

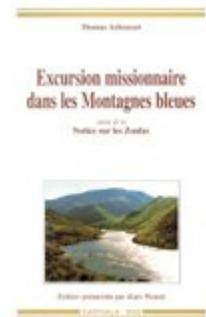
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Thomas Arbousset. *Excursions missionnaires dans les Montagnes bleues suivie de la Notice sur les Zoulas*. Paris: Karthala; Johannesburg: Institut français d'Afrique du Sud, 2000. 209 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-84586-048-3.

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We owe Alain Ricard the rediscovery of this 1840 day-to-day account of the remarkable ride that King Moshesh (or Moshoeshoe) and young Frenchman Thomas Arbousset took to the Orange springs, north of Lesotho. At that time, Arbousset had been living in Lesotho for seven years. He arrived in 1833 as a 23-year-old missionary from the Societe des Missions Evangeliques de Paris. He had two companions: Eugene Casalis, a year younger, and Constant Gosselin, ten years older, a carpenter and mason turned missionary. Why did they choose Lesotho, mountainous, hard to access, occupied by cattle herders, and isolated from the changes brought in the Cape Colony by Boer and British presence? The three youngsters justify themselves clearly and repeatedly: in Lesotho, they were the only Europeans, nicknamed "Moshesh's Whites," and under no other authority other than his own. They trusted that their work would thus be preserved from what they felt was the polluting touch of the colonizer.

Arbousset was not only a missionary: a polyglot and linguist, he mastered French, Oc (from his native place of Pignan, Hérault—south of France), Arabic, Dutch, German, English, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. He learned Sotho, a language for which he helped to create a written form by translations of both Biblical psalms and Sotho poems. He understood Tswana and bits of Zulu. As Alain Ricard underlines, "il ne croyait pas que la connaissance du français constituait l'accès à une catégorie supérieure du savoir humain [he did not believe that mastering French would enable him to access a higher level of human knowledge]" (p. 61). Also, he was a well-trained and enthusiastic amateur botanist, geologist, and natural scientist. That is to say, he was able to understand and

record what he saw and heard, in contrast to many Europeans, mooching around Africa and hailed as "sources." Arbousset had explored before (February to April 1836) the Maluti Mountains. The Mont-aux-Sources still bears the name he chose. But this journey, of which an account was published in 1842, did not take him to the Orange springs. He still wanted to travel around the mountains and survey the springs.

From Moshesh's point of view, the deadly and destructive wars (*lifaqane*) generated by the Zulu conquests were just over. He had welcomed and organized refugees from diverse backgrounds. For strategic reasons, he thought it necessary to check these highlands and their caves where cattle thieves took cover. Moreover, it was the place of his youth, before his family was forced to flee because of the war, and he wished to see the land of his ancestors. Arbousset and Casalis described Moshesh as a broad-minded, peace-loving man, also a smart politician and remarkable orator. He never converted to Christianity but listened carefully to the sermons of "his" whites and to the changes they wished to introduce into Sotho society. He often accompanied them, publicly commented on the day's homily and himself preached for the end of perceived "old-fashioned" customs. He strongly supported Arbousset's exploration project: "comme je (le) mentionnai au roi des Bassoutos ... il me repondit que lui aussi aimerait à faire le voyage avec moi et bien examiner de ses yeux une riviere dont les sources se trouvent à notre porte, et que personne, meme dans le pays, n'avait encore vues, à l'exception de quelques chasseurs, qui ne savaient en rien dire de précis [As I mentioned [it] to the king of the Sothos, he answered me that he'd wanted to travel with me and see

with his own eyes a river, whose springs are at our very door, but no one had ever seen them, in the country, with the only exception of a few hunters whose accounts are not reliable]" (p. 71).

On the February 15, 1840, the party left the capital city: "notre caravane n'était pas peu nombreuse. Elle se composait en tout de 26 cavaliers, 50 chevaux, 7 boeufs de somme charges de munitions de bouche ou de chasse; trois hommes les conduisaient. Trois excellents guides nous avaient precedes avec leur meute [our caravan was not small. 26 riders, 50 horses, 7 oxen laden with food and ammunition composed it; three men were leading them. Three excellent guides were preceding the caravan with their pack]" (p. 74). Moshesh and two of his sons led the party. Two other whites, British workers—one of them a deserter from the British army—asked to join the group. The region was unsafe: the company had to protect itself against lions and defend at night its otherwise free horses. Men were also a danger as lifaqane-related hunger had led to cannibalism: escapees, among them cannibals, sparsely occupied this once populated region.

The respective roles of Moshesh and Arbousset were well defined: "Persuade que la religion des chretiens si stricte et inflexible dans sa nature, pourrait parfois etre prise pour morose par ces peuples ... je commencai ce voyage avec la ferme resolution d'ecouter Moshesh et de lui obeir en tout ce qui a trait a la marche, a nos chasses et a une foule d'autres choses semblables, comme l'un de ses plus humbles sujets [As I believed that the Christian religion, so strict and inflexible in its very nature, could be perceived as dull by these people, I embarked on my journey with the firm resolution to listen to Moshesh and to obey him in all things related to riding, hunting and many other similar things, as the most humble of his subjects]" (p. 124). In return, said Arbousset, "en general il me cede dans les choses essentielles qui sont de mon ressort [He generally gives me precedence for the essential things regarding my mission]" (p. 124). Arbousset's concerns are the Morning Prayer at dawn and the evening one after the meal as well as the Sunday service—the journey is interrupted for the whole day. To organize the celebration—for the party and the local people, be they cannibals—he carefully chooses a bucolic and impressive setting such as a vast cave: "un temple prepare par la nature, pour le service de son auteur [a temple prepared by Nature for the service of its Maker]" (p. 133), he enthusiastically described. Sometimes, their walls are "couvertes de portraits d'antilopes peints en noir, en blanc et en rouge [covered with antelope paintings, in black, white and red]" (p. 134).

In spite of the few dangers encountered, the journey is full of pleasures. Arbousset hunts with his companions and takes part in the collective tasks: "vers la chute du jour, nous dessellames au pied d'une immense roche, ou fut etabli notre campement. Nous avions quitte le voisinage des betes ferocest; mais sans etre surs pour cela de n'en pas trouver d'autres ici. Plusieurs plans de surete furent debattus. Apres avoir eleve en pierres une petite muraille derriere laquelle la compagnie devait passer la nuit, on parla des chevaux. L'opinion prevalente etait que nous devions les tous attacher pres de la roche a quelques buissons qui s'y trouvaient, et leur donner des herbages a manger. Aussitôt tout le monde sans exception s'arma de couteaux, de sagaies, et nous nous mimes a scier de l'herbe. Il aurait fallu voir ces trente a quarante hommes que nous etions, repandus dans la vallee, tous courbes vers la terre, ramassant du fourrage [at sunset we unsaddle next to a huge rock and established our camp. We had left the vicinity of savage animals but feared the presence of others. We discussed several safety plans. After building a small wall of stone to defend the company during the night, we debated the case of the horses. The prevailing opinion was to attach them all to bushes nearby and feed them. Everyone without exception took immediately knives and assegais and we started to saw the grass. It was quite a spectacle: 30 to 40 men, spread in the valley, bent low and gathering hay]" (p. 122). Arbousset also practices his favorite hobbies. He botanizes: "Je remarquai deux especes de lis, extremement blancs et vermeils. Le plus beau est appele par les naturels *telerimero* [I noticed two species of lys, extremely white and vermeil. The Natives call *telerimero* the most beautiful of them]" (p. 120); he immediately thinks of a possible use for this word in "la traduction de passages de la Bible qu'on souffre a tant affaiblir par l'introduction d'un mot etranger a la langue des indigenes, ce qui a ete le cas pour nous jusqu'a present [translation of excerpts from the Bible, for which we suffer when we deeply weaken the Native language by introducing a foreign term; something we have done until now]" (p. 120). He takes a real interest in medicinal plants used by *lingakas* (pl. of *ngaka*) and calls them "empirical doctors," a term devoid of all prejudice. He gathers rock crystals and other stones. He detects gypsum layers "dont les missionnaires pourraient tirer un excellent parti [that the missionaries could exploit], and the presence of lignite (p. 85). As for Moshesh, he recalls during the journey the history of the places they visit, places of his childhood, and the unhappy wars led by the BaSothos against their Matebele and Mantatee adversaries.

The two men hold long conversations, with other companions, especially on Sunday. They take place after the service that Moshesh likes to comment on. Arbousset is keen not to deprive his companions from a chance to express their views and uses his knowledge of the Sotho language to reproduce these conversations carefully. These lively exchanges are where the attraction of the book lies. The way the missionaries transcribed Sotho was once debated. “Après que les gens du village se furent retirés, Moshesh entama avec moi une longue conversation sur le *sessouto*. Ma langue, disait naïvement le chef, est pourtant bien belle! Nous ne la connaissons sous ce rapport que depuis que nous la voyons écrite. Grâce aux petits livres des missionnaires elle ne s’alterera pas: la voilà écrite: oh! votre papier; ce papier arrange tout bien.—Ici j’eclatai de rire en entendant le chef, auquel je fis observer qu’il ne manquait pas de taches dans ce papier si admire. Il répondit qu’il l’avait aussi remarqué; mais que ces taches pouvaient se laver au savon de l’étude: les taches ne sont pas le linge poursuivi; et puis je ne vois encore que des mots à changer, parce qu’ils sont *setlapi*; ma langue reste ma langue dans le papier [When the village people withdrew, Moshesh discussed with me the Sesotho language. My language is so beautiful, he said naively! But we know it as such only because we now see it written. Thanks to the small books of the missionaries, it won’t change: it is written: Oh, that paper of yours, it is really convenient. Hearing the chief, I laughed and observed that the so admired paper was quite dirty. He answered that he had noticed that, but that these stains could be washed with the soap of study; spots are not linen, he added, and I only see words to be changed, because they are *setlapi*; my language stays mine on the paper.]” (p. 106). Moshesh’s words are not innocent: in a footnote, Alain Ricard explains that the first written Tswana dialect was *thlaping* and the Lesotho missionaries tried to suppress *thlaping* terms with a different Sotho meaning. Apparently, some of them were left.

He is sometimes ironic and makes fun of Arbousset: as a calf had just been skinned and roasted, “Moshesh, toujours plein d’appétit, mordait brusquement sur ces mets favoris: le morceau entre les dents, et dans la main un tronçon de lance pour couper le morceau pendant, il me demandait si le goût des Bechouanas ne valait pas celui des Mafra (les Français), et la fraise de veau nos gigots de mouton? [Moshesh, always with a hearty appetite, bit sharply in his favorite meal: the bite of meat between his teeth and a short assegai in his hand to cut the pending piece, he asked me if the Bechuana taste was not as good as the Mafia’s (the French), and calf’s

caul our leg of mutton]” (p. 129). Moshesh, explains Arbousset, is a tribal chief. “Riche de douze à quinze mille bêtes à cornes, rien ne l’empêche d’égorgé dix boeufs à la fois quand il veut: le missionnaire, moins opulent, se contente de tuer de loin en loin un mouton pris dans la petite bergerie; il ne peut pas souvent avoir du boeuf, mais ce n’est pas à dire qu’il l’aimait tout aussi bien: la piquante ironie du prince mossouto n’a-t-elle pas plus d’un sens? [He owns twelve to fifteen thousand cattle heads and can slaughter ten oxen at a time when he so wishes: the less opulent missionary has to content himself with a mutton taken from time to time from the small sheepfold; he can’t have beef very often, but likes it every bit as well. Maybe the sharp irony of the Mosotho prince has several levels?]” (p. 130).

History, the uncertainty of the human condition, and the quest for truth are the main subjects of Moshesh’s philosophical thinking. “Le mensonge est partout, s’écria brusquement Moshesh, et la vérité nulle part: d’où vient cela? —La vérité, repartis-je, j’ai entendu dire que les hommes l’avaient reléguée au fond d’un puits. Ce conte amusa singulièrement le roi des Bassoutos qui parla savamment, j’ose assurer, sur plusieurs questions abstruses, ainsi qu’il se plaît à le faire quelques fois. Il dit par exemple, en propres termes: il y a dans l’homme un tendon de vérité, tout le reste est mensonge, tel un arbre desséché dans toutes ses parties, à l’exception d’une branche encore verte” [Lie is everywhere, cried Moshesh, and truth nowhere: why? I heard that truth has been relegated by men to the bottom of a well, I answered. This tale amused the king of the Basothos and I daresay he spoke wisely of many an abstruse question, as he sometimes likes to do. For instance, he said in his own words: there is in man a sinew of truth, the rest is lie, as a dry tree except for a single, still green, branch]” (p. 88). Nowhere is any arrogance to be found in Arbousset’s writing, or even self-importance. Two worlds meet through a young man from Europe and a king from the south of Africa, both strongly attached to their respective cultures. A true dialogue takes place.

This book also contains very useful footnotes and an enlightening introduction by Alain Ricard. One can only agree when he deplores the oblivion into which remarkable texts have sunk such as this one or the “Relation d’un voyage d’exploration au nord est de la Colonie du Cap de Bonne-Espérance” (1842, no new edition). At the time, says Ricard, their travel writing did not fit with the norms of the genre. Today, their authors are not seen as professional anthropologists, and their missionary origin is very much held against them. When will Eugene

Casalis's *Les Bassoutos* be edited by an anthropologist, with notes and commentaries?

Casalis, Jacottet and Ellenberger's scholarly work on Sotho language and oral literature suffer the same prejudice. Ricard argues: "Their translations dealt with idioms without any existing grammar in French. While everybody translated folktales, these missionaries came up with poetry and epic—and everyone knows that people without rhyme have no epic... This abysmal stupid-

ity has influenced literary studies and partially explains the oblivion of their scientific production. But it rightly belongs to Africanist philology and to the study of languages and literatures" (p. 59). Let me add that the scientific part of these missionaries' work has not been promoted either by the Missionary Society itself (now DE-FAP): in a recent tribute, it almost exclusively presented how its former members accomplished their mission of evangelization.

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