A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS AND SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis aimed to synthesize my evolution as a storyteller. My aim coming into the MFA program was to sharpen my writing skills, but I conclude my studies with a wider skillset. The biggest motive that fueled my work was a rekindled appreciation for history as a study discipline. The first essay titled “The four elements” is a creative rendition of a historiography of the Masculinity of Basotho men. My exploration of scholarly literature around the concept of Masculinity within the Sesotho culture spilled over into the other creative works included in this body of work. It was the primary lens with which I read and understood historical work that informed my fiction writing in particular. I was struck by the delivery of the content of the works I interacted with in my research. It was plain, harsh and in some instances, quite economical with the truth. I initially approached my writing with the notion that it is time “the lion told its story” so the hunter doesn’t glorify himself all the time. This notion evolved as I familiarized myself with the politics of reading and writing history.

Historical research is paramount to the fiction I write as I work primarily in historical fiction. I realized the emphasis placed on accounting for what happened is one-dimensional, almost clinical. I wondered what the subjects in these historical accounts felt. Also, having noticed that the interpretation of certain cultural phenomena was misconstrued, I wondered what that break-down robbed contemporary readers of, in terms of detail and preservation of the dignity of the

subjects discussed. I wanted to re-imagine the events written about with the intention of bringing in my personal knowledge of the cultural and traditional knowledge of Basotho that was passed down to me. As a result, I used close third person point of view often to expose the feelings and struggles of the characters. In historical texts, this is not considered. I also wanted to pin an emotional epic against a rich political background that centers traditional chiefs and demystifies supernatural occurrences.

The last story titled “Seqha” was written in the traditional style of Sesotho folklore, litšomo, as an attempt at writing in a non-Western format. I tried to incorporate storytelling formats in my work that reflect the many identities and the many worlds I represent. The essay “Reflections” captured my experience as a writer coming from another cultural context and the dynamic of conforming to the standards stipulated by dominant workshop models and the process of challenging these. The podcast sample was my way of capturing oral tradition, which plays a significant role in storytelling the Sesotho way. These two works are in direct conversation with the video that accompanies this thesis, which probes at the standards of judgement used to understand history in the Sesotho context. It challenges the application of Western ideologies and thought into the philosophy and way of life of ancient Basotho.

This work has allowed me to sharpen the tools I use to research and write characters and worlds from past eras that I can only imagine. I now approach imaginative writing with critical thinking and a careful consideration of context – cultural and otherwise.

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Essays

The four elements

I marched into the living room that day wearing a green floral dress with bright orange shoes. I was halted by a smell whose faint quality made my brain freeze. It slid off my tongue as I swallowed my terror and it rested in my belly. I plunked my 12-year-old tiny frame onto a bean bag that made a swish sound, as if to announce my presence to my father. Until that moment his attention was owned by the intestines of a black metal. I knew what it was, but I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge it fully. In the dismantled state it was in, its threat, though palpable would have no legs to stand on because of the hands that held it. I watched as cotton wool drank up what I assume to be gun oil. I saw springs whose hollow bodies swallowed oil-drenched ear buds and cotton wool leaving them glistening. My father put a lot of care and tenderness into polishing his gun. He did it routinely, but always made sure not to do it in my presence. On that day, I felt a discomfort in the air as I entered the living room. I have been at the receiving end of well-oiled springs honoring the ballistics that put them perfectly in place to launch a bullet I still walk with. Which is why my father gave me an enigmatic glance from time to time. One I knew carried a conflicted mesh of distress and a strong need to protect.

Most cultures have a set rubric for what qualifies a man’s masculinity. Ancient Basotho were no different. The transition into manhood was an important aspect of societal and spiritual life for Basotho. It served two main functions: to make men out of boys and to secure an entourage for chiefs. The young men a chief initiated into manhood with would serve as his loyal group of

warriors, councilors and confidants for life. Initiation started with boys burning their clothes upon arrival, symbolic of the abandonment of their childhood identity. They would get circumcised within the first few days, and the rest of their time there would be a series of tests and exercises that built endurance and taught them to suffer pain without complaint. Intrinsic to this training was conduct in battle and war times. At the end of this initiation, each young man's maternal uncle, malome, was mandated with giving his nephew a spear and a female cow to welcome him home. Owning a weapon was the final marker of their journey into manhood. Malome would then present his nephew to the chief who would recognize him as a man worthy to be engaged, with potential to marry, join his army, and engage in matters of governance at khotla (traditional court). The circumcision lodge, mophato, would be burnt as the men made their way home. Symbolic of them starting a new life as men. Everything they had acquired and used during their stay would go up in flames.

Fire. The creak and groan of animal skin and wood contracting. Squeals and hisses of liquid from fresh leaves. Rippling sheets of fire spreading on the ground weaving uncertainty and fear together. Charred stumps emerging, wearing the stench of an abandoned adolescence. A flickering orange glow bringing warmth to cold, harsh tones that whipped and lashed the innocence of childhood out of young men. Ash and soot blended with courage and clear purpose. A new spear waiting at home. Ready to be cradled with hands itching to prove their worth. Palms so sweaty they put out the fire caused by a craving for battle.

In 1878 the Peace Preservation Bill was brought before the Cape Parliament. The purpose of this Bill was to maintain peace and order in the Southern African region by ordering Africans in the Cape to surrender their arms. The government had promised to pay compensation for those who

obliged. Intrinsic to the definition of masculinity for Basotho men is ownership of a weapon. There was a designated area in every Mosotho man's hut, regardless of social stature, where he placed his weapons – usually a spear, a fighting stick and a shield. A Mosotho man who did not possess any weapons was considered a woman or a child.

During the national pitso of 1879, the then Prime Minister of the Cape Colony while visiting Basutoland, witnessed an army of about seven thousand Basotho men with guns on horseback performing manoeuvres. He was immediately alarmed and insisted on passing the Bill in Basutoland to protect colonial interests and their political stronghold in the country. In the few years leading to that point, Basotho men had been working in the diamond mines in surrounding regions and using their wages to buy guns. Guns and cattle were the most distinct markers of masculinity. This proposition was met with resistance from Basotho men. This was a call to emasculate them and make slaves out of them and their wives and children.

Fire. Target spotted. A shower of sparks blowing out of its mouth. Milliseconds before. Hot rapidly expanding gas blowing up its chamber. Propellant ignited. Bullet accelerates through its neck. Target secured. Nationalist agenda collapsed. Chiefs subjugated.

My father bought his first car cash in 1982. He didn't have a license, nor did he know how to drive. It was a brown Toyota Hilux with yellow plate numbers starting with the letters "O and N". We referred to the car as O.N. because of this. The car functioned as a family car and a business car. It was an investment into a life-long dream of owning a business. A few years earlier, he had worked for a construction company that was building employee quarters for a mine in Welkom, South Africa. He climbed the ranks quickly and became a foreman. My father generally

considered instructions as mere suggestions. A character flaw or strength, depending on the situation. It didn't serve him in this case. He decided to quit, go back home to Lesotho and start his business. O.N served us well for fifteen years, until my father decided on an upgrade for his business in 1997. A white Nissan Hardbody bakkie. It was his pride and joy. A clear indication of the success he was enjoying in his business. This car carried him back and forth between Maseru and Ribaneng in Mafeteng, south of Lesotho, where his business was contracted to build a road. On one of his trips south, he lost control of the Nissan and it overturned on the side of the road, vomiting its contents, including him. The car was a write-off. My mother, after seeing the car said she would have gone to the mortuary to look for her husband had she not seen him before. No one understood how he managed to survive that accident with only stiff muscles. When he arrived home later that day, I remember his biggest fuss and sense of loss was his gun. A young man had arrived at the scene of the accident shortly after it happened, spotted my father's gun and ran with it. Stiff muscles, a car rendered useless and a life that could have been lost, but a gun demanded we hold a night vigil for it.

Attending khotla was a mandated practice for Basotho men. Men who had come of age who shunned their attendance were considered effeminate for not wanting to participate in issues related to governance and to assist the chief. Women were strictly not allowed at khotla, unless they were bringing food for their husbands at a designated time. Khotla was usually located right next to the chief's hut. Stumps of trees and rushes surrounded this spot. If you stood there in the morning as boys and young men took to the chief's herd, the ground would tremble as hoofs trotted on their way to the fields. Khotla was strategically placed near the chief's kraal. Besides assisting the chief with handling disputes and discussing issues of security and governance,

Basotho men at khotla bonded in many ways. One of them was in carving out shields. Shields were not earned, like spears, which men were rewarded with after circumcision. Shields were carved out by men at khotla with song and dance accompanying this communal task. Then these shields would be distributed to the chief's subjects.

Certain hides were used for warriors belonging to distinguished corps. Cow hide would arrive and the men would stretch and prepare the skin until it was supple. This would be used to make clothing and blankets. Hide meant for making shields was left as is, to remain stiff. Those skilled in carving out shields would use special knives to cut out the distinguishable Basotho shield. No other shield in the region resembles it. The top part of the shield resembles a boomerang. This boomerang shape has a wide bottomed half triangular shape attached to it, that never reaches the length of the boomerang. Attached to the top of the shield is a stick that extends beyond the height of the shield at the bottom and at the top. The top end of this stick is long and adorned with ostrich feathers, which makes it look like a yellow bellflower.

Earth. So loyal. Sweet wild blackberries bruised when picked. Fields of sunflower so enamored by the sun's beauty, their gaze follow it until it sets. Pine cones and needles littering the ground. Hills and valleys that wear greenery like a badge of honor. They should have streaks of red, for all the blood shed on their ribs. But they swallow what belongs to them. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Where heroes are born. From dust.

Red ochre mixed with animal fat is generously lathered on the skin of new initiates. They come home, evolved, different. Each one with a praise poem clasped in his hand. Among them is the son's chief. The young men he is surrounded by are going to form his social nucleus. Men whose

spears will stab enemies in faraway lands to protect him. He can turn his back on them in a literal sense and be certain that his back will not be touched. The land from which that red ochre came is a physical manifestation of the loyalty expected and given of Basotho men to their chief. Most crimes were punishable by the payment of a few cows, except treason. You were cut off or left for dead for it. No exceptions.

One of the most iconic revolts against the colonial government came from Morena Moorosi in 1879. Morena Moorosi, who ruled over the Baphuthi clan, submitted himself under the rulership of Morena Moshoeshoe in earlier years, as many chiefs had done during the Lifaqane wars. To quell the disputes between Morena Moorosi and the colonial forces at the time, the same Cape government prime minister calling for the implementation of the Peace Preservation Bill in Basutoland had proposed dispossessing the Baphuthi of their land in Quthing and dividing the district into farms for white settlers. Two thousand Basotho men from other regions had been commissioned to fight against the Baphuthi tribe when they proved to be stubborn. It went against their moral fiber to side with the colonial government but they obliged, as more was at stake for them. Their general stance was to obey the government. Except in their request to give up their arms.

Around this time, Morena Letsie I had succeeded his father Morena Moshoeshoe as King of the Basotho nation. Morena Letsie was old and sick at this stage with no valor left in him to lead a revolt against disarmament. There was the risk of this revolt failing, or worse leading to the dissipation of colonial rule. This would remove the benefits of the British protection that they had which would give way to the hungry vultures in the Free State ready to take their land away. Two camps were born from this debacle – loyalists and nationalists. Loyalists sided with the

agenda of the colonial government as a strategy to keep their land. The nationalists were irrevocably against disarmament. They were resolute, convinced disarmament was a ploy to take away their manhood. Morena Letsie was torn between pushing for a policy majority of his people strongly opposed and keeping favor with the colonial government. He would encourage resistance from the ground while pleading loyalty to the government. His irresolution was interpreted as a betrayal by Basotho men.

Earth. Bulls stomp on your belly. Leaving you raw. Marks where soil crumbled. The inside darker than the surface. Tomorrow hoes are going to scrape and grate you. You are going to respond by pushing up crops. For sustenance. Your codependence is dense. Your loyalty unmatched.

Land belongs to men. According to Sesotho custom, women are considered minors, even after marriage. They usually inherited land through their husbands. Land is to the masculinity of Basotho men, what roots are to trees. The trifecta that drove Basotho men to war with imperial forces was made up of guns, cattle and land.

For a chief or king to rise to power, he had to conquer other tribes and offer provision and protection to sustain his territory. He had to have a great relationship with the land that made up his territory. Every acre that his people treaded he had to know. A typical settlement of Basotho back then was always based on a mountain. The valley below it was where their fields would be found, and a river was almost nearby to serve their crops. In times of abundance and rain, tranquility would reign.

During times of droughts, attacks would increase because of the scarcity of resources and food. Kings and chiefs, ever so diligent to protect their territories collected wisdom from the realm of the ancestors to manipulate the weather and cause rain to nourish the land. The science of rainmaking was reserved to a chosen few. Basotho believe this is a gift that is hereditary and is often a marker of royalty as most who had this gift were kings who had a responsibility to the land and their people.

Morena Moshoeshoe II, the father of the current reigning king of Lesotho was known to have this gift. When the land was dry and fields weren't producing enough yields to sustain the nation, he would go to the top of Thaba Bosiu mountain, where his forefathers are buried and he would pray for rain. On his way down the mountain after his prayers, clouds would gather and rain would fall.

I grew up hearing the above stories and getting tidbits about the way of life of pre-colonial Basotho. My evolution as a writer during my time in Flagstaff was characterized with a ferocious appetite for learning more about the history of my country and my people. It was perhaps the distance and separation from home that made me yearn for it this way. I missed the tastes and sensations of home. So I searched for them in books and archives. I yearned to walk on ground that knew my footsteps and kept the remains of my ancestors safe. I looked for crumbs of their consciousness in books written by missionaries detailing the lives of Basotho in past centuries. Instead of having their livelihood portrayed as sacred and beautiful, I had to navigate words like "barbaric" in passages recording the ways of life of ancient Basotho. This went against previous interactions with the eras discussed in these books. Some of the contents of these books I had

been told about from my elders around fires and under apple trees. The tone they employed was always wrapped in reverence.

After wrestling with a forced reconciliation between the written recorded history of Lesotho and the oral histories and folktales that spoke of the heroic nature of Basotho, I decided to abandon my perusal of works written by non-Basotho. I then found material written by Basotho detailing the history of Lesotho and its people. The difference in tone and the respect given to the subjects discussed in their work brought me to tears. Tears of joy and gratitude.

I wondered what honoring the oral tradition of Basotho would look like for one of my classes. Basotho have a knack for storytelling and using words to paint strong imagery. The language of Sesotho expresses itself pictorially, making any interaction with words vivid. Basotho orators and praise poets can come up with incredible verses on the spot. An accomplishment they attribute to channeling messages from the realm of the ancestors. I wanted to explore this phenomenon. The written form wouldn't do justice to the story I wanted to tell. My time doing this MFA program has enriched my perspectives and growth as a storyteller in general. Part of my transformation as a writer has been surrendering to the "airy-fairy" nature of creative pursuits. I used to take pride in being a logical thinker and generally saw life through this lens. Until recently that is. In the past, the spirituality of Basotho was so intertwined with their everyday life that in knowing more about them, my knowledge of the spiritual practices of Basotho grew. I found myself treading the line between fact and what felt like fiction at times. For ancient Basotho, the fantastical was part of the mundane of everyday living.

My readings focused a lot on the masculinity of Basotho men. Sesotho masculinity cannot be separated from chieftainship, which is the culmination of Sesotho masculinity. Interacting with chiefs and kings on paper and through stories introduced me to a fascinating phenomenon – rainmaking. Manipulating the weather in times of drought was usually initiated by the king or chief and sometimes spiritual healers. These kings and chiefs were believed to have the gift of making it rain.

Water. Nourishment. Life itself. Splashing over rocks. Going up stems to nourish. Falling on broken earth. Healing it like a balm. Creating symphonies that cradle nature to sleep. Carrying thunder to jolt us awake. Rain singing to soothe us.

Music is an intricate part of Basotho culture. We are always singing. Music notes have hooked together to create bridges when conflict consumed us. When sorrow abducts us to valleys filled with dry bones, music is the rainbow that rescues us and lifts us up to mountain peaks that restore our joy. We break out into song at every occasion, sometimes expressing emotions opposite to the ones sitting in our throats urging on our tears to fall. Sounds of jubilation from our guts and electrifying drum sounds can be heard at funerals while somber songs that thinly squeeze out of our throats can be heard at church weddings.

Music is the blanket I wanted my work to adorn for a project I wanted to pay homage to Sesotho oral tradition. Our folktales almost always feature a catchy song or a character with a distinct tone that requires one telling the story to step into the character's voice. I wanted to capture and distill feelings I couldn't express. After playing around with the idea for a podcast episode, I knew a collaborative approach was the only way. Song, dance and theatre intertwine when Basotho

tell stories, almost to the point of embellishment. I wanted to collaborate with another artist whose style and relationship to their art meshes identity, intellectual musings and spirituality.

Leomile is one such artist. Approaching her for this project was quite ambitious on my part. She is currently working on a new album, collaborating with well-established musicians and moving between Lesotho and South Africa for her craft. Time is a luxury I knew she didn't have. I had to approach her with a strong pitch that would hook her, and this is how my podcast idea went from a simple piece about rainmaking to a layered conversation about spirituality, cultural identity and navigating these concepts in a contemporary world that is grappling with sitting comfortably with ancient indigenous knowledge and western ideologies. Availing herself to me and allowing me to use her music to anchor some of our conversation was an incredible gift. Our conversations 'off air' before and after I interviewed her have deepened my relationship with stories from our elders and their ideas around spirituality, knowledge of self and indigenous knowledge systems that I used to shun.

Central to why she was the perfect person to collaborate with, was her conviction around the concept of rainmaking being passed down genetically as a gift. I was a skeptic of this idea initially, but I kept coming across information on the notion of epigenetic memory. According to epigenetic studies, physical DNA sequence can be passed down as it is, but differ in how it is expressed in our genes. The experiences of our ancestors don't die with them, they're passed down to us their descendants and could wreak havoc or empower us, depending on their nature. The children of holocaust survivors are more prone to nightmares and PTSD for example. This phenomenon can be attributed to epigenetic memory. Positive attributes can be passed down in a similar manner. I suppose the DNA of one endowed with the gift of rainmaking will look similar

to everyone else's, but the magic of being one with nature and being able to manipulate it is contained in how that DNA is expressed in the individual. Sometimes we don't need to boggle down and scrutinize how and why things happen, we just need to be comfortable with the fact that they happen. In Leomile's case, her body remembers and channels this gift when she sings. She summarized her conviction in this with the quote that follows.

"…what science often does is simply kind of dismantle in a logical manner how phenomenon occurs, right? But the phenomenon happens whether science validates it or not. And so many things that were not previously understood are now understood scientifically…and I kind of take offence sometimes when they're only honored and taken seriously because we now have a so-called scientific explanation; but with or without the scientific explanation the phenomenon is there."

Her music summons rain, 'Song for Pulane' specifically which is featured in the podcast. She is convinced that a higher power works through her to channel this ability. We have often joked about how we are probably descendants of rainmakers and their light is simply shinning through us.

Water. Carries memory. Makes babies buoyant in wombs. Buffers life between our world and the ancestral realm. Keeps secrets for generations.

My father's gun couldn't walk to border officials, so he had to carry it to them. Long trips to visit family in South Africa started with a silent questioning of our right to walk the stolen land that belonged to our ancestors. Our passports would be pulled out of my mother's handbag and handed over. Proof that we belong to an arrogant people who wiggled their tongues at colonial

powers. My father's gun would be carried out of the storage compartment of the car, with paper work looked over several times before he would fold the papers, satisfied. His gun would wear its Sunday best, a leather holster or he would simply slide it into one of his pockets. He'd take his passport, the gun's license and walk on behalf of the metal he carried to declare it. My paralyzing fear of guns would be mute during such times. All guns except this one were bad. It was in the hands of someone who would lay down his life for me, so it was good. When we walked on our ancestral grounds, and took hikes in the wilderness tracing where their feet would have treaded, the only weapon my father carried were his fists.

It was important to my father that I know my roots. Up to seven generations back, we pieced and named every ancestor that came before him. This required us to go to his ancestral village where he was from – a world away from where I was born and raised in the city. We drove through roads snuggled between daunting mountain slopes and craggy cliffs. Took in breath-taking picturesque sights of Lesotho's countryside which are unparalleled. Hiked up mountains he used to go up and down as a boy to carry out chores and see family from neighboring villages. The only enemy he was set on protecting me against was a lost identity. A gun could not protect me from this. It is in intentionally tracing my lineage and hearing stories from my elders about the people I come from that so much of myself and my country made sense. What I had dismissed as myths and legends, suddenly resonated deeply with my core.

The driest months in Flagstaff are between March and June. The Spring semester class I had taken which culminated in the podcast episode mentioned earlier, ended in late April. It was my fourth month in Flagstaff and I was yet to experience any rain. Snow had gently arrived a few weeks

after my arrival in January of 2021, reminding me of home. But the thunderstorms I was accustomed to around the same time of the year back home were yet to make an appearance.

My presentation was the last one in class that day. Some parts of the podcast were played to be critiqued as had been done for the others' work. An intriguing discussion followed with my classmates around the themes covered in the episode. I relayed to everyone that my biggest takeaway from this class and my final project was a transformation of the internal dialogue I was having about the indigenous knowledge of Basotho. A paradigm shift had taken place. The research I carried out made me realize that I was using a Western lens to understand my cultural identity, while what I needed to do was go within and encourage a remembrance of the knowledge of my ancestors which I carry in my body. When class was almost over, one of my classmates announced that it was raining. Rain had decided to make a dramatic entrance. Those who could, peeped out their windows and took in the rain. That was one of the most unifying moments I had ever had over a Zoom class. Jokes made rounds in the Zoom chat about how I had made it rain. It didn't rain for a while after that. As I dug deeper to trace my lineage further back, I discovered that I come from a long line of rainmakers. My intrigue with rainmaking is probably a whisper to rediscover this lost identity in my bloodline.

The responsibility of passing down family history and rituals lies with women, according to Sesotho culture. For ancient Basotho, when a young Mosotho woman married into a family, she spent the first week or two living with her mother-in-law in her compound. This was meant to strengthen their relationship and build rapport so the mother-in-law can pass down family history and rituals easily with their bond as a container. The mother-in-law would also teach her new daughter-in-law the basics of running a household and how to cater to her husband's

preferences. Only when both parties were satisfied with this induction process would the young woman move into the hut her new husband built for her to begin her marital duties. Being integrated into the family mattered more than just being a wife. Considering the position of Basotho women in society using a western lens may undermine the power they had.

This power was demonstrated to me during one of our excursions with my father while we were putting together our family tree. We were at my father's ancestral home. We walked around with him showing me dilapidated huts and kraals that belonged to his forefathers and explaining with a stumbling confidence, who lived where and how we were related. We made our way to the main house in the compound (there is no fence to show where the boundaries of the compound are). After exchanging lengthy pleasantries and catching up about the whereabouts of certain relatives, we got down to the business of mapping out our family tree. My father's aunt, who is his uncle's widow relayed this history with so much ease. I noticed the contrast between his attempt and her actual rendition. She's been married into our family for decades and knows our history like the back of her hand. I was in awe of how sharp her memory is. She is approaching eighty years old, an age where it is believed one's memory resorts to occasional visits but generally stays away. She spoke with authority and a conviction that showed that this knowledge was given to her in a 'structural' manner. It is no accident that she has all this knowledge about our family. It is a responsibility that was inculcated into her and a role she took very seriously. From that one conversation, so much of who I am was validated. I heard stories since childhood about the people I come from, but to have a detailed account of who they are and how they were as they walked this earth instilled a deep sense of pride.

A Mosotho man could have not done this for me from my family. All my father could do was take me to the custodian of this knowledge and relinquish power as a figure of authority in detailing my identity. My father's aunt was able to pick up patterns as she narrated our family tree. She knew which sons of the men her husband came from had no children and never married. There were many. She knew which ones left home and never came back. A pattern she cautioned me against. In the presence of my father, she told me about the weakness of the men in our family. Those she had witnessed in her husband and those she inferred from stories and through knowing our family tree so well.

This was part of where Basotho women derived their power. The men owned the land, but they knew more about the generations that came before, who owned that land. Such is the realization that rekindled my relationship with the land that belongs to my forefathers. According to Sesotho tradition, I can never lay claim to that land because I am a woman, however that land has laid claim to my heart and consciousness. I owe some of my spiritual growth to bonding with that land. I show up in spaces that deem me inferior, because of the strength I derive from that land. This is why land is such a contentious issue among peoples whose land was stolen by colonial and imperial forces. It literally carries our identities. Stripping land away from the original custodians of that land is stealing the spiritual identity of the descendants of the people of that land.

After giving birth, elderly Basotho women that assisted in delivering the child would keep the placenta that connected mother and child. Earth would be dug up in the hut where delivery took place and this placenta would then be buried ceremoniously near the entrance. This ritual symbolized a lifelong spiritual connection to the land of that child's birth. Whether male or female, the life essence of that child would be infused with the ground where they slept every

night. There was also a spot at the outskirts of the homestead where still-born babies of that lineage would be buried. In modern day Lesotho, families are still weary of selling portions of such land to protect the sanctity of the place and the dignity of a family. It is believed that allowing outsiders to inhabit such lands taints the legacy of a family.

This is why Basotho men fiercely protected their land during the late 19th century when surrounding tribes had their land stolen from them. It is not only part of the expression of their identity but also where they grounded themselves since birth. Majority of the land that belonged to Basotho was taken away. Which begs the question why weapons survived the intricate definition of masculinity for modern Basotho men, but land did not.

Reflections

In the first few weeks of the Literary Theory class I took in the first semester of my MFA program, I questioned my presence among my peers. I was staying up until early morning hours to accommodate the nine-hour time difference between home and the U.S. where the rest of my classmates were. I stayed quiet not feeling worthy enough to add to the discussions that took place in the seminar-style class. Words and theories like 'Post-modernism' and 'Feudalism' would get thrown around like they were written on the back of cereal boxes. I retreated into my shell and vowed never to speak up until the semester was over.

However, my commitment to the program and to flowing with the rhythm it dictated for me, wouldn't allow me to lay back and passively sit through class. I asked the professor of the class if I could have a meeting with them to explain myself. It was around 2am or so, Lesotho time when we had that meeting. Disoriented from class which often left me overwhelmed, I expressed how taxing my experience was up until that point. My imposter syndrome was high on caffeine and insisted on hijacking that conversation. I don't remember much from it, but I remember being assured that I belonged in that space and not to quit, which I was on the brink of doing.

More conversations were had in the weeks that followed and an agreement was reached. I was allowed to read papers and books by African writers and academics. I was essentially given the greenlight to come up with my own cannon which would inform my writing. This parallel approach opened up a whole new world for me. While Foucault was read and analyzed in class, I could listen and contribute but look for other intellectuals and scholars who wrote from an African paradigm of reasoning. The rabbit holes I went into landed me in the proverbial living

rooms of some of the greatest minds on the African continent. I could quote writers and thinkers like Chinua Achebe, then quote younger academics who are still active in their scholarship who are based at institutions whose corridors I had walked through. I could imagine sending an email asking to have coffee with some of them. While this prospect was probably far-fetched, I could entertain the possibility without feeling like I was reaching for the impossible. There was potential for me to access them and pick their brains. The cannon of thinkers and writers prescribed in this class felt so removed from my lived experience, that had I continued to use their lens to think about my writing, I would have had a miserable experience.

In reading Toni Morrison's "Beloved" along with the rest of class, the stark differences in the lived experiences of my classmates and I became apparent. I was from a completely different world, with a completely different set of moral ethics, principles and worldview. I remember being lauded for my interpretation of a scene where one of the characters in the book emerges from the water. Water in its three states featured in the next scene and I made a connection to the ethereal character emerging from the water and the significance of water to African spirituality. A relevance which resonated since some of the characters were slaves and were probably second or third generation arrivals on U.S. soil. Their spiritual and cultural identity still close in memory and preserved through remarkable ways, given the dreadful circumstances they lived under. It was praise that felt unwarranted. I simply connected a part of my cultural identity to the work I was analyzing. It felt undeserved because I didn't toil to reach this connection.

That was the work I'd been having to do in the background – the work of finding my place and downloading a new way of being. It was an exercise I had anticipated. I was about to move to a new continent, country and culture. All that was familiar to me would be left behind. What I

hadn't anticipated was having to shift my "insider knowledge" to a caricature to translate how I think. I often felt I had to cull parts of me that would be deemed unsavory by my new environment.

There were moments when I would forget to put my anger away, and would find it exposed like a misplaced vintage ornament in a contemporary themed house with sleek clean lines. One such time, was in a class where the rest of the faces I saw on the Zoom grid where class was held did not look like mine, except one African American woman. I had grown weary of expecting a camaraderie in such spaces because of many dynamics. I expressed a stance which was challenged by most of my classmates. I had not taken a class on African American Literature, which I desperately wanted to take, because the class was not taught by an African American. The idea of teaching a certain type of literature without the lived experience of the authors and subjects of that type of literature does not resonate with me. It is a layered stance that includes politics around race and labor. I felt myself unravel. In another class, a discussion centered around the issue of land and the history of colonialism in South Africa was underway. Again, I felt myself unravel. Granted, the discussion was literally too close to home. I looked at my laptop screen and saw faces looking back at me, with none resembling mine except once again, one. My last contribution to that discussion was a call to action, for people whose looks did not resemble mine, to heal themselves and their lineages for the pain the actions those they come from have inflicted on others. It is not possible to inflict that much pain if you're not in pain yourself. I remember stopping my camera, muting myself and collecting the vintage ornament that showed up without warning. I did some breathwork and joined the class after collecting myself.

There were other times when my presence would be affirmed in my new environment, and my moments of anger would be rescued and rebranded. The first time I walked into a classroom and was met by a professor of color, was in Poetry class. Among the many reasons I had taken the class was to have the experience of getting instructed by a person of color whose experiences would probably be adjacent to mine. As part of an exercise on the first day of class, we were encouraged to meditate and channel our ancestors, for those who resonate with such practices, so they can assist with our writing process for that day. I had to fight back tears that entire class. For the first time since starting this program, I felt fully seen. I didn't feel the need to compartmentalize myself. I could bring my entire self to class without feeling unsafe. What a gift.

In a workshop for Fiction class, one of the stories I wrote for review had dialogue written in Sesotho, my mother tongue. This was intentional on my part as I wanted to use language to ground my work in Lesotho, where the story was set. I had hesitantly submitted my story fearing that some nuances contained in the dialogue would be missed by my classmates. Some of the feedback I got was around how well the dialogue worked. They didn't understand it, but they could contextualize it. They also googled some phrases to get translations. I cited one of my favorite authors, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie whose works are always littered with Igbo words and phrases, with no translations. She has stated in interviews that she writes for a Nigerian audience, and that others who consume her work will have to put in the extra effort to find the meanings of Igbo words and phrases to understand. My classmates demonstrated the practicality of this. Another gift.

In her book 'Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing', Janelle Adsit alludes to writers having to navigate monolingual enforcement and multilingual experience. The prerequisite for the

workshops I took part in throughout my MFA program was a monolingual environment. This was a condition most instructors upheld without accommodating the complexities of language and power which would play out in such environments. I am often hyper aware of tone, word choice, inflections and dialect when I engage in spaces where English is the medium of instruction. As a non-first language speaker of the language, I have to translate more than just the words being spoken. The delivery of those words is just as important. There were times during discussions and critiques when I would realize that a lot was getting lost in translation between my classmates and professors because they were speaking a secondary language without paying much attention to it. English may have been our primary language of communication but there were factors such as ideological differences, gender expression, social identities and others, which were not accounted for in our interactions. The workshop model that I experienced didn't hold space for these differences and assumed equal footing for all who participated.

In certain discussions such as those around cultural appropriation and the ethics of those in more powerful social and economic positions, telling the stories of refugees in first world countries, this secondary language became even more apparent. I would look up at my monitor seeking camaraderie from those I knew were more than equipped to educate on the inappropriateness of the positions taken on these issues. However, the burden of educating would be too much to bear. It would feel unsafe to speak up in such instances, so I would blankly stare at my laptop screen while counting the seconds until the subject was changed. It was unbearable to hear opinions that undermined my existence and life experiences. On one occasion, I frantically sent a private message in the chat to one of my classmates and asked to have a quick chat after class. I couldn't be the only one feeling this way. They confirmed it.

As I became more comfortable in class and started speaking up more often, I would speak up when it felt safe to do so. The fear I felt would often be met with a respectful acknowledgement, especially when uncomfortable conversations had to be had. On one occasion, a classmate made reference to a river in their essay being 'discovered' and attributed this discovery to a white settler. Others and I corrected this phrasing and explained why it was problematic. We didn't use language rooted in reprimanding and shaming, which was an unwritten contract we all signed in that class. We took and gave such correction with grace. A courtesy I can attribute to a subconscious awareness of the secondary languages spoken in that class. We were a group of self-aware individuals with a conspicuous emotional intelligence that held space for all of us to feel seen and heard.

The atmosphere in this class was somewhat a contrast to my other classes. The workshop format used here could be likened to the idea of reprimanding through love. There is a people somewhere on the African continent who used to rehabilitate criminals through remembrance of their true essence – love. The elders of that community would surround the convicted person and remind them of who they were as a child and what their destiny was. They would be reminded of their good acts and would be held until the elders were satisfied with their work. This may not be an accurate rendition but is believable as prisons were introduced by colonial powers to African societies. Being held in captivity and constantly reminded of your offences seems counterintuitive to rehabilitation. This is how some workshop sessions would feel. There was a superimposition of worldviews and privileged perspectives which felt like condemnation. It was also a shock to my system because in the context where I come from, outright criticism is frowned upon. Sesotho, my mother tongue, is notorious for round about expressions.

Euphemisms are standard. Having to write letters critiquing the work of my classmates was a torturous exercise that always left me feeling like I was inconsiderate. I was going against all my societal and cultural programming, which was really challenging. I would rather clean a ten storey building with a toothbrush.

I often felt ill-equipped. I wasn't familiar with the worlds they were basing their stories and characters in. I didn't know what mind space they were in and what core motive inspired their work. Giving feedback without this background information felt like I was entering a space, occupying it without considering the original inhabitants of it and then having the arrogance to tell them all the ways in which their way of life was wrong and how mine was right, so they should abandon their ways and adopt mine. A very familiar trope. Adsit details a method she uses with her students where they all read a story together and then she asks "what authenticating details would add to this story?". Then her students come up with a list in groups, of information they would want to know about the characters and the story. This approach feels more like the elders' approach in the anecdote given above. It acknowledges the knowledge and ideological gaps that make the reader ill equipped to understand the story fully. Instead of imposing their worldview, they acknowledge the gap in thought and relatability by identifying what they feel is missing in the story. This approach would encourage more introspection and an interrogation of our role as workshop participants in shaping the work of others in a container that prioritizes empathy.

The privilege I was afforded in the Literary Theory class could not be extended in other classes and workshops because of their nature. I therefore ignored the ways in which I was internalizing "mainstream" canonized ideas around literary craft and storytelling. My work is primarily based on historical events. The production of my fiction therefore, feels like hybrid work. There are

moments of exposition where I try to explain the pre-colonial world of my characters which I don't know first-hand. I usually walk a tight rope where I have to strike a balance between informing to build the world of my characters and explaining to give cultural context, which I get through research and often get tempted to slip into my prose to 'educate' the reader. Then there are times when I let my imagination run wild and I twist historical fact and known cultural practices to suit what my characters want. This leaves me with an anxious deliberation between ethics I need to employ as a writer and my cultural identity and the moral standards it dictates.

For one of the short stories I wrote, the research I took led me to two books. One written in Sesotho and one written in English. The book written in Sesotho was a condensed version of the book written in English. There was a chapter in the Sesotho book which summarized the practice of initiation into manhood of Basotho men. It is taboo to share details of what happens at the circumcision lodge where this initiation happens over a few months. However, the writer of the book was a missionary who had been given the privilege of accessing this sacred knowledge that only men who have gone through this rite of passage know. In the Sesotho version, he writes briefly and vaguely about the process of initiation for Basotho men. In the English version, he goes into a lot more detail and even alludes to Basotho men having to drink a concoction of herbs mixed with human body parts to give them bravery. The writer omitted this information in the Sesotho version because he knew more Basotho would read this and would object to such information being made available to the masses. I asked my elders about the accuracy of the details discussed in the English version. My questions have either been evaded or the writer's motives have been questioned, as portraying Basotho men as savages was probably part of the writer's intention as he had to demonize the cultural practices of Basotho to push his agenda of

converting Basotho to Christianity. My internal tug of war around how much of the information included in the English version of the book I could include in my story, was one I wished I could share with my peers. Peers who could equally understand the underlying ethics involved.

I harbored a yearning to write 'like the others' and to fit my work into tropes steeped in western thought and formula. It is a basic human desire to belong, after all. In the prep work I was doing, building the characters and working out details of the plot, I was following a fairytale trope where the two characters that fall in love in my story get whisked off in the end and live happily ever after. I wanted to impose romanticism on these characters and the plot which is based in the late 1700s and early 1800s, in Southern Africa. An impossible feat since marriage and the idea of love were a completely different concept to what we have today. It is in correcting this direction that I was reminded to stay true to the story I am telling.

Some labels that I also had to question were those that sought to categorize fantastical elements in fiction from other parts of the world. I read up on the concept of magic realism as a potential label for the fiction work I am producing. It seems standard to clothe one's work so booksellers know which shelves to put them on. However, I came to the realization that what is deemed 'supernatural' or 'dreamy' is a standard part of our stories from home. You could switch on the radio on a random Tuesday afternoon and hear a caller relating a story about how their cat spoke to them and predicted a certain disaster their family is in the depths of. Of course, the more 'educated' and westernized population ridicule such claims, but given that an overwhelming 75 per cent of Basotho live in the rural areas where stories like this are 'normal', there is usually no need to qualify such stories.

My initial approach to writing such stories was to overwhelm with exposition to get the reader on the same page as me. I considered how fairytales had no justification for people flying and fairy godmothers showing up and spinning wands. We take in such stories with the understanding that they are fantasy and their main task is to transport you into another world. My current approach is slightly different after realizing how 'matter-of-fact' other stories that are put in that category unfold. Creation stories from other nations around the world have a similar quality. The way they are told also doesn't give much room for debate about the feasibility of these stories. It's just what the carriers of these stories know and they're simply passing them on.

When I was younger, my paternal grandfather would gather his grandchildren around a fire at night, and he would tell us folktales in the most animated way. My grandfather was a stoic man who took life and himself very seriously. He used to wear a three-piece suit to go the store to buy basic grocery items. He always carried a sleek leather file bag and a walking stick made of steel, instead of wood like his peers. On any given day, you wouldn't find him in a playful mood. Until story time came. This was always the highlight of our visits. He would use his hands a lot, sing catchy tunes that always accompanied folktales and use different sounds for the different characters that featured in the folktales. I imagine this is how these stories were passed down to him, so he had to do justice to those who came before him, who also heard these stories told in an animated way. He would teach us these stories and get us to sing along with him. Suddenly the man who idolized logic, who carried an indifferent facial expression and hardly expressed any emotion would be transformed into a production with flair.

Such is the power of these legends I try to seep into my work. Animals would talk, doors would appear in forests and whole worlds would appear under water. There was never an explanation.

It just was. This is how I want to keep my readers drawn into my work. I could keep my stories straight forward, but it is important that I include the fantastical because for the people living in those times, reality and fantasy intertwined. Remnants of this way of life are still present in the fabric of society for Basotho. Since they are my primary audience, I have to keep this feature in my work.

All experiences are valid. Not every space is appropriate to appreciate all these experiences, however. One of the biggest takeaways from my time at the NAU MFA program was this. It is in the gaps where my imposter syndrome would flare up that I would focus on the differences between myself and my peers and I would appreciate them more. Efforts to accommodate these differences were made, and as a result, I grew incredibly as a writer.

The Cave

1780 Basutoland

The sun had just hidden behind Mautse mountain when two men walked through Ngoanamokone's reed entrance. Ngoanamokone's eyes were following the grinding stone in her hands as her palms kneaded back and forth, to fix her daughter's laziness. Ground wheat had to be fine for the porridge she was going to cook in the morning. The large granules she saw as she inspected Nkaiseng's work appalled her to silence. She simply yanked the large wooden bowl from Nkaiseng with the coarse wheat and went outside.

When Ngoanamokone saw the two men, she knocked over the wooden bowl next to her and rose so quickly she struggled to keep her balance. Their visit at this time of day only meant one thing.

"Nkaiseng! Nkaiseng! Ngoan'aka?" she screamed as she knelt down to crawl through the narrow entrance to her hut. Inside, Nkaiseng was putting down the last batch of firewood they had in the compound.

"'M'e?" she screamed back distracted, "Abuti, please come start the fire so I can see to 'M'e," she said looking at her brother Mokuoane.

Before she could get up from the ground where she was sitting, her mother and two large men were standing before her. Ngoanamokone's bulging eyes pleaded with her daughter to comply with the two men. Nkaiseng knew this because her mother's brow which was usually furrowed looked relaxed but tense. Ngoanamokone's eyes often spoke more eloquently than her mouth.

Without looking away Ngoanamokone asked her son, Mokuoane, to light up the firewood in the center pit of her hut. He complied with lethargy in his movements, oblivious to the situation unfolding. The men greeted and proceeded to sit on the grass mat near the entrance.

“We need Mokuoane’s attention. We were sent by Chief Palali to address him as the new head of this family” one of the men, Mphitsane, announced.

Palali’s father died five moons earlier in the winter. His frozen body was found under a heap of snow at the edge of his village with his fingers cut off. Palali was immediately presented before his father’s people as their new chief, adorned with the skin of a leopard around his shoulders. Tongues went dry speculating about the leopard skin that miraculously showed up. When newly stated chiefs or kings took their position, it was the men at khotla who summoned the animal whose skin would decorate the shoulders of their chief or king. The animal would then be killed and ceremoniously skinned by the strongest warrior in the village’s most trusted and senior battalion. Protective medicine would be smeared all over the hands of the men who stretch the skin to make it soft. Then they spoke incantations and asked the spirits of the rulers that came before their new chief to watch over him and give him wisdom to lead them well.

Motlalentoa’s courage seemed to be flailing as he pulled out from his sheath, dried sinews from the shin of the bull slaughtered for Palali’s inauguration. With shaking hands, he told Mokuoane the reason for their visit.

“It is a direct order. I have to dig a ditch and bury your father’s last wish. I’m sorry my son,” he said, as he dragged his feet in Nkaiseng’s direction.

“Monna Motlalentoa, get on with it. We don’t have much time,” Mphitsane shouted at him.

Ngoanamokone's body went rigid as she watched the two men pin Nkaiseng down while one reached for her index finger.

"You are to marry Palali. He is your destiny. You will build a strong homestead and give him many sons," said Motlalentoa.

Nkaiseng's finger began throbbing as the dried sinew started digging into her middle finger. Mphitsane's calloused hands had fastened it tightly around her finger to cause pain sharp enough to shift her will but mild enough not to cause damage. With brows pulling in and a lack of stamina to fight what was happening, Nkaiseng let out a squeal that had Ngoanamokone convinced the men cut her daughter's finger off.

"Stop! Leave her alone!" she pleaded between sobs.

Nkaiseng's heart was precious. Any Mosotho woman whose heart took center stage when she came up in conversation was usually also praised for being a hard worker. These traits compensated for a lack of striking beauty. A woman's beauty was led to an observer's eyes by a good work ethic and a strong sense of domestic duty. Nkaiseng's build was common – proportionate and slim. No part of her body stood out. Her work ethic was mediocre at best. Her facial features never inspired excessive praise. Which is why Ngoanamokone couldn't wrap her head around the scene before her. Two suitors vying for her daughter's hand in marriage was a far-off possibility. Yet here she was, about to push Mokuoane to action to rescue his sister.

Bending Nkaiseng's will was an exercise that needed at least five men. Hers was set in stone. For years her father told her of her betrothment to Khechane, Monyane's son. Monyane was Nkaiseng's paternal uncle. An honor had been bestowed upon her. Marrying within the family

was a blessing. It was much easier to get integrated into the groom's family as a new bride. Between fraught breaths and a perishing voice, Nkaiseng's father had summoned for her moments before he breathed his last. He had held her hand with a weak grasp and told her to marry Monyane's son.

"Your union will bring great fortune to our people. It was preordained by the ancestors. On the eve of your birth, they gave me a vision. Monyane and I sat on the rocks in one of the caves of Mautse and our children were playing in the distance. They locked hands and precious stones and metal started falling from the sky and forming a heap at their feet," he said.

This memory flashed before Nkaiseng and injected her with a combative energy. Ngoanamokone seeing blood on the floor jumped to her feet and grabbed a pot of sour milk from the floor. She swallowed a coppery taste in her mouth and took a deep breath that lingered on her nose leaving notes of determination and hostility. This fight was going to end with a casualty, no question. Nkaiseng's squeal had turned into wailing and increasing hand movements. The fight in her was rising from her gut. She unleashed it just when a pot of sour milk broke on the head of Motlalentoa.

A tart aroma shot up Ngoanamokone's nose and caused bile to rise up her throat. She was determined to have someone's insides spill, not hers. She screamed at the man standing near the weapons her husband once guarded with his life.

"Leave her alone! How dare you spit on my husband's grave?" she asked, eyes clouded with tears. Covered in a white, thick liquid and trying to keep his balance, Motlalentoa was removing the sour milk from his eyes while spewing threats to Mokuoane.

“Take charge of your subjects! Control them! How dare this senseless woman interfere with servants of the chief on an important mission? I will remove her myself if I have to,” he said.

Mphitsane, distracted by the commotion, let the sinews loose on Nkaiseng’s finger. The momentary relief bought her enough time to untangle herself from the might of his grasp and dash to the other side of the hut. Her feet landed next to her father’s weapons. She grabbed his spear and went charging for Mphitsane. Mokuoane seeing this unravel before him grabbed the nearest clay pot and threw it at Mphitsane knocking him down. Rather he gets blood on his hands than his sister who stood to face more judgement as a woman.

The clay pot smashed against the wall and its pieces went flying across Ngoanamokone’s hut. Immediately silence befell the space. Golden light rose up like smoke from the contents of the clay pot scattered on the floor. Vines of purple light shot up and solidified into crystals as they grew with every blink. A gust of wind swept through the room violently. Every dish on display cracked but didn’t break. Faint sounds of a drum that made a gong sound were heard from all directions. The temperature in the room dropped. It felt like the thick of winter when the mountain of Mautse gets covered in snow.

“Mokuoane! What have you done?” Ngoanamokone screamed at her son in disbelief.

The shattered clay pot whose contents were now creating a spectacle in her hut was an object so precious, less than ten people had touched it since its birth. No one knows how it came to be. Not one soul could confirm its contents until today. It was rumored to have been dug up by an ancestor of Mokuoane’s father when all tribes were starting out at Ntsoana-tsatsi, the birthplace of all Basotho tribes. The clay pot protected Mokuoane’s village and his people. It was a portal

that connected the ancestral world to this one. Only those deemed worthy could touch it. One had to walk in the light and swear allegiance to serving his people to be deemed worthy. Mokuoane had just broken that code and the divine protection that kept his people safe.

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Mokuoane's left leg glistened with a stream of blood tainted with a copper red luminescence. The spell that was at least five generations old had spun and struck his left foot when it was unleashed from the confines of the clay pot. His heart felt like a lump of hot coal in his chest, about to explode. He fled. One foot in front of the other, slowly at first. Eventually, the gravity of his actions pulled the pain from under his foot and gave it to the soil beneath to hold for some time. He ran through the reed entrance of his mother's compound, almost damaging it with the force of his speed. Drops of blood left trails of his whereabouts as he made his way through the village.

At the peak of the night when the chatter of the moon and the shadow of mountains got comfortable, Mokuoane's leg gave in. The soil beneath, thinner and weaker couldn't hold his pain any longer. The muscles on his neck were stiff from constantly looking over his shoulder. His eyes were bloodshot, strained from darting from the ground, to the sky, to the horizon, to his side, then back to the ground. He leaned on a tree to catch his breath. Its warmth rushing through his body. A sense of comfort washed over him while he kept his eyes shut for a moment. He recognized the tree now. His ears had heard its leaves rustle this way before. He couldn't be lost. Yet the shadow of the valleys before him were new. These were not the shapes of lions' heads which he saw from the edge of his mother's seotloana. Instead, their shape resembled the sheath

of a notorious warrior whose hands played with knives too often. At one blink they looked stern, thin but intimidating. The next, they looked like stumps with their peaks cut off.

In that moment, he remembered a story his father told him as a boy. It went like this.

> Since the beginning of time, the night sky used to be pitch black except on days when the moon was present. Watchmen used to be stationed over the mountain of Mautse to keep watch for approaching enemies. There was also a warrior at the time named Seqha, who threw spears from a distance so well and always struck his opponents without fail. One day he was dared by those jealous of his skill, to throw shiny stones at the sun and see how far they go. If he could aim and hit moving targets, surely the sun's moving pace across the sky was no match for his abilities. He obliged and threw five gem stones at the sun, which disappeared into the sky. Seeing the sun undisturbed and its light still bright, he was ridiculed. Bellies were touched, fingers were pointed, while roars of laughter bubbled out of bystanders. Until night time came and five sparkles were seen in the night sky for the first time.
>
> The following day, Seqha threw more gem stones into the sky. The sky swallowed all of them during the day. Later, the night sky sparkled with more gem stones. The watchmen could see further and wider with more light. This pleased the king so sent ten heads of cattle to Seqha and urged him to continue. For three moons he threw precious stones into the sky until the night sky sparkled with stones so many we've lost count. That was how stars came to be.

Mokuoane's face lit up as he looked to the sky and saw the five gem stones. He listened for the wind's direction as it whistled at the lone boulders around him looking for companionship. He left the warm embrace of the tree he was under and looked for Ntlo-kholo, his fortress. Ntlo-kholo's big bold body offered him protection from storms as a boy. As soon as he could hold a stick, his father sent him out with the older boys to look after his herd of goats. Free to roam and traverse the breadth of Mautse mountain, the goats would trouble the other boys by going too far up. He would wait for them under Ntlo-kholo's shade when the sun was scorching foreheads during the brightest time of day. He would hide beside her with a molia-nyeoe when unexpected rain fell.

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The cave was hidden out of sight for those not familiar with this part of Maphutseng. Its entrance resembled the slit of a cat's eye. Mokuoane barely made it inside before collapsing to the ground. Dead leaves and twigs crackled as his body landed on them. The pain in his leg had become so unbearable that his landing felt soft in comparison. His left cheek on the cold uneven floor of the cave felt warm and wet as blood trickled out, mixing with saliva from his open mouth. He could hardly keep his eyes open.

A bright golden light filled the cave suddenly. It didn't impose itself. Round and unassuming, going about its business of shining. It kept growing from the middle, growing tongues that seemed desperate to consume something yet finding nothing. Mokuoane's limp, frozen body lay down, rays of light dancing on its surface. One of the tongues grew enough courage to poke at

Mokuoane's back. He felt a tinge of warmth hitting his spine and he forced his eyes open to see where it came from.

His eyes found the light. He looked away then shut his eyes. He opened his eyes and rubbed his brow, then looked at the light again. At the corner of his eye, a shadow floated in and hovered over him. He felt a tingling sensation in his foot which rose up to his stomach as the shadow continued to stay with him. He felt his cheek wobble and catch fire. He got up immediately, putting his hand on it as he stood shoulder to top with the ball of light. The shadow jumped into the light, releasing a shower of golden and violet leaves.

A voice came from the light. "It is I. I have come to help you. Do you welcome my presence?"

"You speak as my father used to. Who are you?" he asked.

"You're free to run if you so wish. One word and I will go back where I came from."

"I can not run. My foot is hurt. I dropped…." before finishing his sentence, Mokuoane's fingers went cold and dizziness mocked his balance.

"Your body is well. Free of all affliction here, save for emotions rooted in fear. Those remain until an act of bravery swaddles them and rocks them to sleep," the voice said.

"Who are you?"

"I am Thibela's son."

Just then, a man with soft, kind eyes stepped forward out of the ball of light. A swoosh of brown-red and violet leaves swirled before him occupying space between him and Mokuoane. The man with soft kind eyes held his right hand over his chest and a beam of green light shined through

the spaces between his fingers and scattered itself over Mokuoane's upper body. A tingling warmth rested on Mokuoane's skin as this light hit him. His breathing became slow and easy. His eyes stung with tears ready to slide down his cheeks.

His father stood before him. His father, who was buried less than three moons ago.

Floating in the cave made Mokuoane's stomach churn. He twisted his ankles to mimic bouncing them had his feet been firmly planted on the ground. He realized his foot wasn't sore any more. He wanted to ask his father how his pain just disappeared, but the light-headedness and jerky motion forward was working on his stomach. He couldn't speak but continued to wrestle with this thought.

"I didn't lose my healing abilities when I transitioned," his father said.

"Did I ask that question out loud?"

"No, you didn't. But I can read your mind. You could read mine too if you were open to it."

"How long are we going to float? Are we flying? Is this flying?"

Mokuoane's father floated towards him and secured his one hand around his waist and the other around his upper back, then launched them both up into the air. Solid substances became as fickle as mist. Mokuoane closed his eyes as they were launched in the air, feeling like his churning stomach is about to launch his bile up. He heard the muffled whistle of the air with the ear that wasn't glued to his father's chest. The absence of a heartbeat had him worried.

"We're landing soon. My feet won't hit the ground like yours will, so be careful not to hit sharp stones."

Eyes shut, Mokuoane scrunched up his face and held his breath. When his next heartbeat came, it was day time and he was sitting on a rock at the top of Mautse mountain, his father kneeling to his side.

“Please hand me that stick. I can’t answer all these questions moving in your head. Calm down.”

“I want to understand Ntate. How did you know where I was? Are we cursed forever? Can I reverse it?”

“Watch the sun for me. As soon as the shadow of that bush disappears, tell me. It means the sun is directly over our heads.”

“Why are you going to stop when the sun is overhead?”

“I told you I can’t answer all these questions you have. This one is important so I will give you something. When the sun is overhead, all forces in the world have equal power. The equilibrium between light and darkness can easily be tipped. Intention loses its power at this point. If you’re handling medicine, one slight thought leaning towards the dark could be amplified by the sun. One slight thought leaning towards the light could also be amplified by the sun. The human mind moves between these states constantly. It becomes too delicate. So our ancestors taught us to suspend all work at this time.”

“Why do we move between these states so easily Ntate? I wish it were simpler. Palali is of the dark and I am of the light.”

“Careful now. Don’t relegate others to the dark because they are your nemesis.”

“I am in this predicament because of him. All I wanted to do was honor your last words. Surround them with a kraal to give them value. Imagine Nkaiseng in that wicked man’s compound as his first wife.”

“Do not relegate your nemesis to the dark.”

“Nkaiseng and Khechane make better sense. Ntate-moholo Monyane approved of the union. You were in talks with him before…before you were taken.”

“Come here my son,” Mokuoane’s father said, pointing to a spot on the ground near him for Mokuoane to sit on. “I’m going to teach you something today that my father taught me. His father taught him and his grandfather taught his father, and so on.”

“I’m listening Ntate.”

“You were born a king. As a first son of the first wife, it is your birthright. But understand, you arrived ready to take care of your people. All we do as the custodians of your life, is help you remember.”

Mokuoane gave his father a lazy nod. His eyes darted to the bush and he noticed its shadow had receded a few fingers from its stem.

“Even people like Palali Ntate?”

His father ignoring his question continued, “A pure heart free of malice is the first thing Molimo le balimo give one destined to be king. They may forget as they get older, but when the time arrives for them to ascend the throne, they are reminded.”

“Ntate, does this mean you want me to stay?”

“I can only give guidance my son. I cannot tell you what to do.”

Mokuoane watched his father pound five different leaves in a clay pot. Three were dry and the remaining two bled a green juice that glued the ground matter together. His father’s calloused hands, decorated with patterns of nicks from his days as a healer, reached for the green meshed matter and put it on his palm. He put it back into the clay pot and asked Mokuoane to check the shadow of the bush.

“It is gone Ntate,” he said.

“When the time came for a man to become king, he was taken to the top of a mountain by his father or uncles. There he would be urged to name his enemies and forgive each one. He would be asked to recall the people he killed and plead with their souls not to bother him. Incisions would be made on his chest where medicine would be put, to protect the purity of his heart.”

“What if he wasn’t ready to forgive?”

“Everything happens at an appointed time. When he is taken to the mountain, it is because the ancestors have whispered to his heart, the destiny that awaits him.”

“Why are we on this mountain Ntate? It was night when we left the cave.”

“Please rest with the questions my son.”

When the shadow of the bush returned, Mokuoane’s father gave the clay pot with the green plant matter to Mokuoane. He stood behind him and said an incantation in an ancient tongue Mokuoane grew up hearing. He circled around Mokuoane three times, with his hands on his chest. Then he took the clay pot from Mokuoane and poured its contents on the ground. Two

trickles of a purple and red liquid ran before Mokuoane. While he was trying to understand how ground leaves turned liquid, his father called his name.

“Mokuoane!”

“Ntate?”

“The road ahead is going to be filled with twists and turns for you. I ask that you keep moving, like a river that negotiates the meanders of its channels. Its waters keep moving. Do you hear me my son?”

“Ke mametse Ntate.”

“What you see before you are two separate roads that you’re equally likely to take. Whichever road you decide to take, I will go with you. Choose wisely.”

“I don’t know what to do. If I go back to Maphutseng, Palali and his men will be waiting for my head. If I keep running, I leave our people stranded, without the protection of the ancestors and Tlatlamacholo.”

“Hand me your spear.”

Mokuoane did as he was told. His father stood legs apart with Mokuoane’s spear raised above his head. Mokuoane watched his father’s lips move slowly at first, to eventually looking like he was chewing dried meat with a wild animal on his heels. Clouds began to form, playing hide and seek with the sun, until a thick cloud doused the sun’s joy and locked it away.

Lightning struck Mokuoane's spear. The bolt from the sky remained fused to the spear. Mokuoane's flaring nostrils and bulging eyes gave way to a scream so loud it reverberated through the mountain. His father gave a mocking laugh.

"My son, I am already dead."

The Journey

Ngoanamokone woke up shivering from sweat. Her eyes opened to total darkness. A lingering smell of smoke told her she hadn't slept long. Her pupils dilated searching for enough light so her eyes can make out shadows of objects in her hut. The fur on the sheep skin covering her body was drenched in her sweat, giving her chills. She gently removed it and sat up straight on the straw mat she was sleeping on. A montage of her dreams tapped her shoulder pleading for her attention. She remembered why her sleep was disturbed.

In the first flash, two bulls stood facing opposite directions. One bull was black while the other was brown with a white head. Their horns were facing opposite directions, with each left horn facing back and each right horn facing forward. The backdrop was lush green pastures with a few scattered sheep. In the second flash, a heap of white ostrich feathers was in Ngoanamokone's fire pit at the center of her hut. Beautifully decorated straw mats were lined up to the narrow entrance of her hut with three shields laid down head to tail, ending the convoy. In the final flash, a smooth muscular back with feline flexibility speckled with small incisions and sweat beads appeared. Ngoanamokone's hands had glided up and down the channel of that back's spine so many times that the familiar texture of it made her fingers tingle. She covered her mouth with her hand when the language of dreams translated to an instruction in her mind. Her eyes bulged as she caught a moving shadow on her periphery. She immediately knelt and expressed gratitude to the ancestors.

Gentle footsteps announced a guest at the entrance. The earthy smell of the hard-muscled body crawling in the dark, making its way through the neck of the entrance to Ngoanamokone's hut,

tensed her muscles. She held her stomach to calm the sensations only a womb that had experience, carrying a life knew in times like these. Soft claws tugged at her belly reminding her of her first experience of labor pains. She wept silently as she felt cold arms embrace her. She felt a viscous warm liquid move inside her belly bringing composure to her muscles and calming her down. Her son was alive.

“I was so worried. Where were you?” she whispered to Mokuoane.

“We need to talk ‘M’e. Can we step outside so we don’t wake the others?” he said as he turned, his body on all fours to crawl out of his mother’s hut.

Outside, the moonlight exaggerated the golden hued light emanating from Mokuoane’s upper body. His mother’s face shone seeing this. It meant her son had been to the realm of the ancestors and came back reminded of his destiny.

“I was with Ntate. He showed me the way,” Mokuoane said.

“I can see my child. You are now a man ready to lead.”

“We can’t stay here ‘M’e.”

“I know. I have to cleanse you before we depart,” Ngoanamokone said as the stench of fear and flight hit her nostrils from Mokuoane’s mouth. His words did not inspire confidence because his shadow was tainted. “Before Mphatlalatsane, the last morning star disappears, we should be at the river.”

***

A clay pot and a spear stood side by side anticipating the warmth of the grip of steady healing hands. Ngoanamokone and Mokuoane had been kneeling for several heartbeats waiting for the waters of Phuthiatsana river to give permission to be entered. The waters of the river were trickling gently knowing they were called to soothe that morning. Stones breaking the surface of the water caused it to froth at the shallow end of the river near where mother and son knelt. The frothing intensified as the waters became rough and flowed with a mysterious speed. It hadn't rained for almost a season.

"The river is sensing your anger my son. Please calm down. It won't let us in until our hearts embrace peace," Ngoanamokone pleaded with her son.

"Perhaps it is your anger that needs to be controlled 'M'e."

"Mokuoane!"

"Please tell the river my heart is sore. I cannot find peace. I must relinquish my birthright to the throne because of Palali's unreasonable hunger for power. I had to collapse the walls of the kraal that held my father's will. I cannot know peace."

Ngoanamokone stepped away from Mokuoane and faced the sun's direction. She pleaded with the ancestors to ask Tlatlamacholo (God) to tell the waters of the river to accept their weary hearts. They wish to exchange their distress, aches and fears for the tranquility of the waters. The certainty of the water that it belongs where it is, will grant them favor where they're going. The flow of the river will give them courage to forge ahead in these uncertain times. Those who live in the realms of the waters will stretch their hands and restore their peace. They will take all that is ugly in them and bury it in the depths of the river.

A knowing rose up Ngoanamokone's throat and made her announce that it was time. She grabbed the spear next to the clay pot and planted it at the shallow end of the river. The pebbles in the river supported the spear. A line was carved out in the water from the obstacle caused by the spear to the flow of the water. Sun rays sparkled in the water with a blinding intensity, which was surprising given that the sun was still rising from the bosom of Mautse.

"Step in right after me. Bring the clay pot with you. Wait for a few heartbeats while I greet the water," said Ngoanamokone.

She put her hands on her son's shoulders, looking directly into his eyes. She jumped in and splashed her face with water. The water reached up to her knees. Mokuoane stepped in shortly after, clay pot in hand. A white powder whose discreet fragrance anticipated the magic of the river sat in the hollowness of the clay pot. Ngoanamokone cupped her hands and collected the river water and poured it into the clay pot. She took her left hand and stirred the contents in an anticlockwise direction while speaking to it. Then she poured the mixture over Mokuoane, whose body tensed at the coldness of the mixture. His mother knelt in the water, collected some into the clay pot and poured it over Mokuoane's head while speaking a language Mokuoane couldn't understand.

The waters came to life. Spurts shot up from the river hitting Mokuoane's upper body at specific spots. His left cheek was hit. His back was struck. Jets of water shot up and tangled around his entire left leg. More water shot up from the river and hit his entire face. After several heartbeats, the water abruptly fell back into the river coloring it black.

"Walk away my son. Go in the direction of the sun. Don't look back," Ngoanamokone said.

Mokuoane did as he was told. He stepped out of the water shaking and walked back to his mother's hut. Ngoanamokone stayed in the water and watched the black tinted water flow down the river until it disappeared. She stepped out of the water and knelt down facing the sun. She thanked the waters for their humility and nurturing.

"Le ka moso," she whispered.

Her legs felt like boulders as she walked back home. It pained her that uprooting their lives was the only solution.

***

Ngoanamokone watched from a distance as her sons greeted the men gathered in a circle near Chief Tšosane's homestead. Knowing women were barred from entering khotla, she and her two daughters stood at the edge of the village of Maphutseng anxious to be welcomed. She beamed with pride when she saw her sons enter the chief's court and drop their weapons to the ground. The men would know that they come in peace. Her plot would have also laid the ground work for the warm reception they seemed to be getting.

The morning she got back from the river with Mokuoane, he had told her about his encounter with his father's spirit on the mountain of Mautse's cave. He was torn about which path to take. Ngoanamokone had comforted him in the only way a mother would and nudged him in the direction that would save his life. Her dream earlier that night had told her exactly which path he had to take. The night Khechane showed up at her compound to elope to his father's homestead with Nkaiseng, he had driven an ox with him to show how committed he was to seeing his father's wishes through. Knowing Palali's men were on Mokuoane's heels, Ngoanamokone decided to

hide evidence of Mokuoane's defiance. She'd pulled Khechane aside after Mokuoane had taken off.

"Tell Morena Tšosane knots have been tied that only he can unfasten. Leave this ox at the entrance of his kraal. Take care of my daughter," she said, pinching the skin on her throat while fighting back tears.

Ngoanamokone and her children had endured a three-day journey to Morena Tšosane's village. A hypervigilant spirit took over her sons throughout the trek. The realization of belonging nowhere made them fear death at the hands of wild animals. Who would perform burial rites on them? Whose kraal would be dismantled so their bodies could rest with others who had abandoned this world for the next? Bags had formed under her sons' eyes. Fatigue and worry kept their eyes wide open, shooing away sleep when it came knocking.

The sun was preparing to hide itself behind the mountains surrounding Maphutseng when ululation battered Ngoanamokone's ears. She had grown accustomed to quiet sounds of nature for the past few days, walking through the wilderness, and crossing Phuthiatsana twice at different locales. An entourage of young women came towards them in high spirits. Their walk was bouncy, boosted by an excitement they couldn't conceal. They hadn't had visitors in over three moons. Beaming faces of Ngoanamokone and her daughters inspired more eagerness from the young women. The group was led by an eager faced woman with an ethereal quality to her. Her zealous energy was replaced by a rehearsed politeness when she knelt before Ngoanamokone and her daughters. The other young women followed suit. They were carrying small calabashes with sour porridge which they gave to the three women before them after they

stood up. The three women's throats had opened up and received the coolness of the porridge as it washed down their angst.

The young woman leading the group had introduced herself as Maili. Her petite frame was swallowed by the chunky metal she wore around her neck, wrists and ankles. Such jewelry set her apart from the others. The way she carried herself silently spoke her importance into exchanges she had with people. She didn't have to announce her status. Her regality stroked the hands of Ngoanamokone, inspiring service out of her. With tingling hands and slow breaths, Ngoanamokone walked towards the village aware of the honor bestowed upon her and her children.

The walk to Morena Tšosane's homestead was much shorter than expected. Maili led the three women to her mother's compound to be given a royal welcome. The compound of the first wife was always adjacent to a Mosotho man's hut to indicate seniority. Upon entering the compound, Ngoanamokone immediately knew who the senior wife was. Besides her apparel giving her away, she had the same face as Maili. Beaming with delight, Mofumahali Khiti approached the three women. With the same rehearsed politeness as Maili, she welcomed them into her compound. Her voiced commanded authority. Ngoanamokone imagined a voice like Mofumahali's only gave instructions once and her servants carried them out.

Meanwhile, the men at khotla were now well acquainted with Mokuoane and his brother. Morena Tšosane shared stories of his interactions with Thibela's son with the men gathered in his court.

“What a wise man your father was. My own father owes him his life. I can’t tell you how many times the ancestors called him back home, but each time he stood at the exit of this realm, Thibela’s son would heal him and plant him back with the living,” said Morena Tšosane.

“He sounds like he was a remarkable man,” one man said.

“His son took after him,” Morena Tšosane said. “The ox I introduced to you a few days ago came from his father’s kraal.” Pointing at Mokuoane, Morena Tšosane continued, “This young man had the foresight to send a token of appreciation to corner me into allowing him to hide from his enemies.”

The congregation of men laughed along with Morena Tšosane. Mokuoane and his brother, still broken from their journey and hearts heavy with grief, just smiled out of courtesy.

“He should join the Titi battalion. We need young men as swift as he is to lead us into battle,” another man said.

“Look at his form. Thibela’s son groomed him properly. This is a man ripe for leadership Tšosane. Place him well,” one of the elderly men in Morena Tšosane’s council said with a calm tone.

Mokuoane fatigued, didn’t correct the assumption about the ox. His mother’s wisdom had gotten him this far. It wasn’t worth reducing his efforts to the wits of a woman. Even though that woman’s courage had dragged his up from valleys long forgotten and put him on the path to becoming a gallant man. With his eyes cast down and shoulders slouched, Mokuoane’s stomach had grumbled so loud it interrupted his thoughts about his mother. The men apologized for keeping them for so long without organizing food for them.

“You must be famished from your journey. I apologize for not offering you food earlier,” Morena Tšosane said. “Ngoan’aka, please tell Mofumahali our stomachs are tired of singing.”

A young man slightly younger than Mokuone went dashing out of khotla towards Mofumahali’s compound. A few moments later, three young women led by Mofumahali Khiti entered khotla carrying likhobe in a large bowl and bitter green vegetables in another. A large wooden platter carried by Mofumahali Khiti was laden with freshly cooked meat with steam twirling above it. She approached her husband and put down the platter by his feet. The young women behind her followed her cue and laid the rest of the bowls and calabashes with beer near Morena Tšosane. “Banna, let’s give thanks to Mofumahali for preparing this feast for us.”

“And your daughter as well Morena. Her mother has taught her well. She needs to leave your capable hands soon. It’s time,” one of the men said.

“Marakabei, I told you to stop pining for my daughter’s hand in marriage. She is my eldest daughter. You will not speak of this again!” Morena Tšosane spoke with anger in his voice.

“Exactly Morena. She has to lead the way for the others to follow,” one of the men at khotla responded.

Mokuoane’s clouded mind cleared when his eyes landed on the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Without confirmation, he knew which one of the young women on Mofumahali Khiti’s tail was Morena Mokuoane’s daughter. He understood Morena’s anger at Marakabei. He too would be as protective if a woman like that was in his court – as a daughter or as a wife. Her dark complexion would have been the envy of many. Mokuoane’s excitement knew no bounds when he saw the line black line down the bridge of Maili’s nose and the dots on her cheeks. Her

decorated face meant she had been to initiation, so she was of age to get married. His eyes involuntarily smoldered with intensity as his gaze followed Maili's back while she walked away with her mother. He felt powerless in that moment. A woman like Maili was probably already betrothed. As the son of a chief, he would have stood a chance to sway the tide. He knew starting over and seeking refuge reduced him to a man with no honor.

The bowls and platter were wiped clean and the men were nursing the beer in their calabashes when Mokuoane stood up and addressed Morena Tšosane.

"Morena, thank you for your hospitality. We are grateful to you for opening up your home and village for us. We would like to stay in your presence and listen to you and your men but we would appreciate a place to rest. It was a long journey," he said.

"I'll send a message to Mofumahali's compound to send her mafielo (servant girls) to come fetch and show you your quarters."

"No need Morena. I would like to express my gratitude to her as well," Mokuoane said as he cleared the bowls and plates before the men with the intention of making his way to Mofumahali's compound.

"Nonsense Mokuoane! What are you doing? Do not disgrace the men of my village. We don't do that here. Leave those utensils at once!" Morena Tšosane scolded Mokuoane.

"I insist Morena. It's the least I can do. For all your kindness. And I would like to introduce myself to Mofumahali and all the women at her compound. To thank them for attending to us."

“This young man has been stung by a relentless wilderness insect that only targets men,” said one man at khotla, inciting roars of laughter from the other men. “No man seeks to be in the company of women unless the bite by this insect tingles and itches.”

“Young man, the only antidote to that sting is the touch of a woman. We must get you a wife as soon as you settle in,” Morena Tšosane said with a serious expression on his face. “Take the utensils back to Mofumahali’s compound if you insist. Maybe one of the young women there will catch your eye.”

Mokuoane hurriedly left khotla with his brother. When he reached Mofumahali’s compound, they greeted all the women who responded reluctantly. They were caught off guard, going about their business of chatting and sweeping the compound. Visitors usually remain at khotla until they’re directed to the quarters where they will rest for the night. The young men approached Mofumahali where she was seated by the entrance of her hut with Ngoanamokone.

“Ae bana ba ka! This is not done here. One of the women here would have collected these utensils. Why was a message not sent from khotla?” Mofumahali said.

“No Mofumahali, we insisted on bringing these to you so we greet you and introduce ourselves. Thank you for the wonderful meal.”

“Maili? Maili, come fetch these utensils ngoan’a ka.”

Mofumahali summoned her daughter who was hidden out of sight. She always retreated to be alone when she was not needed by her mother.

Mokuoane felt her approaching before he saw her. The knots in his stomach traveled up his body and arrested his tongue. When his eyes landed on her, he parted his legs slightly and put his chest out. He couldn't help but stare at Maili. Her alluring presence was no match for her beauty. Mokuoane had never seen features so perfectly placed on a face. She had a slim and petite body that swayed with a sensual tease when she walked. When she knelt before him to pick up the utensils he brought, he saw a slight smile that revealed a gap in her upper front teeth. Dimples formed as she gave him a full smile while thanking him for being considerate.

"You're the first visitor to enter our compound without being summoned. Thank you for cutting our legs short."

Mokuoane felt his body tense up and the air rush out of it. He couldn't move his mouth. He just stood there and watched Maili.

War Dance

Morena Teko's grip on his beloved spear was no longer as strong as it was the first day he polished it for war. The spear was captured from the Bathepu people on the day they surrendered their cattle and land. There lied the king of the Bathepu people on the ground, blood leaking from his body like the waterfall at Mosaka. The top of his spear's head was dripping with his blood. Its neck covered in the blood of those he stabbed to protect his people. It rested on the ground next to him, calculating its fate. It would either be abandoned or it would receive a hero's welcome among its new people, should Morena Teko return for it. The treachery of a spear that killed its own king was celebrated and anointed with a place amongst royalty, an undeniable mark of victory. Morena Teko had come face to face with his greatest enemy yet, twice his size. They had tussled on the ground. Body part after body part uncomfortably hitting the earth and raising dust, choking each king and blood spritzing their eyes. It was Morena Teko's short spear that opened his opponent's side and released his blood to nourish the earth the disgraced king once owned. Then Morena Teko picked up the strange spear of the king of the Bathepu, stabbed him and threw it to the ground again.

"Moollllaaaaammuuuu!" Morena Teko screamed, as he made his way back to his men.

He declared victory and rendered the Bathepu his people. This meant their cattle, their women and their dignity now belonged to him. It is upon interrogation from his commander in chief that Teko remembered the spear covered in blood lying next to the man he just killed. The biggest error of his life as king. He rushed back to the now sombre battlefield, picked up the spear and gave instructions to have the Bathepu king's body buried.

The stolen spear, a symbol of victory, was given a hero's welcome. Sounds of ululation from the throats of relieved women whose husbands had returned safely from war, hit the body of the spear with strong clanking sounds and made it vibrate from head to toe. It was taken to Ngaka Leroele for cleansing immediately. All weapons from battle including the warriors from all the king's battalions have to be cleansed before settling back into everyday life. A mixture of herbs was infused with water from a special spring that only Ngaka Leroele had access to. This herb infused water washed all spears from top to bottom. From the sharpest part of their heads to the flattest parts of their rear ends. The warriors would watch as green water absorbed the redness from the pieces of metal that defended their honour. They would wait their turn to be dipped in the river and smeared with the same medicine that would restore their shadow.

Today, the wear and tear of old age on his bones has weakened Morena Teko's grip. The spear in his hands has been his longest serving spear. The others would meet their end inside the bodies of Morena Teko's enemies, or in valleys that would catch them when they fell from his hands during battle. His hands were the fifth royal hands that took in his spear as a faithful servant. Today, this same spear will kiss the sun and pierce the earth while his subjects sing songs declaring the sovereignty of Morena Teko. It has been a while since I danced with other spears in the presence of their men.

Morena Teko's son, Thibello has been circling his hut since the mist of this winter's morning greeted Mphatlalatsane, the last morning star.

"Morena, banna se ba e hloa mekoalaba," he said to his father.

Morena Teko and his men were going up Mosaka mountain. Its round shape with a cone-like peak was the perfect mountain to perform their scared war dance. The sharp apex represents their guaranteed ascend to the top. Their declaration of victory long before battle begins.

Morena Teko, finally steps out of his hut with his spear held in his right hand and an armed rifle neatly hidden in his pocket. He relented to the missionaries' request to wearing clothes from the place where the ocean swallows people. He is stubborn and has yet to cave in to their request to join the church.

"Their ways clash with my people's ways. I can never abandon the customs of my ancestors for those of the white man," he says often.

His favourite missionary, Mr Ellenberger, lets him talk extensively about his ancestors and their voyage from the north to where we are now in Quthing – the most southern part of what the fair skinned people call Basutoland. He lets him speak of lands conquered and abandoned and the great heroic deeds of his forefathers.

After hours of listening, and drawing shapes on a white leaf, Mr Ellenberger, usually gives him the heartiest of smiles and says, "Let me tell you about the greatest man you will ever know. His adventures and the miracles he performed far outweigh your ancestors' conquests. His name is King Jesus. And he has sent me here to help you repent and receive salvation so you sin no more."

"A king with no land, who loves us all, no matter colour or creed?" Morena Teko would ask, and throw his head back with laughter. "That king does not exist. God exists, yes."

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The sun is journeying up over the horizon and playing on the surface of Senqu river, spewing sparkles of light into the eyes of about six hundred men. A convoy led by Morena Teko and his sons, Thibello and Sechaba is making its way to Hamilton Hope's office. Morena Teko, mounted on a white horse is the epitome of branded royalty. Earrings hang from both his ears, made of brass and elephant tusk. They announce his presence before he arrives anywhere. Each clank announces his brave pursuits. It sings of blood spilling on broken earth to announce new-born kings who have just conquered other kingdoms. On his neck hangs a beaded necklace made of leather from the skin of a duiker, his totem animal. The beads hang in clusters separated by claws of wild birds, fragments of bones from brave animals like leopards and lions. On his shoulders hangs leopard skin decorated by hide from a lion. Signs of a diviner and rainmaker with royal blood.

Before crossing the river to go up the mountain of Mosaka this morning, Morena Teko and his entourage, kneel down on the river banks. His two sons, kneel beside him, Thibello, his eldest on his right and Sechaba, on his left. The rest of his entourage, made up of his trusted advisors kneel behind them on either side forming a triangle with Morena Teko at the tip. He sings a song praising his ancestors and his spirit guides. They all sing in unison as the sun peaks the tip of its head over Mosaka mountain. Then Morena Teko pours snuff and tobacco on the ground and asks his ancestors to tell the Creator what their plans are for the day. He then thanks the animals and plants of the land for daily sustenance, and for providing so much more for his people.

“I ask for these waters and those who live in them to be kind to us as we cross to get to the mountain. We are grateful for all that you provide for us. We seek your permission to enter and cross,” he claps his hands cupped, so the sound echoes to his men, who follow suit.

Then they wait. All weapons are on the ground as is customary. Morena Teko and his men approach bodies of water in this way – unarmed, ready to surrender, especially before a war dance.

Orange lights start flickering from the water. Only Morena Teko can see them. This is his signal from the water that it is safe to cross. They cross the river, while continuing with songs that praise their clan’s ancestors and the kings that came before him. When they finally arrive at the top, what seems like a whole army of men stops chanting and they each throw their weapons to the floor and join in on Morena Teko and his entourage’s chorus.

In unison, the chorus grows stronger as the men form a circle around Morena Teko. The circle has three layers, with the men on the outskirts of the circle, the most junior in rank and age. The men in the middle are Morena’s most trusted warriors during battles, and the inner most circle is made of Morena’s royal council which includes his sons and the royal healer, Ngaka Leroele.

A bull is brought to the centre of the circle by the men and they begin to chant. “Tsie lala banna! Tsie lala!”

All commotion stops and all the men pick up their weapons and keep quiet. The king is about to address them.

“Before we begin, we have to follow protocol and ask for Ngaka Leroele to ask for permission from our elders on the other side.”

Ngaka Leroele stands next to the bull's head, then aligns his nose to the bull's nose and gives a shallow bow. Then he kneels beside it, and claps with cupped hands. All the men follow suit with the clapping while chanting, "Leseli, khanya".

They chant several times, to invite divine light into their space and to charge the atmosphere so the other world can be stirred up. Ngaka Leroele begins to invoke the ancestors of the Baphuthi people, kings of yesteryears, the spirits that guard the mountain of Mosaka and other deities of war.

"We come seeking guidance, baholo. We are your children. Lead us. Shine our paths with your light. The light you carry on your backs that God, the father of lights has given to you. Please tell him we are here seeking wise counsel from all of you," said Ngaka Leroele.

He then presents a satchel made of leather and summons the king to him, the only man allowed to do this besides the King's father, who is long deceased. Morena Teko walks to Ngaka and kneels before him, claps three times with cupped hands. The other men clap three times as well, in the same manner. Morena blows into the satchel bag. Ngaka Leroele then spills the contents of the satchel bag onto the ground by the right hindleg of the bull. He looks at the bones, claws and seashells scattered all over and shakes his head. He takes his tufted cow tail attached to a short stick and points to the skunk's claw leading the bones, claws and seashells on the ground.

"Morena le banna ba heso, that's a symbol of death. The elders don't want us to go ahead with today's plans."

"Ngaka, but everything has been setup. We are here for the war dance and then we go down to

Hamilithone's office," Thibello steps in.

His father moves him aside and asks Ngaka to plead with the ancestors.

"We will be on our best behaviour. What we will not allow is for the white man's government to dictate to us how matters should be handled in our territory," said Morena Teko.
The men take their spears and guns and point them to the sky upon hearing this. Morena Teko's spear is still lying on the ground unattended, but its time to shine is near.

Ngaka collects his tools and steps to the side. The men continue with the war dance while they wait for the verdict from Ngaka. All three layers of the circle move in one accord. Each man stretches his hands behind the man to his left and to his right. The men in the inner circle first kick their right legs up and land to the ground with a loud thud at the same time. They each let out a loud outbreath which sounds like the howl of a vengeful winter wind, followed by a quick pause. Then they kick their left legs into the air in unison, while joisting each other up. Followed by a loud outbreath forced out of puffed up cheeks, and a quick pause. They build up a rhythm as the next layer of the circle joins in. Then the third layer joins in, causing the mountain of Mosaka to reverberate.

Morena Teko breaks his chain in the circle and stands in the middle. He starts moving haphazardly with his fighting stick. The circles get bigger the more he moves, until all three layers break and three lines are formed to his back, his right, and to his left. The men continue the war dance. Then Morena Teko picks up his spear and starts praising himself and all the wars he has won over the years. This brings excitement to the atmosphere. Then men puff out their chests more and continue with their exaggerated outbreaths and pounding the earth.

Thibello grabs his father's spear and points it in the direction that his father speaks of.

"Twenty moons ago, I dribbled the feet of two hundred men coming from the east, with plans to have me beheaded." Morena Teko continues, "I drew a line on the ground right by Qomoqomong river and dared them to cross it. They did. Where are they now?" Thibello plants the spear's head in the ground and pierces the earth with it.

Cheer breaks out and a new song, howled from the back of Morena Teko, is heard. The inner circle dismantled into a line behind the king. They continue to lead during the entire war dance. "Another army approached from the north in the days of my youth. The Mfengu people wanted to kill my father, take all our cattle and leave us to starve," said Thibello pulling the head of his father's spear from the earth and pointing it to the north.

All the men's eyes followed. He drew a circle in the air, gathered up all the strength he had and planted it back to the ground. Another rush took over Thibello's body as Morena Teko's spear pierced the earth. His neck and chest grew veins. Sweat started to trickle down his forehead.

"But I am no coward!" Morena Teko said. "I would not take over the throne before my time. So I went out and defended my father's honour. He gave me the earring on my left that day."

This dance and singing of praises continued until the air was charged with hostility. It was so thick in the air that the men's weapons vibrated with a hunger for combat. Veins pulsating, having risen to the surface of each man's skin. Lungs expanded with fresh morning mountain air, feeding clear minds with only one focus. Limbs tired from the ascend to the tip of Mosaka mountain and

the war dance. Feet itching to get into army formation, to head straight for Hamilton Hope's office.

"Who does he think he is? How can a man who has never been to the mountain rule over men like us? Has he ever fought wild animals with his bare hands? Fought bloody wars? Raided cattle from the most powerful chiefs in this land?" said Morena Teko, drunk from the battle charged atmosphere.

"Tello monna, step forward," Morena Teko summoned Tello to the centre of the gathering. Tello is one of my king's headmen. He is the chief of one of the smaller villages close here. Tello has been summoned to Hamilton Hope's office to answer to two charges – destroying 'Malibata's crop field and taking her children away from her.

"Tello did what any man in his shoes would have done. Why should he have to answer to the white man? Whose customs are we following? Those of our elders or these new ones the white man is forcing down our throats? Whose customs?" Morena Teko shouted into the crowd.

Tello stood before the king and dropped his weapon to the ground.

"Morena, all my surrender is yours. I am under your leadership."
"Pick up your spear Tello. This is not the time to walk around naked."

"Eea Morena." Tello picked up his weapon and told his story to the chief and the men standing around him.

"When my brother died a few weeks ago, I knew I had to step up and take care of what belonged to him. His wife, 'Malibata was now my wife. His children, my children. His land, my land. But that

filthy woman, who let the missionaries' teachings get to her, refused. I had no choice but to destroy her crop field. My brother's crop field. Does she think she deserves to eat when she dishonours the wishes of her dead husband, her dead husband's father, his father, his father's father, and his father's father's father?"

A strong mutter flew around the men. Heads nodded in agreement.

"Morena, le banna ba heso, I went and got my children from 'Malibata's uncle. My brother's children are my blood. I will raise them. Where have you ever heard of children being raised by their maternal family? They will come back to us with strange habits," Tello said.

"Hamilithone, sent 'Malibata and her uncle Lebaka on two separate occasions to summon me to his office. They came into my compound with pieces of paper that speak. I took 'Malibata's paper, threw it to the ground and stabbed it with my spear and turned my back to her. Lebaka disrespected me by stepping on my territory to demand *my* blood. My brother's children. He also threw a white paper at me. I didn't bother to pick it up."

"Hamilithone is making our subordinates disrespect us," said Thibello, desperate to keep the atmosphere charged with animosity. Tello's speech had succeeded in pointing to a common enemy, *Hamilton Hope*.

"When Austen and Griffith convinced me to let them bring a magistrate into Quthing, we had a clear agreement. I remain king and rule over my people. All hearings were to proceed as usual. I would escalate issues to Hope if necessary. Have I not led you well for all these years since my father Morena Letlama's transition? Some of you opened your eyes for the first time with me as

king. Look at you, now you are grown men with beards. They bring a man who still reeks of his mother's breast milk to rule over me?"

Morena Teko had also picked up on Thibello's strategy and proceeded to add fuel to fire.

A song breaks out while the men continue to lap up the stirred hate for Hamilton Hope. The orchestrated movement of feet started again, with whistle sounds perched on the men's lips as they breathed out, cheeks inflated, teeth gnashed. With dust rising, and their spears firmly rooted in the earth, all was set for a confrontation with Hamilton Hope.

Morena Teko made his way to the bull, which was now standing at a distance from the men. Ngaka Leroele was sitting beside it, with a sombre look on his face.

"Ngaka? Laola! Ba r'eng baholo?"
"I'm afraid it's still a no Morena. There's a death shadow that's lurking on the heads of your men. Do you not see it?" Ngaka Leroele asked.

"You know your bones only speak to you Ngaka. Mine speak to me in times of drought and when I precede over matters at khotla. This matter is in your hands, and those of the elders. We need to show this man who rules over this land."

"Will you bear the consequences should this shadow rest on one of your men?"

"No such misfortune will come. I will speak to my men before we descend from here. They will be under strict orders to remain calm and to take direction from me."

"What about the bull's leg. You know we cannot leave this mountain with the bull's legs still intact. It's bad luck."

“Ngaka, is it not wise to shortcut some of the rituals we had planned for war? Will that not reduce the chances of the shadow settling on the head of one of my men?”

“Let me ask. I cannot give surety,” Ngaka said as he looked straight ahead with a blank expression on his face.

He may have gone into a trance; one could never tell with seasoned healers. The theatrics performed by healers new to the practice wear no option the more one practiced.

“There’s no guarantee Morena e moholo, but let’s forge ahead. Claim what is ours. The elders suggest we cut the limb of the bull and perform war rituals related to it only, nothing more. Then we will quietly leave the mountain and head straight for Hamilithone’s office, where you, Morena will speak. Only you and Tello will speak directly to Hamilithone. All others will speak to him through you.”

“Understood Ngaka. Now let’s get going. Khanya, leseli!” Morena Teko said this as he clapped with his cupped hands while doing a low bow to Ngaka Leroele.

Later in the day, the bull’s right hind leg was cut off with the bull alive. The leg was cut into small strips and eaten raw by Morena Teko and his men. This ritual is meant to boost their courage. They are enroute to facing a common enemy that wants to force them to abandon their king.

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The smell of raw meat is potent on the lips of Baphuthi men gathered outside Hamilton Hope’s office. A wooden chair sits in the shade of a tree in Hope’s compound. It belongs to no one in

particular. John brought it out as soon as he spotted Morena Teko on his white horse. He had expected the king to sit on it as he addressed his men, but he headed straight to Hope's office after dismounting his horse.

Pleasantries are exchanged between Morena Teko and Hope.

"John, please tell Mr. Hope I come in peace. I am here to introduce him to my people. Come with me. I have called a pitso."

Hope and Morena Teko head back outside where hundreds of Baphuthi men are gathered, guns and spears in their hands. John follows the two men outside, carrying the wooden chair from under the tree. Morena Teko settles on the chair and watches Hope walk towards the crowd. Hope turns back to Morena Teko briefly before facing the crowd and addressing them.

"Please drop your weapons. I will not stay if you keep your weapons on you," said Hope.

A murmur is heard amongst the crowd, with looks of confusion taking turns on each of the men's faces. Morena Teko and his eldest son, Thibello exchange looks. He walks to his father with some of his chief advisors.

"This man is plain disrespectful, Morena. How does he address your people without your permission?" asks one of the advisors.

"Infact, he gives instructions, in your presence without consulting you first. This is an insult!" another one retorts.

"Theolang moea banna ba heso," Morena Teko pleads.

“Is it worth getting into a tussle over this? We’re here to resolve Tello’s case. This is going to derail us,” Thibello says to the small group of men gathered around his father.

“Let’s choose peace. Remember, this is the strategy our great King, Morena Moshoeshoe used. This is why we’re not crying over stolen land like the Xhosa people not far from here.”

“Monna, you’ve been spending too much time with ‘Lenbega *(Ellenberger).* You’re starting to sound like him. Next, you’ll be telling us to choose that book he carries over our traditions and customs. We need to stand up for Morena Teko. And show this young boy who the rightful leader is here,” Sechaba charges in.

“No son,” says Morena Teko. “Thibello is right. Let’s be strategic. We’re here to make it clear who’s in charge. We can’t let his first challenge of authority derail us. We will look like weaklings. Let’s go back and pretend Hope didn’t just ask our men to turn themselves into women by surrendering their weapons.”

The men disband and walk back into the crowd. Morena Teko sits on the wooden chair again, and all the other men sit on the ground. They look to him for their next move, with weapons still clutched in their hands.

“Banna, put your weapons away as Mr. Hope wants it that way,” he says.

The men hesitant at first, get up slowly and put their weapons in a pile in front of Hamilton Hope. A slight smile registers on Hope’s lips.

Morena Teko begins to address his men.

“It has come to my attention that some of you have sought the guidance of Mr. Hope without consulting me first. Who gave you permission to do so? And who is this Hope? Have I brought him before you as a new member of our community?”

A resounding ‘no’ is heard from the men.

“We’re here today so I can introduce him to you,” says Morena Teko. “This is Hamilton Hope. The new magistrate of Quthing. Mr. Griffith and Mr. Austen have sent Mr. Hope, to introduce the laws of the white man to us. I have been told that we are supposed to combine them with our own laws and customs.”

Hamilton Hope tenses up at the mention of his seniors. He stands to attention and shuts his jaw tight, remembering the full day of negotiations it took to get him here. Morena Teko was adamant that he would not submit under the authority of any colonial administrator.

“Well, then please address us and tell us about these laws,” Morena Teko said to Hamilton Hope.

Hamilton Hope gave a lengthy explanation through the interpretation of John about the new laws and how they’ll interact with traditional Basotho customs.

“In conclusion, questions regarding guardianship and inheritance will be handled by families as Basotho custom dictates,” said Hope. Feeling satisfied with his delivery.

“On that note, can we both agree that your sentencing of Tello was unfair then? You made him pay £5 for not showing up to court. It is against our custom to do this. And we don’t try people for destroying crop fields.”

“I am the final authority. Granted permission to do so by the government. Are you challenging my decisions?”

“Of course I am. That is the point of having pitso,” said Morena Teko.

“You are British subjects. That was the condition for keeping your land. Therefore, you are governed by the colonial government. I am a representative of the government, so you are my subordinate. Not the other way round.”

Morena Teko playfully rings one of his earrings and gives a hearty laugh.

“I am the king here. Not you,” he faces his men and asks them, “Who is your king? Me or him? Does the government rule you?”

The men laugh and chant in unison, “Morena ke uena. Re etelle pele!”

“Give back Tello’s money. We do not make such rulings. It goes against our custom. And I hope this will not happen again.”

Hope begins to clench and unclench his hands.

“Under Mr. Austen, all cases were reported to me first. If one of my subjects went to him first, he would turn them back to me. I am the king here, not you.”

“Did you invite me here to humiliate me in front of these men?” Hope asked Morena Teko.

Before getting an answer, he turned his back to the king and walked towards his office. Hope’s chief constables follow him.

The men, understanding how big an offense this is, stand up and pick up their weapons from the pile.

Morena Teko continues to sit on the wooden chair. Topollo, Hope's constable, comes out shortly after and asks Morena Teko to hand over the chair he's sitting on to him.

"Mr. Hope would like his chair back, Morena."

"Excuse me?" Morena Teko is taken aback by the sheer disrespect. "Tell Hope I refuse to be disrespected by a small boy like him. I am old enough to be his grandfather. He expects me to stand up at his command? Tell him I refuse."

"Morena, with all due respect, I cannot go back with such a report to him."

"Hei uena monna Topollo, whose authority do you recognise here? Are you letting this white man pull you by the nose?"

"Morena, I am only doing my job. Please."

Topollo walked into Hamilton Hope's office with no chair in his hands. Hope realising his mistake asks another constable to step out and tell Morena Teko that Topollo misheard his directions. That he can keep sitting on me, until it is time to leave. Morena Teko raises his eyebrow at this constable and they both welcome the lie waving its white flag at him with a fake smile. He decides to go into Hamilton Hope's office to discuss this matter further.

The men are dancing again. Raising their knees in unison and chanting songs that echo through exhausted chests and eyes struggling to bury their loyalty with the right figure – Morena Teko or Hope.

Sechaba goes into Hope's office with his father, carrying the wooden chair under his armpit. He settles the chair beside Hope's desk and motions for his father to sit. The atmosphere is charged with confrontation. Hardly some time passes when a gunshot is heard from outside. Then another one. And another one.

Topollo rushes in, looks straight at Hamilton Hope.

"A man has been shot. He's dead."

The light on the balcony

His feet ached with every step as his classic military jungle boots gripped the exposed concrete floor that led to the exit of the passenger terminal at Leabua Jonathan Airport in Maseru. He had turned back, a few metres out to take the hexagonal building all in. The white paint on the few walls it had, contrasted with the wooden pillars and glass panes that gave it a futuristic look. He wondered if he should be in awe or expect such a standard for buildings in this small kingdom.

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As was customary, Mr Kalimo who had served as Lesotho's ambassador in several states abroad hosted the most talked about social event of the year every December. Dignitaries, expatriates and high-ranking Basotho in social and political circles were invited, save for the first royal family. It was her second year back from the US, and 'Mangatane hadn't quite adjusted to being considered heir to her mother's socialite reputation and her father's political connections. The elite of Lesotho broke deals with ambassadors and secured scholarships for their children to study abroad at these gatherings.

The British colonial government had selected an area close to the border into South Africa to build modern houses for their officials. After independence in 1966, the area kept its opulence and overstated political power by attracting Lesotho's political elite, under the guise of safety. It would be easy to evacuate the most important people in the kingdom as they would all get to the border within five minutes. All her life, 'Mangatane had played on streets with pavements and tarred roads. Her ears had grown accustomed to a plethora of accents taking up residence for some time and either leaving her gifts in the form new sounds or leaving greedily with sounds

from her mother tongue with no intention of returning them. She was preparing herself to walk into one such gathering, where the absence of her mother tongue in her accent would be rewarded.

James and ‘Mangatane walked into an empty hall, which was surprising, given the loud music and chatter that assaulted their ears as soon as their feet landed on the patio.

“Brace yourself. All of this is to appease your kind. Welcome to the mountain kingdom!” she said.

The sarcasm from ‘Mangatane’s voice threw punches at an already nervous gut that James was coddling.

James lost his breathing rhythm and had to negotiate with his pupils not to dilate too much. His duffel bag sat, careless with its posture in the left corner of the foyer. Its placement there seemed forced. It has never known such shimmer. All its life, from factory to store, has been one interaction after another with calloused hands whose idea of luxury is rest. Its owner’s first touch landed like a tickle on its belly.

Standing in that hallway had forced him to recalibrate his expectations in a way that pointed fingers and laughed on bended knees at his conception of what this new adventure entailed for him. He was not prepared for the sheer opulence piercing his eyes. The extravagant chandelier framed by the elaborate staircase before him with a crystal count comparable only to that of the State House. It presented a luminosity that was too heavy for his eyes. He had prepared himself thoroughly for this trip. He had practised all the time-specific greetings Sesotho demanded and memorised every gender-specific prefix. He knew all the kings and the one queen who had ruled Lesotho from Morena Moshoeshoe I to the current exiled king, Morena Moshoeshoe II. He had

practised for hours on end, common phrases that he would need to get by in the village of Ha Mopeli, where there was no electricity and running water. He was confident he would point at a candle and say ‘kerese’ to the local shopkeeper when the time came, and he would politely ask the locals where ‘metsi’ was when looking for the nearest stream or well to fetch water. He was prepared for the rough terrain that required hard boots and a tongue that would need soothing every night from the assault of complicated names and foreign sounds claiming their territory on it. Yet here he was, standing on a shiny marble floor with a duffel bag on his shoulder and a pinch of remorse threatening to cloud his blindsided idea of what Lesotho held in store for him.

“Ausi, ke kopa u nke mokotlana oa ntate,” ‘Mangatane said as she instructed the housekeeper to take James’ bag for safekeeping.

Ausi reached out her hand to James signalling for his bag, but he instead took her hand and shook it with an exaggerated smile and a ‘dumeylah’ buffering on his tongue. He couldn’t bring himself to say it so he just stood there, smiling, with ausi’s hand in his.

“Mokotla, ntate,” Ausi pointed with her free hand.

He released her, picked up his duffel bag from the floor and handed it over to her with a flash of redness on his cheeks. He searched in his mind for the Sesotho equivalent of ‘thank you’ but couldn’t find it, so he settled on, “Thank you ‘m’e”.

He watched Ausi open a door on the side that led to a room with poor lighting, as if to keep itself enclaved. From the little James could see, the room looked very different to the rest of the house. The walls were lined with bags of what looked like grains. He made a note of this as he walked behind ‘Mangatane to get to the living room where the festivities were held.

Upon entering Mr Kalimo's living room, a large American flag sat nestled above a glass wall feature, as an ode to the American embassy compound opposite. For every square of the glass feature, which made up three quarters of the whole wall on the right, a small sticker flag rested uncomfortably, as if to acknowledge its missed sense of place. Flags from all over the world were on that wall. Each time an expat arrived, Mr Kalimo was tasked with welcoming said expat from the Leabua Jonathan International Airport with an entourage of government employees. These instructions always came from the Prime Minister personally.

"We need to keep tabs on these whites. We love them, they're good for business, but that's about it. Look at what they're doing to our people right next door."

On this particular night, Mr Kalimo was too busy to do his usual airport run.

"Empa Ntate, 'Mangatane can pick him up on her way back from work. You said he's a small boy? Works for the Red Cross? I'm sure she can manage," 'Mateboho had slipped her hand on Kalimo's shoulder and smiled shyly.

It is this smile that made people believe she controlled his every move.

"Kalimo ke monn'a joang a lumelang mosali a mo tefele joalo?" people would say.

That smile always settled every and any issue. This was no exception. 'Mateboho reached for the moss green rotary telephone on a small table in the passage leading to the foyer. She was about to stick her finger into the rotating dialer when she spotted mustard finger print stains. What did she pay that skinny girl for?

"Ausi! Come here!"

When ‘Mangatane looked at her wrist watch, the time was 18:15. She knew a long lecture was getting cooked up by her mother. With European and American guests around to listen, her embellishment of the notion that those who didn’t arrive on time are just plain disrespectful, was sure to be present in her tone as she publicly scolds her for arriving late. All Basotho present would watch this performance with an air of annoyance but out of respect, since she’s the host, would just smile and shrug this off. It was her mother’s way of playing to Western hospitality rules to win over the expats to her corner. So they saw her as a peer, equally perplexed by this bizarre habit of these Africans who never showed up on time for anything.

They were welcomed into the living room by ‘House on Fire’ by Sankomota playing softly in the background as a cool-down track from the recently released ‘Celebration’ by Kool and the Gang. As soon as the resident DJ put the track on, all the guests put their drinks down, sang along and danced. The room could be divided into two distinct groups at this point. Those who had a knack for rhythm, and those who should stick to moving their heads slightly when a song – any, comes on. Days after such celebrations, the main small talk in government offices would be a mockery of the other half the room with their awkward dance moves and jabs at their audacity for thinking they could save the mountain kingdom with their struggling relationship with rhythm and movement. Music and dance are at the helm of the political landscape in Lesotho. Anybody with half a sense of how things work knew this.

“We all know how much South Africa meddles in our politics, but we set them straight,” said a short stout man with a glass of whiskey in his hand. The excited movement of his hand threatened the spillage of the spirit in his glass, but his effort to rest this glass on his chest seemed to contain it. “Take this LLA debacle. It’s obvious the boers are funding them.”

“LLA?” asked James.

“Oh young man, you need to familiarise yourself with the shenanigans of our time. I already have intel on your newly elected president Reagan,” the short stout man said as he gave a hearty laugh exposing a gap in his front teeth.

Unsure how to react, James gave a nervous smile back and bounced on his heels, while deciding whether to release the hands in his pockets from their captivity or not. ‘Mangatane had taken him around the room to introduce him to the guests she was familiar with. Each introduction started with “This is his honourable….or his esteemed…and his wife…”.

The room, reeking of power, made James’ nose runny. The pungent unexpected smell troubled his nose. ‘Mangatane handed him a handkerchief on their fourth introduction when he’d thought best to manage his nasal congestion by pulling back mucus into his nose and making ghastly sounds that made the British expats specifically, uncomfortable. Their allegiance to the queen and all things related to standard decorum was an insistence they held on to. Who would they be if they let go of this characteristic?

“The LLA, Lesotho Liberation Army. They’re really a bunch of hooligans who won’t accept defeat. Morena Leabua won those elections in 1970 fair and square,” the short stout man picked up from where he left off.

“I heard he’s a bit of a dictator,” James responded.

“No, that’s just the white man’s version. He’s a threat to the South African government because he won’t let them make this beautiful land their playground. The boers don’t know what to do with him. The whole story is a smear campaign.”

“He’s been in power since 1965. Doesn’t that seem odd, for a democracy?”

“Young man, what is your name?”

“James-John. Teachers shortened my name to James. So now I just go by James.”

“Listen James, this room is filled with ex-colonial administrators whose presence in this country still baffles me. They’re all spies. And they send your kind to do their dirty work and wreak havoc with our people in the villages. You should go back home. Go back to where you came from. We can handle this drought,” the short stout man said, barely keeping his balance.

“With all due respect sir, it’s organizations like the Red Cross that have a handle on this situation. Grain and powdered milk are making a huge difference in the villages, especially the ones that are inaccessible because of the snow.”

A tall man with graceful eyes appeared from behind the short stout man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s right. South African army helicopters are the reason we still have a country right now. If they weren’t on an operation to catch livestock thieves, how would we get these donations where they’re needed?”

“You mean the same army harassing ANC refugees? The livestock is a cover up, monna! Don’t get me started on Vorster and Botha. Infact, that whole Pretoria circus should just…” continued the short stout man.

James didn’t have the sharpest tongue and generally stayed away from confrontation as he resolved conflict the only way he knew how – with his fists. He felt his fingers twitch and beg to be curled into fists. He walked away while scanning the room to find ‘Mangatane who left him when the short stout man started talking.

“There you are. I thought I had lost you,” James said.

“I noticed you getting sucked into conversation with Mr. Paki, so I gave you space. He has controversial opinions about everything under the sun. I generally don’t prefer his company.” ‘Mangatane responded while settling on a chair in the corner of the buzzing living room.

James didn’t respond but his eyes did the talking. They landed on her chest. They didn’t just latch on, they moved in a jerky motion from one contour to the next, up and down her neck and finally rested at the button where the décolletage of her cream white dress started. The lack of shame from these eyes disarmed her completely. She stood in awe of their audacity. His audacity. She nervously announced a move to the balcony, “do you care to join me?”

The sliding door leading to the balcony was slightly opened, spilling light between the two chairs facing each other occupied by James and ‘Mangatane. The chatter in the background upleveled and died down between intervals of upbeat songs. When a ballad played, everyone decided to

take a breather and sit down. James and ‘Mangatane decided to sit quietly as the recently released ‘Hard to say I’m sorry’ by Chicago played. Their silence was golden. An obvious spell was being cast between them, but both saw fit to deny it. The box of light between them buffered all things unsaid between them.

“So, what brings you to our corner of the world?”

“I work for the Red Cross. With the drought, more hands are needed to save your people.”

The matter-of-fact undertone in his speech undercut the pleasant mood building up between them. He saw a pinched expression on ‘Mangatane’s face and decided to switch topics.

“What’s the weather like over here? You’re the only African country that gets snow in the winter.”

“That’s why Jesus keeps sending white men to come save us. It’s too cold for him to show up personally.”

“That’s funny.”

“Also, parts of South Africa near us get snow. These artificial borders your kind introduced have you confused.”

James felt a slight pang in his chest. He decided to ignore it and rather drown under the weight of the hostility in ‘Mangatane’s tone. Complete silence took over again. The Commodores’ song “Easy” came blasting through the speakers. ‘Mangatane got up, drew the curtains and closed the sliding doors leading to the balcony. The light that held the unspoken between them was gone.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it? The night sky here. I can’t remember the last time I saw so many stars at night.”

“I miss big city lights. The kind that drown the light of the stars in the sky. I can’t imagine why anybody would want to leave that for this,” ‘Mangatane said as she pointed into space with her wine glass.

James shifted slightly in his chair.

“It was all too much. I had to leave. And I wanted to give back. I knew my military experience would be needed here. When I read about families eating snow to survive, I just couldn’t sit and do nothing.”

“What about starving families in your backyard? The poverty rate in the US increased to 15 per cent over the past seventeen years. It’s the highest it’s been since the mid 1960’s. They bring in copies of the New York Times at the US embassy across the road,” ‘Mangatane said as she searched for James’ striking blue eyes in the dim moonlight.

James wanted to respond. He wanted to open up his chest and spill everything so his chest would stop burning. He resorted to stroking his right arm, the one closest to ‘Mangatane. She wore a cream white long flowing dress with a maroon belt that hugged her waist. The dress had a low-cut V-neck line with a soft collar that exposed an uncomfortable portion of her chest. That’s where his eyes landed and glued themselves to. She immediately felt them in the dark. She felt them settle and latch on to her flawless contours. These eyes didn’t judge her. She was used to brown eyes that landed on her chest and cried foul. His eyes landed softly. She found a smile plastered on his face when she looked up from her chest to his face.

James reminded her of a carefree time in her life living in a different cultural context where she could freely express herself. ‘Mangatane reminded James of a time in his life where a lot was forbidden. A time of war, where everything could change in a second. He felt led on by her. Like she was calling him to the edge of a cliff and daring him to dance with his eyes shut, careless to the edge.

“I caused the deaths of hundreds of people in Vietnam. It’s only right that I fix that by rescuing hundreds of others in a remote part of the world. A small corner that no one cares about,” with his eyes closed, James let out a sigh. He felt a cavity in his chest. A removed burden that gave him permission to breathe. He watched her facial expression go blank. He couldn’t read her.

“Don’t you ever feel tired? Why is life a cycle of give and take? I suppose you think this will wipe the slate clean for you? Help you start over?” she asked.

James had a sudden lump in his throat. He felt his voice go lower as he answered, “It doesn’t sound like a soundproof plan when you put it like that,” he said with a slight chuckle.

“I can’t escape myself like you can. I can’t rescue the world because people who look like me are the ones who get rescued. I can’t wipe off the stain of murder that I walk with. I was sixteen when it happened. I buried the murder weapon. My father and his political connections made it disappear.”

‘Mangatane’s confession left a cold sensation in the cavity in James’ chest. He yearned for a stiff drink to warm himself up. All he had was a glass of water in his hand.

Seqha

(written in the style of traditional Sesotho folklore)

Ba re e ne e re…

E le mohlabani ea bitsoang Seqha le mahakoe a mahlano.

Since the beginning of time, the night sky was pitch black except on days when the moon was present. Watchmen used to be stationed over mountains to keep watch for approaching enemies. There was a warrior at the time named Seqha. Seqha was born with gemstones clasped in both hands. When his tiny fingers were unfurled, five small gemstones littered the floor of his mother's hut. The midwives attending to his mother ululated upon seeing this and prophesied that great things would come from his hands.

Seqha grew up to have abnormal strength in his arms and hands. This, and a strong eyesight made him the obvious choice when the king chose his army's commander in chief. He could throw spears from a distance so well and always struck his opponents without fail. One day he was dared by those jealous of his stature and skill, to throw shiny stones at the sun and see how far they go. If he could aim and hit moving targets, surely the sun's moving pace across the sky was no match for his abilities.

"They say you came carrying gems from the land of the ancestors. Prove it. Put those strong arms to use and challenge the sun," they said.

He obliged and threw five gem stones at the sun, which disappeared into the sky. Seeing the sun undisturbed and its light still bright, he was ridiculed. Bellies were touched, fingers were pointed,

while roars of laughter bubbled out of bystanders. Until night time came and five sparkles were seen in the night sky for the first time.

The following day, Seqha threw more gem stones into the sky. The sky swallowed all of them during the day. Later, the night sky sparkled with more gem stones. The watchmen could see further and wider with more light. This pleased the king so he sent ten heads of cattle to Seqha and urged him to continue. For three moons he threw precious stones into the sky until the night sky sparkled with stones so many we've lost count. That was how stars came to be.

It was easy to spot enemies from afar because of him. Less people died during attacks because his army had more time to prepare for counter attacks. Besides the king, other people started sending him heads of cattle and game from their hunting escapades as a token of appreciation. He became incredibly wealthy and soon developed a massive ego.

"If you can light up the night sky, surely you can bring the moon closer to us, so we can touch it," said the people. "Give us the moon Seqha," they continued.

Seqha began to weave the thickest and longest rope anybody had ever seen. He carried boulders up and down mountains and hills to train his upper body and his arms. His muscles began to stretch and bulk up. His legs also grew strong, but they weren't as strong as his chest and arms. One full moon, in the presence of many spectators, he came ready with the gigantic rope he spent months weaving. The night-sky sparkled, reflecting his talent for throwing things with precision and might.

He flexed his muscles, beat his chest and urged the crowd to cheer for him. He took his first swing and threw one end of his thick and heavy rope in the air, aiming straight at the moon. After many

breaths and blinks, the rope reached the moon and coiled itself three times around it. Excitement and applause from the crowd grew wilder. He spat into both his hands, held the other end of the rope that remained on the ground and started to pull hard. With gritted teeth and sweat rolling down his face, Seqha watched as the moon stood up in the sky, stubborn and unrelenting. He pulled and pulled and pulled until all his strength left him. He collapsed and landed face flat on the ground. The crowd gasped with “jooooeee!”, “thusang!” punctuating the crisp night air. Then, complete silence.

One gem stone fell from sky and landed on Seqha’s limp body. Then another one. And another one. Until he was covered under a heap of gem stones. Soon a shower of gemstones started hitting the ground at random spots. The crowd scattered. It started to grow darker and darker with only the moonlight carrying the night-sky as more gemstones fell from the sky to the ground. More chaos ensued.

An old man emerged from the turmoil and calmly knelt beside the heap of gemstones covering Seqha. He sang an incantation while clapping his hands,

“Sa mo roba sechaba, sa mo roba.

La baleha letšoele, la baleha.

A mo kupetsa mahakoe, a mo kupetsa.

Tsa mo thoba naleli, tsa mo thoba.

Ea mo fa matla khanya, ea mo fa matla.”

Suddenly the rubble of precious stones started to shift. Out came Seqha with his whole body glistening, looking radiant. He apologized to the moon for trying to remove it from the sky. Then he apologized to his people for his poor actions which led to the gemstones falling back down. He spent the next few months training fellow warriors in the king's most trusted battalion. He taught them how to throw so well, some of them exceeded his abilities. Then they all started throwing the fallen gemstones back into the sky. It took many moons, but eventually, the night sky lit up again. The king rewarded them all with many heads of cattle and gave each of them a khau to wear around their necks so they can reflect the stars that they put back into place.

Eaba ke tšomo ka mathetho.

Multimedia

Please press ‘ctrl’ and click to follow hyperlink.

Rainmaking podcast – full episode

Video essay on applying western ideologies to Sesotho philosophy – the pitfalls

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