ON THE CUSP OF COLONIAL RULE: MEDICINE MURDER IN LESOTHO

Colin Murray and Peter Sanders. *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: The Anatomy of a Moral Crisis.* International African Library. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 368 pp. Photographs. Maps. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. £60.00. Cloth.

Medicine murder involves taking human flesh from a victim to produce a potion that will strengthen the user in achieving a desired goal—like winning a power struggle, acquiring land, or prevailing in a court case. Located at the boundary of culture and science, and of tradition and modernity, such accusations serve as a test of the essence of colonial rationalization—the civilizing mission. Whether there was an "outbreak" of medicine murders in Lesotho in the 1940s, and if so, what caused it, has been a matter of intense controversy among citizens of Lesotho, administrators who had to deal with the issue, and generations of scholars. Murray and Sanders address these issues directly, and thus open a fascinating line of inquiry.

Yet while their thorough analysis might seem to have resolved these questions, the controversy continues; in her recent book, *Power in Colonial Lesotho: Conflict and Discourse in Lesotho, 1870–1960* (Wisconsin, 2007), Elizabeth Eldredge claims that Murray and Sanders "misrepresented" her view on the issue with a "line of argument" claiming that medicine murder arose "*because* of a cultural propensity and traditional beliefs and practices" (245, n.20). In fact, Eldredge oversimplifies their position. Murray and Sanders have provided readers with a complex set of multiple factors permitting differing interpretations and evaluations. Their analysis is based heavily on archival research and court records, augmented by interviews with Basotho who had intimate personal knowledge of some of the events chronicled in the book.

Though presenting medicine murder (or *liretlo*, the term many Basotho prefer) rather repetitively in several different contexts, the authors do promote thorough understanding of and reflection on that phenomenon. They begin by carefully delineating several questions to be tested. Did medicine murder actually exist or was it a figment of colonial imagination? If it was practiced, was there a startling increase in the 1940s and 1950s, and why did this occur? What was the "moral crisis" in Basotho society that promoted the real or alleged phenomenon? Was justice done by the legal authorities whereby confessed murderers were exonerated in exchange for their testimony?

Murray and Sanders begin by examining the early twentieth-century history of what the British called Basutoland, focusing on the intense conflicts that emerged relating to succession to the Paramount Chieftainship. Subsequent chapters explore indigenous beliefs about medicine murder, the debates within the country about its incidence and appropriate responses, the alternative narratives explaining what was or was not occur-

ring, and finally, the efforts taken to resolve the problem. Interspersed between these chapters are four detailed case studies of the most controversial medicine murders which implicated the Regent Paramount Chieftainess 'Mantsebo, led to the execution of two Principal Chiefs (Bereng Griffith and Gabashane Masupha), and particularly afflicted the district of Mokhotlong. There follows an "Interlude" that focuses on medicine murder in literature, giving attention to the way such writing affected Basotho, South African, and international images of colonial rule and African traditions—ranging from the portrayals of convicted murderers as tragic heroes to John Gunther's stereotypes of African depravity.

The second part of the book provides a detailed analysis of the situations that produced medicine murders. It examines the roles and motivations of instigators and accomplices, and then turns to a gruesome discussion of the choice of victims, mutilation (often while the victim was still alive), killing, disposal of bodies, and the fabrication of medicine from human flesh. (In the event that readers need further details, each suspected case of medicine murder is summarized in an appendix over one hundred pages long in which the event, the evidence, and the final outcome of the case are reviewed.) The authors then turn to the role of the police in investigating medicine murder cases, their sometimes questionable methods of detention and interrogation, and the question of whether they deliberately sought to implicate chiefs. Judicial processes are evaluated, including preparatory examinations, trials, judgments, appeals, and eventual executions for some of those convicted. Some attention is given to the personalities, careers, and foibles of the district commissioners, resident commissioners, high commissioners, prosecutors, and judges.

Throughout the book, the attitudes, behavior, motives, reputations, social contexts, and political objectives of alleged or actual Basotho perpetrators of medicine murder, especially the leading chiefs, are reviewed in great detail. However, the authors do not give equivalent attention to the police, colonial administrators, and judges. A particularly glaring omission occurs with respect to the appointment of a South African, A. G. T. Chaplin, as Resident Commissioner in 1956. While observing that he spoke fluent Sesotho and got on well with the Regent, the authors fail to note the furor that his appointment created and how it fueled the same sorts of fears of incorporation into South Africa that were part of Lesotho's "moral crisis." The authors emphasize that the High Court and Appellate Court judges bent over backward to acquit defendants if there were inconsistencies in testimony that undercut evidence from accomplice witnesses. But they fail to consider the psychological impact that these cases might have had in the context of Lesotho's encapsulation within apartheid South Africa. Although the judges had Basotho assessors to advise them, Basotho defendants were mostly tried by retired white South African judges often applying Roman Dutch rather than English common law.

We learn a lot about the attitudes and objectives of High Commissioners and Resident Commissioners; in particular, extensive evidence is provided on whether G. I. Jones was inappropriately pressured to omit key findings in his report on medicine murder. However, little attention is given to the effect of the many District Commissioners living in close proximity to (and sometimes instructing) accused chiefs. Whether or not police commissioners deliberately turned a blind eye to illegitimate pressure on detained witnesses is not sufficiently explored. To be sure, Murray and Sanders present the allegations made against the police, colonial officials, and judiciary. However, there is an underlying presumption that colonial authorities and judicial officials generally acted in good faith; more attention to the backgrounds and prejudices of these officials would have strengthened the account. While there may not have been a conscious colonial conspiracy against the senior chiefs, nonetheless, shared attitudes and values among colonial elites can produce analogous effects where administrators, judges, and ranking police officers all functioned within the confines of a small expatriate community, with all the assumptions and "common knowledge" that such situations generate.

That said, in their conclusion Murray and Sanders do an excellent job of drawing together the divergent strains of the debate about medicine murder. They argue that the alleged spate of medicine murders in the forties and fifties was exaggerated and that there had probably been an undercurrent of such occurrences dating back to times when enemy warriors killed in battle had been the source of medicines derived from human flesh. But they clearly emphasize that the episode triggering some increase in the incidence of medicine murder was the appointment of a woman, Amelia 'Mantsebo Seeiso, as Regent Paramount Chief, thereby denying the Paramountcy to Bereng Griffith for a second time. Murray and Sanders also challenge Eldredge's assertion that the British implicitly fostered medicine murder by taking no action against the Regent despite substantial evidence that she and her reputed lover, Chief Matlere Lerotholi, had instigated several killings. While Eldredge argues that the colonial authorities protected 'Mantsebo to keep a weak client in power, Murray and Sanders argue that she was the preferred choice of the ranking chiefs and that to depose her without an open and shut case against her might well have a created an even an greater confrontation and more violence. However, the authors concede that the High Commissioner's threats against certain chiefs worsened the situation; Basotho saw their chieftainship under attack, leading some to deny that medicine murder even existed and others to see medicines made from human flesh as even more necessary to their survival, thereby heightening the "moral crisis."

Murray and Sanders end by highlighting the nature of the "moral crisis" that enveloped the Basotho nation. The medicine murder issue emerged following the colonial transformation of established institutions of chief-

tainship, during a controversial regency, amidst heightened fears of incorporation into South Africa's new apartheid regime, and at a time when new nationalist organizations were emerging to challenge the colonial administration. The authors emphasize the "ambiguity and ambivalence of belief and of response" that characterized Basotho attitudes and behavior. Both indigenous and Christian norms against killing clashed with beliefs in the "efficacy of human medicine" and the "duty to obey the chief as the head of their community"(295–96). Although the majority of chiefs did not engage in medicine murder, the minority that did included some of the most respected senior leaders. Hence chiefs, new nationalist leaders, and many ordinary Basotho reacted "not with shame and revulsion, but with a wounded pride" that questioned the very existence of medicine murder, posited a British colonial conspiracy, rallied around Sesotho culture, customs, and chieftainship, mourned those who were executed, and welcomed back into the community defendants who were acquitted (296–97).

Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho is a serious, comprehensive study of a very complex set of issues. It merits serious attention as the authoritative work about the interaction of colonial authority and indigenous leadership during an especially tumultuous period in Lesotho's history.

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