

# Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture

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## Abstract

Ophiolatrea is a universal phenomenon found in almost all ancient societies. This study is an attempt to establish that even in Southern Africa, ophiolatrea is traceable. Using intertextuality and phenomenology as its methods of approach, the study analyses Molutsokane, Lesokoana and Mokete oa Molula, the three well-known Basotho cultural ways of praying for rain. A critical analysis of these three shows that the ancient Basotho did address some of their prayers to a water snake as the object of their worship. According to some of the Basotho cultural practices such as initiation rite and the information one gets from some of the Basotho myths, this water snake is not only the source or the giver of water but it also gives fertility to women. As the giver of rain, the snake is called Tlhahla-macholo and the Creator, as the giver of fertility.

## Introduction

There is hardly a country of the ancient world where it cannot be traced, pervading every known system of mythology, and leaving proofs of its existence and extent in the shape of monuments, temples, and earthworks of the most elaborate and curious character. Babylon, Persia, Hindostan, Ceylon, China, Japan, Burmah, Java, Arabia, Syria Asia Minor, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Mexico, Peru, America . . . all yield abundant

testimony to the same effect . . . (<http://www.northvegr.org/lore/serpent/00101.html>)

Ophiolatrea, the worship of the serpent, is one of the most universal forms of worship the world has ever known. This form of worship is still widespread in many parts of the world. “Today, in America, there is new evidence of Snake worship in the Kentucky and Tennessee hill country—adding to the collection of known sites throughout the North American continent” (<http://www.apollonius.net/reptiles.html>). As far as Africa is concerned, Parrinder (1976) tells us that snake cult is a phenomenon found in Western Africa—the place from which, we are told, the Basotho originated from as part of the Bantu-Speaking people. According to him, this cult is frequently associated with water, rivers and sea, and the temples connected with it are found along the coastline and up the rivers, especially in Dahomey and in the Niger Delta (1976).

This paper is an attempt to show that, even in Southern Africa, one is able to find some traces of Snake worship. To demonstrate this, three well-known Basotho cultural ways of praying for rain will be revisited and analysed. These are *Molutsoane*, *Lesokoana* and *Mokete oa Molula* respectively.

Using phenomenology and intertextuality as its methods of approach, the paper will critically analyse and interpret the above named expeditions and linguistic expressions uttered in connection with the ritualistic performance of these three expeditions. The choice of phenomenology as an appropriate method for this kind of work is something that has to do with the fact that this is a method, which is simultaneously detached and empathic. A detached approach views religious phenomena objectively and allows them to speak for themselves without the interference of the investigator’s own value judgement (Chidester 1987). There is a general tendency among Basotho authors to see issues of their own traditional religion from a Christian perspective when they write. A detached approach will help in guarding against this kind of tendency. An empathic approach helps the researcher to enter into the experience and intentions of religious participants (Smart 1996).

Used as a mode of analysis or tool of interpretation, intertextuality is the shaping of texts’ meanings by other related texts or cultures. It can also be understood as an author’s borrowing and transformation of a prior related text or a reader’s referencing of one text in reading another. Its underlying principle is that texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created and interpreted. The word “intertextuality” is a term coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966. Kristeva declared that every text is from the beginning under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it. She maintained that rather than confining their attention to the structure of a text, researchers should study its “structuration”, that is, how the structure came into being (Brink 1999).

## Religion in General

Different people define religion in different ways, but generally speaking, religion has to do with subordination of human life to that which the individual most feels the need to belong in order that life might have meaning, security, warmth, fulfilment, or be otherwise enriched (Cumpsty 1990). This is not a passive subordination but rather an active one, which is expressed and shown in different ways, which may collectively be referred to as religious expression.

One of the religious expressions people use is prayer. Prayer is, as Dhavamony correctly observes:

A universal phenomenon found in all religions in one form or another, as it springs from the natural human disposition to give expression to thought and feeling in its relationship to the divine. Man naturally communicates with other men by speech; so also does he address the divine by the same medium in accordance with his belief and conviction. Prayer is an act of recollection by which man establishes and cultivates his communion with the divine. (1973: 233)

For the ancient Basotho, prayer was most of the time understood to be a way of making an appeal for the intervention of *Molimo* (object of their worship) through the mediation of ancestors in whatever situation was found insurmountable in life (Segoete 1981). It was also considered an expression of gratitude for all good things he had achieved in life, all of which were believed to have been granted by the ancestors (Manyeli 1992).

They again and most importantly, looked at prayer as a way of keeping fellowship with the object of their prayer. They considered their intimacy with such object as a sure guarantee for enduring protection against all forms of misfortune in their life. They employed quite a number of ways to address their deity in prayer. Such ways ranged from a speculative form of prayer or oral traditional prayers to more practical or action-oriented prayers, which took the form of offerings of sacrifices or joint expeditions.

Throughout this paper, the focus will be on this latter type of prayer. Unlike other modes of prayer, joint prayer expeditions were mainly, and still are, primarily used in cases where the problem for which such prayers were/are offered was/is regarded as affecting the entire nation, region or village. Our focus will be on *Molutsoane*, *Lesokoana* and *Mokete oa Molula*, the three well-known Basotho joint prayer expeditions. As the paper will show a critical analysis of these three reveals that the ancient Basotho did address some of their prayers to water snake as the object of their worship.

## A Critical Analysis of the Three Joint Prayer Expeditions

### Molutsoane Expedition

In an exceptionally dry season, it was customary for the chief to summon all his men for *molutsoane* (hunt-meeting) in the mountains. Early in the morning all cattle of the place were driven into the veld by the men. They climbed to the tops of the hills, cliffs and mountains, searching for living creatures in every hole, den or cave, killing all of them and smashing old pots and even broken ones. Ellenberger describes this in the following way:

A beast of certain colour would first be sacrificed, and early in the morning, the people would start driving the cattle before them to the top of the mountain. It was customary to show their discontent by destroying all the shrubs they happened to come across, to throw stones into dried pools and water-courses, and to kill all the game that came within reach, but it was forbidden to return with any game without first disembowelling the animals and throwing the entrails into a water-course. (1969: 253)

According to Laydevant (1952) one of the victims of the day during this expedition had to be a human being, preferably, a young unmarried man or any of those who could not bear children. Some authors say that such a human victim had to be the most immoral barren woman of the village. Her immorality was taken as the source of the problem. Therefore, it was believed that eliminating her would rectify the situation. It is also said that such a person had to be secretly chosen by the chief of the concerned village and the traditional doctor before the expedition could be carried out. This human victim is alluded to in one of the sacred songs, which stresses the importance of rain in one's life.

This is the song:

*Koana tlaase tau lia rora,  
Li rora li ja khomo e tšoana,  
Khomo e tšoana nyopa  
Nyopa li sa tsoaleng  
Ere li tla tsoala  
Ho ke ho ne pula  
Pulana li nang  
Li na melubela  
Melubela Tlotsi  
Tlotsi ke Sekhele.  
(Laydevant 1952: 28-29)*

Down there, the lions roar  
 They roar so, eating the black cow.  
 The black cow, which is barren  
 The barren that cannot reproduce  
 Unless it rains first  
 Little rains falling  
 Rain abundantly  
 Heavy rain of *Tlotsi* (one who brings about wetness)  
*Tlotsi is Sekhele* (Protector).

The symbolic and nebulous terms of this song are probably an allusion to *Molutsoane* expedition. The black cow spoken of here is probably the human victim who has been sacrificed while the roaring lions in the lake (*tlase*) are water inhabitants (e.g. *Fito*) which now feed on the victim. The little rains are the victim's blood, which, once shed, will bring about heavy rains (*melubela*).

Maybe at this juncture one may wish to know the purpose of emptying the bowels of the victims of the day into the rivulets and rivers. To find out the purpose for this, let us first look at this prayer that was also said in connection with the expedition:

*Oho Molimo a k'u utloe rea rapela,  
 Molimo oa Leseli oa Rammoloki,  
 Molimo O liatla li maroba;  
 Liatla li tsoeu tsa Rammoloki,  
 Li soeufetse ke ho bopa masea  
 Tlhahla-macholo Rammoloki,  
 Hlahla metsi u a etse keleli,  
 Hoba keleli e nchafatsa lichaba  
 Lichaba li tsoang ho uena 'Mopong  
 Lichaba li ea boela ho uena Meahong  
 Leseli. (Matšela 1990: 15)*

Oh! *Molimo* hear us we pray  
*Molimo*, Light and Saviour  
*Molimo* with soft and warm hands;  
 The palms (hands) of the Saviour are white  
 They are white due to creating babies.  
 The Saviour, you who splashes deep waters  
 Splash them into rain (*keleli*)  
 For the rain renews the nations  
 Nations from you at creation place

Nations that will return to you.  
Amen! (*Leseli!*)

Some people, especially Basotho Christians, believe that the word “saviour” as used in the Basotho traditional prayer given above refers to Jesus. Thus they have translated the word *maroba* as “wounds” that Jesus bore on his hands on the cross (Guma 1980). However, this cannot be correct because there is nothing in Basotho culture that appears to suggest their prior knowledge of Jesus before their encounter with the Western Missionaries. Another reason why we cannot take the word *maroba* to mean wounds is that it is the word used in reference to some other people other than “Jesus” in some cases. This is the case with regard to the following prayer:

*Molimo o mocha rapela oa khale.*  
*Molimonyana u tumela baloi,*  
*Tumela ba shoeleng khale-khale,*  
*Bana ba Ntate ba liatla li maroba*  
*Liatla li tsoeu . . .* (Lapointe 1986: 43; emphasis added)

In the underlined words of the above Basotho traditional prayer, the ones who are said to have *maroba* are those who died long ago (*Ba shoeleng khale*). If the word *maroba* specifically meant the wounds of Jesus, one would surely expect it to be exclusively attributable to him alone since only he had hands pierced with nails on the cross. But as the above prayer bears witness to it, the word *maroba* seems to be attributable to other people other than Jesus. This can only be understood as pointing to the fact that the word *maroba* possibly means something else other than the wounds of Jesus. When something is said to be warm and soft, Basotho at times say it is *maroba-roba*. I would like to believe that the word *maroba* is a shortened version of the word *maroba-roba*, in which case it would then mean something warm and soft. Thus, when the word is used to define the palms of God’s hands, the meaning it gives is that God has warm or welcoming hands. In their attempt to make their Christian interpretation of the above prayer more plausible, some Basotho authors have actually gone to the extent of corrupting this prayer by inserting their own additional lines in the prayer. One such corrupted version of the above prayer reads as follows:

*Oho Molimo re utloe, rea rapela:*  
*Molimo o mocha rapela oa khale,*  
*U re rapelle ho o moholo Jere:*  
*Mojari oa litsitso tsa batho;*  
*Molimo oa Leseli, oa Rammoloki,*  
*Molimo o liatla li maroba,*

*Liatla li robokiloe ke ho re shoela;*  
*Liatla li tsoeu tsa Rammoloki,*  
*Li tsoeu joalo ke ho boša masea.*  
*Tlhahla-macholo Rammoloki*  
*Hlahla metsi U a etse keleli,*  
*Hoba keleding U nchafatsa lichaba teng,*  
*Lichaba li tsoang ho Uena 'Mopong,*  
*Li tlang ho khutlela ho Uena Meahong.*  
*Leseli!* (Matšela 1990; emphasis added)

The two lines underlined in the above prayer are clearly an insertion. Translated from the Christian perspective, they respectively read as follows:

The one who takes away sins of the people;  
 Hands are pierced for he loves us.

The “Old One” to whom the “New Molimo” is requested to pray in the first prayer above, is also called *Tlhahla-macholo*. When one looks at the word *Tlhahla-macholo* closely and also relates this word to other prayers which were said and things that were done, in the same context, it appears to refer to *Noha ea Metsi* (a water snake). Although I have translated *noha ea metsi* as water snake, it has to be noted that this is only for convenience. In reality when Basotho use the word *noha*, they include such creatures as reptiles under the same word. For this reason, when they talk of *noha ea metsi* (water snake), they often talk of water serpent and crocodiles as well.

We will now try to unpack our word *Tlhahla-Macholo* as used in the prayer given above. The word *tlahla* comes from the verb *hlahla*, which means to expel or splash. In this way *Tlhahla-Macholo* means the one who splashes *macholo*. What are these *macholo*? The answer to this question lies in the second line, which forms a synonymous parallelism with the line that reads: “*Tlhahla-macholo Rammoloki*”. That second line reads: *Hlahla-metsi oa etsa keleli* (one who splashes water into rain). Based on this explanation, the word *macholo* means deep waters (*maliba*) which is the place believed to be inhabited by water snakes such as *Mokebe*, *Fito*, *Tlatla-metsi*, and *Koena* to mention but a few. In other words, *Tlhahla-macholo* (*Oa khale*) is asked to provide rain by turning water in the pools into rain (*keleli*) since rain sustains life. This should also be compared with what Parrinder says about the Bantu people:

But most of the Bantu believe in natural and local spirits, which may be those of the departed, of “dissociated spirits, often vague and shadowy in character, but nonetheless terrifying and dangerous to the traveller.” There are spirits of mountains and forests, of pools and streams, of trees and

other local objects. *There are numerous animal spirits and sacred snakes which may assist in rain-making.* (1976: 43-44; emphasis added)

Speaking of such snakes or creatures which may assist in bringing about rain, Casalis, the earliest Christian Missionaries to live in Lesotho, said that Basotho “believe that to destroy a crocodile is to infallibly spoil the rain” (*Journal des Missions* 1844: 54).

It seems that water snake is also charged with the work of creation. This is at least what is suggested by the following words of the prayer we have already seen:

Hands are white of the Saviour  
 The hands are white due to creating babies . . .  
 Nations coming from you  
 Nations that will return to you.

To understand these words, we should remember that the ancient Basotho used to say *Ngoana o tsoa letšeng*—a child comes from the lake or *Ngoana o tsoa lehlakeng*—a child comes from the place of reeds. The place of reeds, as it was believed, was *Ntsoana-Tsatsi*. It is at *Ntsoana-Tsatsi* where we find the lake spoken of in the above lines. It therefore makes sense to call this place the place of creation since all children born are believed to come from here. It is also said in the prayer that people return to this place when they leave the land of the living. This seems to be one possible reason why the ancient Basotho buried their dead with their faces facing the eastern direction in their graves.

That water snake is, according to the Basotho traditional beliefs, capable of creating, is a fact manifest in countless myths of Basotho. A typical example in this case is the myth of *Mosimoli le Mosimotsana* (Jacottet 1983; Liguori-Reynolds 1965) in which we are told that *Mosimoli* was re-created by a water snake after she had been killed and reduced to dust by her mother.

In the myth are given the story of *Mosimoli* and *Mosimotsana* who were twins. One day *Mosimoli*, who was a married twin, visited her family only to find that her mother was not at home. Tired and hungry, she decided to prepare some food. Her mother had given a strict rule to *Mosimotsana* (the younger twin sister) that preparing food from *thulare* (special pot) was strictly her (mother) prerogative. So, by preparing the food from this pot, *Mosimoli* violated this rule.

After *Mosimoli* had left, the mother arrived. When she discovered what *Mosimoli* had done, she became so furious that she sent *Mosimotsana* to call her home. On arriving, she was told to put some corn into a deep pit, which the mother had dug. While she was doing this, the mother covered her up with soil and crushed her into fine pieces, which she later on dumped into a deep pool adjacent to the village’s

well. From these pieces the owner of the pool, water snake, re-created Mosimoli.

One day Mosimotsana together with some girls of the village came to the well to draw some water. When they were to take their *linkho* (clay buckets) and go back home, Mosimotsana's bucket could not move. Other girls tried to help but the bucket remained firm to the ground. They finally gave up and left Mosimotsana there. No sooner had they left than Mosimoli emerged from the pool and scoured her sister (Mosimotsana) for not telling her the truth that her mother was angry with her. She filled Mosimotsana's bucket with muddy water and then let her go. This happened several times.

When it finally came to the notice of her parents that Mosimoli had been re-created by the water snake and that she was causing problems for her twin sister, they took one portion of their cattle and drove it into the pool in exchange for Mosimoli after they had had some discussion with the water snake. Thus they were given back their daughter after having been given a stern warning never to hurt her again.

Likewise, there are many Basotho myths, which present this water snake as being in full control of water. Of such myths we may mention that of *Bulane le Senkepeng* where Masilo gives his younger sister to *Noha ea Metsi*, who is referred to as *mong'a metsi*, (the owner of the water) (Jacottet 1985: 77-79). He also gives water during times of drought.

The ancient Basotho identified the presence of water with that of the water snake. According to their belief, this snake inhabited big lakes and all natural water sources (underground). They also believed that the movement of this snake in these deep lakes (*macholo*) caused spattering or splashing (*hlahla*) of water, thus turning it into rain (*keleli*). Heavy storms or tornadoes were and are still explained by the Basotho as having been caused by the emigrating angry water snake. For example, according to Manyeli:

Regular whirlwinds, hurricanes and tornadoes of the 1950s, at Thaba-Bosiu and Roma, were not a problem for ordinary traditional Basotho. According to them a huge snake moved from one place to another. Its tail caused the havoc on its path, for instance, roofs of huts and houses were blown away; fifty year-old trees were uprooted. (1995: 162-63)

It was also their belief that this snake liked fresh cattle dung (*bolokoe*). From this we can infer that the reason for emptying the bowels of all animals killed during the *Molutsaane* expedition into the rivulets and rivers was to entice the water snake into action through the smell of the cattle dung (from the bowels). That is, as the water flowed, it carried along with it all the dung to dump it into different lakes down the rivers and streams.

Even today some Basotho, especially those living in rural areas, still believe that rain is caused by *Noha ea Metsi*. For instance, it has been a common saying in Lesotho among many people that the severe drought that has recently stricken the country is due to the disturbance done to *Noha ea Metsi* by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. They also say the same thing if it does not rain during the construction of a bridge over any of the flowing rivers. That is, they blame it upon the disturbance made to the water snake by the construction.

### Lesokoana Expedition

If the *Molutsoane* Expedition failed to bring the rain, the women of the village concerned were asked to go and “steal” the *lesokoana* from some neighbouring village. The *lesokoana* is the stick used in any household for stirring bread (*papa*) in a pot. An expedition was organized to invade one of the neighbouring villages by the women of another village, in order to “steal” the *lesokoana*. The procedure was as follows: one woman or girl known for her swiftness in running, and who, preferably was the senior of the village, entered the family home and after looking around found the *lesokoana*. She snatched it away and at full speed ran off, in order to give it to her companions, who remained scattered at different intervals along the road leading to their village. In case their taking away *lesokoana* had not been noticed, they themselves gave the alarm shouting: Behold! The *lesokoana* is gone! On seeing or hearing this, the women of the invaded village dashed out of their houses and running pell-mell, attempted to regain the *lesokoana*. A helter-skelter chase ensued from both sides. The men of the village stood in groups on high places to watch this exciting exercise.

Finding herself tired or about to be captured by her pursuers, the woman or the girl having the *lesokoana* threw it to her companion ahead of her, who also was to do the same. Each side competed by taking and retaking the *lesokoana* from each other, until finally one side won by reaching their home with it (the stolen *lesokoana*). It would remain there until the defeated party waged another combat to try to fetch it back.

The winners would then enter their village with merriment, wearing green leaves and a certain grass called *sechaba* about the head and necks and waist, singing victoriously. We should here also mention that this *lesokoana* was not only meant for praying for rain, but it was also organised for praying for barren women. So, if the motive for carrying out *lesokoana* was that of reminding the village that the infecund should be prayed for, then as they entered the village they sang the following song:

*Re mekholochane (bakopi)*  
*Ha re etsa oele-oelele (mangoengoe).*  
*Sila koae, re e'o tsuba thabeng*

*Re 'o tsoala Mosoeu' a lehaha . . .*  
*Molimo a k'u utloe rea rapela*  
*'Maakane! Ho iloe kae,*  
*Ho sa keng ho khutloa re tlo bonoa?*  
*Bo-Nkhono ba llela matlala . . .*  
 (Sekese 1983: 93)

We are beggars,  
 When we sing.  
 Grind tobacco so that we may go,  
 And snuff at the mountain,  
 Let us go and bear *Mosoeu* of cave.  
 God hear us we pray.  
 Oh! Where have the people gone,  
 That they do not come to see us?  
 Grandmothers are demanding meat . . .

After the *lesokoana*, it was expected that it would rain a lot. It is not clear how this brought about rain. The only thing we know is that it was the belief of the ancient *Basotho* that to see a calf or calves frolicking about was an indication of imminent rain. We also know that in *Sesotho* at times, young women (virgins) are called *lithole* (heifers) and the old ones are called *makhomohali* (cows). Perhaps it is from this perspective that like calves, their frolic (running) brought about rain. Or perhaps their sweating was meant to attract rain. That is, based on the principle that “like attracts like,” the running sweat was meant to attract rain.

We should also look at the whole process of *lesokoana* as a symbolic action. For instance, these frolicking women and girls symbolized the calves whose frisking action brought the rain. Likewise, the whole question of putting the green leaves about the head, neck and waist has to be understood as the symbol of the needed rain whose function was to cause greenness in plants. Even the very action of “stealing” *lesokoana* and the *lesokoana* itself were symbolic. Among their many riddles, *Basotho* also have the following one:

*Sefelekoane beta pelo u kene koetseng*  
 Serpent, take courage and enter the lake.

The answer to this riddle as given by the *Basotho* is the stirring rod (*lesokoana*), which, as it is used in stirring bread, is immersed in the boiling water in the pot. Thus, we may deduce from this that the *lesokoana* here symbolized the water snake, the giver of rain as we have already seen, who being symbolically transferred from one village to the other, would give rain to the villagers. That is, the presence of this

“stolen” *lesokoana* signified the presence of the giver of rain, *Noha ea Metsi*. This kind of interpretation is also strengthened by the fact that the name “*Fito*” (another type of water snake) was pronounced each time the *lesokoana* was recaptured from anyone of the participants in the helter-skelter chase. That is, they identified this *lesokoana* with *Fito*, the giver of rain.

## Molula Expedition

There was among the ancient *Basotho* a very peculiar way of praying for fecundity in women. A special feast called *Mokete oa Mohula* (barrenness feast) was arranged by all the married women of the village, who had no problem of barrenness. These together with those who were considered infecund went far away to the mountains with a certain man called Ntili. The only people who were to remain home were men, children and old women who could no longer travel over long distances due to their old age.

It is said that Ntili was the relative of Monaheng (One of the most respected Basotho elders). He was not married. Among the *Basotho*, he was famous for his ability to pray for childbearing to the ancestors on behalf of all the women who could not bear children. He was regarded as a mystery from *Molimo*. He was carried on the back of the infecund like a child to these distant places. They stayed with him in a cave praying throughout the night. They did not bring any food along with them. So, they spent the whole night without eating. It is said that as a sign that their prayer had been accepted, there had to be a miraculous happening: they felt some drops of water sprayed on them or some small particles of stones thrown at them.

Very early in the morning, all men in the village left the village in order to look for the women who had disappeared with Ntili. They also took along with them all their cattle. When they found them, they drove the cattle back home where they were milked together at the same place just as in the case of *Molutsoane*. All the women with Ntili on their backs had to leave the cave and go home together with the men. They (women) decorated themselves in green plants as in the case of *lesokoana*. As they approached the village, they waited at the village gate (*khorong ea motse*). It was while they were still there that they were given traditional beer brought to them by all the girls who remained home during the expedition. One of the cattle of the village was then sent to them driven by some chosen men in order to accompany them as they entered the village.

On that very day, each of the husbands of the barren women slaughtered an ox as a sacrifice to pray for his wife. This was then a big feast where people gathered together to celebrate. All the infecund women were then anointed with a red ochre, *selibelo* (special fatty cream) and *phepa* (white chalk-like powder) all over their bodies.

As they celebrated, they sang a very solemn song (*koli ea malla*), at the same time

crying and exchanging Ntili on their backs from one to another. Their husbands joined them in their crying while Ntili prayed endlessly on their backs in a very solemn way as he was being exchanged from one back to another. When the singing and crying were over, a certain part of meat (*Lithia*) from each of the slaughtered oxen was taken and sent to a maternal uncle of the barren women. After this all the women were taken back to the cave where they were fetched by their maternal uncles in a way similar to the previous one. In the cave, their prayer was that which we have already seen under *lesokoana*. That is, “We are beggars . . .” etc.

When all the business of visiting the cave was over, these barren women had to always carry on their backs an artificial baby called *Ngoana oa Seho* or *Khongoana-Tšingoana*. This artificial baby was always placed beside the mother when sleeping as if it were really a living baby. It was given a name, which later on would be given to a real baby in case the mother gave birth to one (Sekese 1983). It is said that Ntili died in 1822 because of the great famine. After his death, his place was taken by another chosen unmarried man in the village.

Even in this prayer we already see some traces of the water snake, the creator of children. Apart from wells, streams and rivers, other places which the ancient *Basotho* believed were inhabited by a water snake were caves, especially dark caves with some water or lake in them. It is very likely that the cave spoken of here was one of such caves. We have many of such feared caves in Lesotho even today. For example, we have one called Leqhili-qhili at Taung in the district of Mohale’s Hoek and another at Mautse. The drops of water sprinkled over the women in the cave were most probably believed to come from him, *Thahla-Macholo* to whom the prayers of the women were addressed. It is said that they were anointed with *selibelo*. One of the ingredients of such *selibelo* was the fat obtained from milk (*mafura a lefehlo*).

The water snake among other things was believed to like milk. It is therefore very likely that the *selibelo* (mixed with milk fat) was meant to attract the snake by its smell so that he could come out and so answer their prayers. This *selibelo* was used in many occasions where it appears to be still somehow associated with *Noha ea Metsi*. I am here particularly thinking of the case of the initiation schools where the initiates were anointed all over their bodies with this substance. Some of the rituals, for example, in the case of the initiation of girls were performed in the water where the initiates were told that they would be visited by *noha ea metsi* (water snake) who is also called *Motanyane* (Casalis 1861: 268).

That *Motanyane* is *Noha ea Metsi* (water snake), is also alluded to in the following song of the women initiates:

*Ho shoela ke beng bohloko!*  
*Nkabe ke na le malome.*  
*A tle a mphe potsanyane,*  
*Ke tle ke e nehe Motanyane.*

*Ngoan'a metsi a tle a thabe,  
A tle a khutlele metsing . . .  
(Wells 1994: 95)*

The pain of losing relatives,  
I should have an uncle.  
He could give me a goat.  
To give it to Motanyane:  
So that he who lives in water would be happy,  
And would return to the water . . .

From this song it becomes clear that only a gift from the uncle could make *Motanyane* happy. To understand the reason behind this, let us look at the following song of initiation:

*Saka la Balimo  
Ha le na monyako  
Le le chitja feela,  
Bitsang lingaka  
Li tlo le pota  
Tsa re li sa pota  
Li sa pota hang,  
Ka hare ho lona  
Ha ema petsana  
Ea sepata-hlooho.*

Guma translates this in the following way:

The kraal of ancestors  
Has no door: It is merely round.  
Call witchdoctors  
To come and doctor it  
While they were doing so,  
Having gone round it once,  
Inside it,  
There arose a foal,  
Of the hidden head.  
(Guma 1980:124)

This kraal which is said to have no door is the lake (most probably the lake of *Ntsoana-Tsatsi*). The arising foal is the owner of the lake, that is, *Noha ea Metsi*, water

snake. We should here remember that it was the belief of the ancient *Basotho* that at times this water snake appeared as a foal, especially during the day to disguise himself. That the kraal spoken of above refers to water and the foal spoken of in the song is indeed the water snake, something that is confirmed by the following part of the song of initiation given above:

*Tsela khahloloha*  
*Baeti re ete,*  
*Re etele tshosi*  
*Tshosi ke Monyohe.*  
 (Guma 1980: 125)

Road (water) separate (or open)  
 That we travellers might enter  
 To visit Tshosi  
 Tshosi is Monyohe (Water Snake)

In these verses the travellers ask the water of the lake to open the way for them, because they want to visit or see *Monyohe* who seems to be the owner of the place of their visitation. Now in the Basotho myths, *Monyohe* is presented as *Noha ea Metsi* (water snake) who gives water during times of drought (Jacottet 1985: 77).

This world was thought of as being more or less like the world of the living in that its people live in villages built on mountains just like in the world of the living. This is confirmed by the following last part of the sacred song quoted above:

*Ea iketsa thaba*  
*Thaba ea bolula*  
*Ea bolula metse*  
*Metse-metse ela*  
*Ke ea bomalome*  
*Hase ea borare.*

It (foal) turned itself into a mountain,  
 A mountain of to settle,  
 Of to settle villages.  
 Those many villages yonder,  
 Belong to the uncles.  
 And not to the fathers.

The last sentence of this song to me implies that uncles have more power (maybe they are headmen) in these villages, they have more say and responsibility. Perhaps

this is why one's maternal uncle (*malome*) was and still is such an important figure in the life of Basotho. He (*malome*) is an integral part in every important or grave matter concerning the well-being of the family of his married sister. He has to be kept informed about every important event that concerns his sister, nephews and nieces. It is believed that if he is not treated accordingly by the family of his sister, he will complain to the departed ancestors who will in turn neglect the welfare of the family (sister's family). He is believed to have power to either impose misfortune or bring fortune on the family of his sister (Sechefo n.d.: 21). Such influence of the uncles can be understood as deriving from the idea that they are in charge of the villages in the world of the ancestors as has been indicated above.

I know that in reality *Motanyane* was a chosen person who disguised herself as *Motanyane*. But we should understand this person as being symbolic only. She was symbolizing the real *Motanyane* (water snake) as we have already seen.

What has just been said above should be understood in the light of what Eliade says in the following lines about the fertilizing power of snakes:

Snakes are thought of as producing children . . . Among the Togos in Africa (a giant snake dwells in a pool near the town of Klewe, and receiving children from the hands of the supreme god Namu, brings them into the town before their birth) . . . they prevent women from being sterile and ensure that they will have a large number of children. (1997: 167-68)

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that ophiolatrea, as a universal phenomenon found in almost all ancient societies, is also traceable in Southern Africa. A critical analysis of *Molutsoane*, *Lesokoana* and *Mokete oa Molula*, the three well-known Basotho cultural ways of praying for rain, has indeed shown that the ancient Basotho did address some of their prayers to water snake as the object of their worship.

According to some of the Basotho cultural practices such as initiation rite and the information one gets from some of the Basotho myths, water snake is not only the source or the giver of water but it also gives fertility to women. As the giver of rain, this snake is called *Tlhahla-macholo* and the creator as the giver of fertility.

What the above implies is that the name *Tlhahla-macholo* refers to a specific ancient Basotho's local deity understood to be in charge of water/rain and fertility. It cannot be given to the Christian God who is understood to be a universal God. It is therefore wrong for today's Christians to have adopted this name for their Christian God. *Tlhahla-macholo* and Yahweh (The Christians' God) are two different entities. The name *molimo* is still a better option for a local name for the Christian God. This is because according to the Basotho traditional prayers we have seen

above, the word *molimo* appears to be a generic name attributable to any being considered to be an object of worship be it one of the ancestors or Tlhahla-Macholo. Thus when prayers are directed to an ancestor, that ancestor is addressed as *molimo*, hence the saying “new *molimo* pray to the old *molimo* (*molimo o mocha rapela oa khale*)”. New *molimo* in this sense refers to a recent ancestor as opposed to the one who died long time ago. A popular saying that the word *molimo* is never used to refer to an individual ancestor, but only in reference to God is not based on any reality.

What remains to be further investigated, is to find out whether or not there is any other being beyond water snake and ancestors to which the ancient Basotho applied the name *molimo*. So far this study has not being able to establish that. That remains a challenge for the next research on the ancient Basotho’s object of worship.

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