

From Granary to Labour Reserve: An Economic History of Lesotho

Colin Murray

Introduction

More than one hundred years ago, in 1863, Lesotho was described as "the granary of the Free State and parts of the (Cape) Colony".¹ Today it is an impoverished labour reserve. Its dependence on the export of labour to South Africa is starkly illustrated by the following facts. Firstly, perhaps 200 000 migrants from Lesotho are regularly employed in South Africa, out of the country's total population of one and a quarter million.² Nearly 130 000 men were employed in the mines alone in 1977, supplying a quarter of the industry's complement of black labour.³ Secondly, the earnings of these migrants far exceed Lesotho's Gross Domestic Product. Thirdly, according to a recent survey, about 70 per cent of mean rural household income is derived from migrant earnings. Only about 6 per cent is derived from domestic crop production.⁴ Contrary to the Prime Minister's assertion in the Second Five Year Development Plan, agriculture does not "support 80 per cent of the population".⁵ It is the "backbone of the economy"⁶ only in the residual sense that there are very few other employment prospects within the country. The population of Lesotho today is aptly described as a rural proletariat which scratches about on the land.

There is a well established tradition in South African economic historiography — that of economic dualism⁷ — which attempts to explain poverty in the rural periphery of southern Africa by invoking African failure to respond to changing conditions and, specifically, features intrinsic to African social structure which inhibit the capacity to innovate. Writers on Lesotho are well represented in this tradition. For example, Hugh Ashton, the principal ethnographer of the Basotho, ascribed low agricultural productivity in the 1930s partly to a lack of capital equipment, partly to a shortage of male labour (both very plausible reasons), and partly to a prevalent attitude of indifference on the part of the Basotho. "The Mosotho is not an agriculturalist by tradition, and tends to regard agriculture as women's work (which is used to be), and even if he does not positively despise it, he just is not interested or enthusiastic about it". Owing to the ready availability of employment in South Africa, the Basotho lacked any "driving incentiveto develop their lands and improve their agriculture".⁸ In 1970 Jack Williams identified a phenomenon which he called "socio-cultural congruity", made up of three elements: (a) the irrational and sustained belief in superstition and magic; (b) the sharing propensity supposedly inherent in extended family institutions; and (c) a collective impulse not to behave conspicuously. All these factors, he alleged, "impinge on rational decision-making at the farm level".⁹ Sandra Wallman proposed a rather more sophisticated syndrome or complex of factors which constrain the individual

Mosotho from making any effort to improve his lot and from co-operating with development initiatives. She concluded that

“Non-development in Lesotho is a function of a complex of poverty, migration and ideology, and can only be successfully treated when attention is paid to the whole syndrome. It is easy to prescribe negatively, economic development will not be assured by an injection of cash to cure the poverty, nor by a tourniquet to stop the flow of migrants, nor by an amphetamine to lift the pessimism, nor by any one specialist effort alone. More positively – and therefore more diffidently – I would venture that the present emphasis on agricultural development for Lesotho will continue to be nugatory in so far as it exacerbates the unfavourable contrast with urban South Africa.”¹⁰

On the one hand, Wallman is right to emphasize the “unfavourable contrast” between poverty in Lesotho and wealth in the industrial heartland of South Africa. On the other hand, in so far as these arguments are based on the premise that lack of development is to be explained in terms of individuals’ perception of their predicament, they are both reductionist and ahistorical.

Ashton’s diagnosis of complacency in the 1930s and Wallman’s diagnosis of pessimism in the 1960s are both, no doubt, of incidental relevance. As explanations of poverty or “non-development” in Lesotho, however, they are unsatisfactory because they preclude analysis of the changing structural conditions by which capital accumulation has taken place in the core areas of southern Africa at the expense of the peripheral areas. The following review of the transition from granary to labour reserve makes it clear that the appropriate question is not “Why are the Basotho *still* poor?” but “How have the Basotho *become* poor?” This review also invalidates the proposition that the contemporary “facts of life” – poverty and economic dependence – may be regarded as conditions “intrinsic to Lesotho, having no necessary reference to the presence of South Africa”.¹¹ In the first place, such dualism is self-contradictory – dependence is a reciprocal relationship, albeit also an imbalanced or asymmetrical one. In the second place, such dualism cannot stand up to an examination of the country’s economic history.

The chronicle of decline is paralleled in the black ‘homelands’ or Bantustans within South Africa itself and must be analyzed within the context of the systematic elimination of competition between whites and blacks in agriculture and of the systematic exploitation of cheap black labour in the mining industry. There is now much evidence to demonstrate that there was a widespread and vigorous response by Africans to new market opportunities in the late nineteenth century; but that those opportunities were increasingly circumscribed by instruments of discrimination such as the Land Act of 1913, by constriction of access to markets and capital, and by increasing dependence on the export of labour.¹² This paper, provisional as it must be in many respects, is an attempt to fill a gap in this literature.¹³ Notwithstanding their nominal political independence, the Basotho of Lesotho have been and remain subject to the structural constraints that have deprived Africans in South Africa of the means to make a living off the land.

The Decline of Agriculture and the Exodus of Labour

The year 1870 was a historical watershed for the Basotho. Moshoeshe, the

founder of the nation, died in March of that year. His people had just emerged from a crippling war (1865–8) with the Afrikaners of the Orange Free State and had been incorporated, at Moshoeshoe's request, into the British imperial fold. The present boundaries of Lesotho were fixed in the Treaty of Aliwal North of 1869, by which the Basotho were forced to cede much of the land they had previously occupied and farmed.¹⁴

Basutoland was administered by the Government of the Cape Colony for a brief and somewhat unhappy period, 1871–1884. The first Governor's Agent, Charles Griffith, reported that as a result of the war with the Free State the Basotho had been reduced to famine and near-destitution through the loss of their livestock and inability to reap their crops. They recovered remarkably quickly, however, so that by 1873 they presented the appearance of a "thriving and well-ordered people".¹⁵ This recovery was largely due to the discovery of diamonds in 1867 in the arid wastes of the northern Cape Colony. This brought about the first of South Africa's major mineral booms and it rapidly and irreversibly incorporated the Basotho into a larger economic system. The missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) were well placed to record the vigorous response of the Basotho to boom conditions:

"Hitherto our Basuto have all remained quietly at home, and the movement which is taking place beyond their frontiers has produced no other effect than to increase the export of wheat and other cereals to a most remarkable degree. While the district in which the diamonds are found is of desperate aridity, the valleys of Basutoland, composed as they are of a deep layer of vegetable mould, watered by numerous streams and favoured with regular rains in the good season, require little more than a modicum of work to cover themselves with the richest crops."¹⁶

The Basotho bought ploughs, planted assiduously and sold the grain to meet the needs of the distant mining camps. They responded to the incentives of the market with such zeal and success that, on the one hand, the missionaries expressed anxiety lest their material prosperity endanger their spiritual progress;¹⁷ and, on the other hand, the *Friend of the Free State* was moved to remark, "Nowhere else in South Africa is there a more naturally industrious nation, as honest and as peaceable as the Basuto".¹⁸ In 1873 they exported 100 000 bags of grain – wheat, maize and sorghum – and 2 000 bags of wool. In the same year goods of British or foreign manufacture worth about £150 000 were imported into the country. As Griffith remarked, "the Colonial revenue must benefit very considerably by the Basuto trade".¹⁹

The boom generated an acute inflationary impetus and some Basotho started migrating to the diggings in response to the demand for labour. Migration was not new in itself: Basotho had been dispersed as a result of the ravages of the *lifaqane*; and before the war with the Free State many of Moshoeshoe's subjects had undertaken short contracts of seasonal labour on the farms of the Cape and elsewhere; many also had spent their wages on or traded grain for guns and livestock.²⁰ The discovery of diamonds, however, gave new impetus to the pattern of migration. A comment on the first population census of 1875 referred to "the multitude who have temporarily absented themselves in search of employment

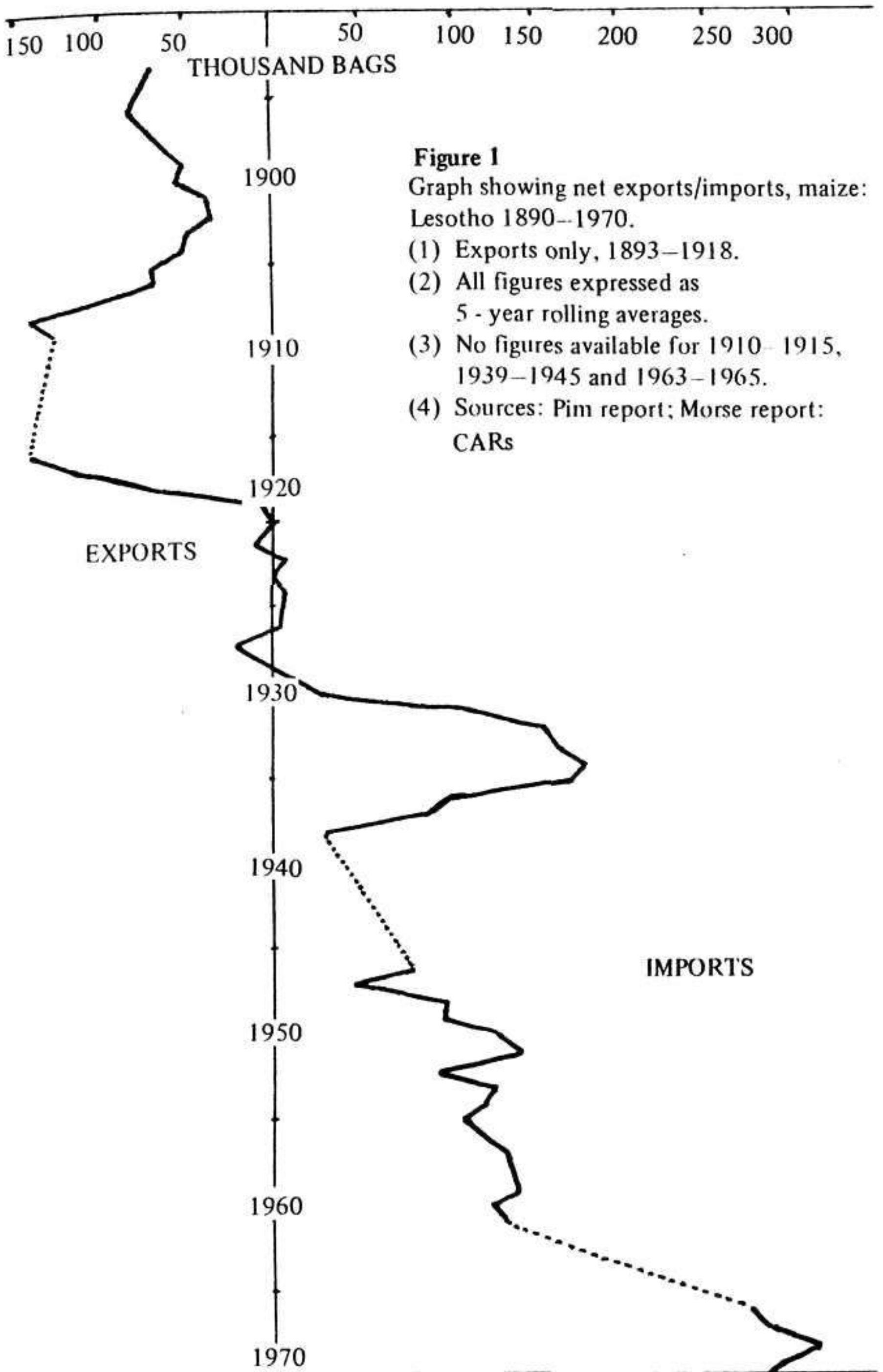
in the Cape Colony, or the diamond mines, or elsewhere".²¹ It was estimated that "by 1875, out of a total population of 127 325 15 000 men were getting passes to work outside the territory for long or short periods, and by 1884 this number had doubled itself".²² During this period it seems that migration was "discretionary" rather than "necessary",²³ although it is difficult from the reports available to distinguish between richer and poorer sections of the peasantry. Certainly the senior chiefs were much better off than most – through their control and distribution of livestock under the *mafisa* system, their right to tribute labour, and thence an ability to plough far more land. There were also other perquisites. For example Molapo, second son of Moshoeshoe and senior chief in the Leribe district, received £800 a year out of the hut-tax collected from his people, and also at least £1 from every labour migrant out of his earnings.²⁴ It appears that most migrants went in order to acquire guns, horses, livestock, ploughs and manufactured articles. Many Basotho continued, however, to make an excellent livelihood from the sale of grain. In 1880 the Acting Governor's Agent Emile Rolland gave the following estimates of the aggregate income of Basotho:²⁵

sale of grain	£400 000
export of wool and other produce	75 000
earnings of labourers and transport-riders	100 000

Such figures must be treated with caution, but they indicate that the production and export of grain was the most important source of income in the 1870s.

The period of prosperity was short-lived. Cereals and livestock products were subject to the vicissitudes of drought, epizootics and economic depression; and from the 1880s onwards market conditions were decisively affected by political and economic factors outside the control of the Basotho. Meanwhile, population expansion in the Lowlands and political pressures arising out of the Gun War in 1880-83, when the Basotho successfully resisted the Cape administration's attempt to disarm them, led to rapid settlement of the Mountains. There was a severe recession in 1882-6, and a savage drought brought widespread famine in 1884.²⁶ Gold fever hit the Witwatersrand in 1886 and precipitated another boom, but this time the export market for grain from Basutoland was adversely affected by a prohibition on imports imposed by the Transvaal²⁷ and by competition from American and Australian grain, which could be cheaply transported by the newly constructed railway from the Cape to Kimberley. A missionary noted in 1887 "The population is rapidly increasing, the fields are becoming exhausted, the pastures diminishing, stock farming yields more disappointments than profits; . . . Money is scarce . . ." ²⁸

In 1893 the Orange Free State attempted to impose a tariff on grain from Basutoland in order to protect the market of the white farmers who had turned from stock rearing to growing crops. This rendered it difficult for the Basotho to sell their grain and so inhibited mercantile exchange in Basutoland; but, as the *acting Resident Commissioner Godfrey Lagden* remarked, the boycott also threatened the interests of the large merchants of the Free State who supplied the Basutoland traders.²⁹ The disastrous outbreak of rinderpest in 1896 wiped out up to 90 percent of the cattle³⁰ and also caused a "remarkable falling off" in the number of Basotho who migrated in search of work, because of quarantine regulations in



the Free State.³¹ The Basotho resourcefully adapted to the loss of their livestock: they used their horses for ploughing and transport,³² and they arranged marital mortgages by counting stones as surety for future instalments of bridewealth cattle.³³ However, the following year there was a savage drought, and the wheat crop failed entirely. "Famine threatens the majority of these poor people".³⁴

The Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902 closed the usual outlets for export of grain and it was followed by another depression and a drought. The comments of the Government Secretary in the first decade of the twentieth century best reveal the fluctuating conditions which began to undermine what had been a consistently favourable balance of trade. In 1905 the wheat crop failed and low market prices led to a general scarcity of money, while "grain and produce of all kinds have naturally gone to pieces through drought and locusts".³⁵ The year 1907 saw "a great improvement on the previous years of drought";³⁶ but in 1908–9 the wheat crop was destroyed by lice and the maize crop by drought, though exports of wool and mohair steadily increased.³⁷ The 1911 census recorded a population of 427 549 Basotho, including 24 630 absentees (Table 1). The PEMS journal *Leselinyani* divined the writing on the wall:

"Were the population to continue to increase, the situation would become truly critical within a few years, unless other means of livelihood were provided for the Basuto. They would be forced to migrate in large numbers to offer their services to the Europeans of the neighbouring countries which are less densely populated, but where their social conditions would deteriorate and where, above all, they would lose their independence."³⁸

As we have seen, Basotho had already been migrating in considerable numbers – 20 000 labour passes were reported in 1892, for example³⁹ – in response to fluctuating economic conditions. In 1903 the Resident Commissioner commended those who had gone out to work for their industrious character in this respect. Significantly, however, he also noted that the minimum wage necessary to attract Basotho was £2.10s a month with food; and that they seemed able to find nearer and more attractive employment than on the Johannesburg gold mines,⁴⁰ where wages were £1.10s a month at that time.⁴¹ In 1907 the Government Secretary suggested, on the evidence of labour passes issued to Basotho, that

"as the population increases and the country fills up the native population is showing a tendency to divide itself into two distinct classes of labour, namely the agriculturalist and the mine labourer. It would appear that year in and year out the latter goes to his work at the mines while, on the other hand, it appears that the native farmer who, on bad years, went out to 'miscellaneous' farm and domestic labour, in a good year remains at home and tills his land."⁴²

It is probable that most mine labourers were younger men who had not yet acquired land or livestock; that migration for them was necessary rather than discretionary; and that a substantial increase in the number of labour passes issued during the first decade of the century reflected a steadily declining per capita income from agriculture, owing to population increase. However, the fact that poor harvests were consistently reflected in low imports of manufactured goods during this period suggests that the sale of grain and livestock products was still the most important means of generating a cash flow inside the country.

The First World War sustained high prices in wool and grain and the Basotho were able to take advantage of this – maize production was particularly vigorous. Wheat exports in 1919 were a record 256 000 bags,⁴³ which prompted an optimistic official disclaimer of “the theory which is sometimes propounded that the wheat lands of Basutoland are ‘worked out’ ”.⁴⁴ The volume of exports fluctuated through the 1920s but reached a peak in 1928, the last year that 100 000 bags of maize were exported from Basutoland. Wool and mohair were by far the most important exports at this time.⁴⁵ The market prices of most commodities also fluctuated but only fell markedly following the 1929 slump. The record of labour passes issued during the decade does not indicate any overall increase in the number of labour migrants.⁴⁶ The number of passes is not of course synonymous with the number of absentees at any one time. But the totals represent more than 50 per cent of the adult males, which suggests that most rural households had long since come to depend on migration as a necessary element in their strategies of survival.

The early 1930s were disastrous. The bottom fell out of wool prices as a result of the massive recession in world trade which followed the 1929 slump. The coincidence of acute economic depression with an exceptional drought in 1932-3 led to a loss of perhaps half the country’s livestock.⁴⁷ Wheat production survived and recovered, but maize did not: in 1933 more than 350 000 bags of maize had to be imported (see Figure 1). At the same time a resurgence in the price of gold stimulated the expansion of mining production,

Table 1. African population of Lesotho, 1911–1976.

Year	Males		Females		Total		
	A	B	A	B	A	B	C
1911	204,797	21,658	222,752	2,972	427,549	24,630	5.8
1921	260,675	37,827	283,472	9,314	544,147	47,141	8.7
1936	317,918	78,604	343,892	22,669	661,809	101,273	15.3
1946	342,340	95,697	347,579	32,331	689,919	128,028	18.6
1956	383,546	112,790	410,737	41,992	794,253	154,782	19.5
1966	463,437	96,350	502,476	19,550	965,913	115,900	12.00
1976	586,331	129,103	629,484	23,551	1,216,815	152,654	12.5

Key.

A. *De jure* population (residents plus absentees)

B. Absentees.

C. Absentees as percentage of *de jure* population (B/A x 100)

Sources.

A.M. Monyake, “Lesotho’s population and its structural characteristics with special reference to their implications for the economy and social services”. Bureau of Statistics, Maseru; 1976 census preliminary results, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru.

Note.

The number of absentees was not recorded in the 1946 census; the figure given is an interpolation between the figures for 1936 and 1956.

and enormously increased the demand for labour on the gold mines.⁴⁸ In the following decade a vast flow of emigration from Basutoland took place which,

offsetting natural increase, explains the virtually static population recorded between the censuses of 1936 and 1946 (Table 1). The effect of the great depression was decisively to tip the balance between successful farming and large-scale migration away from the former and towards the latter. Men from Basutoland were forced to undertake longer and more frequent periods of employment in the mines and industries and farms of South Africa.

Economic decline has continued unabated in the post-war years. Two indices of this are a steady fall during the 1950s both in the absolute output of wool and mohair and in the relative value of wool;⁴⁹ and a progressive decline in agricultural productivity, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Agricultural production in Lesotho, selected years 1950–1977

Year	Maize		Sorghum		Wheat	
	A	B	A	B	A	B
1950*	214	11,9	49	8,7	50	10,1
1960	121	7,4	54	7,8	58	8,5
1970	67	5,2	57	6,9	58	5,4
1972	64	5,4	59	8,5	57	6,0
1976	49	5,8	25	5,6	45	8,0
1977	126	15,7	62	14,7	61	14,7

Key A. Production in thousand metric tonnes.
 B. Yield in 100 kgs. per hectare.

Sources. *Lesotho: A Development Challenge*, IBRD 1975, pp. 38, 95; Annual Statistical Bulletins 1976, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru.

Considerable variation between one season and the next means that it is dangerous to extrapolate a trend from figures ten years apart. But the figures for 1950–1970 are at least suggestive. In these twenty years increasing population pressure led the people to plough up pasture and marginal land so that the total acreage brought under cereal cultivation increased by 12 per cent. Wheat and sorghum acreages greatly increased, while production rose only marginally; maize acreage considerably decreased, and production was very much reduced. All cereals, constituting the bulk of Lesotho's arable production, showed a significant reduction in yield per unit area. The year 1976/7, by contrast, was quite exceptional to the long-term trend of decline, both in production and in productivity per unit area. Perhaps the best single index of the country's incapacity to feed its own people is the shift over the years from net export to net import of maize, the principal staple food. This shift is shown graphically in Figure 1.

The increase in Lesotho's population recorded in censuses between 1911 and 1976 is shown in Table 1. Census practice since 1911 has been to distinguish the *de facto* population – those present at the time of enumeration – from the *de jure* population – those present plus those recorded as absent members of households. The static *de facto* population between 1936 and 1946 is most simply explained by large-scale emigration from Basutoland as a result of the depression

of the 1930s, and subsequent absorption into the towns of South Africa. A smaller proportion of absentees in 1966 (12 per cent of the *de jure* population) than in 1956 (nearly 20 per cent) is attributable to the imposition in 1963 of strict border controls by the South African authorities and also to a narrower definition of "absentee" in 1966. These controls effectively circumscribed the access of women to the South African labour market, since labour contracts undertaken in Lesotho are not available to them. By contrast, the average number of men from Lesotho working on the South African mines more than doubled (Table 3)

Table 3 – Lesotho citizens employed on South African mines, 1963–1979

Year	Monthly average numbers employed	Year	Monthly average numbers employed
1963	58 678	1971	92 747
1964	62 653	1972	98 822
1965	66 527	1973	110 477
1966	80 951	1974	106 231
1967	77 414	1975	112 507
1968	80 310	1976	121 062
1969	83 053	1977	128 941
1970	87 384	1978	124 973
		1979	124 393

Source: Department of Labour, Maseru.

over the period 1963 to 1977. Most of these were recruited by Mine Labour Organizations Ltd., which has always been known in Lesotho as the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) and has recently changed its name to The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA). It recruits on behalf of the South African Chamber of Mines and represents most of the gold mines and some of the coal and platinum mines.

The Political Economy of Migrant Labour

The decline of agriculture in Lesotho has been attributed to many factors: deterioration of the land through mono-cropping, over-grazing, exhaustion and severe erosion; insecurities in the system of land tenure which inhibit farmers from taking effective steps to conserve their agricultural holdings; population pressure which created an acute shortage of land relative to "subsistence" requirements and which forced the exploitation of marginal land quite unsuitable for agriculture;⁵⁰ and climatic vicissitudes such as drought, hail and frost which render agriculture a risky enterprise in any circumstances and may inhibit farmers from making the necessary investment in intensive techniques.⁵¹

The questions of land shortage, population increase and access to capital cannot be examined without reference to a large system of production which demanded, not that Africans grow sufficient food to preserve their economic independence, but that they contribute their labour to the "white" economy. So long as the

Basotho were making a viable livelihood off the land, so long would they not make their labour available to white-owned farms and industries.

The development of white farming in South Africa is the story of perennial competition for labour against African self-sufficiency on the one hand and the demands of mining and manufacturing industries, which paid higher wages, on the other. White farmers took the view that raising wage levels would actually reduce the supply of labour available,⁵² and they preferred to use alternative, coercive, means of assuring a labour supply. In the earlier period, as we have seen, these took the form of protective grain tariffs imposed against imports from Basutoland by the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Above all, however, it was the Land Act of 1913 which deprived Africans of the capacity to compete where, initially at least, Africans were more successful than white farmers because of their lower opportunity cost of engaging in commercial agriculture. The Act stopped Africans from buying land in "white" areas; it severely limited the independent productive activities of Africans on white-owned land, either as squatters paying rent to land-owners or as entrepreneurs who owned their own oxen and ploughs and entered into share-cropping arrangements with land-owners. Under the latter system of "farming-on-the-half" the African worked the land and handed over half the crops reaped to the white landowner in return for the right to live and cultivate and graze animals on his farm. Such independent activities "made the kaffirs too rich" and simultaneously deprived the whites of their labour supply and undermined their markets in grain.⁵³

The 1913 Land Act did not directly affect Basutoland. But there were two indirect effects. Firstly, many squatters and share-croppers were forced off land in the Orange Free State and there is evidence that some of them migrated into Basutoland, exacerbating the population pressure there.⁵⁴ Secondly, since it may be regarded as "an act of collusion amongst the hirers of labour not to give remuneration above a certain level. . . the Land Act was, for farmers, what the maximum-permissible-average agreement was for the mining magnates".⁵⁵ The depression of agricultural wages affected migrants from Basutoland who worked on white farms in the Free State in the same way as it affected Africans who were dispossessed. Discriminatory legislation of this kind either directly compelled these people to take up wage employment or confined them to reserves from which, unable to eke out a subsistence livelihood, they were forced to migrate and offer their labour on white farms and in industry.

Meanwhile the Chamber of Mines had begun from 1896 to consolidate a uniform strategy of recruitment and wage determination. Though it did not alleviate absolute shortages of labour, the policy of official collusion effectively limited competition for labour between companies which would otherwise have forced a rise in wages.⁵⁶ In this way the mining industry was able to maintain black wages at a very low level and to apply a uniform wage structure. The policy has survived successive shortages of labour and also, more recently, labour unrest arising from low wages, poor industrial relations and the frustrations of compound life.⁵⁷ Francis Wilson has shown that the real earnings of black workers on the gold mines were no higher in 1969 than they had been in 1911.⁵⁸ During the 1970s mine wages have greatly increased, in response to the spectacular rise in the price of gold. The average cash

earnings of black workers on the gold mines were R21 per month in 1972 and R102 per month in 1977.⁵⁹ However, this increase is offset by the fact that the cost of living in Lesotho doubled over the same period.⁶⁰

In addition to establishing a monopsonistic policy on recruiting and wages, the mining companies were able to bring pressure to bear on the South African government to pass a series of harshly refined measures to control the flow of labour. These are the "pass" laws incorporated in the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and subsequent amendments,⁶¹ based on the notorious principle enunciated by the Stallard Commission in 1921:

"The native should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister."

In this way, the pattern was established by which unskilled black workers oscillated between their rural homes and their places of work. The mine compound system and the pass laws made it impossible for migrants to bring their families to settle at the place of work. Indeed, the justification from the mining industry's point of view of a policy of paying sub-subsistence wages has always rested on two pre-suppositions inherent in the system of oscillating migration: (a) that migrants also derive an income from working the land in the rural areas and that the two sources of income are complementary; and (b) that wages need not be paid at a level necessary to sustain the expensive urban infrastructure and social services which would be required by a stabilized labour force of miners with their families.⁶² There are disadvantages in oscillating migration from the employers' point of view, in that a high turnover of unskilled manpower is an inefficient and wasteful method of using human resources.⁶³ But the system has enabled employers historically to evade their responsibility to pay a living wage.

It remains briefly to outline the political background of British overrule in Basutoland. It had been a condition of incorporation in 1870 that the cost of annexing and administering the territory should be met out of a hut-tax which was imposed in that year. Colonial policy was in general restricted to the maintenance of law and order, and the dominant criterion of administrative competence was that expenditure should not exceed revenue.⁶⁴ British officials rationalized a policy of benign neglect by contradictory principles. On the one hand, they endorsed the philanthropists' view that "native cultures" should not be interfered with. On the other hand, they shared Cecil Rhodes' view that Africans should learn the dignity of labour. Thus a policy that Jack Spence has described as "a neat coincidence of interest between private altruism and public parsimony"⁶⁵ was also readily compatible with the labour requirements of South African farms and industry. The best evidence for this is the Resident Commissioner's remarks in 1899:

"Though for its size and population Basutoland produces a comparatively enormous amount of grain, it has an industry of great economic value to South Africa, viz. the output of native labour. It supplies the sinews of agriculture in the Orange Free State, to a large extent it keeps going railway works, coal mining, the diamond mines at Jagersfontein and Kimberly, the gold mines of the

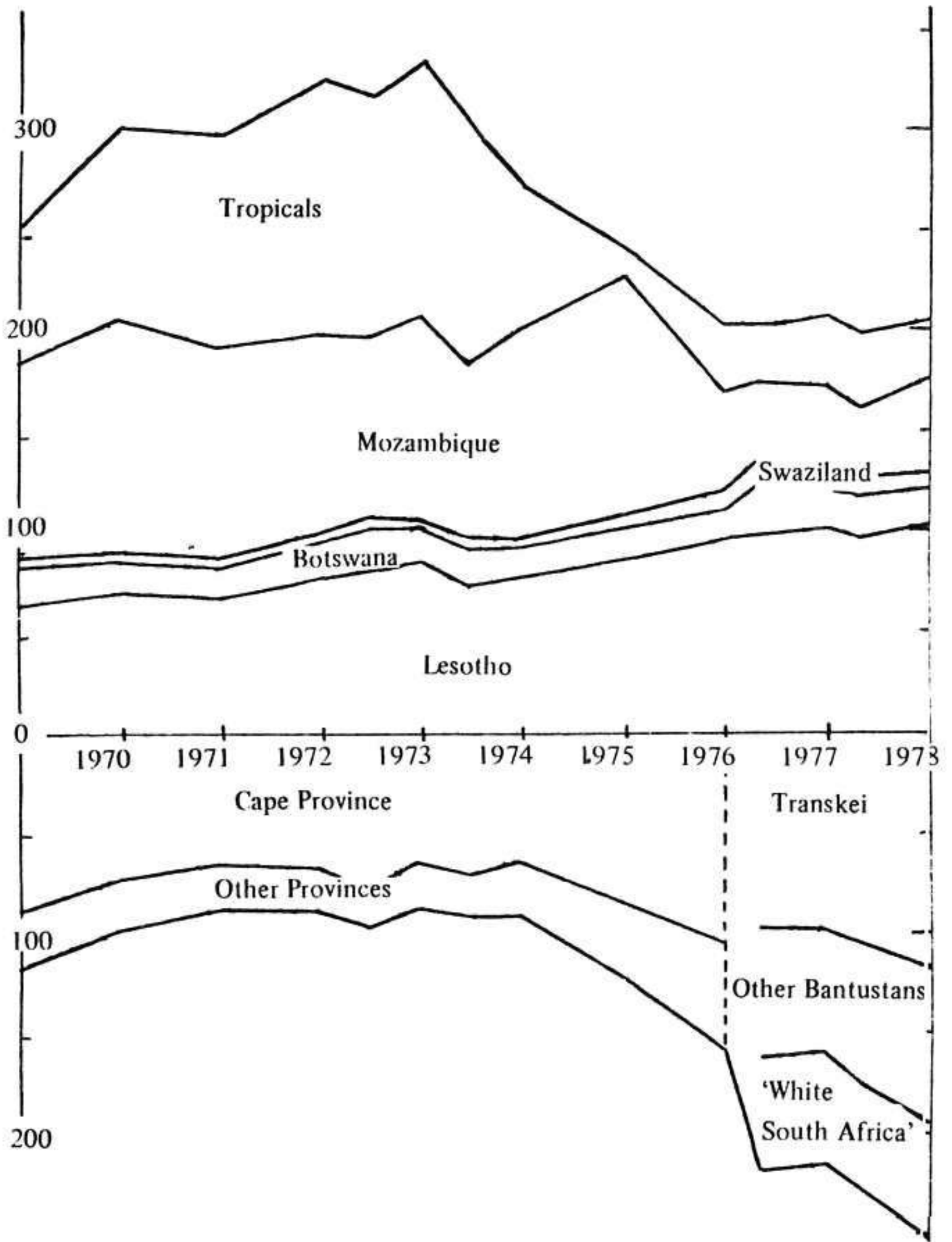


Figure 2. Sources of black labour recruited by TEBA, 1970-1978

Transvaal and furnishes, in addition, a large amount of domestic services in the surrounding territoriesTo (those) who urge higher education of the natives, it may be pointed out that to educate them above labour would be a mistake. Primarily the native labour industry supplies a dominion want and secondarily it tends to fertilise native territories with cash which is at once diffused for English Goods.⁶⁶

In this way the administration in Basutoland was consistently sensitive to the wider interests of imperialism.

Recent Developments

During the 1970s, various political and economic pressures induced the mining industry to initiate a policy of "internalizing" mine labour recruitment, in order to reduce dependence on foreign supplies and to increase dependence on South African supplies. These pressures were: the dramatic rise in the international price of gold, which allowed wages in the mining industry for the first time, to rise in such a way as to compete with wages in manufacturing industry and therefore to attract black South Africans; internal labour unrest and violence on the mining compounds, attributable to low wages and poor working and living conditions; and the political uncertainties arising out of escalating civil war in Zimbabwe, Malawi's temporary ban on recruitment of labour in April 1974, and the collapse of Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique.⁶⁷

In December 1973, foreign Africans constituted 80 per cent of the black labour force recruited for mines affiliated to the South African Chamber of Mines, and South Africans constituted the remaining 20 per cent. In December 1978, the respective proportions were 45 per cent and 55 per cent. (Table 4 and Figure 2). Thus from the mining industry's point of view, the policy has been successful. In the short term, the effect of the policy was to increase the number of recruits from Lesotho, to make up for the sudden reduction in numbers from Malawi and

Table 4 – Geographical sources of black labour distributed by TEBA, as at 31 December 1973 and 1978.

Source	Numbers	1973 Percentage	Numbers	1978 Percentage
SOUTH AFRICA	86 221	20,42	250 311	54,93
Lesotho	87 229	20,66	104 143	22,85
Botswana	16 811	3,98	18 129	3,95
Swaziland	4 526	1,07	8 352	1,83
Mozambique	99 424	23,55	45 168	9,91
Tropicals	127 970	30,32	29 618	6,50
FOREIGN	335 960	79,58	205 410	45,07
TOTAL	422 181	100,00	455 721	100,00

Source.	TEBA Annual Reports
Notte.	Until 1975 the vast majority of miners in the category Tropicals (area north of latitude 22° S.) were from Malawi. Since 1974, however, substantial numbers have been recruited from Zimbabwe. Until 1976 South African miners were classified by their province of origin; from 1977 by their origin in the "white" areas and the ten Bantustans.

Mozambique. However, these jobs are by no means secure. It was estimated in 1978 that the country would have to anticipate the loss of about 40 000 jobs.⁶⁸ There is no realistic prospect of Lesotho being able to accommodate large numbers of its own unemployed citizens, since the rate of job creation cannot even keep pace with the natural increase in the labour force. The crisis which faces the government and people of Lesotho derives from the asymmetry of its relationship of dependence on South Africa. Unemployment may be effectively distributed between the South African Bantustans and the foreign supply areas according to the political convenience of Pretoria. Despite its acute economic dependence in this respect, however, Lesotho's political independence has allowed Chief Leabua Jonathan to articulate to some extent its grievances against South Africa.⁶⁹

Differentiation, Poverty and Class Formation

Despite the orthodox view of a "remarkably equitable" distribution of income between rural households,⁷⁰ there is recent evidence of considerable inequality in Lesotho.⁷¹ Rather than review it here, I draw attention to two general points which are necessary to understand in order to evaluate this evidence and to identify the poor, as a pre-requisite for effective intervention.

The first point is that farm incomes in Lesotho are to a large extent derived from the investment of migrant earnings. Observers often assume that migrants undertake employment in South Africa in order to *supplement* their income from livestock and domestic agriculture. The myth of "subsistence" farming dies hard. It is true that the failure of agricultural production to meet subsistence needs is an index of aggregate dependence on the export of labour. On the other hand, under prevailing conditions of population pressure and farming technology, effective cultivation depends on the availability of male and female labour and on the use of intensive methods: the hire of oxen or a tractor, the purchase of seed and fertilizer.⁷² The most common difficulty rural households face in agriculture is a scarcity of labour or of capital inputs in the form of cash, equipment or animal traction. Migrants also invest their savings in livestock. Thus farming is not conducted independently of a regular cash income. The implication of this is that migrant earning capacity, rather than farm income, must be viewed as the independent variable in assessing the manner in which individual households dispose their resources.⁷³

The second point follows from this. Rural households vary in size and demographic composition. The identification and comparison of "richer" and "poorer" households must allow for the fact that these variables affect both household consumption requirements and migrant earning capacity. This means that what anthropologists call the developmental cycle of the household – the way in which its size and composition change through time – must be built into any explanation

of observed differences in income and wealth between rural households.⁷⁴ Life histories help to reveal the way in which strategies vary with phase in the developmental cycle; above all, with the presence, absence and relative size of an income from migrant labour.⁷⁵ There appears to be an approximate correlation between household size, migrant earning capacity and domestic productive capacity (crops and livestock). About one quarter of rural households have meagre domestic resources and very little access to migrant earnings. These households have two outstanding characteristics: they are small and they are female-headed.

These two points together explain why the class position of villagers in Lesotho is problematic. They occupy different class positions both simultaneously and serially.⁷⁶ They do so *simultaneously* because rural household members distribute their energies and resources between (a) employment in the formal sector, mainly outside Lesotho; (b) the informal sector at home; (c) the domestic economy based on agriculture and livestock; and (d) unemployment at home, on account of the "natural" surplus of labour and also the systematic extrusion of large numbers of "redundant" African from the South African economy in a time of severe economic recession. They occupy different class positions *serially* because constraints and opportunities vary with phase in the temporal processes of household aggregation and dissolution. It follows that differentiation in Lesotho must be analyzed with reference *both* to the developmental cycle of the rural household *and* to the contradictory forces of capitalist accumulation as they apply to the labour reserve.

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2. A.C.A. van der Wiel, *Migratory Wage Labour, Its Role in the Economy of Lesotho*, Maseru 1977, p.16.
3. Annual Statistical Bulletin 1978, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, p.78.
4. Van der Wiel, *op. cit.*, p.88
5. *Kingdom of Lesotho Second Five Year Development Plan 1975/76–1979/80* (SFYDP—, Government Printer, Maseru, Volume I, p.xi.
6. *1970 Census of Agriculture Report*, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, 1972, p.9.
7. D. Hobart Houghton, for example, the author of a standard text *The South African Economy* O.U.P. 1973 (Third edition), discusses the differences between "market-oriented" (white) farming, characterized by a "scientific and experimental" approach, and "subsistence" (black) farming, characterized by a "traditional" approach, as "so great that they cannot conveniently be treated together", p.46. On the contrary, the differences are best explained in terms of generous political support and capital provision made available by the state to white farmers and in terms of specific political and economic discrimination by the state against black farmers, cf. F. Wilson, *The Oxford History of South Africa* (OHSA), Volume II, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, Chapter III. Because it raises questions about the validity of conventional wisdom, it is interesting to note, for what it is worth, the following comparison between maize productivity in Lesotho and that of white farmers in South Africa over the years 1950–1970, expressed in 100 kgs. per hectare.

	White farmers ^a	Lesotho ^b
1950	7,4	11,9
1960	9,1	7,4
1970	11,9	5,2

Sources a. Houghton, *op cit.*, p.267;
 b. Table 2 above.

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9. J.C. Williams, Problems and Prospects of the economic development of agriculture in Lesotho, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Natal, 1970, p.251.
- 10 S. Wallman, "Conditions of Non-Development: The Case of Lesotho", *Journal of Development Studies* 8, 2, 1972, p.260
- 11 S. Wallman, "The Modernization of Dependence: a further note on Lesotho", *Journal of Southern African Studies (JSAS)* 3, 1, October 1979, pp.105 - 6.
- 12 For examples of this evidence and further references, see M. Wilson, OHSa Volume II, Chapter II; F. Wilson, *op cit.*; R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, Heinemann 1977; and C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the Southern African Peasantry*, Heinemann 1979.
- 13 The principal sources are CB; the Cape Parliamentary Papers (1871-1874); the *Colonial Annual Reports* on Basutoland (CARs) in British Parliamentary Papers (1882-1919) and in Colonial Office publications (1920-1965); Sir Alan Pim, *Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland*, Cmnd. 4907, London: HMSO, 1935; *Basutoland, Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland: Report of an Economic Survey Mission* (chairman Chandler Morse), London: HMSO, 1960; and recent statistical material available in the Bureau of Statistics, Maseru. I am also indebted to the following three persons who have recently worked on Lesotho's economic history: Roger Leys, "Lesotho: Non-Development or Under-Development, Towards an analysis of the political economy of the labour reserve", in T.M. Shaw and K. Heard (eds.), *The Politics of Africa: Dependence and Development*, Longman and Dalhousie University Press 1979 (written in 1974); Paul Spray, "A Tentative Economic History of Lesotho from 1830", mimeo, University of Sussex; and Judy Kimble, "Aspects of the Economic History of Lesotho, 1830-85", paper presented to the History Workshop at the National University of Lesotho, July 1976.
- 14 cf. P.B. Sanders, *Moshoeshe, Chief of the Sotho*, Heinemann 1975, pp. 306-7.
- 15 S.B. Burman, *The Justice of the Queen's Government, The Cape's Administration of Basutoland 1871-1884*, Leiden: Afrikastudiecentrum 1976, pp. 42-46.
- 16 C.B, p. 319
- 17 CB, p. 322
- 18 CB, p. 319
- 19 Burman, *op cit.*, p. 46
- 20 Kimble, *op cit.*, pp. 1-9
- 21 CB, p.326
- 22 E.H. Ashton, *The Basuto*, O.U.P for the International African Institute, 1952, p.162.
- 23 cf. G. Arrighi, "Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia", in G. Arrighi and J. Saul, *Essays in the Political Economy of Africa*, Monthly Review Press 1973.
- 24 *Doctor to Basuto Boer and Briton 1877-1906*, Memoirs of Dr Henry Taylor, Cape Town: David Philip, 1972, p.44.
- 25 Kimble, *op cit.*, p.16
- 26 D. Hobart Houghton and J. Dagut (eds.), *Source Material on the South African Economy 1860-1970*, Volume I, O.U.P. 1972, p.226; CB. pp.466-7.
- 27 Spray, *op cit.*
- 28 CB, p. 469
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- 31 CAR 1896/7
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- 36 CAR 1906/7
- 37 CAR 1908/9
- 38 CB, p.480
- 39 CAR 1892/3
- 40 CAR 1902/3
- 41 F. Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines 1911-1969* (LSAGM), Cambridge 1972, p.4
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- 48 F. Wilson, OHSa Volume II, p.142
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- 51 Pim report; Norse report; G.M.E. Leistner, *Lesotho: economic structure and growth*, Pretoria 1966; D.V. Cowen, "Land Tenure and Economic Development in Lesotho", *South African Journal of Economics*, March 1967; J.C. Williams, *Lesotho: Land Tenure and Economic Development*, Pretoria 1972. Critics of the system of land tenure often fail to appreciate its historical importance as a means of preventing further territorial encroachment and as a means of assuring the basic means of livelihood to all those who recognized the political authority of the Basotho chiefs.
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disadvantage to some extent, through "bonus" incentives to skilled migrants to return to the same employer and, especially at a time of massive recession, through an effective ban on the recruiting of unskilled labour.

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72 The costs of fuel and fertilizer are of course directly related to the price of oil. It is the "peasants" in Lesotho and the South African Bantustans who, far from being "cushioned" against rapid inflation by a "subsistence" livelihood, suffer the full effects of the international crisis of capital.

73 The proportion of mean rural household income derived from migrants' earnings was estimated as 43 per cent in 1970, 59 per cent in 1974 and 70 per cent in 1976. These estimates are not directly comparable: for sources, see Murray, *op cit.*, p. 132.

74 Murray, *op cit.*; Spiegel, *op cit.*

75 Spiegel, *ibid.*

76 For the same point in relation to Botswana, see D. Cooper, National Migration Study Working Papers 1 and 2, Central Statistics Office, Gaborone, March and June 1979.