



## The complexity of the cultural identity of Basotho in Lesotho

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“Identities are ... not locked into old social formations of 500 years ago, 2 000 years ago or in one’s DNA roots of 300 000 to 80 000 years ago. Identities are moulded by many factors and most importantly by one’s own life experience, decisions and choices” (Mellet 2010:5).

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to show that the cultural identity of the Basotho is a complex cultural system shaped by complex identities that have been moulded by social factors over many years. The article pays attention to Basotho ways of life, such as customs, traditions, language and music. It is argued in the article that, being a complex system, the cultural identity of the Basotho is open to transformation, and that the present-day Sesotho culture is a product of innumerable historical and social influences.

### 1. Introduction

This study explores the dynamic cultural identity<sup>1</sup> of the Basotho in Lesotho. It is shown in the study that the cultural identity of the Basotho is a complex system that adapts to new social changes. We employ the ‘complex systems theory’ as conceptualised by Allen, Strathern and Varga (2010), Byrne (2010), Cilliers (1998; 2005; 2010), Collier (2010), and De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers (2010) as theoretical framework for this study. Invoking complex systems theory to analyse one’s data requires, according to De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers (2010:27), that one takes into account how the constituent parts of one’s data work as a whole and how these parts interact as a complex system<sup>2</sup> as well as with their environment<sup>3</sup>. De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers

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<sup>1</sup> We shall later define the concepts ‘identity’, ‘culture’ and ‘cultural identity’.

<sup>2</sup> See De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers (2010:2728) for a general description and characteristics of a complex system, and Chapter 1 of Cilliers (1998) for a more detailed exposition.

(2010:28) contend that the environment within which the complex system functions changes continually, and for that reason the system cannot behave in a rigid manner. It needs to adapt and cope with changes.

The environment of this study is Lesotho as a ‘meaning-making’<sup>4</sup> space, and the attention of the study is on how the cultural identity of the Basotho behaves as a complex system that adjusts and acclimatises to the continual social changes in Lesotho. In this regard, the environment produces “complex identities” (Seidler 2010:19).

We shall discuss the context or milieu of the Basotho’s cultural identity in more detail in Section 2.1 below. We now proceed with the definition of identity and answer the question, *What is identity?*

Cilliers defines identity in terms of the “difference” of the ‘self’ from the ‘other’ (2010:12), and asserts that “the element of identity inaugurates the play of difference on the one hand, while on the other, it is the result of that very process” (2010:13). He continues: “to say that A is different from B, is the same as saying A is *not* B. In order to recognise a *difference* between A and B, they must in the first place, be identifiable *as* A and *as* B (in their singularity), and secondly, they must, even if only slightly, share something that makes a comparison possible (there must be some element of identity” [author’s emphasis]. Identity, then, has to do with identification – being identifiable as the ‘other’ by the ‘self’. In short, it is the “possible recognition”, by the self, of the “other as the other” (Cilliers 2010:13). This recognition is possible if there is an element of “small similarity” (Cilliers 2010:13) between the self and the other, or A and B in the above example. Perhaps that is why Seidler calls identity the “different kinds of identifications people make from the particular positions from which they speak” (2010:1).

Cilliers sees identity as the “sense of personal identity, or the identity of an institution or system” (2010:13). Personal identity answers the question, *Who am I?* (Seidler 2010:1), and is part of individual identity – which, according to Gilbert, “takes a person’s identity to explain her behaviour by

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<sup>3</sup> In the theory of complex systems, the term ‘environment’ – according to De Villiers-Botha and Cilliers (2010:27, footnote no. 30) – refers to the “myriad of influences” that the system is exposed to daily.

<sup>4</sup> We are not referring here to meaning as the process of signification, but to meaning as the motivation (the reason) that lies behind doing what you do, or behaving the way you do.

indicating her motives and actions”, and it is the type of identity that “makes someone the person she<sup>5</sup> is” (2010:43).

Then: What is culture? Edward Said sees culture as comprising “aesthetic” (1993:xiii) and “ideological” (1993:xiv) forms. The aesthetic view of culture echoes earlier attempts to define culture in terms of aesthetic and artistic expressions – that is, creative forms such as art, music, drama, literature and theatre – in line with Raymond Williams’s (1974; 1988; 1989) then influential publications on culture. The ideological view of culture is based on the notion of “signifying discursive practices through which hegemony is produced”, and “the lived realities of race as well as the construction of boundaries that make it an intensely political concept” (Spencer 2006:44). Edward Said writes as follows about the political view of culture: “culture is a sort of theatre where the various political and ideological causes engage one another” (1993:xiv). He contends that ideological causes of culture “differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’, almost always with some degree of xenophobia” (1993:xiii). In this study, we consider notions of culture that often refer “simultaneously to creative practices and broader ways of life” of a group of people (Hodkinson 2011:2-3). The focus is on “how they live their lives. The patterns of social organisation and the normal ways in which [they] are expected to behave in society” (Kidd 2002:5-6).

Kidd (2002:9) contends that the way of life of a group of people would need to include, the dominant values of a society, the values that guide the direction that social change might take, shared linguistic symbols (language, religious beliefs, what is considered the correct way for people to behave in their day-to-day lives, what is considered the highest intellectual and artistic achievements of a group, including science, art, literature, music and so on and formal behavioural traditions and rituals.

In this way, culture is seen as collective and shared. It allows individuals to see themselves in relation to their own actions as well as the actions of others in their group.

What, then, is the relation between culture and identity in the notion of cultural identity? Kidd (2002:7) points out that, although culture and identity are linked, they should not be seen as exactly the same; culture represents the macro patterns – the big picture, whereas identity refers to the micro

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<sup>5</sup> The pronouns ‘her’ and ‘she’ should be understood to be generic to gender, and as such inclusive of ‘him’ and ‘he’.

'meanings' that individuals have in a group. Cultural identity, then, should be seen as an individual's "subscription to a distinctive set of values" (Gilbert 2010:48). In this sense, cultural identity carries the idea of "one as a membership of a cultural group". It also means the identification of a cultural group. In other words, cultural identity confers identity as a group; that is, what makes people the way they are, and what makes that group different from another group (group A is not group B). This means that cultural identity is characterised by collective identity, which can be thought of as the identity of a group consisting of individuals with different identities. Collective identity answers the question, *Who do we think we are?* (Mellet 2010:4). Collective cultural identity is one's "identification with language, religion, customs [and] mores" (Spencer 2006:35), including "values, meanings, identities, traditions, norms of behaviour and ways of understanding the world" (Hodkinson 2011:2). Kidd (2002:3) contends that a study of the collective cultural identity of a group involves issues such as the relationship of the individuals to the wider group, the degree of freedom that individuals have in their day-to-day lives, the type and degree of self-consciousness that individuals have about the way they behave and the degree of control that the wider social framework into which we are born has over our lives.

We discuss these issues below, and address the following specific questions about the cultural identity of the Basotho: Who is Mosotho? Who are Basotho? What is Sesotho culture? What is Sesotho language? What are Sesotho customs and traditions?

## **2. The cultural identity of the Basotho in Lesotho**

In this section, we discuss the domain and context of the cultural identity of the Basotho. In Section 2.1 below we return to a discussion of the 'environment' – or the 'space', so to say – that produces identities. In Section 2.2 we answer the question, *Who is Mosotho?*, with reference to the personal and group identities of the Basotho. Section 2.3 is a discussion of Sesotho language as the carrier of Sesotho culture. Section 2.4 focuses on Sesotho culture. Basotho music receives attention in Section 2.5.

### **2.1 Lesotho**

Lesotho is a Southern African country whose population is currently estimated at 1,9 million (data from 2006 population census). Mokitimi (1998:5) observes that "two-thirds of the country is mountainous, while the

other part constitutes the lowlands where the population is more concentrated. Only 12 percent of the country is arable". According to Ellenberger (1912) and Gill (1993), Lesotho was established around 1820 to 1830 by the founder of the Basotho nation, King Moshoeshoe I. In the times of its founder, Lesotho was a big, pre-colonial "country inhabited almost entirely by Basotho" (Wells 1994:vii), but colonial powers reduced it to a "*small* country entirely surrounded by South Africa" (Wells 1994:v; our emphasis) – a country that Mokitimi (1998:5) describes as "one of the *smallest* independent countries in Africa" (our emphasis).

This description of Lesotho characterises the country not only as a space that exists as a vast emptiness, but also as a "social space" (Bank 2011) that generates particular identities for its inhabitants: *naha ea Basotho* (the land of Basotho), and *lehae la bo-ntata rona* (the home of our fathers). This is what Lesotho means to the Basotho of Lesotho.

Meaning-making is a complex process. It is a product of a "myriad of influences" (De Villiers-Botha & Cilliers 2010:27, footnote no. 30) (re)produced inside and outside the country. Meaning-making is thus influenced, amongst other things, by social, economic, religious, historical and cultural factors, but also by local politics, development and underdevelopment, travelling, formal education, television, experience and perception and memories.

The meaning of independent and present-day Lesotho is influenced by geopolitics – being "entirely surrounded by South Africa" (Wells 1994:v), and being economically dependent on South Africa. Mokitimi (1998:50) points out that Lesotho's "economy is so tied to that of South Africa and that it has remained a labour reserve for South Africa's unskilled mine migrant labour system. Most of Lesotho's able-bodied men have to go and sell their labour since they have no alternative but to be part of an exploited class in a foreign country".

The large numbers of migrant workers moving in and out of Lesotho is evidence of Lesotho's economic dependence on South Africa, and the migrant workers have brought about a profound change in the way of life of the Basotho. This is to be expected, if one takes into account that "by the end of the 1980s, the number of Basotho workers on the South African mines had reached 125 000" (Coplan 2007:31) – from a country that had about a million people at that time.

Moreover, the landscape of Lesotho generates a meaning that characterises the diverse cultures of the Basotho. The influence of the *maloti* (the high mountains) and *mabalane* (the lowlands), with their unequal levels of development, is enormous. What is more, the climate of the lowlands, which get less snow than the highlands, creates different life patterns. Also, travelling between the lowlands and the highlands is dialectical and historical, and makes Lesotho's culture a complex system that defines Basotho cultural identity.

Another factor is the travelling in and out of Lesotho: in the past, Basotho men walked "dangerous journeys" for "more than 200 kilometres from Lesotho to the diamond fields"<sup>6</sup> (Coplan 2007:23) of South Africa in search of employment. These experiences have influenced and shaped Basotho accordion music.

We shall discuss this aspect in detail in Section 2.5. We now proceed to answer the question, *Who is Mosotho?*

## 2.2 Who is Mosotho?

The historical understanding of 'Mosotho' in Lesotho and southern Africa is defined in terms of language, culture and nationality. 'Mosotho' refers to any African – inside or outside Lesotho – who speaks the Sesotho language and who identifies with and practises the culture of 'Basotho' (the plural of 'Mosotho'). 'Sesotho' refers to both the language and culture<sup>7</sup> of the Basotho. As a way of life, 'Sesotho' refers to "any object, practice, or value relating to Lesotho or Basotho, felt by inhabitants to be particularly their own" (Wells 1994:vi); as a language, Sesotho refers to the language spoken by the Basotho inside and outside Lesotho since the reign of King Moshoeshoe I. 'Bosotho' (often written with a small b) carries notions of the customs and ways that characterise the Basotho. It is what the Basotho are.

With the political developments leading to Lesotho's independence from British imperialism in 1966, 'Mosotho' was used in Lesotho to mean a citizen of Lesotho. In this context, 'Basotho' – in Lesotho – means the nationals of

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<sup>6</sup> It was on these dangerous journeys that the poetry genre, *lifela tsa litsamaea-naha*, was born. For details see Mokitimi (1998) and Moletsane (1983a; 1983b).

<sup>7</sup> In this study, the differentiation between the two notions is marked as 'Sesotho culture' and 'Sesotho language'.

Lesotho. In Lesotho, 'Basotho' refers to those peoples who, according to Wells (1994:vi), "claim their descent from the clans united by Moshoeshoe I in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century". Wells further points out that the Basotho did not exist as a nation before the 1920s and that the "term 'Basotho' is essentially a political construct referring to those diverse clans that sought protection under Moshoeshoe I in the 1820s and 1830s"<sup>8</sup> (1994:19).

The broader meaning of 'Basotho' refers to peoples who share the language and culture of Sesotho, inside and outside the borders of Lesotho. Mokitimi (1998:5) claims that "today when one speaks of the Basotho, one means those Basotho living in Lesotho and in South Africa". Basotho historians<sup>9</sup> provide plausible narratives about the earlier uses of the word, where 'Basotho' was used to refer to a group of people. Ellenberger (1912:34) gives a clearer picture of the history of the first Basotho in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – as being the Bapeli, who lived next to the Amaswazi. This group of Basotho was known as people who wore the breechcloth with three ends:

one of the three ends passes between the legs and joins the other two in a knot behind, thinking their own fashion mocha or sporan, made of jackals' tails or the dressed skins of rock-rabbit, more dignified. So they called the Bapeli, *Abashuntu*, a derivative of the verb *ukushunta*, to make a knot. This designation, bestowed in derision, was adopted with pride by the Bapeli, and later by the other peoples similarly clothed, and was the origin of the present term Basuto.

This indicates the multicultural nature of pre-colonial Basotho peoples in southern Africa, and as such makes the present cultural identity of the Basotho even more complex, because the moment you say, *Ke Mosotho* (I am Mosotho), you should first establish your environment: Are you speaking as Mosotho who is a citizen of Lesotho, or are you referring to your identification with the language and culture of Sesotho?

### **2.3 The Sesotho language**

The Sesotho language is a mixture of language variations spoken by different clans under the leadership of Moshoeshoe I. Ellenberger (1912:34) points out

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<sup>8</sup> King Moshoeshoe I's Lesotho was bigger during his early reign, but by the war and treaties that followed it was reduced to its current size.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed history of the Basotho, see Gill (1993), Machobane (1990), Ellenberger (1912; 1988) and Damane (1977).

that the variation of Bapeli was Sesotho, although it was harsh and crude compared to the soft and graceful Sesotho variation of the Bakuena and Bafokeng.

According to Ellenberger (1912:34), the first peoples to bear the name 'Basotho' were the Bapeli, Makholokoe, Maphuthing, Batlokoa and Basia. Gill (1993:27) indicates that, although various ethnic groups that today are called the 'Southern Sotho' used to have much in common linguistically and culturally, they were not united politically and also not homogeneous. Their traditions were frequently innovative, localised and contested. With regard to the general feeling that the word 'Basotho' was popularised in the 1820s and 1830s, and that before this period each ethnic group was called by its clan name, Gill (1993:27) relates that.

'Basotho' was later adopted by Moshoeshe as a unifying political term for his emerging kingdom, which contained peoples from a large number of clans, both Sotho and Nguni. It is important that we look upon the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century 'Sotho' with an eye for diversity and be prepared to break out of the stifling uniformity, which has sometimes been wrongly imposed upon the 'Sotho' [peoples].

This view is shared by Wells (1994:29), who contends that, Sesotho language was a mixture of the Sekuena of the ruling clan, the Sefokeng of the original Sotho occupiers of the land and Setlhaping (Setswana) usages added by the missionaries. The standardisation of written Sesotho under the missionaries had a powerful unifying effect on the succeeding generations of the diverse clans that constituted his nation and helped confirm a Basotho identity.

The Sesotho language played an important role in unifying various clans during the time of King Moshoeshe I. The language enabled him to rule a united nation with one medium of communication. However, that practice did not rule out the fact that individual groups spoke and retained their languages<sup>10</sup> under King Moshoeshe I.

In this context, the Sesotho language can be seen as the Basotho's "deep identity" (Gilbert 2010:40) – it is the medium through which they share a

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<sup>10</sup> According to Moloi and Motsau (2011), Lesotho has minority languages. They identify the minority languages as Sephuthi, Ndebele (apparently Lesotho's Zulu, which is called Setebele; its speakers are called Matebele) and Xhosa.



history, customs, beliefs, values and practices, under a unifying king and as a nation. At present, “apart from being an official language, along with English, Sesotho is also a national language, that is, it is ... a language of political, social and cultural participation [and] a language that offers speakers an identity” (Moloi & Motsau 2011:68-69).

In this sense, the Sesotho language provides overpowering meaning to the Basotho, not just as a language, but also as a carrier of their culture; it communicates. It is a well-known fact that cultural (and other types of) identities are “linguistically constructed both through the use of a particular languages and linguistic forms” (Kroskrity 2001:106); for example, communicative practices such as greetings, persuasion, *hlonepha* (respect system) and many others are “indexed, through members’ normative use, to their group”<sup>11</sup> (Kroskrity 2001:106). To identify this close relationship between culture and language, Gilbert uses the concept “language cultures”. ‘Language cultures’ refers to the notion of cultures as constituted by language and the many cultural identities founded on a shared language (Gilbert 2010:52).

## 2.4 Sesotho culture

‘Sesotho customs’ and ‘Sesotho traditions’ refer to practices that distinguish the Basotho from other peoples or nations. When a Mosotho says *ka Sesotho* or *rona Basotho* (according to Sesotho; we Basotho), the understanding is that he is expressing feelings that relate to customs and traditions that identify him with the ways in which the Basotho do things. To elaborate on this notion, Coplan (1992:6 & 53) writes that,

the domain of Sesotho includes not only the language but also the entire self-identified culture of the Basotho nation both as theory and as practice. Most broadly, Sesotho is Basotho ... a people’s conceptions and perceptions of themselves and of their situation in society and history, formulated in the terms and the occasions of their culture. Sesotho is localised types and qualities of things and local styles of enactment. Sesotho becomes a precious resource, a reservoir of identity, self-expression, and social entitlement that appears crucial to any meaningful form of national survival.

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<sup>11</sup> See Finlayson (1982) and Kunene (1958) for a detailed discussion of the cultural aspects of the *hlonipha* language.

The Basotho's customs and traditions are not static, but dynamic; they adapt to social changes. Therefore, it could be concluded that, when one talks of Basotho and Sesotho, one means what happened to the Basotho from the 1820s, under the kingship of King Moshoeshoe I, to the present. Since the emergence of King Moshoeshoe I's kingdom – one country, a united nation and one dominant language – many changes have occurred among the different peoples that sought refuge under him. Some of their customs and traditions were acculturated into the dominant and powerful ones of the ruling Bakuena clan. Not only that, but the arrival of the missionaries and the British colonial rule influenced the customs and traditions of the Basotho. The process of acculturation in Lesotho diluted and substituted some basic and acceptable Sesotho practices. Therefore, currently, when one speaks of Sesotho customs and traditions one is not referring to a static and unpolluted type of culture that is devoid of outside influences, but one that has undergone transformation<sup>12</sup>.

Below we highlight some of the Sesotho practices that have undergone changes, although they still retain some of their traditional aspects. These practices are discussed as examples to show that Sesotho culture is not static but dynamic, that it is not a simple system but a complex system, and that Basotho cultural identity is characterised by difference.

The practices we focus on are initiation, attire, death, and horse rearing. We start with initiation.

#### **2.4.1 Initiation**

Initiation is an old custom that is still practiced in Lesotho (and elsewhere). Undergoing initiation is a stage when Basotho youth are trained for adulthood. As members of their society they are prepared to fit into the existing social structures. Sesotho initiation involves young males as well as young females who are considered to have reached marriageable age. In this study, the focus will be on the influences that change male initiation. We pay attention to male initiation because many people today wrongly regard this as a tradition that has resisted change.

We argue here that the custom of male initiation is dynamic, and as such adapts to changing times. First, male initiates are no longer trained to be warriors, as was the case in ancient times. Currently, the Basotho have

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<sup>12</sup> See how identity transforms itself in the conclusion of this study.

established units of the police force and military force that maintain law and order and provide national security. Male initiates are not summarily absorbed into the traditional king's army, as one would expect. Graduates from the initiation schools are, in most cases, not seen to be playing any major roles in society that could be linked to their initiation school.

Second, long ago, *mesuoe* (initiation schoolteachers) used to be dignified men of good standing in their communities. Today, most of the teachers are not people who are regarded with great respect in their communities. The current situation is that any male who has been to initiation school thinks that he is qualified to be an initiation schoolteacher. In modern initiation schools, the *mesuoe's* self-esteem and social attributes are no longer highly valued.

Third, in many areas, initiation schools have turned out to be a source of income for their owners – which was not the case in the old days. Most people who establish initiation schools today do so for commercial reasons. It is easy to do so because there are no standardised regulations that control the schools at present, whereas in former times initiation schools were under the strict control of the kings and chiefs, and established only by them.

Fourth, the attire worn during the modern initiation graduations comes entirely from Western culture, but has been adapted to Sesotho and associated with Basotho traditional attire. In former times, Basotho male initiation attire consisted mostly of skins and hides from domestic animals. Grass was used to make *mekorotlo* (Basotho hats).

Fifth, the *mangae*<sup>13</sup> songs sung in contemporary initiation schools show aspects of Western education and Christian influence. Sometimes the initiates recite English poems, which are referred to as *makotompi*<sup>14</sup>, and they often sing modified Christian hymns. This seems misplaced and improper, although it is gradually gaining acceptance. In the old days, the content of the *mangae* came from the initiates' own rich and traditional culture.

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<sup>13</sup> *Mangae* refers to the poetry and songs of initiates.

<sup>14</sup> *Makotompi* are *mangae* that have Christianity and English as their form and content – something foreign to traditional Sesotho culture.

Sixth, the bull slaughtered for the boys at the present-day initiation lodge is no longer the offspring of cattle that were captured during war, as in the times past. This is because the Basotho no longer fight wars.

Lastly, journalists from various quarters are often invited to witness the ceremonies of young men graduating from initiation schools, and to cover some of the activities believed to be suitable for public consumption – something unheard of in the past.

#### **2.4.2 Attire**

The transformation of attire has permeated Basotho ways of life. Today, three items – the Basotho hat, a modern blanket and *seshoeshoe*<sup>15</sup> – are accepted as the authentic attire of a Mosotho woman. Needless to say, the blanket and *seshoeshoe* are Western influences; nevertheless, they are generally accepted as portraying the real Basotho attire. Basotho males wear certain types of blankets as *bosotho* or *Sesotho*, and proudly call themselves *maaparakobo* (the people/nation who wears blankets). If one would ask who approved this form of attire as Basotho traditional attire, the answer could very well be: *Ka Sesotho re apara joalo* or *Ke bosotho ba rona* (that is how we dress in Sesotho; it is our traditional attire). Approval or non-approval is not at stake; what counts is the general acceptance of the practice by the modern Mosotho. In this sense, Sesotho attire has adapted to changing times.

#### **2.4.3 Death**

Death is another ritual that has adapted and adjusted to social changes in Lesotho. In the old days, the Basotho used to have their funerals early in the morning, hours before sunrise. One of the reasons for early funerals was to give people time to rest afterwards and then engage in productive and fruitful chores. Nevertheless, today 10:00 is taken as the standard time for a funeral service to start. As to who came up with this time, the Basotho will tell you, *Ka Sesotho ehlile ke nako e nepahetseng ea ho ntša mofu* (in Sesotho it is the right time to start funeral services.)

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<sup>15</sup> A dress made up of special cloth that the Basotho call *terantala*. The word *terantala* is an adaptation of the Afrikaans word *tarentaal*, which means ‘guinea fowl’.

Further, the dead are no longer buried after two or three days only. These days they spend at least two weeks in mortuaries while preparations for the funeral are made. For most Basotho, two weeks have become the standard preparation period for a funeral. If you ask them why that is so, they will tell you, *Ka Sesotho mofu ha a ke be a be a se a sobokelloa feela* (in Sesotho it is improper to carelessly wrap and hurry to bury the dead). It remains a mystery who determined the period of two weeks, but one could see it as the influence of mortuaries. When there were no mortuaries, the two-day preparation for a funeral was to avoid a rotting corpse, especially in the summer.

Furthermore, in the old days corpses were wrapped in hides before burial. Now corpses are buried in coffins of various prices, depending on the wealth of the family concerned. All the same, the funeral would still be said to have gone according to Basotho culture – modern Basotho culture.

In addition, long ago the animal slaughtered for the hide in which to wrap the deceased used to be eaten and consumed on the same day. These days, if there is some meat left it is kept in fridges or shared among family members, who take it to their respective homes.

Also, in ancient times, the meat of the animal slaughtered for the hide in which to wrap the deceased was not salted because it was believed that, since the people were grieving, the meat had to be different (tasteless) from the normally (tasty) salted meat. Nowadays, the meals served at funerals are not different from those served at wedding feasts. Yet this modern convention has come to be regarded as being in keeping with Sesotho practice.

What is more, in the old times women who had lost their husbands used to wear a string of grass called *moli* on their heads as a symbol of mourning. The string, called *thapo* (mourning string) in Sesotho, denoted that the woman wearing it was in the mourning period for her husband. These days, most women put on modern black clothes to replace the *thapo*. This type of clothing is now called *thapo*, although it is not a string at all; it still symbolises mourning for one's husband. Nevertheless, the Basotho will tell you, *Ka Sesotho o lokela ho roala thapo ea monna oa hau* (in Sesotho you have to put on *thapo* for your husband). As to who approved the black cloth as a substitute for the string of grass, the Basotho will not give a clear answer, except to say that it is Sesotho custom to put on the mourning cloth: *ke Sesotho ho roala thapo*. The issue is not whether or not the cloth belongs to

Western culture; today the culture of wearing black during the mourning period is well known and has almost become synonymous with Sesotho custom.

#### **2.4.4 Horses and horse riding**

Horses are new animals to the Basotho, but they have become synonymous with Basotho culture. History says that the first horse (*pitsi/pere*) that King Moshoeshe I owned was a gift from Morena Moorosi in the early 1830s. King Moshoeshe I named the first horse *pitsi ea haka* (an animal unknown to Basotho), because even the renowned doctor, Chapi, did not know what to name it. King Moshoeshe I is said to have asked Morena Moorosi to send somebody to teach him to ride it. From that time on, the Basotho began to own horses and eventually horses became the most popular mode of transport in Lesotho. Coplan (1992:26) indicates that the Basotho became renowned horse handlers and breeders. He goes on to point out that, with the first census (in about 1875), the number of horses in Lesotho outnumbered the human population.

Today one would witness hardly any important Sesotho cultural event where horses and their riders are absent. Horse riding is an adopted part of Sesotho culture, but one that has transformed the culture and given it some idioms, such as: *Lipere tsa re liha ka bo-morena* (we fell off the horses together with the chief). To prove that horses play an important role in the lives of the Basotho, there is a Sesotho proverb that goes, *Pitsi e khoptjoa e le maotomane* (a horse falls though it is four-legged), which means that to err is human. This proverb is presently part of the Sesotho language, which shows that horses are among the animals reared by the Basotho and as such influence their way of life. Also, when the Basotho have different opinions and views on a subject, they use the behaviour of horses to describe this diversity: *Pitsi ha di khomele 'moho* (horses do gallop together). Another important proverb is, *Lipere li ka lebanteng* (the horses are on the racecourse), which means that a great event, or a special competition with an unknown outcome, is about to be witnessed.

#### **2.5 Basotho music**

Basotho music has been influenced by the Basotho's experience of travelling to and from South African mines, and by their lives in the mine townships. In *In Township Tonight*, Coplan (1985; 2007) relates the origins of *lifela* from as far back as 1867, with the opening of the South African gold mines. He points

out that the conditions in the mining compounds prompted Basotho migrant workers to compose *lifela*. He contends that migrant workers used to sing *lifela* on their solitary journeys to and from the mines. Thus, the content of the *lifela* covers social problems (such as family life, economic issues and unemployment) that forced the Basotho to seek employment in the South African mines.

Coplan (1985; 2007) traces the origins of accordion music as far back as the 1920s – to the shebeens and squatter camps of Johannesburg. He points out that the popular instruments in those days were the concertina and the homemade drum. These instruments were accompanied by a variety of *lifela* from the audience, who participated in the dancing during the drinking sessions. The establishment of shebeens became one way of solving the problem of unemployment: through the illegal selling of liquor. Music was played in the shebeens as a way of attracting more customers and entertaining them, so as to speed up cash flow into the shebeen queens' pockets. Coplan further indicates that the music was played in the shebeens for the rough and sexy Basotho migrants, both men and women. He writes that according to numerous eyewitnesses, the *famo* (from *ho re, famo!*) - which means to open nostrils or to raise garments when displaying the genitals, was almost defiantly suggestive. He further observes that women made shaking and thrusting movements with their shoulders, hips and blossoms while lifting their flared skirts in an effort, perhaps to show their ass to Basotho men. The dancers wore no underwear but instead had painted rings around the whole area of their genitals, a ring they called 'stoplight'. Men, dancing alongside or seated against the walls, chose the women they wanted and took them into the back for intercourse (1985:98).

Coplan (1987:23-24) notes that, once at the mines, the poet regales his audience with hilarious and ironic narrations of the seamier side of urban life. Especially popular are amorous encounters with *matekatse* - camp followers of the Sotho migrant army. These women are in many ways the counterparts of the migrants whom it is their profession to entertain. Stubbornly independent, they compose their own songs of innocence and experience to the rhythm of *famo*. The songs are played on drums and accordions in the illegal bars of South Africa. Suffice it to say that in the amorous as well as poetic contests that spring up in shebeens, the women are quite often the victors.

Coplan (1985) relates the historical background to accordion music until the 1950s, when some of the recording companies began to show interest in

*famo* music. He points out that *famo* songs were performed by women with the purpose of matching the male's *lifela*; that is to say, women addressed their *famo* songs to men. The new variety of *famo*, which is accordion music, is sung by both men and women, with the majority of singers being men. In addition, Basotho accordion music no longer pays attention to the ill-treatment of miners or the poor living conditions experienced in the mines long ago. Nowadays, performances take place in clean and open public places – the normal venues where music performances are watched by all members of the public. Also, women no longer flare their skirts to expose their lack of underwear in order to attract men, but dress in acceptable attire. Nor is the music the preserve of (randy) miners and *matekatse* (immoral women).

Traditional Basotho music has been enriched by accordion music. Accordion music has become part of the cultural identity of the Basotho and is now accepted as respectable traditional music. It is meant to preserve the integrity, dignity and identity of the Basotho as a nation. Even though most of the artists are semi-literate, the music inspires both the literate and illiterate members of the community because it identifies them as Basotho. Again, the Basotho who attend the concerts or shows of different artists behave in morally acceptable ways, as compared to what has been described in times past. Also, the public attends these music concerts because they want see the artists in person and they like the music. They do not attend for sexual pleasure, as in former times.

The adjustment from *famo* to accordion music is evident. Although *famo* is described as nothing but the emotional response of demoralised African proletarians to a social environment (Coplan 1987:23-24), nowadays Basotho accordion music is also sung even by people who run their own businesses; that is to say, the educated and the uneducated alike. Although many artists resort to accordion music for financial reasons, they are not as immoral as in the 1950s. Accordion music is not restricted to shebeens; it is now a famous and popular music form through which artists entertain the public at different functions, such as weddings, graduation ceremonies, national official functions and festivals. They also hold commercial shows in halls where the public has to pay an entrance fee to watch them. The artists nowadays make a living out of accordion music.

Basotho accordion music is the nearest thing to contemporary Basotho national music. The Basotho regard it as dynamic Basotho traditional music because it changes with the times – for instance from *famo* to *focho* and



from *focho* to its current national status: '*mino oa Sesotho* (the music of Basotho) – and also as Sesotho traditional music (*'mino oa koriana*; accordion music). It is for these reasons, amongst many, that Basotho accordion music is one music genre that is currently viewed as traditional Basotho music, even though some foreign instruments are being used. This is because accordion music has been modified and adapted to modern times. Furthermore, the music meets the new challenges and expectations of the modern society in Lesotho. The Basotho in Lesotho have accepted that their culture is not static, but that it changes with time. The feeling amongst the Basotho is that accordion music is part of Basotho oral literature, because it addresses social, economic and political issues. For that reason, then, accordion music is regarded as a reservoir of Basotho customs, beliefs and life experiences, and hence its popularity among the Basotho.

## 2. Conclusion

We have seen in this study how the cultural identity of the Basotho has coped, adjusted, adapted and transformed in such a way that it has not lost its structure; instead, it “maintains and develops its identity in a dynamic way” (Cilliers 2010:15). In this regard, we can see the environment of the Basotho as being a dynamic and complex system. Because identity as a complex system functions in an environment, it is has the capacity to be transformed. Cilliers points out that the “process of transformation can be fruitfully understood through the notion of deconstruction”, not ‘deconstruction’ as the “destruction of structure, but as the replacement of one structure with another, which can be deconstructed” (Cilliers 2010:15).

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