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A Colonial Crisis or Conspiracy?

A “moral crisis” gripped Lesotho in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as a rash of *liretlo*, or medicine murders, supposedly carried out by the highest chiefs in the land became the focal point of events in the colony. Medicine murder involved the cutting of flesh from living victims before killing them in order make medicine that would increase one’s political power. These murders transpired during a period of heightened anxiety stemming from disputes over succession regarding who would be regent for the young paramount chief and over colonial reforms and the possible incorporation of Lesotho into South Africa. The murders and the subsequent trials and convictions, which led to the hanging of two of the most prominent chiefs in the land, became so politically sensitized that many Basotho saw the whole affair as part of a British conspiracy to hand the colony over to South Africa. In *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: The Anatomy of a Moral Crisis*, Colin Murray and Peter Sanders set out to explore one of the most controversial and disturbing subjects in Lesotho’s history. Making extensive use of court records and other archival material, the authors seek to explore whether these so-called medicine murders did in fact take place, whether there really was a significant increase in the 1940s, and what may have caused any increase.

Relying on missionary accounts and Basotho testimony, the authors demonstrate the existence and cultural basis for medicine murder before the 1940s. The Basotho strongly believed in the power of medicines to protect themselves from enemies or to provide good fortune. Although nineteenth-century accounts do not mention that the Basotho took flesh from living victims, they do reveal that the Basotho took flesh from fallen enemies on the battlefield to make medicine. The first recorded case of flesh being cut from a living victim for the purpose of making medicine comes from 1895. The authors in part attribute this shift to the absence of war accompanying the introduction of colonial rule. Thus, one could conclude that the medicine murders of the 1940s did not emerge out of nowhere, but rather had roots in Basotho beliefs and practices.

Having demonstrated that the practice existed at least since the beginning of the century, the authors turn their attention to the question of whether there really was a significant increase of the practice in the late 1940s. The official narrative, put forward by the colonial government, placed blame for the murders on the Basotho chieftainship. The authors examine in detail the 1954 report of G. I. Jones and the writing of Hugh Ashton regarding the causes for the increase of medicine murders. They use a numerical breakdown of the actual cases to demonstrate that much of the conventional thinking regarding the “rash” of murders during this time was misguided. Jones blamed the administrative reforms of 1938 and 1946, which altered the power of chiefs, as being the primary cause for the spike in medicine murder. However, the authors, employing a statistical breakdown, reveal that the high percentage of powerful chiefs compared to lesser chiefs and headmen (who were more severely impacted by the reforms), who were instigators
of these murders, suggests that the colonial reforms were not the primary cause. Sanders and Murray concede that Government reforms played a role in the tragic events of the 1940s; however, they view it as far less important than Jones had. Rather, they posit that it was the battle of medicine horns between Bereng and Mantsebo for the regency that initiated the wave of murders.

The authors address two conspiracy theories that have been put forward which implicate, to varying degrees, the colonial government’s involvement in creating the “crisis.” Because the Basotho view chiefs as a central component of their culture, accusing them of these crimes and hanging two of the most prominent chiefs in Lesotho in 1949 sparked a backlash among the Basotho. Within a matter of a few years, many Basotho went from accepting the government’s explanation for the murders to endorsing Josiel Lefela’s belief that it was a colonial conspiracy designed to undermine the chieftainship in order to pave the way for Lesotho’s incorporation into South Africa. The authors refute the idea that the British wanted to weaken the chieftainship. In fact, they argue that the British wanted to strengthen the chieftainship because they saw the chiefs as necessary for their soil conservation plans. One of the issues explored is whether the police were guilty of abusing suspects in order to manufacture their testimony against the chiefs. This was one of the main points put forward by those who claimed that medicine murder was a colonial creation to undermine the chieftainship. The authors seem to argue that what the police did was more akin to theater and dismiss the notion of any colonial conspiracy or any abuse on the part of the police. Their argument that no record of illegal activities was uncovered or that such behavior was beneath the British colonial service is not particularly compelling. The other conspiracy which the authors dispute is Elizabeth Eldredge’s claim that the British were partially responsible for the wave of murders because they supported the Queen Regent, Mantsebo, whom they knew to be committing such murders.[1]

Although the authors raise some valid critiques of Eldredge’s theory, some of their own evidence seems to give at least some credence to the notion that the British protected Mantsebo.

The hysteria surrounding medicine murder declined in the late 1950s; however, according to the authors, this had little to do with a decline in its incidence. Of particular interest here is the authors’ supposition that the crisis ended not because of a decline in occurrence, but rather due to the administration’s declining interest and Lesotho’s movement towards independence, which weakened the importance of the chieftainship. In their conclusion, Sanders and Murray argue that the struggle between Mantsebo and Bereng for the Regency in an atmosphere of political insecurity caused by British reforms sparked the crisis of the 1940s. The crisis that ensued stemmed from the involvement of senior chiefs and was exacerbated by the British efforts to suppress it. Thus, these factors generated the “moral crisis” of the time more than any upsurge in the prevalence of medicine murder.

The five case studies interspersed through the first half of the book rely heavily on the court records to provide a detailed account of five different murders and the subsequent trials. The authors selected these five cases because they provide important insight into the larger questions about medicine murder that the authors explore. These detailed accounts provide a rich texture and allow the reader to gain a greater feel for the events transpiring in Lesotho during this time.

This work provides a compelling analysis of one of the most troubling moments in Lesotho’s history. The authors made excellent use of archival material and found unique ways of using that evidence to support their arguments. However, at times, this book seems to rely heavily on colonial documents and opinion, and does not fully present how the Basotho interpreted these events. There are several instances in which the authors recount their visits to Basotho who were connected to the events of the 1940s; although they supply very nice physical descriptions, they provide little of substance from their conversations.

Note


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