

WEDDING IN MASERU

For once, a relatively happy tale from troubled Africa, reported by our man at the royal nuptials of King Letsie and his bride.

JOHN CORRY



As weddings go, this one was swell. King Letsie III married the lovely Ms. Karabo Mots'oeneng in a ceremony attended by the presidents of Tanzania, Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia, the papal nuncio, many diplomats, the king of Swaziland, and Nelson Mandela. At least 20,000 Basuto were also there, and there may have been far more. So tightly were they packed in the stadium no one could tell. When the royal horsemen in scarlet jackets and pith helmets with silver spikes on top escorted the king into the stadium, the Basuto all broke out in ululating and locomotive cheers. Then a few thousand more burst in from outside the stadium, and onto the infield, where they arranged themselves neatly in rows on the grass. Meanwhile a massed choir sang, and school children waved flags, and everywhere people swayed and jiggled. The royal wedding was a family affair for all of Lesotho.

Indeed King Letsie had told everyone at his 1997 coronation, "I challenge all of you gathered here today to go out and look around for a suitable mother of the nation." By mother of the nation he meant his as yet unknown wife, of course, and while he hardly needed help in finding one, it was good politics for him to ask. It amused his subjects, and reminded them the monarchy was *en famille*. On the eve of the wedding, everyone speculated about the bride price. No official announcement was made about this, and good manners precluded people from asking—although in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, the informed consensus was thirty to forty cattle. Whether the bride's family wanted or needed them was incidental. Tradition was important, and a bride price had to be paid. "So let it be," King Letsie told a local journalist, "until the tradition is found irrelevant." Meanwhile the local journalist invoked another tradition.

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Before he interviewed the king, he wrote, he exercised his "traditional right, as a senior citizen, by proffering advice on handling a 21st century wife and mother of the nation." Clearly the nuptials excited Lesotho, and many people wanted in on them. Maluti Mountain Brewery donated 240 cases of beer and soft drinks for the wedding guests, as well as 1,000 mugs, while the Lesotho Flour Mills Ltd. came up with commemorative bags of its easy bake mixed flour all marked "The Royal Choice."

But popular monarchy or not, Lesotho is still an improbable country. Wars, coups, and old Commie vs. Free World sideshows have had their way with it, and the wonder is that Lesotho exists at all. Lesotho is only slightly larger than Maryland, and it is surrounded entirely by South Africa. Therefore it is the only country in the world—the Vatican doesn't count—wholly within another's borders. Moshoeshoe I, Letsie III's great-great-great-great-great grandfather, founded it early in the nineteenth century when he united the Basuto people. (And note now that Basuto is bah-SOO-toe, and their language, Sesoto, is seh-SOO-toe. Lesotho, of course, is leh-SOO-toe. Moshoeshoe is Muh-SHWESH-WAY.)

Moshoeshoe I is buried with all the other kings of Lesotho on the plateau Thaba Bosiu, the site of one of his military triumphs. Think of Masada, but with a happier outcome for the Basuto than for the Jewish Zealots. When the Boers attacked, Moshoeshoe had his people roll rocks down the hillsides to stop them. (Local lore says he always encouraged friendly visitors to bring more rocks.) Subsequently the Boers withdrew, and in other battles Moshoeshoe went on to defeat the British. But he knew realistically that time was not on his side, and more often than not he tried diplomacy. In 1852, he sent a conciliatory letter to the Governor of the Cape Colony, even though the Brits had just done poorly against him in another battle:



Your Excellency—This day you have fought against my people, and taken much cattle. As the object for which you have come is to have a compensation for the Boers, I beg you will be satisfied with what you have taken. I entreat peace from you—you who have shown your power. You have chastised. Let it be enough I pray you, and let me no longer be considered an enemy of the Queen.

Moshoeshoe signed the letter “Your humble servant,” and the Cape Colony Governor was sympathetic. He realized that British colonial policy tilted unfairly against the Basuto in order to placate the Boers. London, however, did not much care, and the policy went on as before, with unfortunate results for everyone, including, in time, the Boers. The historical record suggests that Moshoeshoe was a multiculturalist, willing to live and let live, while encouraging the Basuto to absorb anything useful. A peaceful co-existence between Basuto and Boer ought to have been possible, but instead there was more war. In 1860, Moshoeshoe met with Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria’s son, when he visited southern Africa. If Britain would not protect Lesotho against the Boers’ Orange Free State, Moshoeshoe asked him, then would it at least allow Lesotho to get enough guns to protect itself?

But Alfred was not forthcoming, and most likely just forgot about it. In 1868, however, Britain declared sovereignty over Lesotho. Lesotho had lost almost all of its fertile land to the Boers by then, but Britain did not want Lesotho to wither away entirely. If it did, the Orange Free State might become strong enough to threaten the Crown’s long-term interests. This, of course, happened anyway. The Boer War broke out 31 years later.

When Moshoeshoe died in 1870, he was much revered, but he left behind him a still unsolved ontological mystery. Moshoeshoe had always encouraged missionaries to come to Lesotho; they had useful ideas, and projects to put in place, on education, medicine, and farming. French Protestants arrived

in Lesotho first, and then came Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and others. Subsequently many, and perhaps most, of the Basuto were converted to Christianity. Moshoeshoe himself, though, was resistant. Nonetheless competition for his soul among the missionaries was always keen. Whatever the religious reasons for a conversion, there were sound political reasons, as well. The church, or denomination, that captured King Moshoeshoe would gain great prestige, not to mention more influence in running Lesotho.

Consequently there was high anticipation when Moshoeshoe announced that he would, on March 13, 1870, make a declaration of faith and undergo public baptism. The French Protestants supposedly had the inside track here, although Moshoeshoe, always the diplomat, was also close to the Anglicans and Catholics. There was speculation that he might even ask all the missionaries to preside jointly while he embraced a one-size-fits-all Christianity. But Moshoeshoe died two days before the baptism, and so Lesotho will never know. Contemporary local scholars, however, think there may be a clue in the words of the prophetess ‘Mantsopa, one of Moshoeshoe’s favorite diviners. “The way to heaven is not a narrow road,” she said, and “the missionaries are ridiculously mistaken in saying that it is.” God was really the “Supreme Chief,” according to ‘Mantsopa, and so the road to His town was very broad, and always crowded with people on their way to His court.

Meanwhile Lesotho is now home to some 2 million Basuto. Perhaps twice that many live across the border in the Free State. They are citizens of South Africa, although familial ties reach across national boundaries, and they owe allegiance to Letšie III, just as their forefathers did to Moshoeshoe I. Nonetheless there are differences among the Basuto. The Basuto in Lesotho wrap themselves in blankets, ride ponies, and wear conical-shaped straw hats. (And yes, obviously there are also

PHOTOS: JOHN CONRY



Basuto in Lesotho who drive 4x4's and BMW's, and are unlikely to wrap themselves in blankets, and would never wear conical hats.) But the weather in the Free State is too warm for blankets, while the conical hats are optional, and the topography does not demand ponies. You may think of the Free State as culturally deprived.

The blankets, after all, have patterns that denote particular villages, families, or even political persuasions. Everyone in Lesotho seems to own one, if not to wear every day, then to tuck away on a shelf, and be taken out on a special occasion, possibly a funeral. Funerals are always held on Saturdays—no one seems to know why—and since everyone in Lesotho apparently knows almost everyone else, the funerals are well attended; and since the deceased are often buried in their home villages, a blanket may be more appropriate to wear than a business suit. The blankets are symbols of the national identity; the ponies are, too. On Lesotho's glorious mountains and in its vast, empty, and achingly beautiful green and brown spaces, they are the only really reliable form of transportation. You may also see ponies in downtown urban Maseru, ridden by blanketed Basuto, daintily moving through traffic. The ponies are small, and tough, and adaptable. Like Lesotho itself, they endure.

Two years ago, South Africa haphazardly sent troops into Lesotho, ostensibly to quell an army rebellion. Whether there really was a rebellion is unclear, but certainly civilian demonstrators were protesting government policies, and many had camped out on the grounds of the king's palace. When the South Africans stormed its locked gates, rioting broke out in Maseru. No one quite agrees on what happened next, but the Basuto say South African helicopters then dropped some sort of inflammable substance. Whether it was because of that, or the work of the rioters, buildings on Kingsway, the main street, were burned to the ground. What happened after that is also unclear,

although South Africa reportedly lost eight soldiers, while Lesotho lost 22.

But the Basuto say the South African death toll was much higher, and probably it was. In the late 1970's, the Lesotho prime minister flirted with the Communist bloc. North Korea, China, Cuba, and other members of the bloc sent military advisers, and in one of the better kept secrets of the Cold War some of them helped build mountain bunkers. "My God," says an otherwise well-informed Lesotho diplomat, who for years represented his country in Europe, "we didn't know those things were there."

So in the wake of the South African invasion, Lesotho's army, or at least some part of it, took to the bunkers. By professional standards, though, the army was not much; it was poorly

trained and heavily politicized, and in what really was a rebellion, in 1994, some of its units fought against one another. But Lesotho was the soldiers' country, and Moshoeshe and the spirit of Thaba Bosiu were still alive. Some of the soldiers even took off their uniforms, and fought while wearing traditional blankets. The fighting lasted three days, and when it was over the South Africans carted away a large cache of weapons. According to the diplomat, no one knew about the weapons, either. Obviously that was not literally true—someone had to know—but the diplomat was making a point. Things simply happen in Lesotho, as they do in much of Africa, and its politics are messy and often inscrutable, even to the people involved.

For example, there are two principal political parties in Lesotho: the Basutoland Congress Party and the Basuto National Party. The army general who led the coup that overthrew the Basuto National Party government in 1986 is now the head of that same party. As military ruler of Lesotho, until he was overthrown himself in a coup, he had banned all partisan political activity; he also had forced Moshoeshe II, King Letsie's late father, into exile. As it happens, Lesotho now has a democratically elected government, although whether it has improved public life is debatable. Politicians in Lesotho appear addicted to either stealing or squandering money, and any number of them should be in jail. Consequently the Basuto, generally speaking, respect and admire their kings more than they do their politicians. Even the king's ponies drew more cheers at the royal wedding than the prime minister did.

Meanwhile there is, as always, South Africa.

"Something will happen—I don't know what," a lawyer in Maseru said lugubriously. "We will wake up one morning, and find we have been swallowed up." Actually there is no sign of that yet, and the best, or worst, chance—depending how you feel about it—of it happening has already come and gone. When 69 schoolchildren were shot in their backs at Sharpeville in 1960, South Africa finally came to world

attention. If Britain had handed Lesotho over to its apartheid government when it granted it independence only six years later, international opinion would have been outraged. Britain did not want that, of course, and so Lesotho became a sovereign nation. It owed that to apartheid, and indeed one way or another apartheid would affect Lesotho for the next 25 years.

After independence one of Lesotho's two major parties supported the African National Congress; the other supported the more radical Pan-African Congress. Subsequent alliances waxed and waned. Governance in Lesotho became a mess. The party that won the election in 1970 was cheated out of its victory when the constitution was suspended. Another election would not be held for 23 years. Meanwhile South African security forces conducted raids in Lesotho to eliminate the African National Congress cadre. Once they blew up an apartment building in Maseru, and took the lives of innocent civilians. At the same time the Communist bloc countries were becoming active. By the 1980's, the KGB's man in Maseru, Boris Asoyan, was one of the best informed men in Lesotho. When the Reagan administration had to withdraw its nominee as ambassador to Lesotho because of his financial improprieties, he was one of the first persons to know.

But apartheid is now dead, and so is the old Evil Empire, and while they were both wicked they did have their uses. The Basuto could join in either opposing or supporting them, and they were something like unifying forces. Ordinary people

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could rally around them one way or another. Who or what can be a rallying point now?

Well...

The royal wedding was also celebrated at a formal dinner: baby sole Parisienne, champagne, pan-fried breast of chicken, chocolate mousse, and 420 guests of greater or lesser distinction. The Lesotho prime minister mumbled a few words. Then a Swazi praise singer introduced the Swazi king with a long ululation, and the Swazi king gave a flowery speech, and finally it was King Letsie's turn. He thanked his wife's parents, and he thanked the Basuto for helping him in his search for a queen, but he said he had found her himself, and that she was "responsible, humble and lovely."

But then he said he would invoke a royal prerogative and fine Thabo Mbeki, the South African president, an ox. Mbeki had missed the wedding, and sent Nelson Mandela in his place, and while King Letsie seemed to be speaking lightly, all the Basuto who heard him thought he was really annoyed. They said he had told off South Africa, and that he had sounded like a king of Lesotho. ❀



Will Terrorists C

Given all the nuclear waste scattered about the U.S. and elsewhere in the wor

One year after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, a Dodge B-300 series passenger van was parked on the sandy flats of the White Sands Missile Range test site in New Mexico. Alone against the backdrop of low-lying hills, the Dodge van looked strangely out of place. Concealed inside were hundreds of pounds of C-4 military-style plastic explosives, rigged to detonate by remote control.

With precision timing, the car bomb exploded in a blast that blew outward in a broad circular pattern at the base and rose upward in a smaller, oval-shaped, intensely violent flash. High speed film and video surveillance captured the spread of explosive debris. Sensitive monitoring devices measured the dispersal and trajectory of bomb fragments from the blast's epicenter, which the bombers called "ground zero."

The disintegrating Dodge van was among the first of many car and truck explosions ordered by Clinton's National Security Council at White Sands between 1994 and 1997 for a high-priority government research project called Dipole Might.

The project was part of an effort by the Defense Special Weapons Agency (formerly the Defense Nuclear Agency) to create a sophisticated computer program for field use by counterterrorism forces. Test bombs ranged in size from 50 to 1,000 pounds of explosives, inside vehicles varying from a Chevrolet Caprice four-door sedan to a 60,000-pound tractor-trailer truck.

Armed with data from the

