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## Land, botho and identity in Thomas Mofolo's novels

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### Land, botho and identity in Thomas Mofolo's novels

*Thomas Mofolo's literary output belongs to a plethora of discourses which address the meaning of self-identification in colonial and precolonial settings. Focusing on all three novels by Mofolo, the main aim of this article is to demonstrate how he constructs the meaning of identity through the narratives of land, humanistic values and nationhood. Reference is made to national debates and the realities of Lesotho in the nineteenth century that underpin the structure of these narratives. The article highlights Mofolo's insistence on botho, a humanistic value in Basotho society portrayed as an age-old indigenous consciousness antecedent to Christianity and Western influences. In *Pitseng* (1910) and *Moeti oa Bochabela* (1907), Mofolo substantiates botho's significance through a depiction of heroism, faith and a cultural fusion that entails a shifting of loyalties between Sesotho culture, on the one hand, and Christian and Western values on the other. In *Chaka* (1925), the author intertwines references to Sotho and Nguni cultures to rationalise the meaning of botho as the basis of individual and social identity. Consequently, the article demonstrates how Mofolo's works implicitly translate aspects of botho consciousness into a social, religious, economic and political practice.*

**Keywords:** botho, nationhood, self-identification, Thomas Mofolo.

#### Introduction

Mofolo's novel *Pitseng* (1910) (*Pitseng: The search for true love*) is a conversion narrative which deals with the transition of society from tradition to modernity. The author utilises a double quest narrative and a love story to represent major challenges facing the Basotho nation of the colonial epoch. The protagonist Katse is an evangelist who brings literacy and Christianity to the Pitseng valley where his predecessors have failed because of their lack of compassion for rural society. Katse's success is based on his humanistic approach to the Christian message. He becomes a role model for two young Christians, Alfred Phakoe and Aria Sebaka, who marry through his influence and become members of the future elite of a nascent modern Lesotho.

The intention of this article is to demonstrate the link between Lesotho's social history and the manner in which Mofolo represents the landscape, language, culture, religion and national history in his work to forge a positive image of a nation arguing for economic and political autonomy. Mofolo's writing relies heavily on history and various discourses of the 1880s and the early 1900s to create a historically meaningful text which brings to light the interconnectedness between the real and the fictive.

The article argues that the land narrative, in particular, emerges as a mnemonic practice employed to forge a national identity of heroism. The representation of the beauty of the landscape (especially in *Pitseng*) reveals landscape awareness as a conscious aesthetic experience of land and of its features. It is an individual as well as a collective experience which offers readers an insider perspective into the range of reactions provoked by features of Lesotho's landscape such as its physical geography, the flora and the fauna of the region which all instill the pride of belonging to a unique African landscape.

I argue that the uniqueness of the landscape derives from the assertiveness of the observer and a narrative voice which projects a positive appraisal of the observed features of the landscape to which meanings are attached. Such meanings lead to the interpretations of one's identity which is defined in terms of ethnic origins, language, and culture. There follows an analysis of places such as villages, their names, ethnic belongingness of social leaders and inhabitants, language and the societal use of space which are a source of pride for Basotho nationals.

The land narrative tries to move beyond the knowledge of the local landscape of *Pitseng* to offer the possibility to be open to surrounding landscapes different from familiar settings. Travel is one way of traversing a diversity of landscapes such as the ones from the Southern African region covered by the hero Alfred on his educational tours. Exposure leads to empathy with other Africans in the region, but also reinforces Alfred's attachment to his identity.

Identity is defined in part by one's relation to the "other". Being Mosotho in *Pitseng* is incompatible with being European. The heroism of the Basotho is expressed as a rejection of the European presence in Lesotho and as a disapproval of Western ways. Europeans are therefore excluded from Lesotho's landscape. There are no Europeans in Lesotho's villages or social as well as economic institutions. Their English language and Western modes of thinking are rejected. The point to make here is that Mofolo does not identify Christianity as a European preserve, and the main reason for the rejection of Westerners is their pursuit of territorial conquest which is perceived as a threat to the Basotho as a nation. The analysis of two colonial wars in the text shows the heroism of the Basotho and the pride with which they regard sites of historical memories, which remind them of their heroic defence of their country.

Reading *Pitseng* together with the author's first novel, *Moeti oa bochabela* (*Traveller to the East*), and his last, *Chaka*, one sees how Mofolo's narrative of land broadens to include the contested space of human values by traditional culture and Christianity. The discourse on human values focuses on the *botho* value which is the ethos of social identity and survival in traditional society, but a means to spiritual salvation in Christianity. Drawing from the exclusivist Christian binaries of Christian/heathen, generation/degeneration, as well as the Western notions of progress and modernity, Mofolo's harsh discourse in the first texts, which equates lack of Western education

with inhumanity, for instance, “children lived like animals, lacking education” (*Search for love* 9), sets the foundation for a Christian/Western identity which effaces the authority and dignity of *botho* as the purview of uneducated men and women. In some instances, however, Mofolo extols tradition and portrays it in a positive light.

The voice of tradition permeates Mofolo’s last novel *Chaka* which focuses on the ethos of *botho* as a condition for peace. This article argues that the novel *Chaka*, like other Sesotho narratives of the violence of the *lifaqane* era, embodies a mnemonic procedure that retrieves a collective experience of violence in order to condemn the inhumanity of warfare and its consequences on human life. The *lifaqane* hardships are associated with the rise of the Zulu kingdom and are invoked to represent the uncertain future in the face of a threatening new form of violence and inhumanity which the Basotho were fighting against during Mofolo’s time, that of becoming servants ruled by *umlungu*, the white man in the Union of South Africa, which was established in 1910, the year the *Chaka* manuscript had just been completed and submitted for publication (Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo* 144).

#### **The land narrative in *Pitseng***

*Pitseng* begins with the voice of an omniscient narrator whose gaze on the landscape communicates a sensitive description of the mountainous highlands of the south-eastern part of Lesotho, with specific reference to the Maloti mountain range, which has become a national symbol. The narrator describes representative images of Lesotho’s landscape: the rugged snow-capped mountains and their fresh water sources, heights and cold fresh air. The poetic style in which the abundance of nature is described rekindles emotions as the text praises the beauty of the countryside and bestows its inhabitants with a sense of pride in being a mountain people belonging to “a country that has a great abundance of water, with springs that bubble all over, with many rivulets, with marshes, with mountains, and which has many arable lands, where many animals prosper and multiply” (*Pitseng* 1).

Mofolo’s landscapes echo one another. The above poetic prose on the beauty of Lesotho is expressed repeatedly in the first novel: “the country was full of water, the springs were bubbling everywhere; the little streams were running swiftly, murmuring pleasantly over the beds of sand and stones, the water was clear, the drinking places were full, only waiting for the cattle, the springs were waiting only for the animals to drink” (*Traveller* 30).

The land narrative in *Pitseng* often uses the picturesque imagery of livestock to illustrate the country’s special feature as a pastoral society in descriptions such as: “Higher up still in the trees and bushes the mountains are white from the groups of goats feeding on the tree leaves” (*Pitseng* 190). Furthermore, the narrator introduces a human element in his appraisal of the land’s beauty. He uses a collective voice that authenticates an indigenous insider perspective. The communal voice of the opening

sentence of the novel: "Lesotho has always been a country loved by us, Basotho", establishes a collective reawakening of the narrator and the local reader's attachment to a shared territory described elsewhere in the text as an "exceedingly beautiful country" (*Pitseng* 25). Landscape is revealed as an emotive subject, a psychological phenomenon evidenced by the experience of pleasure and peacefulness where "[t]he beauty of the scenery—the mountain peaks, the gorges of different depths, the rivers and their tributaries—is pleasing, exciting, and calming at the same time" (*Pitseng* 115).

The landscape narrative comprises a unifying symbol of national identity and national pride for a Basotho nation of diverse origins now belonging to the same territory, language and culture. In the conventions of orature, place names inscribe names of chiefs and royal leaders on the physical landscape to symbolise the fatherland. In Mekenye's words, "The chiefs were the caretakers of the land and the nation on behalf of the people". In other words, "Chieftainship and land represented African autonomy" ("Re-Examination" 79). The novel's topography upholds an identity formation process defined by the chief's totemic belongingness which is indicated by his clan's descent, history and kin relationships: the village of Phoka, the village of Mosia (*Pitseng* 3). In these examples, the chiefs' names refer to the totem of the Hare (Phoka) and Mosia, the name of the founder of the Basia clan. In addition, place names reveal the ethnic or cultural groups they designate. For example, place names such as "Phatla, Lumisi, Tondini, Ginvigazi and Mzimba" (*Pitseng* 3) designate villages occupied and administered by the Bathepu chiefs, a Xhosa speaking minority of the south-eastern part of the country. The configuration of space thus acclaims chieftainship and legitimises the occupation of Lesotho by the Basotho of Sotho and Xhosa descent.

The demarcation of villages, however, reflects some degree of intolerance towards cultural diversity in that in some villages, the Basotho of both Sotho and Xhosa descent intermingle whereas other villages consist exclusively of inhabitants of Xhosa origin who are isolated and located "way yonder into the cliffs" (*Pitseng* 3). Tensions sometimes erupt between the Basotho and the Xhosa groups as in the case when Basotho men coming from a beer-drinking party from a Xhosa village regroup as they traverse a village occupied by the Basotho and then fight a Mothepu man who walks in their midst. Their comfort in being in "Basotho territory" and the Mothepu's conceived "otherness" justify aggression. This gratuitous violence reveals suppressed tensions that have been reinforced by group differentiation and marginalisation of the Xhosa cultural group.

This effect of the demarcation of villages is seen elsewhere in the novel when Alfred's mother warns him against marrying a woman of Nguni descent. When she declares, "Oh, my child, I hope you did not fall in love with a Letebele. I am very afraid of those people" (*Pitseng* 165), Alfred's mother exploits the settlement

patterns of the Ngunis who live in villages which do not intermingle with Basotho as a reason to designate them as the different “other”, located outside the confines of the dominant group. When she claims, “the Matebele don’t like us” (*Pitseng* 141), she is projecting her latent dislike of the Ngunis and consequently discredits them as a group. Marriage, isolation and fear reinforce the exclusion and marginalisation of the Ngunis from a common identity with the Basotho of Sotho descent. Herein lies the paradox of intergroup relations and the novel’s collective “we”, which though seemingly homogeneous, almost exclusively represents the emotive bond amongst the dominant majority, the Sotho language group.

Mofolo’s landscape reconstructs rural life and the social use of space in a manner that celebrates pride in belonging to a social group with communal values and the ethos of a self-reliant and prosperous pastoral society. This is achieved by offering a landscape and a space demarcated by the different activities of agricultural production. The narrative presents a landscape of fertility, rich in agricultural resources, where the river’s confluences and tributaries provide water which the inhabitants skilfully use for irrigation of vegetables and orchard plantations. The chief of Phoka village is particularly praised for being “a man who liked agriculture very much, and he [...] led the water with furrows from among the cliffs to irrigate his orchards” (*Pitseng* 3). Livestock, maize, wheat and sorghum production in *Pitseng* are lauded for surpassing other regions in Lesotho. By designating the population collectively as “inhabitants, men, women, girls and herdboys”, who engage in livestock rearing, farming and hunting, the land narrative enforces the collective engagement of Basotho in economic self-reliance.

The land narrative also reveals landscape as an emotive experience which awakens patriotic sentiments. A relationship between song, mobility and the fatherland is enacted when the heroine Aria, at the young age of twelve, contemplates the beauty of the landscape on her way back from the mission school. Impressed by the beauty of nature, she sings in awe the national anthem of the Basotho: “*Lesotho fatše la bo nta’ a rona*” (Lesotho, land of our fathers) (*Pitseng* 29). By “praising her country that she loves very much” (29), Aria reasserts her identity through her awareness of her love for the Sesotho language. She sings Sesotho songs “understanding their meaning and whose words speak of a person’s feelings, or what she is seeing with her eyes” (*Pitseng* 29). She rejects a European identity and “does not sing European songs since she does not understand what they are saying” (*Pitseng* 29). Here, the author depicts landscape as a space for profound reflection on identity inspired by being in communion with the land. The narrator’s statement on the Sesotho language may be read as an authorial rejection of English as a language of identity formation. It can also be understood as a justification for the deliberate choice of Sesotho as the appropriate language of artistic creativity. Incidentally, the novel’s comments on the Sesotho language portray a diaglossic relationship with other African languages of Southern Africa. Sesotho is

depicted as a romantic language: “a very beautiful language, a language with certain musical qualities of its own, which is pleasing to [the] ears” (*Pitseng* 57). A non-native speaker courting in Sesotho speaks a “mutilated language” (*Pitseng* 58), contrary to authentic Basotho suitors who use poetic language, a source of pride for the narrator who exalts the oratory skills of his fellow Basotho young men.

Equally important is the fact that, despite the rejection of Western ways and of European presence through the affective response to the landscape, the Basotho accept the greatness of their African neighbours as can be seen in the novel’s depiction of the Southern African space. It is through Alfred’s curiosity to learn that the reader gets to see the landscape of the region. The narrative portrays a realist landscape of Lesotho, South Africa, Barotseland (present day northern Zambia) and Bulawayo in present day Zimbabwe by naming these countries, their real cities and mountains and by describing their urban or rural landscapes. The geography of the region is an open space without physical frontiers, enabling freedom of movement and perpetual mobility in a free zone for the interaction of characters and circulation of ideas. The Southern African region’s physical, linguistic and cultural landscapes are represented through the gaze of mobile characters, in particular the hero, Alfred, who enables the reader to perceive it as a multicultural and multilingual setting with the necessary characteristics to advance cultural plurality.

The possibility of multiculturalism comes with the quest for education, which begins locally in Pitseng where school children in their uniform decorate the visual and aural landscapes as they travel daily from their respective villages singing all the way to and from school. It is through the landscape description of the month of January at the beginning of the South African educational year, for example, that the novel announces Alfred’s departure to Cape Town with other Basotho students for higher education, where, later, his work and professionalism as a teacher are highly esteemed. In this case, the narrative retells some autobiographical details. According to Mofolo’s letter to G. H. Franz, the author left Lesotho in 1902 and “became a teacher at Bensonvale Institution” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene viii). Incidentally, Mofolo’s young hero Alfred makes a final return from South Africa to Lesotho at the end of the war in 1902 to teach in Pitseng.

Apart from the heroism of the Basotho in Southern Africa, the land narrative brings to memory a successful historic event of Basotho missionary work in Barotseland initiated by the French missionary François Coillard in 1884 (Gill 140). As he traverses Lesotho’s landscape, on his first trip to college in South Africa, Alfred imagines how the same journey was taken by students from Pitseng who left for far-away Barotseland in Zambia. In a pride that celebrates “a mission by Africans to Africans” (Gill 140), the narrative voice goes on to recount the story of correspondence between the Basotho teachers and school children in the homeland and the diaspora. It praises the Basotho for their role in developing literacy in Barotseland.

Travel accounts narrated through Alfred's educational tourism as he visits different landscapes bear a textual resemblance to the actual correspondence of Basotho missionaries in Barotseland writing to families in Lesotho through the *Leselinyana la Lesotho* newspaper in a regular column *Tsa Borotse* (News from Borotse)—as they relate the cultural mores of the host country (see, for example, Masunyane). Paradoxically, while the novel endorses cultural exchange in Barotseland, initiated by Basotho, it is against this cultural pluralism that the novel constructs the image of a "true Mosotho" (*Pitseng* 52) in the character of Alfred who finds the cultural mores of other nations strange and as a result decides to resist "foreign influence". He is determined that being "among strangers and in a strange land, he should remain a true Mosotho, live like a Mosotho, just as if he were still at his home in Pitseng" (*Pitseng* 52). This rejection of a transnational and transcultural identity frustrates the hopes of the open-ended dialogue of cultures and nations which is implied in the depiction of the Southern African region as an Africa without frontiers.

The rejection of Western ways and identity is further enforced in the novel by a visible absence of Western cartographic representations from the territorial landscape of Lesotho, in what Louise Bethlehem (28) characterises as "the refusal of the landscape to conform to familiar European aesthetic categories". Mountains and their snow peaks (the Wittenberg mountains near Herschel [Bethlehem 12]) serve as a compass for travellers. Cardinal points are expressed by the tradition of naming territory after chiefs. In particular, Matsieng, the royal village of the paramount chief, is used as a point of reference for describing distant locations: "When a person begins to reach Titima's village, coming from the direction of Matsieng" (*Pitseng* 3). Moreover, the land narrative occludes European merchants, missionaries, educators and colonial administrators from Lesotho's landscape. While Chinese, Indians and Europeans inhabit South Africa and Alfred "admires how the economic life of the country operated", he observes with a sense of pride that "[a]t his home, in Pitseng, there were no white traders though there were shops" (*Pitseng* 54). The observation is a subversive statement which contests the monopoly of European entrepreneurs over trade (an important platform for the Basotho Progressive Association at the time) and at the same time denies them rights to land ownership. It is a statement that praises Basotho entrepreneurs for their accomplishments and argues for their economic empowerment in their homeland. The following laudatory description of Mafeteng town is another example that intertwines land and economic empowerment issues:

Many official government jobs are in the hands of Basotho. These include the inspector of the water piped into Mafeteng from the mountains, who is a Mosotho. The postal service to and from Quthing is operated by a Mosotho using his own cart, his own horses, and his own driver. In fact there is now a press owned and operated by Basotho. Everything pertaining to the progress and development of the nation is to be found in this town. (*Pitseng* 122)

Mofolo's honouring of accomplishments by Basotho entrepreneurs, in particular the establishment of a press, suggest an implicitly subversive criticism of press censorship by his mentors, the French missionaries. According to Derek Jones, Solomon Monne and Abimael Tlale were members of the Basotho Progressive Association (having joined in 1904 and 1907 respectively), the first Basotho to run a local printing firm in Lesotho, in Mafeteng (1403). Their newspaper, *Naleli ea Lesotho*, published in English and Sesotho, was read in Lesotho and South Africa. Maloka explains that the newspaper "balance[d] views expressed by *Leselinyana* which tended to be used as an evangelisation tool by the missionaries" (14–5). Mofolo pays homage to this event which challenges missionary censorship and monopoly over the press. He sees the establishment of an indigenous press as a sign of emancipation and progress.

The exclusion of Westerners from Lesotho's landscape is expressed further in the novel as a disapproval of their wars of conquest. The landscape narrative re-enacts colonial wars and celebrates the heroism of Basotho in defeating European colonialism.

Set in the period between two significant historical moments, the end of two colonial wars, that is, the 1880–1 anti-colonial Gun War—*Ntoa ea Lithunya*—also known as the Disarmament War, and a year after the end of the 1899–1902 Anglo-Boer War—*Ntoa ea Maburu*—(*Pitseng* 9, 83), the choice of the novel's time frame reflects a historical consciousness which locates the essence of the story of *Pitseng* in the context of dispossession and reconstruction of society peculiar to the aftermath of colonial wars. The historical 1880 war broke out when the British colonial government imposed a disarmament law over its African subjects in the then Cape Colony. The Basotho resisted. According to Gill (129): "the Basotho were the only Africans in Southern Africa who were left in the possession of their arms". Gill explains the consequences of the Gun War on settlement patterns in the highlands of Lesotho where landless Basotho occupied the virgin Maloti mountainous area previously the property of chiefs. Mission churches and schools were built to reach the newly established population. The atmosphere of victory prevalent after the war is said to have rendered Basotho "more intensely nationalistic" (134, 135).

The land narrative in *Pitseng* is emblematic of the nationalistic sentiments following the Gun War. For instance, Aria visits the town of Mafeteng, a real town in the South of Lesotho. Her visit offers the narrator discursive space to relate the 1880–1 Gun War from a point of view which pays homage to Basotho heroism. The landscape of the Qalabane mountain in Mafeteng leads the narrator to describe the Qalabane War, *Ntoa ea Qalabane* which was fought during the historical Gun War. It was led in the South in August 1880 by one of Moshoeshe's sons, Lerotholi, at the villages of Maboloka and Qalabane in the Mafeteng district (Mahao 108). The novel satirises the British for their defeat in Qalabane at the hands of determined Basotho armies:

But it is also sad to remember that [...] the great and furious Battle of Qalabane was fought between the invading forces of the whites and the Basotho, one that the Brit-



ish do not forget because of the losses they sustained. To this day there are bones to be found which are either human or animal or both. There are also bottles that may have contained liquor that is further evidence that the British were once there in large numbers, because they are very fond of liquor. Mafeteng is a town that was once besieged for a long time during the War of the Guns. (*Pitseng* 121).

Mofolo's historical reference to the Gun War is a reconstruction of national memory. As he rewrites the war, Mofolo inscribes history on the landscape by honouring Mafeteng and Qalabane as a historic town and mountain respectively. Both are lauded as "historical sites of memory" associated with resistance, victory and self-determination. The novel implicitly contributes towards forging Basothos' national image on the basis of an idealised national history of heroism, a metaphor for what Aerni-Flessler interprets as "Basotho resistance to foreign incursions, European and African" (*Pitseng* 64).

The novel's assertion of heroic resistance to European conquest is illustrated further by the imagery of snow. During the winter of 1902, Alfred returns from South Africa where his mentor Katse has just died. He is forced to hide in a cave on account of the historical "Great Snow" of that year, which fell at the end of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 (*Pitseng* 167). The War was also called the Peace War because of the event of the great historical snow.

According to Mekenye, the historical relevance of the Anglo-Boer War is that it ended with the Vereeniging Treaty which resolved to incorporate African peoples into the Union of South Africa, a resolution which the Basotho rejected. The Basothos' resolve for sovereignty concretised later in 1909 when a delegation of their chiefs went to England on behalf of King Letsie II to plead with the British not to include Lesotho as part of South Africa (Mekenye, "African Role" 136). Consequently, Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland became protectorates of Great Britain. Mekenye argues that "it was the Africans (principally the chiefs and the Western-educated elite of the affected territories) and not Great Britain who played the primary role in the defeat of South African colonialism during the formation of the Union in 1910" (128).

The landscape of snow, Basotho symbol for peace, expresses the Basothos' heroism in safeguarding their political autonomy. Mofolo uses the landscape of winter and snow to document Lesotho's history as follows: "Some people held the belief that that snow had come to clean the earth of the enormous pools of blood that was spilled in the war because it fell shortly after the signing of the peace agreement" (*Pitseng* 183). This is the same symbolism that welcomed the evangelist, Katse, only this time, it celebrates Alfred's takeover as Katse's successor. His marriage to Aria happens in January 1903, during summer rains, in a landscape full of joyful sounds of birds and animals. It is a landscape of abundance which celebrates growth and development: "the grass [is] tall and lush and deep green; it is a time when fruit trees

are laden with fruit; it is a time when the domestic animals look their best because they would have recently shed their wool" (189–90). The landscape narrative thus presents a symbolic embrace of the new leadership roles of Alfred and Aria as the mission-educated elite of a country on its way to political autonomy.

As the novel embraces the advent of self-determination, the landscape narrative is confronted with contradictions coming from the transition from tradition to modernity. This is expressed in the contradictions of place. Despite being a symbol of pride and heroism because of its wars and the absence of Westerners, "Mafeteng was also known for having embraced European education" (*Pitseng* 122). Damane confirms that during Mofolo's time, Mafeteng was the most developed town in Lesotho (*Pitseng* 75). At this juncture, the land narrative lauds Mofolo's native town for being at the crossroads of Basotho nationalism and European civilisation. The narrative embraces the European idea of progress and sets Mafeteng as a benchmark for the country's transition into modernity. The landscape of modernity is associated with economic empowerment and "European-style" items. It describes modern houses in Mafeteng and their interior, with detailed descriptions of novelties such as the different rooms and their functions, windows, ornaments, utensils, stoves, ceilings, floors and beds whose presence is synonymous with individual prestige. This landscape presents a different sense of pride from the habitual collective experience. It is a pride that distinguishes the haves and the have-nots, which empowers and humiliates at the same time. As an illustration, while on the one hand the Basotho women are empowered by the European-style items which relieve them of "hard physical labor", the identity of these women is misleading because ordinary rural folk mistake them for "white middleclass persons" and approach them with humility (*Pitseng* 121–2). The landscape of modernity brings with it contradictions of an ambiguous identity.

### **The *botho* humanistic value**

*Botho* emerges as the essence of individual and social identity formation in Mofolo's three novels. The author reinforces this value by making it the core element that determines the construction of hero figures and a humane society. In this section, I illustrate how Mofolo constructs community-oriented heroes (Fekisi and Katse) in *Moeti oa Bochabela* and *Pitseng* through *botho*. I also show how the construction of a humane society is undermined by Christianity and in *Chaka* by the lack of human compassion.

The essence of *botho*, "human compassion" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 105) is captured in Mphasha's description of cultural meaning as being "symbolic of tradition forming an indefinite continuum from the past to the future" (190). The recurrence of this value in Mofolo's fictive societies which date from before, during and after the historical *lifaqane* era makes the notion of human compassion a cultural resource that remains invariable despite epochal changes.

Derived from the word *motho* meaning “a person, a human being”, the nominal form *botho* refers on the one hand, to the state of being human “in appearance” and “knowing how to speak” (*Traveller* 1); on the other hand, the cultural reference is obtained through a shift in meaning to signify the state of being not just a human being but a person with humanity. In this sense, a person becomes *motho* by accomplishing visible acts of compassion towards members of the society and outsiders. The cultural meaning of *motho* refers to a compassionate, kindhearted person who treats others with humanity; the word is sometimes emphasised in italics and bold letters in Sesotho novels. The *botho* value underpins the ethos of a humane society.

Fekisi’s heroism is demonstrated through an interplay of discourses of tradition and Christianity. He comes from the ordinary background of a cattle-keeping tradition of the pre-colonial era but appropriates the Christian language to inquire about God and the mysteries of the universe. His metaphysical questions about the origins of the universe point to the existence of God and bear a textual resemblance to the conversations of early Basotho converts with French missionaries (*Pitseng* 14; see also Casalis’s conversation with the first Mosotho convert [Sekhesa 239]). The description of Fekisi as “a man in the full meaning of the word ‘man’, a man as the Creator planned man to be, a true image of Him who made all things visible and invisible...” (*Pitseng* 1) draws from the Christian discourse to complement the Sesotho cultural definition of *botho*.

From a cultural point of view, Fekisi’s heroism develops not only from his being a “model herdboys” in terms of his cattle-herding skills, but especially because of his compassion. He advocates a cultural transformation grounded on humanity and human rights, thereby challenging the existing “social order of cattle-keeping”, and the “discourses of cattle-keeping” (Hofmeyr 147). Social relationships amongst herders are determined by relations of power where the “principal herder”, the *mampoli*, is represented as a coercive leader who maintains uncompromising discipline. Fekisi challenges the authority of the *mampoli* and markers of masculinity such as stick fighting which he dismisses as violent. His arguments for the equality and protection of young and weak herders are unprecedented. Fekisi’s heroism based on human compassion is a radical departure from the folklore tradition and panegyric poetry of the Basotho, where heroism is often associated with masculinity, power and war imagery.

Fekisi’s undertaking to humanise the “social order of cattle-keeping” earns him the cultural description of *motho*. The narrative voice repeatedly uses the word *motho* to reinforce this identity: “[...] *motho lipuong, motho liketsong, motho mekhoeng; motho sephiring le pontšeng, motho bohlokong le thabong, boiketlong le bothateng, tlaleng le naleng*” (*Moeti* 1) (“[...] a man in speech, in actions, in all his habits; a man in secret and openly, a man in grief and joy; in good fortune and bad; in hunger and plenty” [*Traveller* 1]).

Fekisi is also qualified by the praise name, he “who gets up with the same heart

as yesterday" (*Pitseng* 1), (*ngoana oa se-tsoha-le-pelo-ea-maobane*) drawn from a Sesotho idiom that designates a peaceful and warmhearted person. Although he has masculine qualities needed for material survival, and is the very model of "a strong man and a great warrior when it comes to sticks" (*Pitseng* 8), unusually he complements these physical traits with compassion: "He is good, he is kind, he is truthful" (*Pitseng* 8), moral attributes which are reiterated throughout the novel to complete the definition of humanity. By acknowledging Fekisi's compassion and uniqueness, traditional society in Mofolo's novel reconnects with its own values and validates new ones intended to transform established social practices and discourses.

Like that of Fekisi, Katse's heroism unfolds in a context of cultural exchange between tradition, Christianity/Western values and modernity. He is an evangelist/teacher in a colonial society in transition. He arrives in Pitseng in snow, a prophetic event which in Sesotho symbolism presages peace. As a result, villagers know intuitively that his "heart is white, and the affairs about which he comes are also like that" (*Search for True Love* 19). The prophetic statement captures the essence of *botho* through the imagery of peace and "virtues of the heart", where the metaphor of a white heart represents a peaceful and joyful character disposition.

Upon his arrival in Pitseng, Katse finds a society of non-believers who attach great importance to human compassion, but who have been disappointed by the lack of humanity shown by his predecessors, a fact that has led to indifference towards the Christian message and its relevance to everyday life. The principle of human compassion is introduced early in the novel against the background of resistance to a Biblical Christianity which does not resonate with cultural values. Society silently notices when a person is not compassionate; when he "has no regard" for others and is "a person who is hard to approach, and who is not used to helping others, who is not generous [...]" (*Pitseng* 33).

The silent scrutiny of society denotes the power of culture and of the collectivist spirit. It is for this reason that Christianity, devoid of compassion, is treated with cynicism, which is not only an admission of human limitations and an awareness of tension between words and deeds, but also a judgement on the authenticity of Christian humanitarianism and discourse. Where Christianity fails to be compassionate, the community satirises the biblical word and says that "there is no one except Jesus" that can accomplish the biblical message (*Pitseng* 33). Therefore, Christianity becomes culturally meaningful only when it strikes a chord with the community's cultural principles. This explains why Katse, unlike his predecessors, "opened [...] the hearts of all the people, and they allowed their children to go to school, and they too came to be taught at the church [...]" (*Pitseng* 19). The women of Pitseng, associated with motherhood and compassion, call for blessings for Katse: "that he may not lose his kind heart"—"*a se ka lahla pelo ea hae e ntle*" (15)—translated in the novel: "that he may continue to do good" (*Pitseng* 18).

Katse becomes a hero only because society has ascertained the genuineness of his compassionate deeds and his proselytising. From this point on, notions of “a complete person, a true human being, a wholesome person, someone with integrity, a complete person with a constant personality” are repeatedly emphasised throughout the novel. These are complemented by a series of deeds which are narrated in terms such as “kind heart [...] welcome and respect [...] hospitality [...] gratitude [...] selfless acts [...] self-sacrifice [...] things of peace [...] large heartedness” (*Pitseng* 19), and many others which make the novel *Pitseng* a compendium of cultural meanings of the *botho* concept. Mofolo uses this elaborate “naming” of deeds and virtues which permeates the novel in order to reiterate human compassion as the essence of identity formation in a setting of contact with Christianity, Western values and modernity.

Fekisi and Katse are community-oriented heroes to the extent that their acts of compassion are directed towards rescuing and promoting the well-being of society. Yet, their moral perfection and individualism alienate them from the material world by drawing them to the realm of the spiritual. Fekisi rejects society and abandons it in search of spiritual salvation. He learns about the myths and the cosmology of his culture which confirm that spiritual survival cannot come from within society. He is taught about “God and the ancestors” through an anachronistic Sesotho mythology which assumes that pre-colonial society had a knowledge of the Christian God. Mofolo’s anachronism regarding pre-colonial and Christian beliefs is laden with missionary discourse on parallels between Basotho tradition and Christianity (see Machobane). The apparent historical contradiction is seen by Kunene as “a trap to which the new Christian faith strongly predisposed the Basotho, viz., finding facile parallels to their own traditions in the Bible” (“Leselinyana” 157). The novel’s Sesotho mythology paradoxically negates the *botho* cultural value by substantiating the notion of pre-colonial society as profoundly immoral, that which rationalises Fekisi’s search for “righteousness because all men hate it” (*Pitseng* 48–49).

Before his departure Fekisi reflects on the meaning of exile. He argues for moral autonomy by opting for individual over communal choices. The following interior monologue illustrates his reasons for overriding communal morality: “If they are righteous people, then indeed they are not lost because I have left them; God who said I must go will see to them, will look after them. Again, if they are not righteous as they should be, it is their fault—theirs only—it is not mine” (*Pitseng* 49).

Preoccupation with individual salvation renders the *botho* value irrelevant by depriving it of the social and nurturing environment in which it exists. It also alienates the hero from his cultural resources. Fekisi appropriately uses the metaphor of death to describe this dilemma: “As he went on walking thus, he was thinking that he was dead to his elders, they would meet no more. He was thinking he was dead to his companions, his friends, his sisters, the village, the cattle, his native land, he was already in the grave” (*Pitseng* 53). The symbolism of death metaphorically represents

the loss of the *botho* cultural value with which Fekisi was determined to promote a humane society. By renouncing society, Fekisi is as good as dead. He is but a faint memory of a people's hero. Society mourns this disengagement from the regeneration process from which it benefited: "today the shoot of the pumpkin was withered" (*Pitseng* 52)—"*kajeno raka le shoetsoe ke molebo*" (43) (when the shoot withers, the entire pumpkin rots). Consequently, the realism which reinforced the *botho* practice gives way to the mysticism of faith and the realities of the "Christian heaven" (van Wyk), where images of "Ntsoanatsatsi", of the "Home of God", with "Mount Zion", the "Son of Man", along with "visions and mist" (*Traveller* 82, 85, 86, 87, 88) merge in a mystic experience of the Christian religion. Mofolo's use of mysticism clearly renders the *botho* cultural value immaterial and responds to the realm of the spiritual which is a private experience to which the novel gives no clear interpretation.

Unlike Fekisi, Katse does not leave the Pitseng community of his own volition. He is physically disabled and hands over the Christian mission to his pupil and successor Alfred. Even before his departure, however, Katse's journey towards perfection had already alienated him from the society he served. According to the Christian perspective, human compassion is a means towards attaining moral perfection. Majoale, a fervent young Christian, describes Katse's acts of compassion in the following terms: "[...] it became clear he was striving to reach the state of perfection, to set an example to all those who sought to be pure enough to deserve to see God. He for his part, persevered to make each new day to bring him even closer to God than the day before" (*Pitseng* 90). Alfred confirms this perception when he observes that "Katse went beyond the limits of most human beings. He is one in a thousand" (*Pitseng* 90). Katse's heroism is founded on his Christian desire for reward after death. Despite the fact that both Sesotho cultural tradition and Christianity establish a common understanding of the social behaviour required to construct a humane society, the Christian understanding gives a markedly individualist conception of human compassion. Where *botho* puts emphasis on the here and now of the material world, on peace and the well-being of all, as well as accountability to society, Christianity conceives human compassion as a ground for personal reward. It is this antithetical interpretation of the cultural representations of *botho* which has the effect of alienating the hero and setting him apart as a morally superior human being who does not need society and who does not belong to the ordinary world.

The theme of the alienation of morally superior individuals is further developed in the depiction of Fekisi and Katse as solitary heroes. The novel is silent on the nature of the human relationships Fekisi engaged with amongst his closest, that is, the nameless "parents, companions, friends and sisters" that he leaves behind. He is thus the only member of society who is compassionate. Likewise, Katse's next of kin are nameless characters described as Katse's wife and child at the beginning of the novel and never referred to thereafter. During a disastrous famine, Katse single-handedly

helps the destitute people of Pitseng, feeding the hungry and tending to the sick. The depiction denies other members of society the space to express their compassion. After Katse's death, Alfred and Aria take over the literacy and missionary project. They are solitary individuals whose interaction with society is confined to the challenges of their professions as teacher and teacher-assistant respectively. They do not go out of their way to rescue society in the manner similar to many of the following list of acts of compassion accomplished by their predecessor Katse during his lifetime in Pitseng:

His care for the sick and the aged was great [...] He had an eye that saw quickly where there was hardship, and he would run to the rescue. When there was famine, he was quick to observe people who had no more food, who went to bed without anything to eat, and where this situation existed, he would be there without delay, and help with whatever he might have at hand [...] The bit of food he had he shared with those who had nothing [...] and thus continued to feed those who were not as fortunate as he. And not once did he ever think, 'This is my chance to get rich' (*Pitseng* 32, 33, 89, 90).

The novel enumerates these acts of compassion which make Katse a champion of the *botho* humanistic value. It is important to note that the acts are not inherently Christian but social in nature. By attributing them exclusively to a Christian leadership, the novel affirms the supremacy of Christianity by showing the incapacity of society to rescue itself. The depiction also undermines the authority of traditional leadership which has been lauded in the land narrative as caretakers of the nation.

In Mofolo's first two novels, there is a discernible supremacy of Christian and educated characters who have the privilege of being compassionate, as opposed to the anonymity of ordinary folk. This discourse is characterised by the opposition between the era of darkness and of light, where non-literate society is in general depicted as degenerated and "old Sesotho ways [are] associated with heathenism" (*Search for True Love* 122). This perception of Christianity and of the meaning of progress was prevalent during Mofolo's era as substantiated by the writings of his contemporary Bethuel Sekokotoana, who wrote a column entitled "Qaqiso ea tsa Mehla" (Essay on Changing Times), in the missionary newspaper. Mofolo honours Sekokotoana by citing his article on modernity in the novel *Pitseng* (145). Yet Mofolo sometimes renounces this position and honours tradition as being worthy.

#### **Other applications of *botho***

The narrator's digressions on traditional practices of courtship and marriage depict "authentic culture" as being responsible for gender-based roles where the concept of womanhood enforces principles of hospitality and nurturing that extend beyond the household to all especially the "less fortunate" (*Pitseng* 145). Real men and women are those who come from a "nurturing background" (*Pitseng* 144). Even as society embraces Christianity and Western education, the idea of a woman suitable for mar-

riage continues to be determined by traditional values. For this reason, Aria's suitors and would-be mothers-in-law are uneducated rural villagers who desire to marry her not on the basis of her faith but because she is a complete person—*motho oa sebele*—with whom a “life of peace” is guaranteed in married life (*Pitseng* 175). *Botho* practices are rationalised as a deep desire for well-being, peace and self-preservation.

It is on the issue of traditional marriage that the narrator feels the need to defend tradition against charges of backwardness:

The modern days are said to be days of light, of wisdom, and of progress, while the olden days, the days of the *difaqane* are said to have been days of darkness, of foolishness and ignorance. But in this matter of marriage we have found that those days of old were days of wisdom, and not of darkness and ignorance, and it is modern days that are days of darkness and ignorance, not wisdom and light. (*Pitseng* 145)

At the economic level, the *botho* culture informs the narrator's indictment of capitalist practices of the mining industry in South Africa. As he tours Johannesburg, “the famous city of gold” (*Pitseng* 55), Alfred visits the mines where he is “surprised by the persistence of whites when they wanted the stone called diamond, as well as the one from which gold was extracted. They have respect for nothing when they are after one of those two stones, not even people's lives; and those stones were found with great difficulty indeed [...]” (*Pitseng* 55). Again the novel's strategy is to scorn capitalism for inverting humanistic values with materialism by excessively valuing small insignificant stones (*majoana*) “whose value we the Basotho didn't even know about” (*Pitseng* 54), declares the narrator who in so saying exonerates his countrymen from the violence of capitalism. The Sesotho epithet *majoana* belittles the value of gold and diamonds to accentuate the disproportionate desire for wealth at the expense of human lives. Whites “have respect for nothing” (*Pitseng* 55)—*Ha a qenehele letho* (*Moeti* 44). The English word “respect” does not fully express the cultural significance of the Sesotho verb *ho qenehela* which means “to have compassion, pity, sympathy, empathy, mercy, concern”. Capitalism's capacity to kill for affluence is devoid of *botho* which would prescribe that miners who toil to find the “precious” stones be treated with compassion and dignity like human beings. Mofolo's indictment of the South African mining industry finds echo in the oral poetry of Basotho mine workers themselves (see Moletsane; Coplan; Mokitimi).

### ***Botho and the deconstruction of the hero in Chaka***

One reading of *Chaka* interprets the novel as one amongst a plethora of texts that rationalise the “transition from the heroic to the colonial” (van Wyk). It has been ascertained that Mofolo did some “researches in Natal” in preparation for the writing of *Chaka* (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene xii). According to Kunene (*Thomas Mofolo* 160–5), Mofolo also read and relied heavily on Azariel Sekese's historical articles from the



missionary journal *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, “written fifteen years or so before Mofolo wrote his book” (Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo* 165). Historical precision regarding Shaka’s life has long been a subject of controversy. From a historical perspective, Kunene illustrates several differences between Mofolo’s fictive account and historical events (*Chaka* xiv–xix). It is also important to note a marked similarity bordering on a word for word interpretation between Sekese’s account of how Chaka mourned his mother (*Thomas Mofolo* 165), Mofolo’s account of the same event in his chapter “The Death of Nandi” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 150) and Fuze’s narration on the same subject (63–4). With regard to Shaka’s military reforms, there is evidence that the essence of Mofolo’s account (107–11) corresponds to historical facts analysed in studying the role of the military in the formation of African pre-colonial states (see Uzoigwe).

From a literary perspective, Naidoo’s interpretation (20) of the novel reiterates the fact that “Mofolo weaves his tale against the backdrop of historical figures and locations but allows for the free intervention of the supernatural and the mystical”. Mofolo’s *Ka mathetho* (End of tale) (168), a closing formula borrowed from the phrase *Ke tšomo ka mathetho* following Sesotho folktale performance, strengthens the idea that the author’s intention is to create a fictive universe which intertwines the historical, the supernatural and the mystical. The approach enables the author to shift the focus from history in order to underscore the discourse on moral values. Mofolo’s procedure is analogous to Mda’s account of his own writing:

I write about the supernatural, but I don’t present it as being problematic, in other words my characters take it for granted [...] the characters are not surprised by the sudden appearance of the mist [...] Things that seem to contradict the laws of reason, happen in my novels, even in my plays for that matter. They are put there as a matter of fact, as though they do not contradict empirical reality. (qtd. in Naidoo 303)

Mofolo’s narrative voice explains the rationale for this strategy which emphasises some aspects of the Chaka narrative more than others: “The events in Chaka’s life were overwhelming because they were so numerous and of such tremendous import; they were like great mysteries which were beyond the people’s understanding. But since it is not our purpose to recount all these affairs of his life, we have chosen only one part which suits our present purpose” (*Pitseng* 152).

Mindful of Mofolo’s selective engagement of the Chaka narrative intended to “add a new dimension to the meanings of old facts” (Kunene, “*Leselinyana*” 156), I focus on the author’s handling of the *botho* theme and less on the verities or misrepresentations of the life of the historical Chaka.

The application of the *botho* value in *Chaka* is based on a fusion of language, culture and symbolism from Zulu and Sesotho worldviews with an occasional Christian narrative voice assuming an authoritative appraisal of events and of characters. We have seen how the depiction of the *botho* cultural value is an organising factor in

Mofolo's construction of individual and social identity based on human compassion, a phenomenon exemplified in the construction of heroism. I argue that in *Chaka*, the "transition from the heroic to the colonial" is expressed through the land narrative of conquest and the discourse on humanistic values which are intertwined to rationalise the loss of African land and autonomy that was feared to come with the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The loss is symbolised by Shaka's anachronistic prophecy to the Zulu nation: "*umlungu*, the white man is coming, and it is he who is going to rule you, and you will be his servants" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 167). Shaka's prophecy was concretised in the creation of the Union of South Africa and later in the apartheid model of governance.

It is worth noting that Mofolo wrote his novel *Chaka* during political turmoil when, as in the 1880–1 Gun War, Lesotho was faced with the possibility of losing her land and political autonomy to colonialism. Unlike the victorious aftermath of the Gun War, the incorporation agenda of the peace treaty that followed the 1899–1902 Boer War threatened the autonomy of the Basotho. As a prominent member of the Basutoland Progressive Association, Mofolo cannot be disassociated from his association's fight against South African colonialism and Lesotho's impending incorporation into the Union. His association felt that any loss of autonomy would have to be blamed on the Basotho chiefs for not doing enough to protect Lesotho. Mekenye explains the elites' sense of frustration at incorporation: "the Basutoland Progressive Association [...] and its political organ, *Naledi ea Lesotho*, warned the chiefs that 'Should an accident happen to this small land of ours, we shall truly blame them [chiefs]'" (*Pitseng* 135).

The novel *Chaka*, written during this time of turmoil and "completed by around late 1909" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene xi), is an expression of anguish and disillusionment that tries to rationalise the fall of Zululand, a "strong nation" of military tradition which became a fallen kingdom to the point of not being able to resist white domination and incorporation into *umlungu's* world. To achieve this, the author superimposes two different historical temporalities: the era of the Zulu military success of the *lifaqane* wars of the 1800s; and the reality of political subjugation of kingdoms which were to be incorporated into the Union of South Africa in the 1900s. Through *Chaka*, Mofolo is addressing a colonised society using a warning from a completely different era of the *lifaqane* epoch. The loss of the *botho* value depicted by the novel to be at the core of Zululand's political downfall is therefore presented within a historical and political framework.

Chaka's life story begins with a prophecy, he is "a boy, an ox of the vultures" (*ngoana oa moshemane, pholo ea letlaka*) (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 9) expressed by a Sesotho idiom evoking warrior metaphors, foreboding the death anticipated of every male child by virtue of him being a warrior. The idiom has its roots in a historical era of territorial conquest and expansion "where a warrior was a highly valued person, and the spear never slumbered" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 54).

The novel portrays the *botho* cultural value against the background of warrior imagery and an environment devoid of compassion. Chaka has a distressful childhood of persecution. There is a parallel between society's inhumanity towards Chaka and the context of Fekisi's "social order of cattle-keeping" which calls for condemnation of persecution and of inhumane treatment of the weak. The claims to humanistic values expressed by the collective voice of the women of Pitseng are re-enacted by Zulu women who condemn Chaka's father, Senzangakhona, for wanting to kill his son, subjecting him to inhumane treatment. Like Fekisi, Chaka runs away from persecution for fear of losing his life. His is imposed exile. Mofolo's heroes are always forced to make firm individual choices about their destinies. Where Fekisi, Katse, Alfred and Aria are compelled by the desire for moral perfection, Chaka is compelled by the desire for political power and fame, a decision the novel criticises with the same fervour expressed in *Pitseng* to rebuke the materialism and inhumanity of the mining system of South Africa.

The dilemma of individual choices brings to light the role of the healer. In *Pitseng*, the evangelist's work is metaphorically represented as "healing that has to do with teaching" (16) to symbolise the teaching of literacy skills and religion and by extension the advent of Christian and Western civilisations. There has been much analysis of Mofolo's use of the doctor-healer-sorcerer figure, Isanusi, considered as a symbol of evil by the Faustian argument and from a theological perspective (Hallencrutz; Riche; Lilford), while the historical record establishes that the Isanusi figure never existed in Shaka's life (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene xvii). The Faustian and Christian arguments of evil tend to obliterate the respect African societies have for healers: "the healer deals with the complete person, and provides treatment for physical, psychological, spiritual and social symptoms. Healers do not separate the natural from the spiritual, or the physical from the supernatural" (Truter 57).

The doctor-healer-teacher role is represented as a determining factor in the realm of leadership, nation building and identity formation. Drawing from Basotho national memory of Moshoeshoe as a violent young man (Thoahlane 12) who visited a renowned Mosotho healer Mohlomi to learn about leadership, peace and diplomacy, Mofolo introduces Chaka who is but "a tender youth", to a healer-figure whose mentoring is the antithesis of peace. The healer-figure's role in the novel is to deconstruct the narrative of compassion and peace in a discourse loaded with Basotho cultural and historical memory. The Isanusi figure is not only a healer but a sorcerer who deconstructs the representation of Mohlomi, the historical pre-colonial statesman whose sayings retain proverbial status in Sesotho culture. Mohlomi's legacy is that of a chief who was "full of compassion, and made it his duty to relieve the distressed" (Ellenberger 91). He is renowned to have been "a friend to everyone, and urged the chiefs to love peace. 'It is better,' he said, 'to crush the corn than to sharpen the spear'" (93). *Chaka's* Isanusi uses the same symbolism of corn and the spear to unravel the peace narrative:

The diligent cultivator of sorghum is the person who knows the time for working in the fields, who, when the proper month comes, gives up beer parties and feasts, and rises at the crying of the cock to go to his garden, caring nothing about the cold and the fury of the sun, his one aim being that that *moment* should not pass him by. If you like kingship and fame, you must be like that. You must be a cultivator of kingship: let your spear be your hoe, use it, and use it intelligently. Where necessary, you must reduce everything to total annihilation, sweep it all away, and never let your enemy escape lest he should rise up against you. Remove the weeds from your garden of kingship with war, and that is how you will achieve your fame. (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 46–7)

Isanusi to Chaka is the antithesis of what Mohlomi was to Moshoeshe. Latent in this representation is a mnemonic practice which draws from the memory of violence (embedded in Sesotho proverbs and narrative accounts drawn from cannibalism and the *lifaqane* experience) to idealise the notion of peace. The depiction of the Isanusi figure is revealing; Chaka sees in his face, “hate, malice and unbounded cruelty, more evil in his heart, treachery and betrayal” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 37). Yet when Chaka blinks he sees in the same person “sympathy and pity, profound compassion and a heart that felt the grief of others, and had true love” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 37). Isanusi represents an antithetical definition of *botho*: what it includes and excludes.

The antithetical depiction of Isanusi brings up the question of Chaka’s individual choices. Isanusi’s offer to give him back the kingship that is rightfully his falls within the healer’s purview to ensure the “removal of hostile sources”, to use Truter’s expression (57). Isanusi is different from his predecessor (Nandi’s doctor) in that he goes beyond protecting Chaka from “the evil spirit of the people” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 21). He motivates and endorses Chaka’s inclination to “lose control over his priorities” (Eriksen). Chaka opts for warrior values against humanistic values. Unlike Fekisi who complements warrior attributes with compassion, the Chaka figure emphasises military heroism which is synonymous with masculinity and images of manhood; that is, being *monna* (in italics in Mofolo), the prototype of a male figure, as opposed to *motho*, a compassionate human being. Manhood emphasises notions of male beauty, valour, warfare, military genius, killings, conquest and fame which are embodied in Chaka’s depiction. These concepts negate mercy, forgiveness and compassion. The depiction of Fekisi is mimetic of Moshoeshe’s legacy as a compassionate king who defeated armies and appeased them by sending them cattle as they retreated (Thoahlane 15). Fekisi, for instance, fights against ten men and defeats them: “As they ran away, he called to them in mercy and goodness to take home those wounded in the eye and the arm. Then he prayed them much to give up ill-treating the herdboys as if they were not human beings” (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 10).

The action calls to mind Moshoeshe’s idealised legacy that he considered the enemy with humanity. Fekisi “fought only when he was attacked; and even when

he was victorious, he did not pursue [...] He was just, he was kind, he forgave at once [...] he hated to see people being persecuted" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 10, 11). The idealisation of Fekisi in admiration of Moshoeshoe's attributes is in contrast with Chaka's military approach which emphasises the idealisation of war values. Following military reforms, the Zulu nation has executioners, men live in barracks and the youth spend their time "learning the art of war":

Their speech was all about war, their conversations were about war, their songs and praises were about war, their games were about war, even the manner of their eating was related to war. That is to say that all the things they heard, all the things they saw, all the things they did, were matters pertaining to war, because they did not see anything but the spear, the war axe, and the shield; and they expressed their pride through acts of war. (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 112–3)

To advocate a radically different model of leadership based on human compassion, the novel reiterates the ideal of peace, citing the peaceful existence of "all the nations settled along the sea and stretching to the south" along with "the villages and the hamlets; great kings and small, the country adorned with villages built on the foundation of peace" as well as "the nations of the Basotho and the Batswana living peacefully, not troubled by anything" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 106).

Mofolo appeals to the ideal of peace and human compassion in depicting Chaka. In the first two novels, the notion of human compassion ceases to have meaning due to the cultural alienation of the hero figures Fekisi and Katse. In Chaka's case, this happens after he has killed his future wife, Noliwa, following his resolve to gain more political power and expand his territory at all costs: "[...] the last spark of humanity still remaining in him was utterly and finally extinguished in the terrible darkness of his heart [...] his human nature died totally and irretrievably, and a beast-like nature took possession of him; because although he had been a cruel person even before this, he had remained a human being, his cruelty but a human weakness" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 127–8). The opposition between "humanity" and "beast-like nature", depicted in the Sesotho novel as *botho* and *bophoofolo* (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 128) is observed as core to the appreciation of Basotho moral values (Casalis 303).

Chaka's end is interpreted not through the mysticism as with Mofolo's first hero Fekisi, but through a realism that highlights the downfall of a hero who regrets his lack of compassion. Before his end, Chaka dreams of "Dingiswayo, and all his praiseworthy deeds as he tried to instill the spirit of humanity into his people, and he saw himself destroying all those beautiful deeds [...]" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 161). The *botho* cultural practice is embodied in Zulu identity in the person of Dingiswayo, the Mthethwa ruler who is repeatedly lauded for having "tried hard to instill in the nation the spirit of human compassion" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 105) by engaging his people in a productive economy that diverted their attention from warfare. It is also

expressed in the humility of Noliwa who, despite being associated with Chaka's might and fame, "knew that she was just a human being who was like all other human beings" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 105). Noliwa's thought is meant to suggest that in essence, Chaka is a human being like any other, but he fails to acknowledge this.

Mofolo writes during the colonial era, an epoch he designates as "these modern days" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 155). His writing rationalises the past and the present, namely, the transition from the heroic defence of land and political power to the defence of economic, political and cultural values in a colonial setting which requires a regeneration of the conception of heroism. The exclusion of white people in the land narrative in *Pitseng* plus Chaka's prophecy on the coming of the white man draw attention to the impending conquest, in Mofolo's time, of African nations great and small by colonialism with its peculiar conception of human relationships. Chaka's prophecy of the coming of the white man highlights the fall of the Zulu nation from military heroism where the proverb—"They ferment, they curdle! Even great pools dry away!" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 168), a translation of the Sesotho proverb *Lia bela, lia hloeba! Maliba ho psha a maholo!* (166)—expresses regret and distress in the face of a new and frightful system of governance. The distress in *Chaka* is made more poignant by the reality of the success of smaller, militarily insignificant kingdoms such as those of the Basotho, Batswana and Swazis who in 1909 survived *umlungu's* power. Consistent with the land narrative in *Pitseng*, Mofolo adopts in *Chaka* a perspective which covertly credits what is perceived as the Basothos' heroism and resolve not to be conquered. His literary depiction of the transition from the heroic to the colonialist and post-colonialist paradigms interprets heroism in a colonial setting, not in terms of warrior values of conquest states, but through representations of governance through *botho* principles.

## Conclusion

The land narrative in Mofolo's novels asserts with confidence the Basothos' control over the territory of Lesotho. It expresses a desire for a Southern African space without frontiers, opening possibilities for transcultural cultural exchanges. Yet on the home soil it does not lay a foundation for trans-ethnic relationships. The land narrative rejects the economic, political and linguistic hegemony of colonialism and supports the autonomy of the Basotho in these areas.

In trying to argue for economic and political autonomy, and in response to the challenges of individual and collective self-identification in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial society, Mofolo's arguments are deeply rooted in the Basotho cultural principle of human compassion which he also portrays as a Christian way of life. Motivated by the desire for a compassionate and nurturing society, the author challenges various forms of violence ranging from male violence to the large scale violence of territorial conquest and colonial wars. The negation of violence is also directed against the supremacy of European entrepreneurs in Lesotho and the dehumanis-

ing economic situation in the South African mining industry of the colonial era. The author portrays national and individual responses to the challenges of political and economic autonomy in heroic terms which forge a sense of national pride.

However, the author's dialogue on humanistic values and national identity appears to be challenged by the reality of internal social conflicts such as the divide between the Basotho of Sotho and Nguni descent, the literate and the non-literate, Christians and heathens. These distinctions are symptomatic of a latent sense of unease in a society whose "path of human compassion" (*Chaka*, trans. Kunene 121) interrogates the seemingly homogenous and emotive bond of the Basotho nation.

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