Basotho and the Expérience of Death, Dying, and Mourning in the South African Mine Compounds, 1890-1940

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Abstract
This paper, using the case of Basotho of modern Lesotho, examines the experience of death, dying and mourning in the South African mining compounds during the period 1890 to 1940. The paper not only shows how the mine and government authorities treated African mineworkers as nothing more than a source of cheap labour, but also discusses the various strategies deployed by these mineworkers to assert their humanity. It is argued that these "invisible" struggles by the mineworkers to accord their dead customary respect, in some way, even challenged the very institutions of control on the mines.

Résumé
Les Basotho et l'expérience de la mort, du deuil et des rites funéraires dans les concessions minières sud-africaines, 1890-1940. — Cet article, à partir de l'exemple de la région du Basotho au Lesotho, étudie l'expérience de la mort et du deuil dans les concessions minières sud-africaines, au cours de la période 1850-1940. Il ne concerne pas uniquement la façon dont la direction des mines et les autorités gouvernementales traitaient les mineurs uniquement en tant que source de travail bon marché mais examine aussi les différentes stratégies utilisées par ces derniers pour prouver leur humanité. On essaye de démontrer que les luttes « invisibles » menées par ces mineurs dans le cadre de l'observance des coutumes mortuaires ont, dans une certaine mesure, menacé le système de pouvoir prévalant dans les mines.
The discovery of diamonds (in Kimberley) and, later, gold (on the Witwatersrand or the Rand) in South Africa in the latter half of the 19th century, was a significant turning point in the social and economic history of the southern African region. This development resulted, among others, in the acceleration of the process of land dispossession (especially in the 1870s)—one of the strategies of the British imperial government which intended to undermine the self-sufficiency of African rural homesteads. Important for the purpose of this study, however, was the engendering of the system of labour migrancy during this phase of “primitive accumulation”, for the purpose of ensuring a reliable supply of cheap African labour for the mines. Consequently, mine managements constructed compounds, an institution developed on the diamond mines, in the 1880s, to house and control African migrant workers.

The social history of these compounds (or hostels) has been well covered in numerous studies, and does not need to be repeated here. Nor is there any need to discuss African mortality from mine-related diseases, such as pneumonia, tuberculosis (TB) and silicosis (Packard 1989; Smith 1993: 124-68; Katz 1994; Crush et al. 1991: 41-45; Leger 1992). What has not been done effectively, however, at least in the migrant labour literature pertaining to southern Africa, is to look at various ways that death and grief were experienced by African mineworkers. The issue of death tends to feature in the migrant labour literature in question generally in discussions of mortality and morbidity from mine occupational diseases and accidents, as well as in relation to mutual aid

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associations that African miners formed in the compounds (see Delius 1989: 589; Van Onselen 1976: 198). There is, however, a need to focus on the experience of death, dying and mourning on the mines, not least because the treatment of Africans corpses by the mine and city council authorities was seen simply as a problem of waste disposal within an urban setting. This was consistent with the mine management’s attitude which not only subjugated the lives of African miners to the imperatives of capital accumulation, but also regarded the latter as “things” and “objects” whose value was nothing more than providing labour. That Africans had rituals pertaining to the disposal of the dead and mourning like any people was of no concern to these authorities.

This study, using the case of Basotho of modern Lesotho (formerly Basutoland), attempts to address this lacunae in the migrant labour literature within a conceptual framework which sees the human body as an inseparable part of the social space. The natural and cultural domains are not only dialectically related, but also constantly interpenetrate each other. The human body is not simply a biological entity, but also represents history, memories, and power; hence cases of disputes over the possession and control of the body of the deceased are not unknown (see Cohen & Odhiambo 1992; Dennie 1992).

Death and Mourning

The mourning for the dead is a universal practice which is but mediated by religious and cultural practices in different societies. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists as well as social historians, have found that there exist, in almost all societies, not only the practice of grief for the dead, but also mortuary rites (see Owen et al. 1994; Stroebe & Stroebe 1994; Weizman & Kamm 1987). The Basotho attitude towards death, dying and mourning, is, for its part, consistent with what is practised in other parts of Africa. African attitudes towards death and mortuary rites are based on the practice of ancestor worship and the belief in the existence of evil whose agents are witches. Africans also distinguish between “appropriate” or “good” death which results from normal causes such as age, and “inappropriate” or “bad” death which may be caused by an unexpected occurrence such as an accident. But death does not result in the annihilation of the individual or his/her identity, but in graduation to another form of life. Those who die leave the world of the living to become ancestors who, it is believed, are not distant like God, but partake in mundane affairs; bringing luck when they are happy, and misfortune when angered. Hence in times of misfortune, ritual offerings are per-

2. Basotho, sing.: Mosotho; language: Sesotho.
3. For a critical review of the literature on the body, see Porter (1991).
4. For a cross-cultural study of this phenomenon, see Bradbury (1993).
formed to appease ancestors. But misfortune can also be the work of evil agents, hence diviners are commonly consulted for “strength” or bringing “luck” (see Opoku 1989).

Indeed, attitudes towards death, and mortuary rites themselves, are in no way static. Formerly, Basotho, like their Bantu-speaking neighbours, buried their dead in a squatting position. Death was announced by women with a piercing cry: as people gathered to join in the mourning and view the corpse, preparation for internment—*i.e.* the washing of the body and the digging of the grave—would commence. Every effort was made not to leave the corpse alone in order to keep witches away. During the burial, which took place as soon as possible, the body would be laid in the grave, seed (for sowing) and grass (for building a dwelling) placed next to the deceased for his/her next life. The bereaved and those who attended the funeral would then be ritually cleansed, as death was regarded as a dark shadow cast upon the living because of the loss it brought. The deceased’s dwelling would also be destroyed to free his/her spirit. As part of the ritual process and a sign of mourning, relatives of the deceased would be shaved on the head. For their part, the widow and orphans would wear a cord of plaited grass around their heads, and replace their copper and glass necklaces with metal beads. After several months, the deceased’s maternal uncle would then terminate the mourning period by leading in the performance of a ritual which cleansed the family and the belongings of the deceased. These practices persisted among Basotho through the turn of the century (see Eiselen 1950; Willoughby 1928: 1-89; Ashton 1967: 100-119; Ellenberger 1912: 237-304).

By the 1930s, largely due to century-long missionary and colonial influences as well as the worsening economic situation in Basutoland itself, not only had Basotho attitudes towards death changed, but the mortuary rites themselves had been greatly altered. According to Hugh Ashton’s 1930s anthropological findings, wailing was now less important, mourners making every effort to control their emotions. Men would even chat and joke during the internment. Moreover, many families, including “heathens”, would invariably invite a Christian missionary or

5. **Weizman & Kamm** (1987: 25) underscore the therapeutic significance of “verifying” the dead: “It is important for the bereaved to make contact with the deceased by staying with the loved one for a while after the death or viewing the body. It is an important first step towards the intellectual and eventual emotional acceptance of the death”.

6. According to **Opoku** (1989: 22); “Relatives of the deceased [in African societies] customarily shave off their hair as a symbol of separation from one of their members. The new hair that grows back indicates the belief that death does not destroy life and that life continues to spring up”.

7. According to **Weizman & Kamm** (1987: 24), “During the last half-century people have become more controlled [in their expression of grief] across all cultural groups”. This change is, of course, largely due to industrialisation and urbanisation, as well as to advances in medical knowledge.
evangelist to lead the funeral with a sermon. The placing of the body in the squatting position was also gradually giving way to the European practice of laying the body horizontal to the ground. Coffins were also gaining increasing use, especially among the better-off families. But deviners’ powers were sought to protect the grave after the internment—a practice which was not noted by early observers. Needless to add that while in the past graves possessed no special and communal space, with burial generally taking place in the cattle-kraal, the hut of the deceased or in the forest, by this period cemeteries, introduced by missionaries, were now an accepted part of the Basotho landscape. And unlike in the past when walking over what was known to be a grave would require one to undergo a special purification ritual, no special attention was now being given to the abode of the dead, with people sitting about in the cemeteries without any fear. The relatives of the deceased continued to shave their head, but the wearing of a strip of black cloth, a practice which continues to this day, was gradually replacing plaited grass as a sign of mourning (Ashton 1967: 100-119).

However, in spite of these changes in mortuary rites and attitudes towards death, two important death-related aspects remained. Death and the burial of the deceased remained a communal affair which evoked a sense of group solidarity. Secondly, great importance was still attached to the internment of the body of the deceased. Theoretically, Basotho ensured that their dead, even those who fell in battle, were buried, ideally at home, in order to prevent their spirit from wandering about and witches from mutilating the corpse for their evil purpose. Hence, as the missionary W. C. Willoughby (1928: 29-31) observed in the 1920s, many African societies had a customary provision for a “fictional” burial in case the body of the deceased failed to reach his/her home. The family affected would wait until the death of the person concerned was confirmed, and then proceed to perform a ritual for the “burial” of the belongings of the deceased. Mourning would follow the customary process. It is, therefore, in this context that migrant labour played a significant role in influencing the Basotho attitude towards death, not least because the death of a migrant was also the loss of a breadwinner. Furthermore, not only was the place of internment (the town) spatially separate and distant from the close relatives of the deceased (especially the widow and young orphans), but on the mines, as shown below, no significant place was accorded to the respect of the dead and mortuary rites.

Migrants and Death

Basotho men associated going to South Africa’s mines with death and danger. As the following song-poem (recorded in the 1980s) by an experienced Mosotho migrant indicates, going to the mines not only
required one to “strengthen” himself with medicine but the migrant experience itself involved a ceaseless fight against misfortune, death, and witchcraft:

“Death does not choose; famine chooses.
I was going to my mother quietly:
‘Mother, take a letter for me,
I am going to DeBeers (mines).
Scarify me with *getella pele*
[‘finish first’ medicine],
So that these multitudes should follow my lead.’
Other men’s villages are not entered freely,
Lad, the day I’m going, I mount to ride away,
A woman of witchcraft was already hard at work;
I saw her early going to the graveyard,
She puts on a string skirt fastened with knots,
She takes the arm of the corpse and waves it,
A mouthful of blood, she spits into the air,
She says, ‘Men gone to DeBeers.
They can come home dead from the mines.’
To me, Child of Rakhal
I am not dead; even now I still live,
I am a wanderer of the mines; Sootho” (Coplan 1995: 33).

Indeed, many Basotho attributed misfortune on the mines to the anger of ancestors or the evil manoeuvres of witches. One Paris Evangelical Society missionary observed in the 1940s: “There are still vast realms of thought to conquer in evangelizing the Basuto on the Rand, they still bear their forefathers’ beliefs of old; witchcraft, ancestral spirits, and the like. If an accident befalls a young man in the shafts underground, he believes that his great-grandfathers are angry with him, and are to be appeased. Such men, the mission on the Rand has tried to win over, but apparently in vain” (Selikane 1949: 11).

And because of the high mortality rate on the mines as well as the obvious negligence of the mine bosses, some Basotho migrants were even convinced that Whites had a hand in all this. One informant remarked: “At the mines? Truly speaking, Whites have long been aware of this [...] when you are attested, when you leave, you are measured; a coffin already being prepared for you.” What also made matters worse was the fact that African migrants were dispossessed of their dead who were taken to the mine morgue. This practice laid the basis for the generation and propagation of the belief that white people, just like witches, used African body parts for medicinal purposes. In 1893 at a mine in Kimberley, for example, one Mosotho reacted against what he thought to be the mutilation of the bodies:

8. A common practice in Lesotho in the 1930s was to scarify departing migrants around one of the eyes; see DIETERLEN (1930: 24).
9. Interview with Solomon Mokoaleli, born 1914.
There was one person of the Nguaketsi who was sick for fourteen days and died on the fifteenth. The same day that he passed away I requested the owners of the Compound to allow me to bury him, and they agreed, asking me to come the following day. The following morning I went there at 7 o'clock and found the deceased still there. I waited until 8 o'clock. At 8 pm I saw some black men working here walk past me. I asked them where they were going to. They were carrying a bucket. They were going to the morgue. Then when I peeped through a small opening on the door, I saw them piercing that corpse on the chest, even draining the blood. They did not cut out any flesh from the body. I used to hear in the past that Whites flay people, I did not believe it but today now do.

(‘Leselinyana la Lesotho, 1 March 1893).

Not surprisingly, the Sesotho word for “operation room/theatre” is madimong (“the place of cannibals”).

Nonetheless Basotho migrants developed a sophisticated approach which allowed them to continue going to the mines despite the fears and anxiety they had. This approach took the form of the koata strategy, which was characterised by unruliness and abusiveness. Likoata insulted people, including women and train officials; they sang, whistled, and shouted. What was initially a way of coping with going to the mines became an established form of behaviour which was also reinforced by certain stereotypes. Young migrants were also socialised into this behaviour, thus passing over the koata pattern of behaviour to other generations.

Koata behaviour was linked to the association by many Basotho of South Africa with violence, exploitation, oppression, suffering and hatred; or, as they metaphorically put it, with “cannibals.” “At the mines”. David Coplan (1994: 7) points out in his anthropological study of the consciousness of contemporary Basotho migrants, “‘cannibal’ [...] is a metaphor both for the earth itself, which consumes the miners in its belly, and for overeager black team leaders (boss boys) and white miners, who push black workers to the point of exhaustion in their gluttony for power and higher pay”. Crossing the Caledon River which separates Lesotho from South Africa, was seen as entering not only the domain of “cannibals”, Satan or Sodom, but also the place of adventure. South Africa was seen as a “profane” flatland as a way of comparing it with the “pure” and beautiful mountainous landscape of Lesotho. Basotho working in the mines were compared to rats boring the “holes” under the supervision of white bosses, while those at home were seen as jovial monkeys in control of their destiny. This is one of the central themes in the Basotho songs collected by Hugh Tracey (1959), and more recently by Coplan (1994).

10. Koata (pl. likoata, “squad”) was a derogatory term which was used to refer to a “squad” of mine recruits.

11. Not is this metaphorical association of mines with “cannibals” peculiar to Basotho. For other cases see, for example, COMAROFF & COMAROFF (1992: 156); NASH (1979); TAUSIG (1980).
Dunbar Moodie’s students (Moodie & Ndatshe 1994: 13), as well as in novels inspired by the migrant experience (see Shanafelt 1988; Majara 1972; Matlosa 1950). For this reason, and no less because of the fact that the body of deceased was buried away from home, going to the mines was associated with going to war or on a cattle-raiding expedition (Maloka 1995: 160-170). Just like with war or cattle-raiding, many migrants brought home the booty (i.e. money and goods); while others failed to return home due to “inappropriate” death.

The Sick and Deceased

The body of the deceased was central to the mortuary rites; the bereaved also had to view it in order to come to terms with the loss. Indeed, the mining companies repatriated sick African miners in order to transfer the cost of caring for the sick from themselves to families in the rural areas. But Basotho miners themselves also insisted on being repatriated, preferring to die at home for reasons discussed above. It was also not uncommon for Basotho chiefs to apply for the return of their “boys” on hearing that they were sick. Miners commonly wrote letters to chiefs and families reporting the illness of a fellow countryman. In February 1905, for example, Chief Api Lerotholi wrote to Ernest Mabille, a Frenchman who used to work as a missionary in Lesotho, asking him to repatriate eight Basotho working at Knights Central Gold Mine who had been sick for some months. He appealed to Mabille to do everything possible as he was prepared to refund him for the cost incurred. The British Resident Commissioner and districts’ correspondence files in the government archives in Lesotho are full of requests of this nature addressed to the mines, labour agents and the Native Affairs Department (NAD) officials. The usual procedure was for a concerned father, wife or any member of the family, to approach the local chief or Assistant Commissioner, or even the Paramount Chief and the Resident Commissioner, and ask for the return of their son, husband, or brother. Sometimes mine authorities would claim that the men being sought were not sick but just “loaing”.13

12. Despite the Basotho customary requirement that those who fell in battle should be buried and, if possible, at home, it was generally accepted that this was not always possible. Hence the song: “We, men, we are the oxen of the vultures / We are cattle to be shared by the vultures / To be devoured by carrion crows in the veld”; see Ashton (1967: 104).

13. Paragraph is based on Lesotho National Archives (henceforth LNA), S7/7/34, A. Lerotholi to E. Mabille, 14 Feb. 1905; S7/4/4, Compound Manager (Premier Mine) to Resident Commissioner (henceforth RC), 23 Aug. 1907; S7/1/3/25, Pesa to Assistant Commissioner (henceforth AC) (Mafeteng), 1 May 1910; LNA, AC Maseru, Letters Out (unnumbered), AC to Director of Native labour (henceforth DNL), 7 Feb. 1911; LNA, MF 3/1/9, Chief Bereng to AC (Mafeteng), 12 Aug. 1928.
The return of the sick was one of the major concerns raised at the first sitting of the Basutoland National Council of chiefs in 1903. Chiefs wanted the sick to be returned in the company of one of their kinsmen in order to minimise the chance of death on the way. The head of the NAD, Godfrey Lagden, responded:

"The case of men who are very ill and fearing death desiring to return home though in bad condition has presented many difficulties. Both the doctors and medical attendants and even the friends of the sick men have at times failed to deter them from leaving when they ought not to leave. The superstitious dislike of dying and being buried away from home has not been overcome and it is doubtful whether for a long time it can be overcome. The various mines have been approached by me upon the subject of allowing in such cases a friend to accompany a sick man. That however will not obliterate the risks of death on the road to those who start in extremes. I do not think it can now be alleged that any man dies from lack of reasonable attention." 14

Notwithstanding his racist and Eurocentric stereotypes, Lagden was partly correct. What he nonetheless failed to address was the chiefs' request that efforts be made to minimise the death of their men on their way to colonial Lesotho.

However, as the body of the deceased was not repatriated home, his belongings, essential to the practice of a "fictional" burial, became an issue. It is unclear how Basotho conducted their "fictional" burial, but it is likely that their practice was similar to what was observed among the Shangaan—a people who were the largest single source of African labour for the gold mines until very recently—at the turn of the century: "Should a [Shangaan] man have died far away from home, in Johannesburg for instance, no ceremony will take place before the news is thoroughly confirmed. Then all the relatives assemble. A grave is dug and all his mats and clothing are buried in it. The objects which he was using every day, which have been soiled by the exudations from his body, are himself. A sacrifice will be made over the grave" (cited in Willoughby 1928: 30).

Nevertheless, the NAD commonly sent the belongings of the deceased, especially money, back to their families, but regarded clothes as not "saleable". Basotho miners, in their response to this inhuman treatment, developed their own system. "Home-boys", friends or relatives, would take the belongings of the dead to their families. Those who were literate wrote letters to inform the families directly, or indirectly through Sesotho newspapers. If no one was in a position to write, the family was informed when the belongings were taken home. At the Knights Deep, C. Rampa, a literate Mosotho miner, regularly sent the belongings of the deceased to their families via Colonel Maitland Brown, the head of the Native

Recruiting Corporation\textsuperscript{15} (NRC) in Maseru (in Lesotho). He would write to the family concerned, even sending a copy of the letter to the Sesotho newspapers, urging them to fetch the belongings of their child. In one instance, he appealed to a certain family to respond and not abandon their child (\textit{Leselinyana}, 9 Feb. 1917; 8 Dec. 1916). There was nonetheless the danger of people falsely claiming to be relatives of the deceased, wanting to be given the belongings. There was no system of monitoring this; everything depended on the honesty of those concerned.

Nor was the treatment of the dead itself not a disputed issue. As early as January 1899, in response to protests from white residents, the Johannesburg City Council complained to the Chamber of Mines about the way the corpses of African miners were being transported. “The corpses are in most cases nearly uncovered and are generally transported on open carts”,\textsuperscript{16} the City Council observed. The Chamber agreed that in future corpses would no longer be conveyed along public roads; that graves would be dug deeper; and that, where possible, “the natives [would be] buried on the most isolated portion of the [mine] property”.\textsuperscript{17} In April of the same year, however, the City Council proposed that a crematorium for Africans be created: “This is rendered more important by the fact that the present burial ground will shortly be filled up and the Town Council has no other available space at its disposal”.\textsuperscript{18} But the Chamber opposed the idea on the grounds that this would interfere with Africans’ “tribal customs”, and not least because it might lead to a mass exodus of African labour.

With the death toll of African miners from disease and accidents extremely high at the turn of the century, the Chamber was obliged to approach municipal councils along the Witwatersrand to consider establishing cemeteries for black workers. This process began in 1904, and by 1905 the Johannesburg and Springs councils had adopted guidelines which were forwarded to the government for approval. In November 1906, regulations permitting the creation of cemeteries on mine property were gazetted. \textit{Inter alia}, they specified that the site should not affect existing ones, and that Chinese and African labourers were to be buried at separate sites; bodies could neither be cremated nor exhumed; graves were to be a minimum depth of four feet; and corpses were to be covered soon after being laid in the grave. Finally, death registers were to be kept by each mine, stating the name, “race” and “nationality”, address of the deceased, and the cause of death. It was taken for granted that the corpses would be buried without coffins.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} This organisation was formed by the mine bosses in 1912 for the recruitment of African labour.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Chamber of Mines Annual Report} (henceforth \textit{CMAR}), 1899, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 135-137; and \textit{CMAR}, 1905, p. 27.
Yet among the issues raised with the Native Grievances Commission of 1913, was the complaint that the mines were not supplying the deceased African employees with coffins. Graves, moreover, were shallow. As far as the latter complaint was concerned, H. O. Buckle, the chairman of the Commission, recommended that mine cemeteries should be respected and fenced. But he rejected the demand for coffins because the "native custom" of using blankets had to be "respected". According to him, only a "minority" of Africans required coffins.

The demand for coffins was continually raised with the government and the Chamber, but was invariably dismissed out of respect for "native custom". Yet when African families objected in 1913 to autopsies being conducted on the bodies of their deceased, following the establishment of the South African Institute for Medical Research, their complaints were dismissed "in the interest of research". It was not considered that this also interfered with "native custom", because, as shown above, Africans generally believed that the dead or their organs could be used by witches in their craft. What is clear, therefore, is that the reason why African miners were not offered coffins was because of the costs that the mines would incur, and not some concern with "native custom". This struggle around the provision of coffins was only resolved by the amendment of the Compensation Act in 1941 which required the mines to contribute towards funeral costs. However, what became an issue then was the repatriation of the deceased rather than burying them on the mines (Knight 1984).

Generally, many Basotho miners were not satisfied with the manner in which their dead were treated on the mines. According to one informant: "You are just buried—the Johannesburg way, not according to our custom." Another informant even exclaimed: "Nothing was done! That is why you will find the Shangaan putting together their shoes, different type of clothes [...] put on top of the grave there". After an accident, bodies were taken to the mine morgue, while graves were prepared by hired diggers or "home-boys" released from duty. The burial was conducted after a day or so by "home-boys" released for that purpose. This contrasted sharply with the respect accorded the dead in colonial Lesotho itself.

With a coffin costing some £1 5s 6d or £3 in the mid-1910s, depending on the quality of wood and make, Basotho workers then helped each other and struggled to find space for treating their dead in accordance with

20. This Commission was established following the outbreak of massive strike action on the Witwatersrand.
22. CMAR, 1913, p. 21.
23. Interview with Solomon Mosunyana, born 1913.
24. Interview with Mokopoi Mokopoi, born 1914.
custom. The fate of one Mosotho who fell sick at the Premier Mine was described in the following terms:

“He was sent to the Native Hospital, he remained there but not mentioning the pain in his chest. He was now breathing with difficulty. On 28 March 1917, at 3.30 pm, he passed away. On the 29th, at 5.30, he was buried. Before he was buried, the son of a chief, Phate Letsie, with his counsellors, arranged to get a coffin for the deceased. When they had agreed, they informed the [Basotho] nation, asking for contributions. The response was good; so and so teke [three-penny piece], so and so sixpence, and so forth. When put together, totalled £10 1s 8d. A coffin was purchased for £3. One pound was used to serve food to those who attended the funeral. The balance was £6 1s 8d” (Leselinyana, 29 May 1917).

In one instance, at the West Rand Consolidated Gold Mine in February 1912, Basotho workers led by the son of a chief managed to raise enough money from their kinsmen to purchase a coffin and clothes for deceased miners. In another instance, one of the Basotho chiefs at the Jagersfontein diamond mine (in the Orange Free State) called a *pitso* (a popular assembly) in March 1917 where it was agreed that a fund be established to purchase coffins in the case of death and to help the sick return home; each Mosotho was to contribute three pence every month. Collections were also made in order to send money to the family of the deceased at home. Basotho miners were not alone in this practice; other African miners also established mutual aid associations (Delius 1989: 586; Van Onselen 1976: 198).

The role of the church, especially the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, once it had established itself on the Witwatersrand in 1922 to evangelise among Basotho, was also important. Following a skip accident at Randfontein Gold Mine Estates in June 1939:

“Twenty-three people were retrieved as corpses, plus one white person: all twenty-four casualties. From these corpses the evangelist of the Church of France [the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society], Elias ‘Moleli, tried this servant of God to look for the Christians without finding a single one. It was sad to see that among those many, none had accepted God. [...] The corpses were then taken to the cemetery. It is a big yard. Arriving, they were put down. Mr Elias ‘Moleli, of the Church of France and a Wesleyan priest [...] prayed for the corpses (Leselinyana, 19 July 1939).

The time and day of funerals all affected attendance which was likely to be higher if the cause of death had been a “faction fight” or a serious accident. Numbers fluctuated, from as low as seven and eleven people;


26. For this history of the work of this missionary society among Basotho miners, see Maloka (1994).
while during one funeral in Springs, thirty-three women and fifty-seven men attended (ibid. 29 May 1917: 19 July 1939). During one particular funeral at the Knights Deep Gold Mine in March 1917, fourteen white boys and seven girls approached those attending to inquire about the cause of death and stayed for the whole service (ibid., 6 April 1917).

But establishing mutual aid associations and providing coffins for dead compatriots, could not in themselves suffice to help Basotho men cope with death and the reality of mine work. Equally important was how these men represented mine-related death; how they interpreted and rationalised death on the mines. Their perception of mine accidents is one area which best reveal the meaning they attached to this form of danger and “inappropriate” death.

Mine Accidents

Goldmine managements’ obsession with keeping down the cost of African labour was reflected, among others, in the neglect of occupational safety. Major goldmine accidents during the period covered in this study were caused by rockfalls and rockbursts; explosives; trucks and tramways; the cage and skip that transported workers and ore between underground and the surface; and the high risk involved in shaft-sinking operations (Smith 1993: 179). Neglect, fatigue, lack of experience and training, poor supervision, and “high speed” to increase profitability, also contributed to accidents (Simons 1961). As will be shown later, Sesotho newspapers regularly published letters from Basotho miners describing accidents. Such reports narrated the incident, gave the names of the deceased (if Basotho) and of the village and that of the chief where the deceased were from, and concluded by conveying condolences to the affected families. These reports are particularly valuable to scholars because they show the reaction and attitudes of Basotho miners to accidents, and how they perceived and understood them.

Rockfalls and rockbursts were directly linked to deep-level mining and the temperature and humidity underground. The deeper the mines, the more likely were rockfalls and rockbursts. Together, they accounted for most of the deaths resulting from gold mine accidents; twenty-six percent of the total accidents in 1903, thirty-two percent in 1919, thirty-eight percent in 1929, and forty-two percent in 1939. This rising trend was a result of both the expansion of the mining after the abandonment of the gold standard in 1932, and the fact that mines were getting deeper (Smith 1993: 180). Such accidents could result in many deaths, depending on the number of workers underground at the time of the rockburst or fall. The bodies of miners were frequently covered by tons of rocks for days or weeks. According to one informant: “Rocks would be removed [. . .] Khele, so many rocks. . .! In the evening and the following day, people
were still being retrieved."  

After a rockfall accident at City Deep Gold Mine in February 1915, one Masotho miner lamented: "Oh, what a loss even though God spared the nation, this accident befalling only two [miners]. The latter have not yet been found, and it looks like they will be retrieved after a long time because the rocks have fallen with everything; huge trees, thick irons, big poms" (Leselinyana, 19 Feb. 1915).

Between 1903 and 1919, death from explosives came second after rockfalls and rockbursts. These accidents could happen during charging, or result from unexploded explosives and poor supervision of blasting operations. In 1911 a Masotho worker wrote: "Dynamite has just killed one young Masotho man while he was with his boss under the mine of Driefontein [...]. This young man was carrying a candle, as they are used underground, and the dynamite he was carrying caught the light, he tried to extinguish it, the boss then told him to drop it, he threw it to the floor, and stepped over it. His boss kept on saying: 'Escape, leave it!'; but he did not move; it then exploded, breaking his legs and arms, and killed him" (ibid., 10 June 1911).

Another Masotho exclaimed after an accident in August 1911 at the City Deep: "Such accidents are stirring to be watched; especially those of the dynamite, because they really damage a person, the new arrivals having difficulty of going underground after seeing the victim..." (ibid., 7 Dec. 1911). From the 1920s onwards, however, accidents due to explosives declined in number once a new type of explosive was introduced and improvements were made to blasting methods (Smith 1993: 187).

The trucks used for transporting broken ore, known to Basotho workers as likokopane ("cocopan"), often collided with one another, sometimes the speed at which they traveled was badly controlled. Accidents from such causes were rarely fatal, though the transportation of workers between the surface and underground in the cage or skip also involved risk; the rope could break, or its controller make a serious mistake. Fatal accidents involving cages invariably involved a significant number of miners in any one incident. This was one of the aspects of life on the mines that new recruits were warned against; this formed a key part of their socialisation and initiation. Stimela Jingoes’ experience on arrival at Langlaagte Block B Gold Mine in 1916 is worth citing at length:

"I had been told by another cousin, Mokoena, ‘You take care when you first go underground. There will be old-timers in the cage with you, the cage that takes you down to the level where you will work, and they are sure to try to frighten you. They will say a lot of things. Try not to scare easily’. I felt prepared for whatever underground held in store. The next morning a whole batch of us newcomers waited at the top of the shaft. At first we saw only a rope turning,

27. Interview with Phomolo Matsabisa, born 1914.
and then suddenly the cage appeared from out of the mine. It opened. ‘Go on! Get in! Get in, you new ones!’ Mokoena was right. There were old-timers waiting for us in the cage. The door closed, and a bell signalled that we were ready to lower away. That signal must have been rung in a certain way to inform the controller that there were new ones in the cage, for at once the cage shot straight up. It stopped dead. Then it fell like a stone. We gaped at each other, with eyes like pebbles, our stomachs heaving.

‘Speak, boy! Who’s your love?’ ‘If you don’t tell, the rope will split.’ ‘We’ll all die.’ ‘I’ll tell you. Stop!’ ‘Talk up!’ ‘Who’s your mother’s lover?’ ‘How many sheep did you steal at home?’ ‘We don’t want to die, Oh God!’ ‘Who’s your lover?’ ‘Yes! Yes! I stole them. Yes. Please, please. Stop!’ The questions came so fast, from all sides, that none of us could think straight. I clutched at the thought of Mokoena. ‘Try not to scare easily.’ *I need to start talking*, I told myself. *If I close my mouth firmly.* How those others babbled. They were confessing to the most dreadful deeds. The truth must be spoken: I was terrified.

‘You! You quiet youngster! You’re cocky, eh?’ ‘You think we’re playing a game here? If we’re not all killed here when the rope snaps, you’ll be taught manners!’ ‘Molimo [God]. We’re dying.’ As the cage plunged down, it grew dark as night. At last it stopped. We were all panting, but we were alive, and from there we went to our various stations to work.” (Jingoes 1976: 64).

The nature of shaft-sinking and the speed with which the operation was executed also put workers at great risk. Jack Simons (1961: 42) wrote in 1961 at the time the Orange Free State gold mines were expanding: “Relative neglect often occurs also in shaft-sinking and development, usually the most hazardous stage in mining. Partly for this reason the Orange Free State gold mines have an annual accident death rate of 3 to 4 per 1,000 workers, which is similar to the incidence on the Witwatersrand fifty years ago”. Yet Basotho miners rationalised their concentration in this dangerous work by appealing to their heroic history, strength and capacity for hard work (Maloka 1995: 106; Guy & Thabane 1988).

Accidents in the skips, on trucks, rockfalls and rockbursts, even the collapse of shafts, were among the accidents most frequently reported by Basotho miners in Sesotho newspapers. But it was common for miners to have experienced numerous accidents by the end of their mine careers. An example was that of Moloantoa Sekaja: “On 17 January 1917, an accident befell a young man called Moloantoa Sekaja [...]. A rock fell [...], as he was a foreman underground [...]. that rock broke his right hand. This was at one of the mines of Knights’ Deep known as Robertson Shaft. That Moloantoa once broke his left arm while working at the Premier Mine. Now he is a cripple, as those arms, even though not amputated, will no longer do any heavy work. He has been here on the Rand for a very long time. At the moment, he is still at the hospital. May his family know this” (Leselinyana, 16 Feb, 1917).

Accidents on any one mine also tended to be more frequent than the majority of mine reports admitted. For example, on the 23rd of May 1917, a Pedi was run over by a truck at 11.15 am at a work site called Number Three at the Premier Mine (Transvaal) Diamond Mine. At
11.45 am falling debris closed part of Number Four, slightly injuring two Pedi and a Mosotho. At 4 pm Number One also experienced a rockfall, killing a Pedi and a Mosotho, and seriously injuring four other miners. At 4.40 pm a Mosotho was struck by a lump of rock at Number Four, injuring him on the leg. The following day another Mosotho was struck by a truck on the thigh, tearing off his skin (ibid., 8 June 1917).

Although mortality from accidents decreased from the 1920s onwards, the number of injuries increased largely due to measures taken by the Prevention of Accidents Committee, first established in 1913, and its four sub-committees. Safety measures were popularised through the organisation of competitions among workers and between mines, and first aid schools and underground rescue teams were set up. The medium for such campaigns included posters and advertisements in *fanakalo*, the mine *lingua franca*, and films (Simons, 1961: 50; Chamber of Mines 1953). However, the death of 177 workers in the Kinross coal mine disaster in 1986, and of 104 miners at Vaal Reefs Gold Mine in May 1995, clearly indicate that occupational safety still remains a crucial issue on the mines. Even in the 1990s, an average of 1.5 per 1,000 workers die annually from gold mine accidents, and a further 26 per 1,000 suffer injuries (Cape Times, 22 May 1995, 18 May 1995; Leger 1987).

The response of Basotho workers to mine accidents usually assumed two forms. In some instances they resorted to strike action, refusing to work until the cause of the accident was attended to. This was the case at the Main Reef Gold Mine in February 1911 when eight Basotho and two Whites died in a skip accident. Ten days later a similar accident killed another miner. The following day Basotho miners refused to go out on their shift, and the compound manager called in the NAD inspector to intervene. Represented by Chief Foso Majara, the Basotho workers indicated that they were unwilling to work until the skip was repaired. Majara even selected a group of men to verify that the repairs had been done. When the mine engineer eventually arrived and demonstrated that the repair had at last been done, the Basotho miners agreed to return to work the following day (*Naledi ea Lesotho*, 28 Feb. 1911).

The second response, actually the most common one, was linked to the *koata* strategy of likening labour migrancy to a cattle-raiding expedition and war, as well as of representing South Africa as a “cannibal”. Thus mine accidents were seen as an integral aspect of mine work. In 1911, a Mosotho miner at City Deep encouraged his countrymen to come to the mines: “But do not be afraid, my fellow brothers, money is little [here], they [cattle] are not captured with ease. Rise up, let us help our elders. We are really tired of simply saying: ‘Father, I have fallen for so and so’s daughter’. Join so that we may drive them [the cattle]!” (*Leselinyana*, 19 Oct. 1911). After a serious mine accident in 1928 which killed three miners and injured another seven (including five Basotho), one Mosotho concluded his letter: “It is really true that the cattle are captured with
great risk" (ibid., 9 March 1928). This comparison of mine work to cattle-raiding not only reflected the role of bohali ("bridewealth") in pushing men out to the mines, but also made it easier for at least some Basotho to continue going to the mines, and in large numbers, despite the dangers that were involved.

Similarly, Christian converts used biblical equivalents of the cattle-raiding metaphor. After an explosion of dynamite, at the Premier Diamond Mine in October 1912, had killed two miners and injured another three, one Mosotho worker commented in his report: “We on the mine live daily on the verge of death, there is nowhere where people are not dying on this earth, even Jesus Christ said: ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’ (Matthew 6:34)” (ibid., 5 Dec. 1912). “Evil” was translated as “risk, danger” in the Sesotho bible that this miner quoted. When two Basotho miners were trapped under rubble following a rockfall accident at the City Deep, their parents were consoled as follows: “Let us mourn with the parents of these children, who thought their children were here to work, while God was expecting them to leave because their time had arrived” (ibid., 19 Feb. 1915). In January 1917, a falling rock smashed the face of a Mosotho, and this was accepted: “This young man, even though he is now injured, it is acceptable, because he was not lying on his stomach in the field nor did he collapse on his way from beer-drinking; he was just fulfilling this law: ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread’ (Gen.3:19)” (ibid., 16 Feb. 1917).

Of course, the problem with such attitudes, both in their cattle-raiding and biblical variations, was that while they may have helped Basotho to cope with dangers on the mines, they limited the possibilities of these workers taking more militant action against poor working conditions. Strikes caused by accidents were infrequent, and even then, often turned on the question of repairs and not fundamental issues of mine safety. All too often, this rationalisation, though a useful survival strategy, led to docility and passivity. Parents and relatives were called upon to understand and accept the fate of their sons, fathers and husbands. They were consoled, asked to look upon God, or see their son/father/husband as a hero-warrior.

Compensation

What made matters worse, at least in as far as the Basotho’s conservative representation of mine-related death was concerned, was the fact that mine managements were reluctant to compensate African workers for injuries or death incurred on the mines. The issue of compensation deserves attention, not least because, as argued above, the death of a migrant was also the loss of a breadwinner. This factor must have gained more
importance in Lesotho from the 1920s onwards as many Basotho homesteads developed dependency on migrants’ earnings.

The gold mining companies began to compensate their workers for accidents, TB and silicosis after the turn of the century. *Ad hoc* compensation for accidents began in 1903 after considerable pressure from the NAD, but payments were first codified a year later after much deliberation, as some mining companies had been unwilling to meet their obligations. Under the 1904 Agreement, ten pounds was to be paid to the family of a miner who died from an accident; the same amount to the miner who suffered “permanent total disablement”; and five pounds for “permanent partial disablement”. Beneficiaries were defined as wives, children under age, and parents who could prove that they depended on the deceased at the time of his death. The mine concerned was to pay the money to the NAD which in turn would forward it to the beneficiaries. In the case of permanent disability, the compensation was to be paid to the miner in the presence of a NAD inspector. This agreement was subsequently incorporated into the 1911 Native Labour Regulation Act. The amount of compensation somewhat increased; between one to twenty pounds for permanent or partial disablement resulting in loss of work; and thirty-five to fifty in the case of death or permanent total disability.29 Total compensation was, however, less than or at best equivalent to what a miner could earn in a one nine-month or twelve-month contract, and therefore only enough to sustain a worker for a short period, all the more to really compensate him for injury and loss. And though a total of £1,500 of compensation was paid to miners between March and June 1905, more went to white employees than Africans (Smith 1993: 183).

African miners were anyway excluded from the benefits of the Workmen’s Compensation Act of 1914. While this Act made provision for the sum of £144 to be paid to workers earning four pounds a month or less if they suffered total incapacitation, African miners were limited to fifty pounds by the 1911 Regulation. Amendments to the Compensation Act in 1934 and again in 1941 extended the scheme to Africans, but even then excluded them from pension benefits. African workers were given a lump sum of hundred and fifty pounds or slightly more, depending on an individual’s earnings, while White, Indian and Coloured workers had the right to a pension equivalent to fifty-five percent of their normal earnings (*ibid.*; Simons 1961: 51).

Over and beyond discriminatory compensation practices, gold mine and government authorities from the start tried to minimise the amount paid to Africans by cutting down on the numbers who could qualify for

29. Paragraph based on CAD, GOV 899, 50/39, Secretary for Native Affairs (henceforth SNA) to High Commissioner (henceforth HC), 15 June 1905; LNA, S7/7/34, SNA to RC, 22 Feb. 1905; S7/7/32, SNA to RC, 18 Feb. 1904; CMAR, 1905, pp. 27-29.
compensation. In April 1913, the Director of Native Labour sent a circular to labour supplying areas: "It having been held that before any compensation may be paid the fact, even in the case of a wife, a child, or a parent, that the beneficiary has been dependent upon the deceased must be established, it is necessary in each case where such information is called for that I should be informed of the exact degree of dependency of the individual to whom it is suggested that compensation should be paid".30

Many African miners were, moreover, ignorant of their right to compensation for death or serious injury. A Mosotho worker wrote to the missionary newspaper, Leselinyana (11 Dec. 1921) suggesting that such rights should be publicised. Indeed, they should be read out to recruits when they signed their contracts:

"The most troubling thing is this: Whites or white people, when they are victims of an accident, they are often paid, there are even laws that relate to diseases that affect them and compensation; but for us, black men, there is nothing, even when we die from accidents we do not know what compensation for each person is. Whites know quite well what theirs is [...] they also know what their orphans and widows will get. Oh sirs, please attend to this matter, talk to recruiters, that before we cross [the Caledon River] we are well informed, we be told about our rights the moment we are informed about our pay.

More than fifteen years later, one of the issues raised with the Resident Commissioner in Lesotho and the Native Recruiting Corporation, and discussed by the Basutoland National Council of chiefs in 1937, was the continuing Basotho ignorance on the part of migrants of their right to compensation, especially those who only discovered the full extent of their illness at home once they had been repatriated. Nor was the problem made any easier by the deliberately difficult bureaucratic and medical procedures of proof which compensation required. Basotho chiefs were informed that when their men died at home from silicosis or TB, their lungs had to be sent to Johannesburg for confirmation of the cause before any compensation could be released!31

Even where compensation was obtained, the sums were so small that they were soon exhausted. Thus my informant exclaimed: "These compensations have no use: a mere fifty pounds!"32

One Mosotho miner disabled at the Simmer Deep God Mine in 1915 and paid fifty pounds compensation, approached the Resident Commissioner fifteen years later: "In 1915 I was at work in Johannesburg where I accidentally lost my two eyes, and I was given fifty pounds compensation which was a great help to me, it lasted me ten years and then got finished. Sir now I am in difficulties, I have six children and their mother... it is real misery regarding food and clothing for them. Owing to this difficulty, on the 21st December 1929, I was guided to Johannesburg to see the

32. Interview with Solomon Mosunyana.
workers, when I arrived there, the workers were very much pleased to see me, if there was any permission”.33

For once, the NRC acted on this matter quickly, because it was “impossible for us to permit him to visit the Rand personally for the purpose of collecting money”.34 There was official concern that this might raise the miners’s awareness of the problems of the compensation system.

Other incapacitated Basotho workers forced matters and were allowed to take light mine jobs. This was the case of one informant who was crippled by a loose rock while employed at the Witwatersrand Gold Mine in 1936: “I remained at the mine hospital. After recovering I was taken to Moselekazi [the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association35 compound]. There were all tribes there of injured and seriously ill people... We stayed there until all was fixed [. . . ] each person was sent home”.36 But “I continued to go to seek work. They were even saying I should not be compensated because I will still continue coming to work... They had given me a job I could do without hurting myself”. But not happy with the pay at the Witwatersrand Mine, he insisted on being sent to another mine, and was referred to the WANLA compound: “When I arrived at Moselekazi, there is an office of one white man called ‘RaBasotho’. I went there and stated my appeal. He said: ‘If you will agree to go underground, it is fine. But I will write a letter that they should know that you are injured when they send you underground, because that leg is crippled.’ He then gave me that letter [. . .] I arrived there [on the new mine] in the evening and slept in the compound”.37

He was accepted on that mine, and taken underground to monitor fire and smoke.

* 

Mine and government authorities, in line with their influx control measures and the mentality which saw the “natives” as nothing more than a source of cheap labour, treated African mineworkers as “things” without any special place in history. But African mineworkers, Basotho in this case, struggled to assert their humanity. Their “invisible” struggle to accord their dead customary respect in some way even challenged the very institutions of control and their subjugation to the imperatives of capital accumulation.

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34. Ibid., NRC District Superintendent to Government Secretary, 7 May 1930.
35. This association was formed in 1902 by the mine bosses to recruit labour outside British South Africa and the High Commissioner Territories.
36. Interview with Mokopoi Mokopoi.
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WILLOUGHBY, W. C.
ABSTRACT

This paper, using the case of Basotho of modern Lesotho, examines the experience of death, dying and mourning in the South African mining compounds during the period 1890 to 1940. The paper not only shows how the mine and government authorities treated African mineworkers as nothing more than a source of cheap labour, but also discusses the various strategies deployed by these mineworkers to assert their humanity. It is argued that these “invisible” struggles by the mineworkers to accord their dead customary respect, in some way, even challenged the very institutions of control on the mines.

SUMMARY

Les Basotho et l'expérience de la mort, du deuil et des rites funéraires dans les concessions minières sud-africaines, 1890-1940. — Cet article, à partir de l'exemple de la région du Basotho au Lesotho, étudie l'expérience de la mort et du deuil dans les concessions minières sud-africaines, au cours de la période 1850-1940. Il ne concerne pas uniquement la façon dont la direction des mines et les autorités gouvernementales traitaient les mineurs uniquement en tant que source de travail bon marché mais examine aussi les différentes stratégies utilisées par ces derniers pour prouver leur humanité. On essaye de démontrer que les luttes « invisibles » menées par ces mineurs dans le cadre de l'observance des coutumes mortuaires ont, dans une certaine mesure, menacé le système de pouvoir prévalant dans les mines.

Keywords/mots-clés: Basotho, Lesotho, Mineworkers, Death, Customary, Struggles/Basotho, Lesotho, coutume, luttes, mineurs, mort.