

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF FIELDS:  
LABOUR MARKETS AND AGRARIAN CHANGE IN LESOTHO

Christian Boehm

*University of Copenhagen  
Institute of Anthropology  
Frederiksholms Kanal, 4, DK-1220 Copenhagen K., Denmark  
Email: [christian.boehm@anthro.ku.dk](mailto:christian.boehm@anthro.ku.dk); phone. +45 35323492*

**Abstract**

The article sets out to explore the impact of retrenchment of Basotho miners from South African mines on the conditions of contemporary Sesotho farming practices. The crisis of Sesotho farming has a long history associated with processes of deagrarianisation of Southern Africa and the integration of the Basotho into a regional and global economic system. Because farming has come to be thoroughly dependent on external cash inputs, it is argued that deindustrialisation and the current disintegration of the migrant labour system have reinforced, rather than strengthened, the marginal position of farming in Lesotho. In a situation of competition for scarce resources between farming actors, social capital has become a critical agricultural skill.

**Key words:** Agrarian change, natural resource management, labour markets, social capital, Lesotho.

INTRODUCTION

“*We are all farmers*” (*rea lema*), the elderly Basotho<sup>1</sup> man with a rustic appearance assured me, the anthropologist, as a reaction to my enquiries concerning dominant livelihood strategies within his community in Lowland Lesotho. Yet I knew from the considerable number of ethnographic studies on Lesotho as well as previous visits to Lesotho that this was far from a realistic picture of how Basotho make a living. Lesotho’s rural economies have been thoroughly dependent on the export of labour to South African mines for almost a hundred years. The proportion of households in Lesotho that are able to live by means of their agricultural production in 1999 was estimated to be below 3% (Sechaba 2000). Nationally, the proportion of landless households had risen above 40%, and looking over the valley, we saw that approximately 50% of all fields were not ploughed in the middle of the farming season. What did he mean?<sup>2</sup>

The present article will set out to explore the meaning of *rea lema* in the context of two dimensions. First, the chronic and very acute crisis of agriculture and food security within Lesotho. Second, recent changes on the labour market and in particular the significant reduction in the number of men employed in the South African mines, resulting in high unemployment figures. My anthropological starting point is based on an understanding of

---

<sup>1</sup> *Basotho* (singular: *Mosotho*) are the people living in and beyond *Lesotho*. *Sesotho* designates their language and culture.

<sup>2</sup> Reflecting over his statement, I thought of dominant discourses of how Basotho chose to represent themselves to outsiders, especially whites (*makhoa*), who more often than not are associated with a keen interest in farming and, hopefully, with some sort of external assistance to them. This explanation, however, remained unsatisfying as an interpretation of *rea lema*, which is an often-heard statement in rural Lesotho.

agrarian change as embedded in multi-dimensional social processes (Berry 1993). In order to understand local discourses, of which *rea lema* is an integrated part, as well as recent agrarian developments in Lesotho, it is necessary to conduct a detailed ethnography of the social processes that frame agricultural activities.

## THE SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF FARMING: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The section below will briefly outline some of the recent anthropological thinking of relevance to my effort. Anthropological approaches to the study of common property natural resource management (CPNRM) and agriculture<sup>3</sup> in so-called developing countries have long and almost per definition focused on the social nature and cultural embeddedness of these activities. Yet as a reaction to the persistence of mainstream, positivist, ethnocentric and linear models of development, which continue to favour ‘transfer of technology’ models in applied development practice, emphasis on a more dynamic and flexible approach from social science has experienced a renaissance during the last decade (Berry 1993; Richards 1993; Scoones & Thompson 1994; Long & Villareal 1994; Leach et al. 1997; Mehta et al. 1999; Devereux & Maxwell 2001; Woodhouse 2002).

Central to this approach is a view of natural resources as socially constructed in a web of symbolic and cultural meanings rather than mere material use-value property. Natural resource users are seen as a heterogeneous group that pursues a wealth of diverse livelihood strategies based on plural and partial knowledge systems and a rather negotiated understanding of the natural environment. Emphasis is put on the role of institutions in its widest anthropological sense as being embedded in social practice and meaning. Understandings of CPNRM systems as normative implementation of straightforward rule sets, which are applicable for clearly defined population groups, are rejected because empirical evidence rather draws attention to the inconsistency, ambiguity and conflict-ridden nature of these systems. Common for the above mentioned scholars and the approach as a whole is that social and cultural aspects of CPNRM are at least as – or even more - critical as the technical and ecological aspects of CPNRM systems and that – as a consequence of this insight – action focused research and development in practice has to acknowledge that CPNRM activities cannot be isolated from wider social, cultural and economic processes and contexts.

Berry (1993), in her account of African agrarian history, offers a critique of both Neo-classical and Marxist economics by rejecting their view of culture and power as being subordinate aspects of economic activity by showing that economic activity is embedded in a wider array of social dimensions. Because institutions, rules of access and use as well as economic decision making units are extremely fluid, Berry (1993) claims that we cannot possibly understand CPNRM systems by tracing rational actors’ responses to fixed rule-sets governing property rights. Critical to her analysis is the position of negotiation by the actor.

---

<sup>3</sup> Theoretically, I make no distinction between fields and other common natural resources at this point. In Lesotho, all land, including fields, are owned by the nation and nominally held by the King (‘Paramount Chief’ prior to independence in 1966). In practice, however, the property regime governing fields works more along lines of private than common ownership. Grazing areas, on the other hand, are more of a typical common property resource, in spite of the fact that only livestock owning household can ultimately benefit from this resource. In general, the private – common dichotomy has serious limitations in accounting for practical matters concerning property regimes of natural resources.

What outsiders often see as an irrational waste of precious resources<sup>4</sup> makes sense from Berry's point of view in that investments in the means of negotiation of resource access are at least as important as investments in the means of production as such. As resource access and use is determined by the mobilisation of potential allies and social networks, farmers need to keep options open and strengthen the position from which they ultimately have to negotiate their farming strategy (Berry 1993).

Along the same lines, both Long & Villareal (1994) and Richards (1993) stress the importance of social relations and networks in the composition of farming agency (Long & Long 1992). Their emphasis rests on the construction and maintenance of organisational capacity that enables poor farmers to keep going despite difficult circumstances. Richards (ibid.) rejects the concept of a comprehensive body of indigenous farming knowledge and argues that farming strategies are the product of improvisational skills, resource access negotiations and technical experiments. For him, agriculture is the outcome of a social performance, which in turn is part of a wider performance in social life. The agricultural strategy for a particular field thus becomes a micro history of what has happened to a social situation, involving a range of social actors at a particular time, rather than the end product of a carefully designed technical plan. Similarly, Scoones & Thompson (1994) point out that farming knowledge is a social process rather than a technical activity and that we should understand agriculture as a set of ideologised and political activities in a highly differentiated social setting rather than the outcome of a series of carefully planned actions<sup>5</sup>.

IDS (Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, UK) based scholars Leach et al. (1997) and Mehta et al. (1999) took these thoughts a step further in that they focused on the critical role of multiple institutional arrangements in mediating resource control and access. Leach et al. argue that CPNRM is typified by dynamic institutional webs, where institutions are "*regularised patterns of behaviour between groups and individuals*" (Leach et al. 1997: 2 after Mearns 1995a: 103). This is a relatively informal view of institutions that are in contrast to more formal community based organisations and their rule-sets that have often been the focus of research directed at understanding problems of CPNRM. For Leach et al. (1997), as well as the other above-mentioned scholars CPNRM is embedded in informal institutions, which exist because people invest their life in them. The implication of this argument is that the *management* of natural resources is located not only within formal institutions but within the complex web of regularised daily behaviour, such as the family, the household, marriage, gender relationships, social networks, etc.

Inspired by the works of Ulrich Beck (1991), Mehta et al (1999) have argued that CPNRM is characterised by both risk and uncertainty, in that farmers have to cope and navigate along three profound types of uncertainty. First, livelihood uncertainty, which describes the vagaries of international labour and capital markets. Second, ecological uncertainty, which stresses that ecological systems are influenced by variation and disequilibrium. Third, knowledge uncertainty, indicating that knowledge is always situated, contested, plural and partial.

---

<sup>4</sup> E.g. in Lesotho, the slaughtering of a cow on the occasion of a feast for the ancestors.

<sup>5</sup> The authors do not argue that there is no plan, but rather that the outcome is not only the result of the implementation of the plan, but also a range of other, and often unpredictable, dimensions that impinge on the plan.

## FROM DEAGRARIANISATION TO DEINDUSTRIALISATION: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

With the above outlined anthropological propositions concerning the social embeddedness of agricultural practice in mind, I now give some historical background of agrarian change in Lesotho throughout the past century. Much has been written on this topic in the context of Lesotho, especially on the reasons for the chronic and acute crisis, which farming in this small Southern African country faces<sup>6</sup>. For the purpose of the present article, I will briefly recapture some important historiographic points concerning the nature of the relationship between the system of oscillating labour migration and domestic agriculture.

Colin Murray (1981) has vividly described that during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Basotho were a prosperous and self-sufficient people, who were quick to grab the economic opportunities for grain export offered by the newly opened diamond mines in Kimberly in the North-western Orange Free State. In 1873, Basotho exported some 100 000 bags of grain as well as other agricultural products such as wool and mohair (Ferguson 1990). The subsequent historical developments are the result of a complex combination of factors leading to the gradual decline of agriculture within what was called Basutoland during the time of the British colonial administration. In addition to that, almost the entire Basotho male labour force became engaged in the South African mining industry. By the 1930s, the 'transition' from "*granary to labour reserve*" (Murray 1981:1) was largely complete.

The main reasons for such a radical reorganisation of the relationship between Basotho and their powerful neighbour South Africa during this period are the following. First, the imposition of protectionist measures by the governments in South Africa paired with cheap grain imports from overseas, especially from Australia and the US. Second, the introduction of the hut tax by the British colonial administration<sup>7</sup>. Third, armed conflicts and the associated need for weapon purchases. Fourth, a number of livestock epidemics such as the rinderpest. Fifth, a series of droughts and locust attacks, which resulted in periodic food shortages and starvation. The number of Basotho men working in the South African mines during this 'transitional' period 'rose from 15,000 in 1875 to 78,604 in 1936 (Foulo 1996).

By 1935, the so-called Pim Report, which was commissioned by the British colonial authority of Basutoland, reported on the devastating effects of recent socio-economic developments in relation to the state of the natural environment in general and domestic agriculture in particular. Inspired by the 'Dust Bowl' debate in the US, this report, together with subsequent ecological surveys, formed the foundation for a number of colonial measures to combat surface- and gully erosion on the one hand and improve the conditions for domestic agricultural production on the other in the decades to come. The main elements of the colonial programmes were terrace establishment and contour ploughing, gully control, the distribution of phosphor fertilisers, fruit tree distribution as well as livestock improvement programmes (Showers 1982). It was during this period that today's landscape began to take shape. Ever since the implementation of the recommendations put forward by the Pim Report, generations of agricultural experts have come to Lesotho. Until independence in 1966, they were paid by the colonial administration, later by international development aid

---

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Wallman 1969; Turner 1978; Eckert 1980; Murray 1981; Showers 1982; Robertson 1987; Prah 1989; Ferguson 1990; Christensen 1994; Franklin 1995; Sechaba Consultants 1991, 1994, 2000; Phororo 1999 and others.

<sup>7</sup> The hut tax was the condition put forward to the Basotho rulers by the British Government in return for the establishment of the Protectorate Basutoland and the protection against the Boers. Ten Shilling had to be paid by each homestead and it is said that Chiefs rigorously enforced the collection (Sechaba 1991).

agencies. Their collective efforts have – at best – merely managed to slow down the further decline of agriculture in Lesotho<sup>8</sup>.

From this brief historical account it becomes clear that the crisis of agriculture in Lesotho is by no means a recent phenomenon. Rather it has been an established fact of rural life in Lesotho for at least 70 years. The relationship between migrant labour and domestic agriculture, however, remains complicated. While the first generations of Basotho miners went to the mines for limited periods and only in order to earn cash for taxes, guns and livestock purchases, the need to migrate soon became determined by food shortages back home in their villages in Basutoland. The decline of agriculture has many reasons, such as soil erosion, population pressure, maize monocropping, pests and – of course – the loss of large tracts of land to the West of the Caledon River following the first (1858) and second (1865) Basotho – Boer War as well as the declaration of Basutoland as a British Protectorate in 1868. (Gill 1993). But it is also clear that the system of labour migration as such has substantially contributed to the disintegration of the ‘granary’ and the decline of agricultural production. Mining took some of the population pressure away from the land and made a substantial part of the male population disappear for long periods. But it also meant that fields were left to be worked by the old, the young as well as the remaining ‘gold widows’ on behalf of their absent men.

In the long run, labour migration brought substantial incomes to rural economies<sup>9</sup>, especially as wages were considerably increased during the 1970s to secure a steady reproduction of the labour force in a situation where the flow of labour supply from other Southern African countries declined due to liberation wars and other reasons. Investments or improvements in agriculture gave increasingly little compared to the still abundant wage labour opportunities in South Africa. Rural households prime attention was, and still is, geared towards jobs – not farming. What further complicates the attitudes of rural dwellers towards farming in Lesotho is that farming is seen as a domestic and ‘female’ chore rather than a real profession. If men originally were ‘forced’ off the land by droughts, wars and pests, their ambition nowadays clearly are outside the agricultural sector. Once offered a job, a Basotho man will always leave his field to others and go for the cash, which he needs badly. Farming has come to be low-status, something to be left to women and elders. Men were and are supposed to make money. During the 70s, when the number of Basotho men in the mines was at its peak, a mine job was almost good enough to feed a family. Nevertheless, in the absence of a pension scheme, farming remained essential as a retirement strategy.

Farming thus came to occupy a position as supplementary income, both subordinated to and – due to the cash intensive nature of agriculture in Lesotho - highly dependent on migrant labour. Basotho made substantial gains from migrant labour and put comparably little energy into agriculture. In a cash economy, cash always had the priority. The irony is that, while wages are relatively low, meaning that farming continues to be necessary for survival, farming outputs are so low that wages are necessary. In a neo-Marxist perspective (Murray 1976; Turner 1978; Spiegel 1979), Sesotho farming could only be properly

---

<sup>8</sup> A discussion of the successes and failures of environmental protection measures goes beyond the scope of this article. The further decline of agriculture is linked to other factors than exclusively the environmental one. I thus do not intend to blame any agricultural expert for the crisis of agriculture in Lesotho.

<sup>9</sup> The system of ‘deferred pay’, meaning that a large proportion of the wage (originally 60%, and since 1991, 30%) goes directly on a Lesotho bank account where it is held in trust until the miner or a dependent withdraws it, was designed to prevent the wages from being spent on beer and prostitutes in the mining compounds or within other social structures that developed at the place of employment. Although difficult to proof and generalise, there is strong evidence that, despite the ‘deferred pay’ scheme, a large proportion of miner’s wages never reached the miner’s household. “*Being ‘gold widows’, we were waiting for what would never come...*”, as one Mosotho lady expressed it to me.

understood within a regional, capitalist and exploitative system of economic production, which serves the needs of the centre rather than that of the periphery and which has left Basotho to “*scratch on the land as a rural proletariat*” (Murray 1979: 337) The process that Bryceson (2000) has described as ‘depeasantisation’ and ‘deagrarianisation’, acute in many other Sub-Saharan African countries today, has occurred in the industrialised context of South Africa and its immediate periphery around the turn of the last century.

## RECENT LABOUR MARKET CHANGES: THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In this section, I argue that Lesotho has entered a new ‘transitional’ phase, consisting in part of ‘deindustrialisation’, the proletarianisation of women as well as a diversification of livelihood strategies. The South African labour market has undergone radical changes in terms of employment opportunities for both men and women. Two major aspects of changes are crucial to outline here.

First, the retrenchment of Basotho men employed in the South African mining industry - a decline from up to 130 000 in the 70s and 80s to around 50 000 at present<sup>10</sup>. This has a number of reasons, such as the falling gold price on the international market, the restructuring of the South African mining industry due to falling ore grades and profitability as well as political pressures on the South African government to employ national rather than foreign labour after the demise of apartheid<sup>11</sup>.

Second, the worldwide trend of Asian investors relocating the production of textile garments (Warren, K. & Borque, S. 1991; Dyer 2001) has reached Lesotho, amongst others as a result of Lesotho and the US signing the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) in 2000. Lesotho has been successful in attracting industries from the Far East because of plentiful availability of a relatively well-educated and ‘docile’ labour force, a favourable legislation as well as a developed infrastructure across the border in South Africa. Employment figures are close to 40 000 at the moment, the majority being young women. The future seems promising for the industry, with labour being cheap and the local currency being weak, thus making exports to the US very profitable<sup>12</sup>.

The discussed labour market changes are summarised in Figure 1, which is shown below. It must be mentioned that all employment figures are subject to uncertainty as sources differ and because nobody really knows how many precisely work in the South African mines<sup>13</sup>. The graph below is thus based on figures from a variety of sources such as TEBA (The Employment Bureau of Africa), the Lesotho National Bank as well as other studies done on the subject.

---

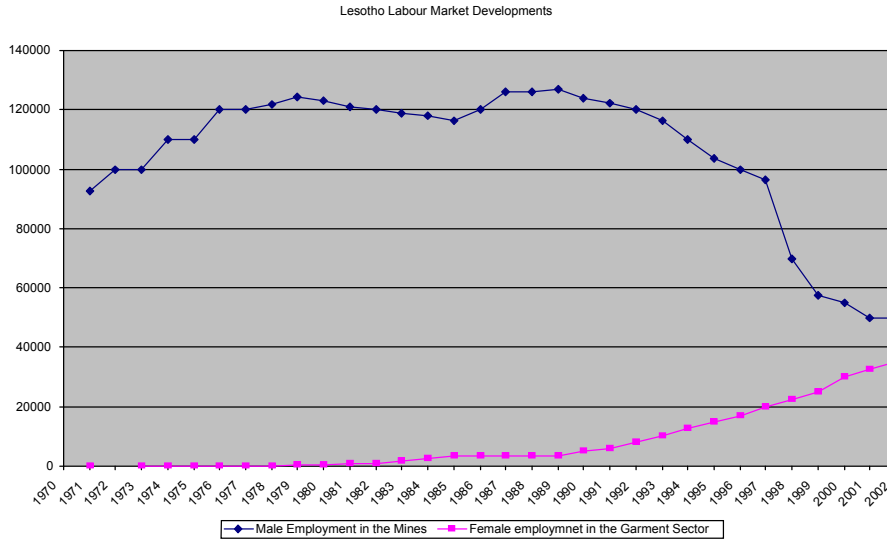
<sup>10</sup> Personal interview with Chris Hector, Regional Manager for Lesotho and the Eastern Free State at TEBA (The Employment Bureau of Africa), 13.02.2002.

<sup>11</sup> See also T. Foulo, *Emerging Trends in the Migration of Basotho Miners*, Central Bank of Lesotho, 1996; Central Bank of Lesotho, *Annual Report for 2000*, March 2001; Westermann, G., *Survey on Migrant Workers Retrenchment*, Irish Consulate, Lesotho, 1999;

<sup>12</sup> Literature is sparse on this very recent phenomenon. See also Dyer 2001 and Salm, A. et al., *Lesotho Garment Industry Subsector Study for the Government of Lesotho*, 2002;

<sup>13</sup> There are several recruitment agencies, subcontractors as well as direct recruitment operations working simultaneously.

Figure 1: Lesotho Labour Market Developments



What the loss of the mining opportunity has meant for the micro economy of households and communities within Lesotho has to be seen in relation to two aspects. First, a miner usually supports not only his own family (with a mean household size of app. 5 persons per household) but also other kin members without direct access to cash. Second, the population of Lesotho has doubled since the 1970s, when employment of Basotho men in the South African mines was at its highest. While 49.7% of all households in Lesotho had at least one household member working in the mines in 1979, this figure has declined to 11.9 in 2002.

The principal ethnographers of the Basotho<sup>14</sup> have described a situation where up to 80% of the mean rural household income was derived from men's migrant labour earnings. What used to be the absolute economic backbone of Basotho villages and rural economies has been degraded into the privilege of a few. The loss of the mining opportunity has only partly been compensated by newly created jobs for young women in the garment sector.

#### FIELDS WITHOUT MONEY, MONEY WITHOUT FIELDS: THE CASE OF MOLAPO'S FARMING STRATEGY

In order to investigate what impact the above-outlined labour market changes have for contemporary conditions of Sesotho farming, I now leave the macro perspective and look at case material from a Lowland<sup>15</sup> village in the vicinity of the capital Maseru. The scope of this paper, however, does not allow for a detailed investigation of all (technical) elements of farming strategies. The focus will thus rest on what *rea lema* means in practice and on the social relationships that constitute – and are constituted by – a system of production.

<sup>14</sup> Such as Ashton, E.H. 1967; Turner, S. 1978; Gay, J. 1980; Ferguson, J. 1990; Murray 1981; Spiegel 1980;

<sup>15</sup> Lesotho is geographically and socio-economically commonly divided in three (Urban, Lowlands/Foothills, Mountains), four (Maseru, Lowlands, Foothills and Highlands) or five (Maseru, Lowlands, Foothills, Highlands and Senqu River Valley) regions. The Lowlands is the main agricultural as well as the main labour supplying area. It therefore appears natural to study retrenchment and agrarian change in a Lowland setting.

Ha Sechaba is a village of 815 inhabitants, including the 13.1% (16.2% of males and 10.2% of females) who are away on migrant work in other parts of Lesotho or in the Republic of South Africa. Located below the Southern edge of the Berea Plateau, Ha Sechaba is a 'normal' and medium-size Lowland village. While other villages along the main roads have experienced considerable growth and diversifying local economies in the wake of retrenchment, Ha Sechaba, has, due to its location on the dead end of a poor fair weather road, been somewhat stagnant (in terms of village growth) for a number of years. Concerning fields, however, Ha Sechaba is well endowed with only 25% of all households having no fields at all and 42.4% of all households having two or more fields<sup>16</sup>. In terms of retrenchment, Ha Sechaba carries its share of the burden in that the number of households with direct access to mining income (i.e. at least one household member employed in the mines) has been reduced to 14%, while the 1991 figure for the Lowland region was 49.7% (Central Bank of Lesotho 1991). Being in commuting distance from the Industrial Areas, 12.8%<sup>17</sup> of all households in Ha Sechaba have direct access to wages earned in the Asian textile factories. Hence, as can be seen from these few income status indicators, the lives of Ha Sechaba's rural dwellers are intimately tied up in – and correspond well to - the larger processes described above.

As the local settlement pattern was formed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a historical period with frequent warfare<sup>18</sup>, the landscape is one of large open fields and a fairly tightly clustered village. Nevertheless, most households have, in addition to their fields a garden next to the homestead, where maize, pumpkin, spinach and other vegetables are cultivated. Only the small wetland patch in the river bottom as well as the steep slope below the sandstone cliff is laid out and managed rotationally (*leboella*) for grazing livestock.

As mentioned above, the rise and decline of oscillating labour migration has left its imprint on the way Ha Sechaba is laid out. There are two older parts around the Chief's place (*moreng*) as well as a distinct *Motse Mocha* (new town). *Motse Mocha* has emerged during the heydays of mining (1970s and 80s) in a time where many miners had the economic means to build new modern houses for their families as well their own retirement<sup>19</sup>. *Motse Mocha* is different from the rest of the village: your neighbours are rarely your kin; a number of migrants from Lesotho's Highlands have built there; most of the landless households are to be located there; the entire socio-economic profile is different. In contrast, the part of Ha Sechaba called Malutsane is old, the inhabitants, most of whom are somehow related by kin, have plenty of fields, while the proportion of households with access to wages is lower than in *Motse Mocha*.

It is in Malutsane that we find the household of Molapo<sup>20</sup>. Molapo lives together with his mother, his two children and one of his brother's children in his deceased father's house

<sup>16</sup> In comparison, the national figure for landless households in 1999 was 41% and for the Lowland region 40% (Sechaba Consultants 2000).

<sup>17</sup> The total number of women employed in the garment sector (20 in January 2002) fluctuates significantly because employment periods are short and the staff turnover at the factories very high.

<sup>18</sup> In particular, the period of Lifaquane during the first half of the 19th century and the Basotho – Boer Wars during the second half.

<sup>19</sup> Houses were, and still are, a prime status symbol in the Lowlands. In the absence of significant livestock investment opportunities, houses have, I argue, a similar function as visible representations of the absent miner within his community, as Ferguson (1990) has argued to be the case for cattle have in the Highland regions of Lesotho.

<sup>20</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

Molapo was one of the first persons I came to know more closely during my stay in Ha Sechaba. Although he is fairly young, he often participated in meetings and court cases at Moreng (Chief's place), which is where I stayed myself. Many conversations with him started there. In addition to that, Molapo is a proud farmer who would willingly walk for hours to show to me all his agricultural endeavours.



along the dirt road that ends in Ha Sechaba. He is in his early 30s and has no field of his own yet. After having worked as a miner for 10 years at Western Holdings, a South African gold mine, he returned home to live in Ha Sechaba and “*try life as a farmer*”, as he expressed it. His wife, so he claimed, had left him upon retrenchment.

In order to unpack how retrenched miners may react to global changes and manoeuvre through the vagaries of coping in an uncertain environment, I will present here in some detail Molapo’s agricultural strategy for the last year’s main summer season, which started with the spring rains back in October 2001, and which came to an end around May/June 2002. In the table below, I show how Molapo has put together his main farming implements (rows) for the four fields (columns), on which he worked during the season. More importantly, I wish to explore and draw attention to the multiplicity of social arrangements that is necessary to manipulate the necessary inputs.

Table 1: Schematic Overview over Molapo’s farming Strategy

	<b>Field 1</b>	<b>Field 2</b>	<b>Field 3</b>	<b>Field 4</b>
<b>Field Owner</b>	Molapo’s deceased father is the formal owner mentioned on Form C, the official field document proving ownership. His mother holds the field until her death and a formal inheritance by one of her three sons. “ <i>Whom she likes most, he will have it</i> ”, according to Molapo.	Mohlomi brings in half of a big field. Mohlomi owns two fields in total. His other field remains unploughed. The chief had threatened him to take away the fields because they have been lying fallow for some years. He was thus forced to “ <i>keep the field busy</i> ”, as he put it.	Me Matankiso’s deceased husband is the formal owner. Me holds two fields but cannot plough alone after the death of her husband.	Me Matlanyane’s deceased husband formerly owns the field. She has agreed to leave it to Molapo over a ten-year period in exchange for Molapo repairing and maintaining her house.
<b>Ploughing</b>	Moses, a distant relative does the ploughing. 50% of the ploughing costs (120 Rand pr. Ha.) were supposed to be subsidised by Government, but apparently never paid. Ploughing was done in time.	One of Mohlomi’s friends from a neighbouring village agrees to plough the whole field by means of tractor and keeps one half of the field as payment for him. The ploughing was done late.	Me Matankiso owns a few cattle and manages the ploughing with the help of relatives, who are rewarded in kind (home brew). Ploughing was done late.	Moses, a distant relative does the ploughing. 50% of the ploughing costs are subsidised by Government. Ploughing was done late.
<b>Fertiliser, Seed &amp; Pesticides</b>	Molapo covers the costs for fertilisers, seed and pesticide with substantial help from his two brothers, both working in the RSA.	Molapo covers the costs for fertilisers, seed and pesticide with substantial help from his two brothers, both working in the RSA.	Molapo purchases some more fertiliser and mixes it with cow dung from Me Matankiso’s cattle. Seed and pesticide are also bought by Molapo.	Molapo covers the costs for fertilisers, seed and pesticide with substantial help from his two brothers, both working in the RSA.
<b>Labour</b>	For hoeing, a number of poor	Molapo and Mohlomi both	Molapo and Me Matankiso harvest	Molapo does most of the work

	Field 1	Field 2	Field 3	Field 4
	women are hired for 7 Rand pr. day. Moeketsi, the owner of a cart and cattle, assists with both hoeing and harvesting.	work the field together, assisted by their family members.	the field together, with the help of a few relatives. Me also does a little weeding on the field.	himself. For hoeing, a number of poor women are hired for 7 Rand pr. Day
<b>Sharing &amp; Payment Arrangements</b>	Moeketsi will receive a small share (10 kg) of the harvest in exchange for his labour and be allowed to graze his cattle on Molapo's mother's field. Molapo keeps the rest for himself.	Molapo and Mohlomi claim to share the harvest fifty / fifty <sup>21</sup> . This is a formal sharecropping arrangement with a social dimension. <i>"I help them by ploughing with them"</i> , as Molapo expressed it.	Molapo and Me M. claim to share the harvest fifty / fifty. This is a formal sharecropping arrangement with a social dimension. <i>"I help them by ploughing with them"</i> , as Molapo expressed it.	Molapo keeps the entire harvest. In exchange for the field, Molapo pays a friend from Maseru in kind for repairing Mrs. Rhamalumane's house. <i>"The field is the payment for the labour I organise"</i> , as Molapo put it.

Molapo harvested his crops in May/June, but because of a combination of late ploughing and an early winter, the output on fields two, three and four was poor. Molapo anticipated that there would not be enough grain for household consumption for the entire year. Neither would he be able to sell much within the community, which he had planned to do in order to recover some of his family's cash investments. In good years, so he assured me, he is able to make a living from it. What is obvious about his farming strategy is that he makes a wealth of agreements with other community members in order to raise the main implements needed to make a season's farming: land, traction power, labour and implements such as fertilisers, seeds and pesticides.

Few in Ha Sechaba can just farm alone. For the type of arrangements made, different types of assets have to complement one another. Newly established households with access to some cash need access to land, while widows (39% of all households are headed by widows, 90% of whom are female) holding their deceased husbands' fields but with hardly any source of cash need some financial input in order to be able to harvest at least part of their land. Very few people control all the means of production. This forces people to join together and makes individual trajectories and farming strategies to intersect within the framework of specific strategies for particular fields. In the construction of these highly flexible and constantly changing farming units, kinship of course plays an important role, even though informants insisted that agreements have become more businesslike and cash-based.

Institutions of productive relationships facilitating the pooling of different resources that are needed on particular fields and during specific times exist in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and are generally termed for 'sharecropping'. In the context of Lesotho (*lihalefote* or *seahlolo*), it has been studied in great detail by Turner (1978), Spiegel (1979) as well as Robertson (1987). I thus merely recapitulate some main points deemed important for

<sup>21</sup> How to share is, not surprisingly, a frequent source of conflict between sharecropping partners. Fifty / fifty is an ideal based on one partner bringing in the field, the other taking care of the ploughing and both partners paying for the necessary fertilizer and seed expenses. However, being relatively abundant, the value of fields appears to suffer from inflation in relation to the other inputs. Most partnerships where one partner brings in the field while the other takes care of the rest will rather share seventy / thirty than fifty / fifty.

an understanding of the impact of retrenchment and unemployment on the conditions of contemporary Sesotho farming.

In brief, sharecropping means that two or more households join together in order to form a farming unit with the purpose of raising the above-mentioned implements necessary in order to plough, plant and harvest a particular field for a particular season. Robertson (1987) makes a distinction between *seahlolo*, the traditional Sotho type of communitarianism, redistribution and 'social welfare' and *lihalefote* (derived from Afrikaans: half – half), the more businesslike and entrepreneurial contract aimed at individual advantage, that has its roots in the co-operation between Basotho and Boers during the latter's settlement in what is the Eastern Orange Free State today. In practice, however, I found that both concepts are mixed. It is important though to emphasise that certain types of sharecropping have a strong social element of income diffusion, while others have not. The farming units are highly flexible and they frequently change from season to season. Other partners work together for long periods and many successful partnerships are terminated by the death of one partner. Because households typically have different kinds of farming implements available during different stages of their life cycle, sharecropping is often inter-generational.

Writings on sharecropping usually take their point of departure in anthropological theories on the 'developmental domestic cycle', after the ideas of the Russian agricultural economist Chayanov (1966) as well as Fortes (1958). Put briefly, the idea of the domestic developmental cycle outlines the relationship between the different phases during the development of a life cycle of the household as an economic unit on the one hand and material wealth on the other. In theory, and very frequently also in practice, households in rural Lesotho follow a cyclical pattern of accumulation, growth, decline and impoverishment. Sharecropping is very closely tied to a differentiated community<sup>22</sup>, which in turn is the result of people moving in and out of poverty and/or wealth.

In the context of Lesotho, the domestic developmental cycle had, and still has to be understood in terms of the migrant labour system (Spiegel 1979) as well as, I would argue, the decline of it. Whilst wage labour used to be the primary economic backbone of rural Lesotho, agriculture counterbalances the insecurities inherent in a migrant worker existence. Thus wage labour and access to land were and are the prime dynamics of a given household's phase within the domestic developmental cycle.

The main limitations inherent in applying a rigid model of the domestic developmental cycle for the analysis of social phenomena of any kind are: first, the model is unable to explain linear change over time; second, many people 'fall by the wayside of the cycle', meaning that they did not fit the outlined stages of the cycle. In other words, if deviation is the norm, what purpose has a cyclical model? In addition to that, a gender-based critique of a rather male-based application of domestic cycle models in the ethnography of Lesotho would, I argue, also be justified. Nevertheless, being the 'mother milk' of 1960s/70s Cambridge anthropology<sup>23</sup>, domestic cycle thinking has formed the basis for a number of significant anthropological writings on Lesotho.

The statistics on the changing labour market conditions given above tell much of the story. During the heydays of mining, most households shared similar labour market conditions and thus took similar choices that resulted in similar trajectories. Without undermining the critical importance of social heterogeneity and multiple realities of rural

---

<sup>22</sup> Marxist style social research in Southern Africa and beyond, in its search for an explanation of class phenomena, took economic differentiation not as an essential condition but rather as a result of different households being at different stages in their domestic developmental cycle (Spiegel 1980), which is why class consciousness did not develop in rural African societies.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication with Colin Murray (22.11.2001).

communities and without falling into the trap of constructing a 'typical' miner's household in Lesotho, I think it is fair to say that many lives took similar directions with the result that individual trajectories in the form of 'typical domestic developmental cycles' developed a multitude of times.

It is important to stress that not all forms of co-operation across different stages on the developmental cycle are called for sharecropping. Co-operation with household members, as is the case on Molapo's field One, is not sharecropping. The type of arrangement on field Four is not sharecropping either, because the field is a payment for repairing the house of the old widow. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that sharecropping is often communicated to be a necessity rather than an ideal. The ideal, which is also part of the discourse of '*rea lema*' is to plough alone, to be a strong and independent individual as well as, and this is the crucial point, to be able to help others.

### SHARING POVERTY: SHARECROPPING AND RISING UNEMPLOYMENT

As sharecropping is a phenomenon of differentiation, and because differentiation is bound to increase in a situation of retrenchment and rising unemployment, sharecropping has become a lot more common during the last decades. In Ha Sechaba, 51% of all households sharecropped during the last season. In a survey situation, many social arrangements are never called for sharecropping: "*we just work together.*" In addition, there are numerous households with fields who want to sharecrop, but who were unable to find a partner willing to enter a contract with them – hence the large number of fallow fields. On the other hand, households with access to cash but without fields have few problems to find a partner, which has led to an inflation of the relative value of fields in relation to other agricultural inputs. From the above, it becomes obvious that an efficient sharecropping system that optimises the means of production and works the land, which is available to the community can only function well if there are fairly precise proportions of different types of households that have a need to integrate into a unit.

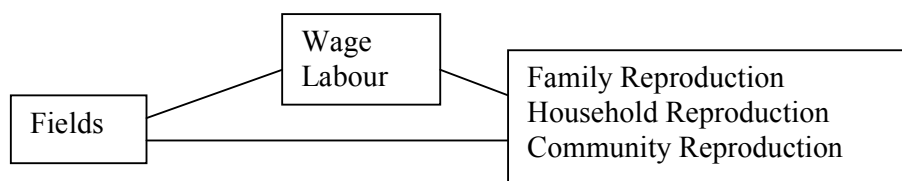
In the case of Molapo, his ability to work four fields is determined by the flow of cash coming from his two brothers in the Free State mines. Molapo is not among the well-off community members and he is not even known as a skilled farmer in the technical sense. But for the majority of community members with access to land but without any source of cash, he is an attractive partner because he has indirect access to wage income. Furthermore, what determines his relative success as a farmer during this season, however and besides his entrepreneurial qualities and personal skills, is his ability to make agreements and make things happen on the ground at the right time. The amount of social capital and social skill that has to be applied and manipulated by Molapo at specific times during the farming season is considerable. Ploughing, hoeing and harvesting in a high altitude environment with erratic rainfalls, frequent hailstorms, early frosts and recurring droughts has to be timed in a precise and flexible manner.

The 2001/2002 agricultural season is a good example: the rains came in October and ideally the maize ploughing should have happened by end October. Yet when it came to Christmas, most fields were still not ploughed and an investigation in the various arrangements usually revealed that people were waiting for something or somebody: the brother had to come from the mine with the cash; the neighbour had to get his tractor repaired; somebody had just died; the eldest daughter had to come home from Maseru and contribute to the expenses; the government had promised subsidised seeds but failed to deliver; most of the very poor people were waiting for a sharecropping partner willing to

enter an arrangement with somebody without anything but a field. Some of those who had a good agreement in place had to make secondary agreements on order to be able to enter the contract. Even in a relatively wet season such as 2001/02, practising successful and timed farming was very difficult because nobody could just go out and do it. Everybody had to wait and devote immense amounts of energy in establishing social arrangements. In the first week of April we woke up to the first frosts, which put a stop to the maize growth and turned the landscape from green to brown within a number of days. This meant yet another poor harvest due to late ploughing or no ploughing at all.

In a, admittedly somehow simplistic, triangular model that attempts to sketch a relationship between production and reproduction in rural Lesotho, it becomes apparent what the decline of the migrant labour economy means for processes of production and reproduction. All three elements are thoroughly dependent on one another. If wage labour opportunities disappear, as is currently occurring, the impact on both agricultural production and social reproduction are considerable.

Figure 2: Fields, Wages and Social Reproduction



The global and regional changes that have affected the labour markets in Lesotho and South Africa have resulted in a serious decline of overall wage earning opportunities for Basotho. Hence, the balance between the different types of households present in Ha Sechaba as well as the balance between the implements necessary to farm has changed. The above-described labour market changes, implying the retrenchment of Basotho men and the involvement of young women in the labour force<sup>24</sup> have significant implications for what Basotho can do with their fields.

In practice, we see a situation of shortage of most of the necessary implements: shortage of cash (seeds, ploughing, fertiliser, etc.) due to unemployment and the lack of income generating opportunities; shortage of labour due to the – almost culturally prescribed – absence of men between 20 and 50 and the recent migration of young women; and a relative abundance of land<sup>25</sup>. In terms of the domestic cycle, one could argue that the dynamics that underpin the various development stages have changed and that this has considerable implications for agriculture. The necessary nodal points<sup>26</sup> where different households meet at

<sup>24</sup> Anthropologically interesting in terms of gender and agriculture is that women's money cannot thoroughly replace men's money when it comes to farming fields. First, female wages in the garment sector are so low that it is barely enough to feed the children and pay the cost of commuting. Secondly, women are frequently inclined to prioritise money for children or daily food in contrast to men, who rather 'build the house' and invest in agriculture. Thirdly, women's position as wife, daughter, daughter-in-law or mother means that fewer people outside of their household (*lelapa*) can legitimately claim their income. In terms of food production, however, most women are active in cultivating small gardens, which are up to 17 times more productive than fields (Epprecht 2000).

<sup>25</sup> This is ironic because there is a dominant discourse in and on Lesotho arguing that Lesotho suffers from land shortages. This shortage of land is very relative, because of the large tracts of arable land that lies fallow. Shortage can be very real for those without direct access to land (25% in Sechaba).

<sup>26</sup> Hastrup & Olwig (1997) define 'nodal points' as follows: "Important cultural sites in research...are found in nodal points in the different networks of local and global relations that constitute the context of life... (Ibid: 12).

different stages in their lives with different resources to put into the farming arrangement are struggling to become established and are becoming fewer and fewer, thus the apparent abundance of fallow fields.

The social embeddedness of fields in a way used to be a strength of agriculture in Lesotho because the various exchange arrangements worked as channels of diffusion of wealth and facilitated access to land even for landless households. But I think that this strength is also a general weakness in the sense that it becomes fragile in a situation where the balance between different sorts of capitals available in a rural community is tipped due to changes in the macro environment.

### TO PLOUGH OR NOT TO PLOUGH?

Every year when the spring rains have softened the arid soil of Lowland Lesotho's fields, Basotho farmers have to ask themselves: *how will we be able to plough this season?* Two dimensions of Sesotho farming seem to be of great relevance when Basotho make up their mind. First, the high risk involved in the cash investments necessary for a farming season. Second, the importance of having a social support network in place that can facilitate the right implements at the right time.

Concerning the first issue, it is commonplace to hear Basotho farmers express that they have put their 'hope' into a particular field, a specific crop or some chicken. Their use of the concept of 'hope' in this context expresses well what Sesotho farming in fact is: a kind of 'gambling'. In order to illustrate what Basotho farmers mean by 'hoping' and to emphasise the elements of risk and uncertainty in contemporary Sesotho farming, I will briefly return to Molapo's budgetary calculations in relation to field One.

Field one is said to have a size of 1.2 ha and provide a harvest of between 800 kg and 2400 kg (10 – 30 80kg bags), depending on the climatic conditions and the amount of fertilisers applied. If sold to the Government mill the value is between 800 and 2400 Rand. If sold locally, the value is between 1600 and 4800 Rand (but the grinding must be paid, which is between 120 and 360 Rand for the total harvest at the local mill). The costs involved in ploughing field One in the mentioned season were as shown below.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Seed	116 Rand
Fertiliser	560 Rand
Tractor	150 Rand
Labour	200 Rand
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,026 Rand</b>

Thus, Molapo could make a significant loss if he sells to the Government mill. Only be selling locally, can he make some profit, depending on the outcome of the harvest. Purchasing 800 kg of grinded maize meal in the Supermarket (which is slightly cheaper than local prices) costs app. 1,350 Rand, meaning that in case of a bad harvest, Molapo could have purchased 800 Kg for roughly the same amount than he paid for having field One ploughed. Only in case of a good or medium harvest, Molapo can realistically 'hope' for a significant surplus in either cash or kind.

---

Nodal points are intersections of individual trajectories within a farming context, i.e. the social field that emerges when people farm together in one way or another.

Needless to say, there are other considerations of a social and cultural nature in Molapo's mind than pure cost-benefit 'bottom line thinking' when it came to planning for field One. However, the risk inherent in investing a large sum of money in the context of the uncertainties of the Lesotho climate shouldn't be underestimated. Especially when there are many other pressing needs, such as schooling and health-expenses.

The second issue concerns the social network that must be in place in order to be able to optimise resources. As we have seen above, farming in general and sharecropping in particular are of an extremely social nature. The tradition to co-operate is reflected in a wealth of vernacular terms for different forms of co-operation<sup>27</sup> in relation to agricultural activities. In this situation, the difference between being able to plough or not to plough becomes a matter of social capital more than anything else. Farming functions as social glue, but at the same time also a source of conflicts and disappointments. Stories about unreliable partners are many and frequently agreements are never implemented in practice. The ability to find the right partners at the right time in a climate of competition for good partners is a key agricultural skill more precious than knowledge about soil types, surface erosion, seed types, or fertiliser mixtures. Many farmers in Ha Sechaba are not as successful as Molapo because their social claims are not strong enough to facilitate what is needed to farm. Their fields lie fallow and they can only wait and try again in the next season<sup>28</sup>.

By investigating what resources are crucial for household's farming strategies at different stages on the domestic developmental cycle, it becomes clear that social resources of any kind are especially critical during stages of fission and decline. In a situation of retrenchment and unemployment, even younger households are in a stage of, if not decline, then stagnation because they do not control even a minimum of financial resources necessary to get into farming<sup>29</sup>. Social skills have of course always been important, but I suggest that their significance for successful farming has increased and that the current state of emergency is a result of too many people competing for fewer and fewer resources, making social capital in the form of the right agreements at the right time critical for success. One might think that retrenched miners return 'home' to their farm and that the relative significance of agriculture would increase as a result of unemployment. The opposite seems to be the case, however.

The above-described farming considerations, the financial risk as well as the social capital necessary for farming, point towards retrenched miners ways of coping with a condition where many of them are not as lucky as Molapo. For most retrenched / retired miners, investments of more than 1,000 Rand are impossible. Here Molapo's budget items can provide guidance. Retrenched miners stress the importance of becoming independent from a regular source of cash and that cattle are the best way to do this<sup>30</sup>. Cattle can do the ploughing and replace the tractor, at least in theory<sup>31</sup>. Cattle are free of charge as they graze on common grazing grounds, except the small vaccination costs as well as the costs for a

<sup>27</sup> (E.g. *thusana* = helping each other; *kopana* = joining together; *kopanetse* = working in group; *kalima* = borrowing)

<sup>28</sup> Some people in Sechaba chose to plant winter wheat. But, as one elderly male informant stated, "*this is just to keep the hunger away (mantša tlala)*".

<sup>29</sup> Two young men interviewed within Maseru's industrial area called *Stationeng* expressed it like this: "*We still live with our parents in Ha Mokhalinyane. Now we've come here for months but still no job. All jobs are for women only. We want to live by means of agriculture but without money it is impossible. The job is necessary but it's only to get life started. Fertilisers, seeds, a house, a wife – it all needs money.*"

<sup>30</sup> This is one reason why cattle are so important to Basotho. See also Ferguson (1990) for a discussion of the 'Bovine Mystique'.

<sup>31</sup> In practice, cattle are often extremely weak and/or sick after the winter and are hardly able to do this very demanding job.

herdboy<sup>32</sup>. Cattle provide manure, which can partly replace artificial fertilisers. Cattle can also be sold if one needs cash and cattle reproduce. Also, cattle can draw carts for harvesting, assist in hoeing, provide milk, etc. Those retrenched miners, who invested in cattle before retrenchment are considered to be lucky<sup>33</sup>. In practice, farmers lacking cash mix small amounts of fertilisers with larger amounts of cow dung. If they have cattle they plough with them. If not, they can hire a span, which is significantly cheaper than hiring a tractor. Labour costs can simply be reduced by not hiring labour for hoeing, but instead hoeing oneself or, equally frequent, not at all. All these cash expense reduction strategies have one significant disadvantage: they reduce the final output. “*Our fields are weak nowadays*”, as farmers in Sechaba used to say. Soil degradation as a result of erosion, maize monocropping and the continued use of fertilisers<sup>34</sup> is a fact that neither the rural dwellers of Lowland Lesotho nor a social analysis of the conditions of Sesotho farming can ignore.

The other main coping strategy for retrenched miners is having a good social support network in place. Having a ‘strong partner’ is clearly a preferred and ideal situation. However, the social dimension of farming strategies cannot be isolated from wider social processes and structures within and beyond the community. As Bourdieu (1976) has pointed out in his analysis of marriage in Southern France, the strategies deployed to ‘play the hand’ (where the ‘hand’ symbolises the children while ‘playing’ signifies the social skill necessary to secure good marriages for one’s children) cannot be isolated from other social strategies. Similar in Lowland Lesotho, where Basotho are engaged in a host of different social or livelihood-oriented strategies beyond farming. Also here, Basotho have a limited number of assets to play with. What they can ultimately do with them, depends on their skill in putting assets to work.

The multiplicity of livelihood strategies and the diversification of survival strategies also answer the question of what are those who could not plough going to eat? The answer is that most will somehow ‘muddle through’ while the poorest ones might receive food aid or, if lucky, some assistance from either the Chief or the Social Welfare Department in Maseru. Again, we must consider that farming in Lesotho itself is fairly costly, while buying food is relatively cheap, which means that the margin between growing food and buying food is highly dependent on the season’s condition and sometimes very small. Being able to farm does not mean that you will eat. Farming is a high-risk activity and in order to alleviate this risk, people have to diversify their livelihood portfolios and do all kinds of other things.

In practice, most households employ a combination strategy of expenditure reduction, increased efforts to find so-called ‘piece jobs’<sup>35</sup> and other income generation activities, selling out assets such as livestock as well as social networking strategies, especially ‘borrowing’ food or money from neighbours and relatives or purchasing ‘on credit’ from the

<sup>32</sup> Sons are often doing the job. In case herdboys are hired, they nowadays often have to be paid in cash.

<sup>33</sup> One might expect cattle numbers to be rising. However, the mean number of cattle per household in Sechaba is with 1.58 (my data from 2002) slightly lower than the national average for the Lowlands with 1.83 (Sechaba Consultants Survey in 1999). Total livestock numbers have been stagnant for a while, meaning that cattle numbers per household are declining due to population growth. There are a number of reasons for this stagnation despite the attraction, which cattle hold in retrenched miners’ eyes. First, rampant stock theft, which had affected nearly 10% of all households during 1999 (Sechaba 2000); second, unemployment itself meaning that fewer can invest in purchasing livestock; third, in Sechaba the grazing is limited and furthermore said to be affected by a pest destroying the grass.

<sup>34</sup> A causal relationship between soil degradation and the use of fertiliser is a concern expressed by local farmers. Seen from the biophysical perspective, Lesotho’s soil suffers from phosphorus deficiency, which is why fertilisers are necessary.

<sup>35</sup> *Piece Jobs* is the common term for all jobs that are paid per day. Most *piece jobs* are to be found in construction, roadwork or on the fields of the wealthy community members.



local spaza shops. Recently, a number of young women can help supporting their rural households through work in the Chinese-owned textile factories in Maseru and Maputsoe. This form of keeping going despite adverse circumstances is a firmly established way of life rather than mere survival strategy in case the harvest fails. As demonstrated above, Basotho can never count on their fields alone, which is why it may be more advantageous to them to keep open other options. The condition of wages being necessary for successful farming, which has developed during Basotho men's long involvement in the South African mining industry explains why Basotho in a situation of unemployment cannot simply return to their fields. On the contrary, the disintegration of the migrant labour system appears to have further marginalized the significance of farming in Basotho's livelihood portfolios and deepened the overall crisis of agriculture in Lesotho.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, it would seem reasonable to argue that Basotho place much emphasis on *rea lema*, because it is much easier to manipulate a discourse rather than to change the course and conditions of Sesotho farming and because it may be necessary to maintain a discourse in the light of a depressing reality. However, I hold that there is more to *rea lema* than Basotho trying to give the impression that everything is under control. Farming is not only deeply rooted in other social processes, but it simply constitutes the 'social backbone' of Basotho rural communities. Despite the overwhelming dependency of rural communities on male wages earned in urban centres in the RSA, for a majority, life in the mines was an extension of life in the village rather than a world for its own. Farming and the associated and necessary social networking activities form a set of social situations and social relations around farming-actors across and beyond the village.

Sesotho farming faces an apparent paradox. On the one hand and as argued above, farming activities function as social glue in a society characterised by considerable and disintegrating tensions along the axes of men and women, young and old, royal and common as well as residents and newcomers. *Rea lema* plays an important role in questions of identity and ethnicity because farming is an integrated part of Sesotho custom. It is thus not only a social performance (Richards 1993) but also a cultural performance. This function is actualised by the current economic depression resulting from mass unemployment among Basotho men. On the other hand, farming has long played a marginal economic role in Basotho's livelihood portfolios and this situation seems to have been acerbated by recent labour market changes.

*Rea lema* signifies how life should be – not how it is. The ideal of agriculture as the proper Sesotho road to economic independence stands in stark contrast to the marginal economic role farming plays in reality. Only in theory it can be done without cash. Literally it translates into "we are farmers". This should not be equalled with "we make a living by means of agriculture". Rather, it means, "we live in a society framed and tied together by farming activities". The significance of social skills in putting together and managing a season's farming has, I believe, increased as a result of the above-discussed labour market changes. The high level of uncertainty inherent in an existence without access to cash while living in a cash economy has made investments in the means of negotiation and social networks equally, if not more important than investments in production implements. Risk and uncertainty mean that actors need to keep open options in case the rains fail, job-hunting proves unsuccessful, a productive household member dies, the livestock is stolen or any other vicissitude of daily life so typical for Southern Africa today. The flexibility necessary to keep

open options is not achieved by a flexible agro-pastoral system itself but rather by means of, first, risk alleviation by means of livelihood diversification and, second, building up social claims and social capital by means of network investments.

The structural problem of agriculture in Lesotho is not merely, as expert discourses on agriculture in Lesotho frequently argue, rooted in an outdated land tenure system and/or poor farming practices. Exploring the social life of fields reveals an all-encompassing social system of magnitude within a community involving every single inhabitant in one way or another, including those abroad on migrant work. In order to understand the crisis of agricultural production, the social life of fields can give some clues. There is always a long story behind the decision to plough or not to plough. In investigating the conditions of Sesotho farming, the construction of social situation that form the background for particular person's farming tactics is a research strategy that takes the anthropologist far beyond the field and the community of the farmer. The concept of the social embeddedness of farming (Berry 1993) in multiple social, economic and political processes and institutions (Leach et al 1997) of regional and even global scale in an environment characterised by uncertainties of knowledge, livelihoods and ecologies (Mehta et al 1999) is anthropologically rewarding and fruitful. However, it moves the boundaries of the problem of Sesotho farming, and thus the possible entry points for a strategy to reverse the negative trends in crop production in Lesotho, almost out of sight.

## References

- Ashton, E.H. (1967), *The Basuto: a social study of traditional and modern Lesotho*, Oxford University Press
- Beck, U. (1991), *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*, London
- Berry, S. (1993), *No Condition is Permanent: the social dynamics of agrarian change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Wisconsin
- Bryceson, D. F. (2000), *Sustaining Rural Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa: Sustaining What for How Long? Multiple Livelihoods and Social Change Series No. 17*, Institute of Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester
- Bourdieu, P. (1976), *Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction*, in Forster, R. & Ranum, O. (eds.), *Family and Society*, London
- Central Bank of Lesotho (1991), *Migrant Workers Retrenchments: Implications for the Lesotho Economy*, Maseru
- Central Bank of Lesotho (2001), *Annual Report for 2000*, Maseru
- Chayanov, A.V. (1966), *On the Theory of Peasant Economy*, Homewood: Richard D. Irwin for the American economic Association
- Christensen, M.L. (1994), *Gender and Household Differences in a Soil Conservation Project*, Unit of Development Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden
- Devereux, S. & Maxwell, S. (eds.) (2000), *Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London
- Dyer, K. (2001), *Gender Relations in the Home and the Workplace: a case study of the gender implications of Lesotho's current economic development strategy for the clothing industry*, The Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho at Roma, Lesotho
- Eckert, J. (1980), *Lesotho's Land Tenure: An Analysis And Annotated Bibliography*, Special Bibliography No. 1, Lesotho Agricultural Sector Analysis Project, Ministry of Agriculture and Colorado State University

- Epprecht, M. (2000), *this matter of women is getting very bad: gender, development and politics in colonial Lesotho*, Pietermaritzburg University of Natal Press 2000
- Ferguson, J. (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press
- Fortes, M. (1958), Introduction, in Goody, J., *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, Cambridge
- Foulo, T. (1996), *Emerging Trends in the Migration of Basotho Miners*, Central Bank of Lesotho
- Franklin, A.S. (1995), *Land Law in Lesotho: The Politics of the 1979 Land Act*, Avebury, UK
- Gay, J. S. (1980), *Basotho Women's Options: a study of marital careers in rural Lesotho*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge
- Gill, S. (1993), *A Short History of Lesotho*, Morija Museum and Archives, Lesotho
- Goody, J. (1958), *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology No. 1, Cambridge
- Hastrup, K. & Fog Olwig, K. (1997), Introduction, in Hastrup, Kirsten & Olwig, Karen Fog (eds.) *Siting Culture: the shifting anthropological object*, London
- Leach, M. & Mearns, R. & Scoones, I. (1997), *Environmental Entitlements: dynamics and institutions in community-based natural resource management*, IDS Discussion Paper 359, Institute of Development Studies
- Long, N. and Long, A. (eds.) (1992), *Battlefields of Knowledge*, London
- Long, N. & Villareal, M. (1994), *The interweaving of knowledge and power in development interfaces*, in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J. (eds.) *Beyond Farmer First: rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice*, London
- Mehta, L. & Leach, M. & Newell, P. & Scoones, I. & Sivaramakrishnan, K. & Way, S. (1999), *Exploring Understandings of Institutions and Uncertainty: new directions in natural resource management*, IDS Discussion Paper 372, Institute of Development Studies
- Murray, C. (1976), *Marital Strategy in Lesotho: the redistribution of migrant earnings*, in *African Studies*, Volume 35, No.1, 1976
- Murray, C. (1979), *The Work of Men, Women and the Ancestors: Social reproduction in the Periphery of Southern Africa*, in Wallman, S. 1979, *Social Anthropology of Work*, London
- Murray, C. (1981), *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*, African Studies Series, Cambridge
- Phororo, D.R. (1999), *Agriculture and poverty in Lesotho*, unpublished manus
- Prah, K. (1989), *Land degradation and Class Struggle in Rural Lesotho*, in Hjort af Ornäs, A. and Salih, M. (eds.) *Ecology and Politics: Environmental Stress and Security in Africa*, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Sweden
- Richards, P. (1993), *Cultivation: knowledge or performance*, in Hobart, Marc (ed.) *An anthropological critique of development: the growth of ignorance*, London
- Robertson, A.F. (1987), *Lesotho: seahlolo and lihalefote*, in Robertson, A.F., *The Dynamics of Productive Relationships: African share contracts in comparative perspective*, Cambridge University Press
- Salm, A. & Grant, W. & Green, T. & Haycock, J. & Raimondo, J. (2002), *Lesotho Garment Industry Subsector Study for the Government of Lesotho*, Maseru
- Scoones, I. & Thompson, J. (1994), Introduction, in Scoones, I. & Thompson, J. (eds.) *Beyond Farmer First: rural people's knowledge, agricultural research and extension practice*, London

- Showers, B. K. (1982), Assessment of the Land Use Potential at Ha Makhopo, Lesotho: a holistic approach to agricultural evaluation, Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University
- Sechaba Consultants (1991), Poverty Mapping Exercise, Lesotho
- Sechaba Consultants (1994), Poverty Mapping Exercise, Lesotho
- Sechaba Consultants (2000), Poverty and Livelihoods in Lesotho 1999: more than a mapping exercise, Lesotho
- Spiegel, A.D. (1979), Migrant Labour Remittances, the Developmental Cycle and Rural Differentiation in a Lesotho Community, M.A. Thesis, University of Cape Town
- Spiegel, A.D. (1980), Rural Differentiation and the Diffusion of Migrant Labour Remittances in Lesotho, in Philip Mayer (ed.) *Black Villagers in and Industrial Society*
- Turner, S. (1978), *Sesotho Farming: The Conditions and Prosperity of Agriculture in the Lowlands and Foothills of Lesotho*, Ph.D. Dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London
- Wallman, S. (1969), *Take Out Hunger: Two Case Studies of Rural Development in Basutholand*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 39, London
- Warren, K. & Borque, S. (1991), Women, Technology, and International Development Ideologies: Analyzing Feminist Voices, in di Leonardo, Micaela (ed.) *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Post-modern Era*, Berkeley
- Westermann, G. (1999), Survey on Migrant Workers' Retrenchment, Irish Consulate, Lesotho
- Woodhouse, P. (2002), *Natural Resource Management and Chronic Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa: an overview paper*, Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Working Paper 14, Manchester