (a certain process of charms) by the doctor. He was given *thato* (drugs added to the medicines as directed by the divining bones). He then had to



take the medicines and a long stick along with him to a stream. On returning, he dragged the stick along the way till he reached his destination. As a result, a heavy rain was expected to fall. Even in this case, apparently the medicines and the stick striking the waters were meant to influence *Tlhahla-Macholo* to give rain. Most probably the ingredients of the medicines either by their smell or by any other means were intended to attract him from his hiding place (Sechefo, n.d.:16).

### 5.1.3.2 *Lesokoana expedition*

If the *Moroka-pula* failed to bring the rain, the women of the village concerned were asked to go and "steal" the *lesokoana* from some neighbouring village. The *lesokoana* is the stick used in any house for stirring bread (*papa*) in a pot. An expedition was organised to invade one of the neighbouring villages by the women of one village, in order to "steal" the *lesokoana*.

The procedure was as follows: One woman or girl known for her swiftness in running, and who, preferably was the senior of the village, entered the family home and after looking around found the *lesokoana*. She snatched it away and at full speed ran off, in order to give it to her companions, who remained scattered at different intervals along the road leading to their village. In case their taking away *lesokoana* had not been noticed, they themselves gave the alarm shouting: Behold! The *lesokoana* is gone! On seeing or hearing this, the women of the invaded village dashed out of their houses and running pell-mell attempted to regain the *lesokoana*. A helter-skelter chase ensued from both sides. The men of the village stood in groups on high places to watch this exciting exercise.

Finding herself tired or about to be captured by her pursuers, the woman or girl having the *lesokoana* threw it to her companion ahead of her, who also was to do the same. Each side competed by taking and retaking the *lesokoana* from each other, until finally one side won by reaching their home with this "stolen" *lesokoana*. It would remain there until the defeated party waged another combat to try to fetch it back.

The winners would then enter their village with merriment, wearing green leaves and a certain grass called *sechaba* about the head and necks and waist, singing victoriously the following song:

*Soloane*, we need rain.  
Where is rain?  
Chief give us rain . . . etc. (Sekese, op. cit. pp. 92-93)

We should here also mention that this *lesokoana* was not only meant for praying for rain, but it was also organised for praying for barren women. So, if the motive for carrying out *lesokoana* was that of reminding the village that the infecund should be prayed for, then as they entered the village they sang the following song:

Re mekholochane (bakopi)  
Ha re etsa oele-oelele (mangoengoe)  
Re 'o tsoala Mosoeu 'a lehaha  
. . . Molimo a k'u utloe rea rapela.  
'Makane! Ho iloe kae,  
Ho sa keng ho khutloa re tlo bonoa?  
Bo-Nkhono ba llela matlala . . . etc. (Ibid.)

We are beggars,  
When we make *oele-oelele*,  
Grind tobacco so that we may go,  
and snuff at the mountain,  
Let us go and bear *Mosoeu* of cave  
God hear us we pray.

Oh! where have the people gone,  
 That they do not come to see us?  
 Grandmothers are demanding meat . . . etc.

After the *lesokoana*, it was expected that it would rain a lot. It is not clear how this brought about rain. The only thing we know is that it was the belief of the ancient Basotho that to see a calf or calves frolicking about was an indication of imminent rain. We also know that in Sesotho at times, young women (virgins) are called *lithole* (heifers) and the old ones are called *makhomohali* (cows). Perhaps it is from this perspective that like calves, their frolic (running) brought about rain).

We should also look at the whole process of *lesokoana* as a symbolic action. For instance, these frolicking women and girls symbolised the calves whose frisking action brought the rain. Likewise, the whole question of putting the green leaves about the head, neck and waist has to be understood as the symbol of the needed rain whose function was to cause greenness in plants. Even the very action of 'stealing' *lesokoana* and the *lesokoana* itself were symbolic. Among their many riddles, Basotho also have the following one:

Sefelekoane beta pelo u kene koetseng  
 Serpent take courage and enter the lake.

The answer to this riddle as given by the Basotho is the stirring rod (*lesokoana*) which as it is used in stirring bread is immersed in the boiling water in the pot. Thus we may deduce from this that the *lesokoana* here symbolised the water snake, the giver of rain as we have already seen, who being transferred from one village to the other, would

give rain to the villagers. That is, the presence of this 'stolen' *lesokoana* signified the presence of the giver of rain, *Noha ea Metsi*.

### 5.1.3.3 *Molula expedition*

There was among the ancient Basotho a very peculiar way of praying for fecundity in women. A special feast called *Mokete oa Molula* (barrenness feast) was arranged by all the married women of the village, who had no problem of barrenness. These together with those who were considered infecund went far away to the mountains with a certain man called Ntili. The only people who were to remain home were men, children and old women who could no longer travel over long distances due to their old age.

Ntili was the relative of Monaheng (Monaheng of Basotho). He was not married. Among Basotho, he was famous of his ability to pray for childbearing to the ancestors on behalf of all the women who could not bear children. He was regarded as a mystery from *Molimo*. He was carried on the back of the infecund like a child to these distant places. They stayed with him in a cave praying throughout the night. They did not bring any food along with them. So, they spent the whole night without eating.

It is said that as a sign that their prayer had been accepted, there had to be a miraculous happening: They felt some drops of water sprayed on them or some small particles of stones thrown on them.

Very early in the morning, all men in the village left the village in order to look for the women who had disappeared with Ntili. They also took along with them all their cattle. When they found them, they drove the cattle back home where they were milked together at the same place just like in the case of *Molutsoane*. All the women with Ntili on their backs, had to leave the cave and go home together with the men. They (women)

decorated themselves in green plants as in the case of *lesokoana*. As they approached the village, they waited at the village gate (*khorong ea motse*). It was while they were still there that they were given traditional beer brought to them by all the girls who remained home during the expedition. One of the cattle of the village was then sent to them driven by some chosen men in order to accompany them as they then entered the village.

On that very day, each of the husbands of the barren women slaughtered an ox as a sacrifice to pray for his wife. This was then a big feast where people gathered together to celebrate. All the infecund women were then anointed with a red ochre, *selibelo* (special fatty cream) and *phepa* (white chalk-like dust) all over their bodies.

As they celebrated, they sang a very solemn song (*koli-ea-malla*), at the same time crying and exchanging Ntili on their backs from one to another. Their husbands joined them in their crying while Ntili prayed endlessly on their backs in a very solemn way as he was being exchanged from one back to another. When the singing and crying were over, a certain part of meat (*litlhaha*) from each of the slaughtered oxen was taken and sent to a maternal uncle of each of the barren women. After this all the women were taken back to the cave where they were fetched by their maternal uncles in the way similar to the previous one. In the cave, their prayer was that which we have already seen under *lesokoana*. That is, "We are beggars . . ." etc.

When all the business of visiting the cave was over, these barren women had to carry always, on their backs an artificial baby called *Ngoana oa seho* or *Khongoana-Tsingoana* prefiguring the actual one being asked for. This artificial baby was always placed beside the mother when sleeping as if it were really a living baby. It was given a name, which later on would be given to a real baby in case the mother gave birth to one (Sekese, op. cit. pp. 42-45).

It is said that Ntili died in 1822 because of the great famine. After his death, his place was taken by a chosen unmarried man among the men of the village.

Even in this prayer we already see some traces of the water snake, the creator of children. Apart from wells, streams and rivers, other places which the ancient Basotho believed were inhabited by a water snake were caves, especially dark caves with some water or lake in them. It is very likely that the cave spoken of here was one of such caves. We have many of such feared caves in Lesotho even today. For example, we have one called *Leqhili-qhili* at Taung in the district of Mohale's Hoek. The drops of water sprinkled over the women in the cave were most probably from him, *Tlhahla-Macholo* to whom the prayers of the women were addressed. It is said that they were anointed with *selibelo*. One of the ingredients of such *selibelo* was the fat obtained from milk (*mafura a lefehlo*).

The water snake among other things was believed to like milk. It is therefore very likely that the *selibelo* (mixed with milk fat) was meant to attract the snake by its smell so that he could come out and so answer their prayers. This *selibelo* was used in many occasions where it appears to be still somehow associated with *Noha ea Metsi*. I am here particularly referring to the case of the initiation schools where the initiates were anointed all over their bodies with this substance. Some of the rituals, for example, in the case of the initiation of girls were performed in the water where the initiates were said to meet *Motanyane* (another name for *Noha ea Metsi*).

That *Motanyane* is *Noha ea Metsi*, is alluded to in the following song of the women initiates:

... Ho shoeloa ke beng bohloko!  
 Nkabe ke na le malome.  
 A tle a mphe potsanyane,  
 Ke tle ke e nehe Motanyane.

Ngoan'a metsi a tle a thabe,  
A tle a khutlele metsing . . . (Wells, 1994:95)

. . . The pain of losing relatives,  
I should have an uncle.  
He could give me a goat.  
So that I could give it to Motanyane:  
The child of the water would be happy,  
And would return to the waters . . .

From this song it becomes clear that only a gift from the uncle could make *Motanyane* happy. I know that in reality, *Motanyane* was a chosen person who disguised himself as *Motanyane*. But we should understand this person as being symbolic only. He was symbolising the real *Motanyane* (water snake) as we have already seen. Commenting on this, Ellenberger says:

All this gives some idea of how terribly the old Basotho used to suffer from drought and consequent famine. When everything had been tried in vain, the rain makers and the people used to cut themselves with knives in order to show their misery. They would roll in the ashes and rise up uttering weird cries; and after religious dances, in which all took part they would sing melancholy airs, and again give vent to cries, groans, and lamentations, which they kept up day and night, together with this or a similar prayer:

I am a child of God yet I starve  
New ancestor pray to him of old  
Pray, *Nkopane* of *Mathunya*  
Pray, *Mohlomi* of *Matsiel* (1969:255)

### **Excursus: The Symbol "Water Snake"**

The image of Water Snake is not very friendly one and calls perhaps for some comment. Water is universally associated with life and power. For instance, it is said that for the people of the Near East, the force of water rushing in a wadi after a rain storm was a symbol of the majesty and the power of the divinity. Likewise, an abundance of

water was taken as a symbol of happiness and divine blessing by the peoples of parched lands (Gratsch, 1981:825-826). Another example is that of Hindus who attached great importance to both bathing in and drinking the water of the Ganges River as a means of enjoying rest after one's death (Ibid.). It is also said that ritual washings with water as a preliminary to entering a holy place was common among the ancient Egyptians.

The ancient Babylonians used water for persons who were thought to be beset by demons. Even in Greece it is reported that purification with water was done in connection with the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries. We know also that one of the Pre-socratic Greek philosophers, Thales, understood water as the principle or source of all life, the position which is not very much different from that of the Basotho concerning the origin of man and other beings. Whereas Thales saw the water as the principle of all, the Basotho on the other hand did not see the water itself as the source of all, but they saw within the water itself what they regarded as the source (water snake) of water and other beings including man.

From all this it becomes clear that the ancient Basotho were not exceptional in associating water with the presence of the divinity. Perhaps the only peculiarity with their concept of such divinity was to identify him with the water snake which was a symbol of evil in some of these religions. But is it true that a snake is always a symbol of evil? What about the artificial serpent that Moses erected in the desert which the Israelites had to look at in order to be saved? (Nb. 21:8-9). Can we say it was symbolising the evil? I do not think so. How could the people of God be saved by looking at the evil, the enemy of God? Furthermore, what about Moses's staff that turned into a snake? (Exodus 4:3). What was it symbolising?

With all this I am trying to show that there is nothing evil or satanic if people have water snake as the symbol for the Supreme Being. It would however, be wrong to take



such water snake to be such literally. The Creator is none of the created realities. Such realities can only be understood as mere symbols and nothing more. Above all, is it not the Creator who created snakes?

Furthermore, the Creator is known indirectly through his creation. This to me suggests that each part of Creator's creation manifests something of his being or nature. I therefore see no problem of having in mind the form of any of his creatures as a symbol for him as long as like Anselm, I understand him as the being surpassing all creatures and above which nothing greater can be conceived and also as the source of all goodness to whom belongs all perfection and life in its fullness.

I know that there are some people who will be scandalised to hear that the Creator of the ancient Basotho was *Noha ea Metsi*, water snake. Such people should know that this was not an ordinary snake, but the Ultimate Being. We should also remember that this being as Lapointe puts it, is presented through a symbolic language, a language which cannot be understood and interpreted literally (1995:24).

The same water snake seems to be the one that initiates *Mathuela* (Sangomas) into *Bothuela* (the process of being a sangoma), a phenomenon which is very common amongst Southern African peoples. According to the information I received, one does not call himself or herself to *Bothuela*. But a call to *Bothuela* is an initiative of *Balimo* as the Creator's agents. It is one of the means through which *Balimo*, who are ever concerned about the well-being of the living, provide them with healers and diviners who will protect and secure the life of the living against sicknesses, illnesses and all sorts of life perils. We should be aware of the fact that the nations of the world do not only differ in terms of cultures, but also in terms of the type of problems they encounter in their daily life. Therefore Africans have their own unique problems which cannot be solved for them by European.

For instance, an African in life is mostly troubled by *boloi* (witchcraft), *thokolosi* (familiar), *maroko* (the state of being haunted by the dead in dreams), *tlali-mothoana* (man made lighting), *kokoana* (the smallest snake believed to have been inserted into one's stomach or bloodstream by witches), *lithotsela* (the lingering dead) and many others. These are the problems the scientists with their sophisticated technology can do nothing about. Whether they really exist or not is not the issue. Even if they are only symbolic or expressing psychological states, the fact remains that they have become a common problem for many Africans even today. While I acknowledge the fact that these are very strange or even incredible phenomena, I consider it illogical to reject their reality only because they are unknown in the West. These are unique problems which need a unique solution.

I think before we can take such phenomena as nothing, we should ask ourselves a question, how can almost the whole continent be so much preoccupied with non-existent? or if we take them as mere psychological states, do we then suggest that so many millions of Africans believing in these things are having a common psychological problem? I should not be understood as saying that these things do exist in reality nor in mind. My only concern here is that as these are very peculiar things, we cannot just ignore or affirm their reality without paying any special attention to their uniqueness. The good Lord who loves an African as much as he loves any European and who knows all his people and their problems, has made it possible that among Africans there be others with special gifts from him which enable them to solve African problems such as those mentioned above for Africans.

These are *Mathuela*, *Masione* (Zionists) and many traditional healers found throughout the whole continent of Africa. These are the people appointed (as they say) by *Molimo* through ancestors to safeguard the well-being of the Africans. That their

mission has (maybe) the divine origin is shown by the supernatural characteristics displayed by some of them. Of such characteristics we find clairvoyance, thought-reading, telepathy, knowledge of secrets and miracles' performance. Were these not the characteristics displayed by the primitive prophets in the ancient Israel? If they were accepted as divine gifts in Israel, why can they not be accepted as divine gifts also in the case of Africans? Does the reluctance to accept them not point to the biases which have misrepresented African epistemologies for so long?

If we can only understand that God reveals himself in different ways to different people, we would have no reason to isolate, reject or marginalise these people in our churches. Taking into consideration their good works (e.g. fighting against such evil things as witchcraft, *thokolosi* etc.) and morals, what reason do we genuinely have to condemn them? "How can Satan drive out Satan?" (Mk. 3:23) Only the power from God can overthrow the power from Satan. This is already a challenge to all those who associate *Bothuela*, African healing practices etc. with evil or are even not ready to accept those who practice them. I am not here defending the corrupt *mathuela* or African healers who use their power maliciously to harm others, to falsely accuse others or to deceitfully draw innocent people (children and desperate women mostly) into becoming sangomas. But I am concerned about those men and women given these special gifts and who genuinely use them to help others and who show the highest morality in their daily life. We cannot condemn the whole phenomenon because of the few who abuse it. Abuses are everywhere. The history shows that even Christianity was very much abused by some of the church leaders. It would however, appear stupid and foolish to condemn Christianity because of the few corrupt leaders. So is the same with *Bothuela*.

## Conclusion

Like many of the African peoples, Basotho had their own religion which they practised before the arrival of the missionaries. This ancestor-based religion penetrated and influenced every aspect of their life. It so much dominated their daily life that it was rather difficult if not impossible for any careless observer to draw a line of demarcation between it and the daily life of Basotho. It was a lived reality which manifested itself in every activity. It was because of such intimate union between it and daily life that those who understood religion as something separate and different from their daily life were misled into concluding that the Basotho did not have any religion prior to the period of the missionaries.

In this religion, two kinds of beings were of the utmost importance. These were *Molimo* (supreme being) and *Balimo* (ancestors). In fact, the two were the two-fold object of this religion. *Balimo* who were regarded as councillors of *Molimo* played the role of mediatorship between the living and *Molimo*. That is, their role was like that of Christ between Christians and God. However, unlike the God of the Christians, who is often presented in human form, the *Molimo* of the ancient Basotho had a very fluid nature in that as a vital force he was manifest in various aspects of nature. Of all these, he was most manifest in the form of water snake.

It has become evident from what we have seen that for the ancient Basotho the high god *Molimo* was most often in mind when the *Balimo* were addressed. We have seen this in oral traditional prayers in which there seems to be an indirect reference to *Molimo* always. It is also clear from some of the prayer expeditions that there were some special moments, especially during acute disturbances, when they addressed and dealt directly with *Molimo* as Water Snake. Nevertheless *Molimo* as the Supreme Being remains very

much with the *Balimo* and very immanent. Also, myths seem to remain closed. There was undoubtedly a tendency toward transcendence but the situation does seem to fall between the extremes of the settled and the consciously migrating. This according to Cumpsty, as we have already seen, seems to confirm our understanding of their pre-Lesotho history as one which would generate this consciousness.

In his theory of religion, Cumpsty asserts that when people are in search for a place of their own, they tend to move from a monistic tradition to a dualistic tradition. He further maintains that once they have been settled in the place of their own, a tendency is to return to a monistic tradition. With regard to the ancient Basotho, it has not been our concern to find out what happened after their settlement. In any case going back to the monistic tradition was very unlikely since the situation was confused by the arrival of the missionaries with their dualistic tradition (Christianity) at the very moment of settlement. It is only now with the introduction of inculturation in the Catholic church that the roots of a settled monistic tradition finds reexpression within the received dualistic tradition.

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