

# Poets of Lesotho

first steps of a brief  
incursion into  
Sesotho literature

**MOFOLO BULANE**

That wealth of popular wisdom known as folklore lies at the root of the blossoming tree that is Sesotho Literature. It has never dawned upon authors and poets in Lesotho to write in English, despite the fact that some of them hold degrees. Sesotho Literature still remains, therefore, for the local market. Judging by the number of editions and "out of stock" escape routes of the publishers handling books in Sesotho, we shall assume that the home market is expanding. Secondly, supply does not meet demand, which keeps the population in the midst of artificial darkness. The rate of literacy in the mother tongue is high, approaching the mark of 90 per cent, which is a record to be proud of. The largest consumer still remains the school where, contrary to the normal colonial practice elsewhere, the mother tongue occupies a definite place on the time-table.

In 1921 the late Z. D. Mangoela published a collection of LITHOKO TSA MARENA A LESOTHO (Praise Poems of the Basotho Chiefs). It was a great step forward in reducing this genre of Sesotho folklore to writing, thereby preserving it and assuring its transmission to later generations. It is on this publication that many a Mosotho poet and writer has had to depend.

D. C. T. Bereng, who belonged to the House of Moshoeshoe, basing himself on the oral poetic tradition in Sesotho, published his collection of poems in 1931. The pamphlet, published at Morija, Lesotho, bears the title: LITHOTHOKISO TSA MOSHOESHOE LE TSE LING (Moshoeshoe's Poems and Others). It is to these poems that we shall draw attention.

There are eleven poems in all. The poet's mind has been brought to bear upon the figure of Moshoeshoe, from his birth till his death. The figure of Moshoeshoe, for the poet, signifies all that Lesotho means.

Moshoeshoe is the founder of the Basotho people. He welded the various fleeing and warring tribes into a single whole Basotho people. Today these component parts have lost all their original tribal characteristics. They are one people with the common aim in mind. Those who still talk of tribesmen in Lesotho are doing so out of sheer racist supremacy and complete lack of understanding.

After repulsing a series of encroachments on

Lesotho, this strategist and military genius passed away in 1870, two years after Lesotho, in what has become the greatest fraud in colonial history, had been placed under the protection of Queen Victoria of England. Perhaps it is in memory of Moshoeshoe's heroic feats, in times of peace and war, that the present head of state in Lesotho is styled Moshoeshoe II.

D. C. T. Bereng is the first Mosotho poet to come out with a collection of poems. In his poetry Moshoeshoe is not depicted as a towering figure, as someone standing far above the common people. Rather he is being depicted in all the glory and simplicity of a popular hero who is one with the people. There is an alternating lyrical depth and epic sweep in some of the poems, which we are trying to translate for the first time here. These translations are not perfect; they give a rough picture of the poet's yearnings and his command of the Sesotho language. Some lines are extremely difficult to render into English because of the imagery and associations lifted from folklore, for example, nomenclature of birds, animals, and plants.

"Poem on the Death of Moshoeshoe" registers the poet's sorrow on the occasion, with scenes of the burial and some historic moments in the life of Moshoeshoe:

Tears of death torment me,  
My soul dissolves away into pieces,  
My blood vessels are tearing away.  
My soul deserts and flies away:  
As if abandoning me in space,  
As if searching the universe  
For a place of rest.

Yesterday happiness overflowed my heart  
But to-day the spear of death tears me  
asunder.

My eyes are teeming with wells  
Of water mixed with salt.  
My eyes sink into my flesh,  
They withdraw into the depths of take me,  
into the depths of take me, the world  
perishes,

That I may go where Moshoeshoe has  
gone!

For I beheld the moon round as a wheel  
And methought it would never break to  
pieces.

The underlined part is from: a Sesotho children's song, running thus:

Depths of bog, take me away  
For my ma loves me not;  
I'm loved by my uncle.

As they sing it, they put their feet into a bog or swampy place. Further on in the same poem we read:

He has not died for his sons,  
He has died for the people.  
Chief's children will bury the people,

Chief is buried by the people.  
 He is buried by his heroes,  
 He is buried by Mohale-oa-Makoa.  
 He is buried by those not forgotten  
                                   in trying moments.  
 Those through whom he ruled,  
 Those through whom he waxed fat,  
 Those through whom he reigned,  
 Those through whom he gained glory,  
 Those through whom he accomplished  
                                   feats.  
 The first to throw dust into his grave is  
                                   Shaka;  
 Although by origin he is a Ndebele,-  
 Although he was his enemy,  
 He was a victor of peoples.

He was a victor of peoples.  
 He was a lion, this Shaka!  
 A beast to devastate all chiefs,  
 To devastate them and their lands.  
 As for Thesele he found tough meat,  
 And said: "Hang! I am puzzled indeed!  
 Moshoeshoe throws a stone upon the rock;  
 He fights against 'impis' only to feed them.  
 You are 'izinto sakankulunkulu kupela'  
 The very things of the gods alone.  
 He fights like angels facing the crucifix!"  
 So said Shaka.

Moshoeshoe is buried by heroes alone:  
 The first to throw dust into his grave is  
                                   Sekonyela.  
 Moshoeshoe is buried by distinguished ones  
 When people were burying Chief  
 With 'mokorotlo', the war song of men,  
 The mountains groaned and moaned,  
 The heavens were torn asunder,  
 Winds howled with the violence of thunder,  
 Beasts took refuge among people,  
 Hedges of reeds suddenly collapsed,  
 Walls all over Lesotho fell down,  
 Tigers and colts kissed,  
 Jackals grazed together with lambs,  
 Hawks flew together with pigeons,  
 Water flowed back to the sources.  
 Strange things happened  
 When the Ruler of Lesotho was buried.  
 We saw frightening scenes  
 Because wolves and people walked  
                                   together  
 Snakes moved away from the bush  
 When people buried the Chief  
 With the war song of men echoing afar....

(Ndebele, in this context, will be understood to mean Zulu. Otherwise, used in Sesotho to mean someone of the Nguni group of languages, it has a derogatory meaning.)

It would be interesting to see how the burial of the leader is depicted by both Whitman and Mayakovsky. D. C. T. Bereng, as we have observed, draws his poetic fire, his fantasy and imagination, from the world of folklore. There are here refrains and repetitions, with some names of endearment, direct quotations from Moshoeshoe's praise

poems. There are some sayings of Moshoeshoe which have gone into the treasure-trove of the Sesotho language.

We could look into "Moshoeshoe's Grave", which opens thus:

Letters are engraved on Moshoeshoe's grave;  
 Here lies Moshoeshoe Moshoeshoaila,  
 Who has welded tribes into a people.  
 Here rests Matlama's Thesele.  
 May he find the comfort of his glory,  
 Chief, in the soil of his land!  
 Chief of justice and not partiality,  
 Truth and not foul play.  
 Fortunate are those who found support in him;  
 They found a pillar on the walking stick of peace.  
 Because of him the old walk erect with health,  
 They have forgotten their old age,  
 They have forgotten their grey hairs,  
 Saying colour is the ear-mark.....

It continues:

Here lies the one who introduced light into  
                                   darkness,  
 Power and walking stick of the Basotho  
                                   people,  
 Founder and builder of Lesotho.  
 Peace! Rain! Plenty!  
 In the land of the Basotho people.  
 Moshoeshoe has been buried here,  
 In this formless heap of stones;  
 His Royal Highness of Lesotho,  
 Blood of Peete and Libenyane,  
 Of Mokoteli's chieftainship,  
 Of the chieftainship of Bakoena's Ranneko.

Though seasons pass,  
 Though they go unnoticed,  
 Can your name, Moshoeshoe,  
 Your name, Mokhachane's son,  
 Come to an end and our life continue?  
 What should I say thoughts?  
 What should I sing reflections?  
 What should I look for sense?  
 What should I talk about fluency?  
 Speak affair, affair speak,  
 You tell me about the customs of the beauties,  
 I shall relate stories with a sweet voice;  
 I will play the harmonium with my throat,  
 The song will sound from it.  
 I will remember my love,  
 The one somewhere above my people,  
 Creator of visible things.....

In the poem "Mahlale a Mahlale" (On Wisdom), D. C. T. Bereng gives us his philosophical reflections: He considers the origin of life, creation of heaven and earth; he speaks of politics, morals, ethics, religion and times immemorial, when there was not anything. He devotes himself to praises to God for having created all that the poet sees around himself. In this poem, however, religious interpretation of the universe occupies the centre of the stage.

Sesotho folksong occupies a very large space.

Stanzas upon stanzas open up the world of folkdance together with the material details that go with it. Indeed there are songs inserted at intervals by the poet. Some lines are of interest to ethnographers. There is a direct rhyme scheme in some parts of the poem, which, however, the poet changes deliberately from stanza to stanza. For instance, the opening stanza is: 'aabbccdddece;' the following one: 'aaabbccddeeffg'.

Where poetry is achieved not by external effects like rhyme, there is that flow of language, internal harmony and rhythm. The poet has a wonderful feel of language, and his choice of verbs achieves an astounding poetic effect. Here is the opening stanza of this poem:

Ntho tsohle li na le tlhaho ea tsona,  
All things have their own origin,  
Leha matsatsi a ka fapan's tsona;  
Though they may differ in days;  
Tsohle li bopiloe,  
All have been made,  
Tsohle li hloliloe.  
All have been created.  
Lentsoe lona le leng  
There is but one word  
La motho ea leng teng.  
Of the omnipresent one.  
Bohlale bo tsoile ho Ea bohlale,  
Wisdom emanated from the wise One,  
Kelello ke matl'a Ea bohlale,  
Sense is the power of the wise One,  
Hlokomelo ke ketso ea Ea bohlale.  
Care is the work of the wise One.  
Tsohle ka bohlale li entsoe,  
All have been made with wisdom,  
Tsohle ka hlalohanyo li hlotsoe,  
All with sense have been created,  
Tsohle bophelo li bo bepetsoe.  
All from the slime of the earth for life  
have been made.

(The main concern here is not so much to translate as to shed light on some aspects of Sesotho literature. The English versions, therefore, which are being given without comments and commentary—both linguistic and literary—might not strictly tally with the original. We have dispensed with the rhyme scheme of the original in favour of some other way of rendering the poet's thoughts.)

D. C. T. Bereng is fond of synonyms, with their nuances in meaning, which the translator can best open up semantically and not lexically. He goes further in his discovery of the world:

Wonders upon wonders, everywhere wonders,  
Made by the Son,  
Made by the Spirit,  
Created by the Word,  
Not with intrigues,  
Which are made by cunning,  
Or decided upon by cheating devices,  
Actions, the height of evidence,  
Behold, those living on earth have run,  
Those living in the soil have raced,

Those living in the water have swum,  
Those with feet and those without them.  
But how about the swiftness of thoughts!  
The eye, I say, is nothing compared to thoughts.  
And what is more swift than the eye?

In the following lines the poet relives the exciting moments of a folk dance:

Which young woman will accompany me  
With an echoing ululation?  
That I may gather courage,  
Dance as it fits the young man,  
And turn and move slowly to the tune!  
The while she dances with me the maiden way,  
For a blanket wearing a kaross;  
Or, shall I say, the skirt of a soft skin  
Worn of the days and nights of merry-making  
Is a dress that is made of kaross,  
My 'setolo-tolo' should be humming,  
Its strings giving out a melody  
Frightening to the listening ear.  
The harmonium should be sounding  
With tunes, touching and pleasant,  
In my mouth a stream of poetic words,  
Now burdened with melancholy,  
Now burdened with mirth;  
I should be standing on tip-toe,  
Swaying to and fro  
And stamping on the ground with my heels,  
The while looking into the face of the dark beauty;  
Dancing away as she breaks into a glowing smile,  
Looking up and viewing my club stick.  
My feet should be in the form of a Z,  
As I turn around and around,  
Breaking forth in a melodious Sesotho song.

The poet winds up this lyricism with an invitation to the "African heaven" of its kind. Remember the Ghanaian, F. K. Parkes: "The African Heaven". 'Setolo-tolo' is a Sesotho musical instrument. The harmonium referred to in these poems is the Sesotho one called 'thomo'.

The poet says:

Would she were the moon  
And I the river,  
Working tirelessly for hours on end  
Like men and things always travelling.  
Volunteers may come to the song  
To see countries taking beautiful shape  
At the hands of a creator.  
Creatures, come and please the eye,  
All sorts of beasts are invited;  
Insects in their thousand varieties,  
Trees of all kinds,  
Snakes of all groups and colours.

On the authority of the Gospel the poet speaks of the creation of the world in the following terms:

Before there was life,  
When the earth was shapeless;  
Before life on earth,  
Before death,  
Before nothing was created,

When nothing was known;  
 When the existing ones knew  
 About those that did not exist;  
 When the non-existing ones knew  
 About those that were present;  
 Nothing everywhere.  
 Chaos everywhere.  
 He shouted with the voice of a lord,  
 He ordered darkness, light to reign;  
 Water was ordered to part;  
 Mists in the space;  
 Seas formed on earth.  
 There was drought everywhere,  
 There was moisture everywhere,  
 There was nothing everywhere.

We see how contradictory the poet's thought is. He aptly uses contrast to illustrate the complicated nature of the situation. We come upon the following two transitions with which we close this poem:

I shall stretch my hands,  
 Bending my knees the while,  
 Hitting my forehead with an ox tail,  
 Singing and clapping hands:  
 'Rainbow, the shade of water,  
 Rainbow is the mark of rain'.

And this:

Thoughts will torture me;  
 I shall not rest from thinking.  
 I shall think of the government's success,  
 Of its wealth and comfort;  
 I shall also think of the poverty of nations.  
 I shall study the history of fallen kings  
 And seek the causes of their downfall.  
 I shall think of administrative ways  
 Of various governments,  
 And end up by saying,  
 "People are superior to the ruler,  
 But the law is superior to the people;  
 And God is superior to the law."

The poet's concept of law is very revealing. It is that controversial point when the law is not decided upon in popular councils but rather imposed from above in conformity with the will of those wielding power. The spirit of the law, in these circumstances, runs counter to popular will. It is embodied in the constitution, legal procedure, the bill and act of parliament. It is evident in every monstrous act that gives legal sanction to cohesion and oppression in a community locked up in perpetual strife. In fact, here is that juggling with words which reveals the undemocratic essence of all the oppressive governments under whatever camouflage they go.

There is comfort in the world;  
 There is suffering in the world;  
 There are heart-rending moments  
 in this world.

Thus cries the poet in a world of deepening hostilities.

"Sello sa Likhutsana" (Lamentation of the Orphans), the last poem, shows the poet's masterly use of the refrain of the Sesotho funeral dirge. The poem,

hereunder in extenso, is permeated with the religious submission foreign to the Sesotho lament:

Rulers of the world,  
 Judge with justice.

Jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na jo!  
 Lamentation of the orphans.

Father, Son and Spirit,  
 Three persons in one:

Jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na jo!  
 God of the orphans.

Though we are trampled underfoot,  
 Downtrodden, oppressed, scoffed at,

Jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na jo!  
 There will be but one reward.

Even those who hate us  
 Will be judged by the Almighty.

Jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na jo!  
 Death awaits all.

The moon and the stars,  
 The sun and the sky,

Jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na, jo 'na 'na jo!  
 Creatures in space.

We have now seen the great contribution Theko Bereng has made to Sesotho Literature by his feel of language and grasp of diverse effects, internal and external, with which he achieves poetic diction. He has delved into Sesotho vocabulary at its lower level, that of folklore: alliteration, folk song, word-images and others. In interpreting the world around himself, in transporting his impressions, he has imposed his thought, obviously enriched by the Gospel, the pastor's sermon, and wide reading.

The poet has not looked deeper into the fate of his country, into perspectives of development. His sorrow over what he saw is more in the spirit of looking towards the idyllic past of folk song in the moonlight. He has not, because of historical limitations placed upon him, put his pulse on the march of events and time. In this lies his greatness, in this his power and weakness as a thinker. His literary portrait of Moshoeshoe could best be appreciated when compared with that of Makalo Khaketla in the latter's historical drama.

D. C. T. Bereng is the swallow that ushered the spring of our poetry. His influence and place in Sesotho poetry cannot be wished away. It is rewarding, in this respect, to view his lyrics against those of B. M. Khaketla and Azael Makara, on the one hand, and those of K. F. Ntsane, on the other.

He is the Mosotho poet to introduce the lyro-epic form in Sesotho poetry. His kind of epic form derives directly from the praise poem, which sweeps through the halls of stormy history reeking with blood. This he intersperses with personal reflections, thoughts, emotional outbursts, and experience at once personal and universal. There is not that conflict between the civic and the lyrical hero.

In the masterly hands of the poet, the two-fold character of the hero harmoniously comes off as one. This should give the lie to the fallacious theory of a discernible conflict between the civic and the lyrical motif in poetry, especially in such times as ours when there are epoch-making events to which poets give echo. The civic motif, however, is always permeated with a certain short-sightedness which imparts to it illogicality and a sense of unconscious assimilation of the world under the poet's reflection. There are mists hovering over his lyre, which truthfully reflects the conditions in which lived and created the first great Mosotho poet. In literature, this happens contrary to the poet's will and consciousness. Here again the all-important question of world outlook presses itself forth.

B. M. Khaketla's epic poems are directly an imitation of Milton's epic mind, with unmistakable images and literary devices reminiscent of the latter's "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained". B. M. Khaketla's "Tholoana tsa Boikakaso" (Fruits of Inordinate Pride) in his collection of poems, LIPSHAMATHE (Johannesburg, 1954), is the case in mind. Unlike D. C. T. Bereng, he draws much wind from English poetry, Victorian et al., and uses his vast knowledge of Sesotho lore only as a back-cloth. His poetry is intellectual, and shows a divided personality reconciling himself to the ideology of the masters while, torn away from the "native" soil, depriving himself of authenticity. His mind, for all its brilliant achievements in the field of Sesotho literature, is not a match for the Miltonic epic heights.

Azael Makara obscures his poetry with archaisms and laboured associations. His fanatical devotion to litany and sectarianism marks him out for a poet of the faith. His poetic work, also entitled "Lipshamathe", is otherwise a wonderful achievement. It is vitiated by his religious fanaticism, which can only be meant to please the Holy See at the expense of the poet's capability and reflected reality. This is the only work with which he entered the poetic scene. He was published by the Catholic Publishing House, Mazenod, Lesotho, in the 'fifties - no date of publication in the copy with the present author.

His "Lithoko tsa Lesotho" (Poem on Lesotho) and "Na, 'Mabana ka Utloa Bohloko" (Lesotho Laments her Lost Children) should have been unsurpassed in contemporary Sesotho poetry but for the poet's self-pity, helplessness and glowing sentimentality. It is again that glorification of the advent of the missionary which, we are told, delivered Lesotho from the Stygian darkness of paganism "where a witch-doctor's gait failed under the crushing weight of medicinal horns". While we shall not deny our unfortunate past, the historical perspective should always be a guide to pinpoint the shortcomings and the bright side. Here the poet has been eaten up with the whiteman's diabolical talk of our savagery and his much vaunted civilising mission. The positive role of the missionary's activities has been exaggerated; and the truth monstrously distorted in this poetic appraisal of our past and present, which, of course, foresees our future in terms of equality in the world to come.

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