

Death of a Kingdom in the Sky

The Sunday World, May 2006

by Kim Haughton

Palesa's smile is beautiful. The bright teenager beams in her school photograph which hangs on the wall of her Maseru home. It's the first thing you see when you walk through the front door. However, nobody is smiling on this sun drenched winter morning because the 15 year old is lying in state, her white casket, filling the sombre living room.

In the days leading up to her funeral, Palesa's family were very busy. Her father was overseeing the construction of her tomb at the nearby Thibella graveyard where she would be laid to rest. Her uncle was busy too, sourcing a cow and a ewe for slaughter, a local tradition and a mark of respect. Neighbours helped to erect two huge tents in the garden to house the 400 mourners who were expected to arrive for the funeral service.

The unfortunate ox looked happy in Palesa's garden, chewing the cud, oblivious to his impending fate. Traditionally, when a female family member dies, a heifer must be slaughtered. This is why Palesa's uncle and her father, together with the man from the abattoir are wrestling with a reluctant ewe, passing her under the legs of an even more reluctant ox. This, according to the family, will change the sex of the ox from male to female. Only then, can it be killed.

The animals will then be butchered and cooked outdoors over open fires. The meat is fed to guests following the burial. Attendance at funerals is high. For some in this poverty stricken land, it is a rare opportunity to eat meat.

But Lesotho is running out of cows. They are slaughtering too many, they are burying too many of their people.

The funeral has become a part of life, just like going to church or to the market for food in the tiny kingdom of 2 million people. On Saturdays, people wake up to another assortment of coloured tents peppered around their grieving villages. Ask a Basotho what they did at the weekend and it is likely that they have attended a funeral.

The huge increase in deaths in Lesotho over the past 10 years has been largely due to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Approximately 29,000 people died of HIV/AIDS in 2003, representing almost 1.5% of the population (MSF). This figure shows no sign of decreasing. If the death rate continues at this level, Lesotho could become unsustainable as a nation by 2025 (according to BBC report)

Totally surrounded by South Africa, Lesotho has the third highest HIV prevalence in the world. With 29% of adults infected, it comes only after Botswana and Swaziland and is the poorest of the three. According to the WHO and UNAIDS, around 360,000 adults and children in Lesotho have HIV/AIDS. This would be like three quarters of a

million people in Ireland having the disease, or, put another way, the entire population of Connaught, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan combined.

People pay their funeral expenses in advance, on a weekly or monthly basis. The funeral homes act like insurance companies offering people to sign up to certain packages depending on their age profile etc. New funeral businesses are mushrooming up all over the country and funeral adverts cover pages in local newspapers and magazines.

With such a massive increase in deaths, funerals have become big business. The funeral industry is now believed to be Lesotho's third largest industry after textiles and the civil service. A funeral normally costs between one and two years salary (€1500-€3000), a fortune by local standards.

In the capital Maseru, on a hill near the king's palace, a massive new private home is being built. This belongs to the owner of MKM, the largest and most successful funeral provider in Lesotho. Their rivals, Lesotho Funeral Services say that MKM attract their customers by pretending to give discounts but the customer actually pays more in the end. It is a cut-throat industry and there is no doubt that a small minority are getting very rich from Lesotho's increasing death rate due to HIV/AIDS epidemic.

While there is a huge stigma and lack of acceptance attached to having AIDS, there is a strange and practical acceptance of death as a part of daily life. People in Lesotho are effectively living to die. Living involves daily, weekly and monthly preparations for untimely death. The current life expectancy at birth in Lesotho is thirty-four years.

If you are lucky to live to the age of seventy however, you receive a government pension of €20 per month. In Mohale's Hoek district, a 73 year old pensioner keeps her funeral receipts carefully folded in a little black purse under her suitcase. Out of her meagre €20, she pays €14 to a burial society to cover her funeral expenses and those of her daughter. She has to labour in the fields and grows maize to make ends meet as she has her four grandchildren to feed. Their parents died of AIDS.

With funerals becoming increasingly lavish and expensive, not all families can afford to pay. According to Nanki Mohasi, stock controller with Lesotho Funeral Services in Maseru, there are 35 unclaimed bodies lying in her fridges. The funeral home will eventually bury these unclaimed bodies in mass graves with financial help from local government who will provide the plot.

Mostly, they are the bodies of those who have died of AIDS related illnesses. Too embarrassed and ashamed to admit that a loved one has died of AIDS, families dump the bodies at the local police station or even outside the funeral homes as Nanki has witnessed.

It is common for those in the final stages of AIDS to be left alone in their rondavels (round houses) to die. Like Sello Motebang, age 40 in the rural district of Mokhotlong. When social workers Mamaketekete and Matankisao pull the latch on the door to his tiny mud house to see how he is, they expect the worst. He is still alive, but only just. He no longer eats and is too weak to get up on his feet. He has only ever been to a traditional doctor who treated his chronic diarrhoea and dramatic weight loss

with African potato and vulture tree leaves. The two women come to wash him and light a fire to keep him warm are also trained to clean corpses of those who have died from AIDS related illness in a safe way and prepare the bodies for the funeral.

In Lesotho, it appears, an entire country is on the brink of collapse. What happens to a nation when its schools have no trained teachers? What happens to the hospitals of that country when they run out of qualified nursing staff? What happens to the crops in the fields when there is no men to reap the harvests? What happens to the AIDS-orphaned children?

Palesa didn't die of AIDS. Her family had sent her to South Africa for a better education. She wanted to be an accountant like her sister who is in college in Pretoria. Palesa was part of Lesotho's 'brain drain' problem, similar to that which befell Ireland in the grim 1980's when unemployment was high and job prospects were low. Qualified professionals and bright young students are moving to their bigger and more prosperous neighbour for a better life. So, while AIDS is killing a significant portion of the population, emigration is claiming so many more.

'Palesa', her name means flower. "Why God", her mother asks "did you have to take my little flower, why did you have to take one of ours" Why, we may ask, so many people from this beautiful little kingdom in the sky?

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