

The Herdboys of the Highlands

Last Summer, Ailbhe Keogan travelled to Lesotho to meet with herdboys as research for a planned documentary. She soon discovered that her contextual understanding of herdboy culture in Basotho history was wrong.

The little boy in the red wellies and dirty t-shirt pulled down his ragged shorts and started to piss against a fence. Then he turned to face me in full flow, as I sat, reading in the Lesotho morning sun. He smiled. It was innocence abloom. He wanted nothing more than to share this early morning pleasure with me. He pissed in my direction. We laughed. He finished and as he fixed himself, he noticed a dark wet patch on his shorts. Spillage. He tutted to himself softly. An old man in a three-year-old's body. He picked up a dry sheaf of corn he found on the dusty ground and started to rub at the wet patch. It stubbornly refused to be wiped away. Instead, the dust left its mark. He looked mildly upset. He tutted again. My heart broke a fraction. It is understood that he cleaned his shorts for him and not for me. The Basotho people are proud by nature and tradition. Yet, like the little boy in the red wellies, Lesotho is a young nation that, despite its best intentions, is struggling to keep its best foot forward.

Lesotho is a small land-locked enclave, nestled high in the Drakensberg range of South Africa. Eighty percent of the country's landscape lies above 5,900 feet and most of the population live in remote mountain villages. The only real fertile land is situated in the West where oats, sorghum and wheat are harvested. In the rest of the country cattle are raised. The Lonely Planet guide calls Lesotho, 'an intriguing anomaly in a sea of modernity'. It is a fitting description. This proud little kingdom in the sky was born out of resistance to change. From its mountainous fortress, Lesotho successfully withstood the Boer invasions, the destructive forces of the difaque, the intent of colonial powers and the very real threat of being subsumed into their noisy South African neighbour to become an independent nation in 1966. Lesotho's progressive aspirations are reflected in the existence of a seemingly healthy democracy, complimented by government supported education and healthcare systems. These facts have ensured that this predominantly peaceful democracy receives regular and substantial injections of international aid. Yet the reality remains that it is a country struggling to find its place in the modern world. The AIDS

pandemic is a monstrous threat, there is little or no indigenous industry, soil erosion is rife, farming methods are antiquated, its existence is interminably linked to the fortunes of the bigger, more unstable South Africa and there is a significant schism of beliefs between those in the urban centres and those surviving in the mountainous rural landscape.

The little boy in the red wellies lives in a tiny rural village, high in the mountains, a village with no running water or electricity. We travelled for six hours on pony-back to get there, cajoled into the saddle by the intimation that we would find *real* herdboys aplenty. 'They might fight for you.' Mattias, our translator had said, his eyes wide with promise. He told us this because it is what we wanted to hear. It's true. We had come to Africa in search of Lesotho herdboys or boy shepherds. Documentary-maker, Mike Kelly of Feenish Productions, applied to the Simon Cumbers Media Challenge Fund, to finance a research trip to Lesotho. We wanted to make a documentary about herdboys. It was to be a relatively straight-forward affair, we thought, an ethnographic study of sorts. There would be footage of herdboys stick-fighting, taming bulls, running for cow's urine, stealing honey from hives, hunting porcupines, horse-racing but like many seemingly good ideas, it was derailed by our growing understanding that the preconceptions on which it was built were wrong. The herdboy lifestyle should not, as we'd previously imagined, be presented in isolation. Attempting to do so would render the narrative incomplete, wanting. We understood that herdboys were part of an ancient tradition of Sotho herdmanship. We were wrong.

The whole truth is more complicated. It asserts that whilst animals, especially cattle, were always highly prized by Lesotho society, they were not traditionally left in the charge of boys so young. Herdboys, it seems, were drafted into Lesotho culture by the forces of change in the early twentieth century; they were brought in to fill the vacuum left by the thousands of men who left Lesotho in search of work elsewhere, most commonly in the South African mines. Herdboys, we were told by Mashoe, an ex-herdboy and Lesotho's premier artist, are a distinctly modern phenomenon. Their story belongs, not to the Lesotho of the past, but to the Lesotho that exists today.

In the Summer of 2007, a successful Simon Cumbers application allowed us to travel to the enclave. Our initial destination was Malalea, a mountain village noted for its progressive tourist facilities, the most prominent being Malalea Lodge. A percentage of its income is given to the Malalea Civic Trust to improve conditions in

the community. We drove straight through Maseru, one of Lesotho's few cities and its capital, on the night of our arrival. We drove past the coming and goings of shadows at the border post, past the shanty-shops with their wanting wares, past the small groups of shuffling blankets, rubbing their hands over small street-side fires. It is cold in Lesotho. There was snow on the mountaintops throughout our entire trip. This fact, coupled with a historical nugget regarding King Moshoeshoe the Great's preferred dress code, explains why everyone you meet in Lesotho is wrapped in a big, thick blanket.

We drove on. Past the corrugated-iron huts and brick houses, past the signs for mobile phone services and Moonshine Liquor, past the 'AIDS is real' notice and the telling abundance of funeral home advertisements, past the churches and TV satellites, past abandoned car wrecks and agricultural machinery, past pawn shops and clinics, past the high schools and bus stops, past the last of the city lights and up into the mountain darkness before finally reaching the big, grass gates of Malalea Lodge.

The next day, Mick, the big, affable Englishman turned native and owner of the Lodge introduced us to some locals. A translator, Mattias, was found. The following day at breakfast, he told us he has found two herdboys willing to come meet us. We set off into the hills with our equipment. The muted tones of the drought-ridden countryside (2007 witnessed another poor harvest) were interrupted only by the bright coloured blankets we saw on the horizon. One of these blankets soon transformed itself into our first interviewee, a herdboy called Patl, a shy 16 year old, a little unsure of himself and our motives. We tried to reassure him that we wanted nothing more than to ask him a few questions. 'We want to find out about your life', we explained. He looked uncertain, his dog looked positively hostile. We clipped a small microphone to his dirty blanket. He laughed awkwardly. So did we. The dog didn't. We felt nervous. Mattias looked eagerly to us for the opening question. And so began the first of many interviews with the herdboys of Lesotho, the microphone perched incongruously on the edge of a dozen woolly blankets.

The Basotho blanket is one of the few possessions a herdboy can realistically lay claim to. It is usually accompanied by a pair of gumboots, a hat, a fighting stick, a obedient if savage dog and whatever animals a herdboy has managed to earn over his working life. A herdboy does not receive wages. A predominantly rural community with a relatively low-cash economy ensures that a successful herdboy is presented with an animal just once a year. These young shepherd boys are charged with

bringing the animals out to graze on whatever land they can find. This is a challenge in itself as most of the Lesotho land is dangerously over-grazed. Every year the herdboys spend an extended period in a *motebo*, a shoddily built structure that acts as an outpost high in the mountains, in temperatures that often fall below freezing.

The life of a herdboy is not an easy one. Physically, it is demanding. A herdboy, when talking of his time spent in the *motebo*, will inevitably tell you about the constant hunger pangs and the sharp chills. He will tell you about the long, boring days in the company of animals, the cruel bullying by the older boys, the slim chance he has of ever meeting and marrying an educated woman and the threat of lightning that hangs over his head. This is a genuine fear among the herdboys. It is a fear that, although wrapped in superstition, is founded in very real statistics. Death by lightning is a lot more common high in this mountainous land than it is elsewhere. In order to avoid the potential deadly bolt from the angry gods or evil witches, a herdboy will go to a witchdoctor prior to his spell in the *motebo* and have 'protection' medicine inserted into a small incision, often located on the forehead. If a herdboy is killed by lightning then his body is deemed spoiled goods and often buried outside of the village graveyard.

But if a herdboy tells you about the cold and the boredom and the hunger, he will also tell you about the male camaraderie he enjoys, the special relationship he nurtures with his animals, the fine horses he races, the friendly stick-fights he enjoys and the freedom of the mountains that he has rightfully earned. This freedom from the rules and regulations of the village is often celebrated by the herdboys. Sent into the fields at an early age, herdboys do not like being told what to do. The relationship with the animal owners is often strained yet its mutually-dependent nature ensures that it survives a lost animal or two. If a herdboy loses an animal, he risks receiving a beating or foregoing the animal he worked hard to earn that year. However, it is largely understood that animals do go missing through circumstance rather than neglect or malice. It is this understanding that enables a herdboy to slaughter an animal every now and then for food. 'If we didn't do this', one herdboy confessed, 'then we would never eat meat'.

The life of a herdboy is also emotionally taxing. Their existence is often a predominantly lonely one located at the periphery of Lesotho society. A herdboy is often viewed as a macho illiterate with few prospects by villagers who are scared of their skill with a stick and unimpressed by their fondness for dagga, a type of

cannabis. This view is not completely ungrounded. At times, the aggressive and anti-social behaviour of a herdboys in response to his perceived exclusion from Lesotho society means that herdboys, sadly, remain excluded. The cycle is self-perpetuating.

A herdboys relationship to formal education is an especially uneasy one. A herdboys aversion to authority is part of the reason why they find 'regular' school so difficult. This, coupled with the fact that their irregular attendance, due to shepherding responsibilities, leaves them behind in their studies. When we visited a secondary school in Morata, we saw a huge bulky figure stuffed in behind a small desk. He looked older than his classmates. And uncomfortable. He was not alone on this count. There were several older boys hidden in the back row. My heart broke a fraction. This mammoth figure might as well have been wearing red wellies. I smiled at him but he did not smile back.

There is a contentious gap between those called to duty at an early age by parents who either need the income or who are unwilling or unable to tend to the animals and those who get to avail of a full education. This gap is the cause of great resentment, both in and outside of herdboys circles. Brendan Shalvey, a Tralee man who spent two years teaching in Malalea, recounts an incident whereby a group of herdboys attacked and killed a uniformed boy on his way home from school. The motive seemed to be boredom and resentment.

In a herd boy's world, learned knowledge is forsaken for a different type of knowledge – that of the land and the animals. It is an ancient wisdom, learned young. This earthy knowledge stands in stark contrast to the book knowledge, peddled by the predominantly Christian schools. There seems to be a perceptible divide in the Lesotho people's belief. In one realm, there is the 'rural' system of beliefs, imbued with a drive to survive. It relies on land, animals, weather, witch doctors. In another realm, there is a more urbanised system of beliefs, imbued with a drive to progress. It relies on commerce, education, politics, a healthcare system. Both have their merits and like most societies, the realms of belief overlap. It is more a diffusion than a clean divide yet it is a divide nonetheless.

This divide was driven home in the back of a Toyota truck on the impossibly bumpy roads of Lebohang. We had just been to visit the smart and progressive Lebohang Morena Agricultural Project situated in the suburbs of Maputsoe, a busy border town. Locals, Tarcisius and Pascales, had used aid money to buy a much needed hammer mill and to build a grain storage facility. They had then negotiated a

deal with local landowners to grow corn on their land in return for a percentage of the yield. Despite, a very poor harvest, they talked excitedly about the potential income in the future. I asked them about government support initiatives and, in doing so, I opened the heavy doors to a political debate.

National elections in February 2007, returned the LCD (Lesotho Congress for Democracy) party for the third time. Tarcisius and Pascales, and indeed other community initiative leaders in the back of the truck, bemoaned this fact. They passionately dismissed them as ineffective and corrupt. 'They have little interest in helping the poor', they insisted. 'Is this belief widespread?' I asked. 'Yes', they said. 'Then who voted them back in', I asked, confused. I suggested the possible existence of a Lesotho middle class with vested interests. Tarcisius and Pascales shake their heads in unison. 'It is the people in the countryside', they told me, 'they are uninformed. They don't know about these things. They are happy with the pension the LCD give. 200R a month. Even South Africa government give 800R a month pension.' He sighed heavily. Like so many developing countries, there is no social welfare culture in Lesotho thus this pension seems like a gift to many. A lesser amount could have been equally well received by some.

This sentiment is echoed by a pharmacist we met at a party. 'The LCD are corrupt', he said. His pregnant wife agreed. She is an English teacher at the local high school. She cites Shakespeare and he is a proclaimed Rastafarian. They were the nearest thing to a liberal middle class we encountered. 'Who did you vote for?' I asked. 'The ABC', they both answered affirmatively. Proudly. Prior to the February 2007 elections, there was an increase in suspected politically motivated killings and assassination attempts. It was a time of heightened political activity and increased public and voter interest as a result of the emergence of new political parties and alliances, the ABC being the most significant.

As a quick aside, the ABC party is, in urban areas at least, the hope of the future. Many believe that the time of the LCD is over. Every ABC supporter we speak to about the February 2007 elections insist that, threatened, the LCD called the elections early on purpose so the ABC did not have time to canvass or reach the rural populations. But as the conclusion of the EISA Election Observer Mission maintains '[...] the Lesotho National Assembly Elections were conducted in a manner that, to a large extent, allowed the Basotho people to express their will freely, notwithstanding the challenges created by a 'snap' election.'

The Rastafarian pharmacist told me his government wages were so bad he was planning on going into the taxi business. He got distracted then by the music and the group of Lesotho men and women who gathered around the boom box to dance. The party was hosted by six Welsh women who were departing for home after a year spent teaching in nearby schools. 'I loved it all', one of Welsh women told me, slightly drunk, slightly emotional. 'I love the Lesotho people' she continued 'especially the kids. The AIDS is shit though and the way they beat the kids at school'. She asked me why I had come to Lesotho. I told her about the documentary, about the herdboys. She immediately asked about the initiation schools. I told her what I knew which wasn't much. In essence, the role of an initiation school is to facilitate a boy's passage into manhood. It is a place where grown men share their knowledge with those undergoing the rites of passage. I explained to her that the herdboys only told us superficial things. They told us about the songs they sang and the dances they learned. They also told us it was hard but often this remark is the one that drew the conversation to a close. I imagine a vow of silence has been taken by these young men. It is supposedly a place, where you learn how to be 'real' men, how to negotiate the female landscape. One Lesotho observer insisted that the initiation schools produce rapists not men. Whatever the mixed opinions of Lesotho society, it is understood by all that the tough love approach is preferred up in the mountain schools. It is said boys die there, trying to become men. They are commonly circumcised, in unsafe conditions, a single razor blade being used repeatedly.

The feral nature of the initiation schools lies in contrast to the 'civilised' nature of the predominantly Christian schools. Father Tim, an incredibly likeable Limerick priest who manages St. Luke's Mission in Maputsoe, told us that students are often sent home because they do not have the correct uniform or the right books. It is a fact that struck me also during my own research. In one illuminating 'herdboy' text, *Shepherd Boy of the Maloti* by Thabo Makoa, my indignation was set ablaze by the young herdboy's account of his school enforcing a two-colour shirt policy. This ensures that the student is forced to change his school shirt every second day. This system, seemed to me, to have been devised by people wholly unaware of, or indifferent to, the impoverished conditions many of their students endured at home. Some students were lucky to have one shirt, never mind two. I shared this story with Father Tim. He nodded. He told us a sad story then, about two young girls he caught trying to sell their 'wares' to a bus full of men in order to buy school books. Yet

despite the alleged 'beatings' and the strict rules, the Christian education system has succeeded in making Lesotho a predominantly literate nation. They have done this in conjunction with a series of governments who, on some level, share a general belief in education as a way up, a way out. A whopping 33% of the budget is spent on education. Literacy rates stand at 85%. Yet this seemingly just cause for optimism regarding the future of the nation is tempered by the existence of two massively corrosive forces at play in Lesotho society – namely unemployment and AIDS. Despite the high literacy rates and best of intentions, the truth is, that Lesotho, as it currently stands, holds little future for either the graduating students of the mainstream system or the herdboys of the initiation schools.

Lesotho is a country that has no real history of home grown industry outside of farming. It is true that the textile industry boomed for a while, orchestrated by the Asians, but this boom dipped severely and is only now just starting to even itself out again. Plus it is only of any real relevance to those living in urban areas, near the factories. It is not a real choice for the herdboys. They instead have to grapple with a severely over-farmed and eroded landscape or leave, like so many others before them, to work in the mines. At one time in Lesotho's recent history, 60% of Lesotho men worked abroad, most of them in South Africa. When I suggested tourism as a possible source of real income for Lesotho, Telo, the enlightened chairman of the Malalea Civic Trust, explained that tourism, indeed any local industry, must be developed in tight conjunction with South Africa. It is very true that the future of Lesotho, due to its geographical location, is inextricably tied up with the fortunes of its neighbour. 'People will only come to us if they come to South Africa', he said.

One example of a working partnership between South Africa and Lesotho is the Highland Water Project which sees Lesotho, successfully in the opinion of many, exporting its only natural resource – water- to South Africa. Unlike many African countries, Lesotho has no precious minerals but this, in fact, may be a blessing in disguise. As Robert Guest outlines in *The Shackled Continent*, precious minerals have sustained and been the cause of many brutal wars in Africa. Lesotho is lucky enough to have avoided war, civil or otherwise, in modern times.

Lesotho has another war to face instead. The spread of AIDS is the greatest threat this small country has to face if it is to flourish in the future. One in three Basotho people are infected with the disease. It is everywhere. I think of the beautiful butterfly hair clips we packed carefully for this journey. They remained untouched in

my bag for the whole trip. All the girls here have their heads shaved, a sign that they are in mourning. It is a simple fact that everyone has lost someone close to them to AIDS although many of these deaths will officially be put down to Tuberculosis due to the stigma attached to AIDS.

There are a number of reasons why Aids is so prevalent in Lesotho society. Polygamy is an acceptable part of Lesotho life. Most men have multiple partners. And modernity has ensured that women have seen fit to do likewise. This said, women do not leverage much power in Lesotho society despite their presence in government. In the domestic sphere, they carry out most of the work. Domestic violence against women is common, if not accepted by a large part of Lesotho society thus wives are often unable to refuse sex with a potentially HIV husband. It is considered his right and he is silently empowered to take his due. Lesotho men, be they husbands or not, rarely opt for the use of contraception. Condoms are interpreted as an affront to their masculinity. When we questioned the herdboys on their knowledge of AIDS and protection methods, they gave us the text book answers about wearing condoms and not having sex. But I wondered from their uncomfortable smiles if they really believed the official line or whether they conformed to the belief that real men don't wear condoms. This is a belief that was carried off to the mines with the armies of men that left to work. These men were usually housed up in single sex dorms, frequented by prostitutes. Often times the disease was, and still is, brought home to rural villages on a return trip. These attitudes and habits, combined with other misinformed superstitions, such as the disease itself is hidden at the bottom of condoms and the Roman Catholic ban on all contraception makes for a society that is deeply unprepared to fight the spread of AIDS. The government however, is not silent on the issue despite the fact that the subject is deeply taboo in Basotho culture. The government has formally declared a national state of emergency.

We visited a Zimbabwean doctor in his clinic in Maputsoe. When he heard we were from Ireland, he showed us the x-ray machine bought with Irish aid money before ushering us into his office to talk. He was eager to get his message out. Dr. Jesse is a man deeply concerned with Lesotho healthcare issues such as child malnutrition and AIDS. He is particularly vocal on the latter. Dr. Jesse believes that the published AIDS statistics are mere extrapolations. Most people refuse to take a HIV test despite it being free. The slogan of the ubiquitous 'Know Your Status' campaign goes widely ignored. Most people would rather just not know.

He asked us, as reporters and documentary makers, to highlight the government's preferred policy in relation to HIV testing. Currently, Lesotho currently endorses the WHO/UN approach. This approach, routed in human rights thinking, means that the '3 C's' are given primary importance. Testing of any individual must be testing of individuals must be *confidential*, accompanied by *counselling* and only conducted with informed *consent*.

Lesotho policy, although offering free HIV tests to all its citizens, relies on people wanting to know, on people volunteering. The policy tries to balance the "Right to Know" and the "Right to say No". Dr. Jesse believes this is a fool hardy approach. 'People just don't want to know', he insisted, 'but they should be made to know'.

Dr. Jesse is one of the growing numbers of public health authorities and policy-makers around the world calling on governments to modify or abandon the well established model of voluntary counselling and testing for HIV in favour of more practical models. Dr. Jesse cited Uganda as an example of a success story Lesotho could emanate. Dr. Jesse applauded the Ugandan government's decision to allow routine Routine Testing and Counselling (RTC) in clinical settings. It is a hospital based approach aimed at integrating HIV Counselling and Testing services with existing day to day clinical services. Dr. Jesse believes that this type of approach would also help to reduce stigma and discrimination by making AIDS just another disease instead of the 'special' status it currently inhabits. His opinions, routed as they are in real life experiences, seem solid and practical to me.

Perhaps, the ABC, if it wins the elections next time round, will agree with him. Perhaps, Lesotho society will one day stem the spread of AIDS and the consequential brain drain and implement viable methods of creating employment and opportunity at home. Perhaps, the herdboys will combine mainstream education with their knowledge of the earth to find new ways of resuscitating a dying land. Perhaps. Perhaps not. I don't know. I can't say. Robert Guest insists that the African 'countries that prosper tend to do so by their own efforts.' I can only hope that the rising sun, featured in the ABC's election campaign, is symbolic of a brighter future, not just for the herdboys but for the country as a whole. Perhaps one day, in Lesotho, a little boy in red wellies will have real options for a happy future.