

# The Tension of Branding Basotho Traditional Initiation Ceremonies (*Lebollo*) “Unholy” by Roman Catholic Missionaries in Lesotho: 19th Century

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## Abstract

As a significant cultural ritual and rite of passage to manhood and womanhood, initiation is regarded to be among the most important phases of human growth within various South African cultures. In specific regions, especially in rural areas or where these traditions are strongly upheld, it is customary for males to undergo initiation through circumcision. Males who have not been initiated often find their opinions dismissed in discussions or scenarios that necessitate important decision-making. Similarly, females are also expected to participate in their own initiation ceremonies. Attaining acceptance into manhood (*bohlangana*) for males or womanhood (*bosadi*) for females, and gaining acknowledgment as fully-fledged humans, requires participation in a Basotho traditional initiation school along with undergoing circumcision. Upon initial examination, parallels can be drawn between Sotho traditional initiation ceremonies (*lebollo*) and the sacramental practices of the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter the Church) since both signify an individual's transition into a different stage of life. This article reports on a study that delved into the conflict between Basotho cultural identity pertaining to *lebollo* and its practices compared with Catholic sacramental practices prevalent in Lesotho. It further investigated why the Church has labelled those who participate in traditional initiation negatively, as engaging in “unholy” practices, rather than offering support. Consequently, the negative treatment harms community members instead of encouraging them.

**Keywords:** Lesotho; Basotho; *lebollo* (traditional initiation ceremonies); Christianity; Roman Catholic Church



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## Introduction

There is no doubt that Christianity has significantly shaped the societal landscape of Lesotho, influencing both its cultural practices and communal values. The arrival of Christianity in the country is intricately linked to its colonial past, where missionaries played a crucial role in disseminating the faith among the Basotho people. Guma (2001, 274) notes that before they undergo cultural rites and circumcision, both boys and girls are viewed as incomplete members of society, and derogatory terms, such as boys (*bashemane* or *mathisa*), are used to describe them. As a country with a predominantly Christian population, Lesotho's social structure is closely intertwined with Christian doctrines and rituals, which is evident across various facets of life, including family dynamics, education systems, and healthcare services. The Roman Catholic Church (hereafter the Church) not only functions as a venue for worship but also acts as an important hub for community support and empowerment, fostering social unity and progress. The data for the study was collected by studying the extant literature that addresses the relationship along with the tension that exists between Roman Catholic and Basotho cultural practices. Thus, the article is a literature review on the subject and works within the theoretical framework articulated under Roman Catholic and Basotho belief systems per se.

## Prolegomenon to the Article

The researcher is Mosotho, and his parents were raised in Roma, also known as Ha-Maama, Lesotho, where the Church set up schools, a hospital, a university and a seminary. Roma is a tranquil and lovely region where nature is valued. Cultural rites are observed daily. Traditional initiation ceremonies (*lebollo*) and ancestral beliefs are integral to life in this community. During winter and spring, many traditional initiation schools commence these cultural rites. Both young females and males are often taken to initiation schools, some without their parents' consent, creating a dilemma that pits the community against the Church. Historically, the scope of cultural rites was extensive, but missionaries in Lesotho sought to diminish and eliminate them. The local clergy members, who understood both the culture and Church teachings, inherited this attitude toward cultural practices. Ceremonies such as *lebollo* and ancestral beliefs have been labelled as unholy, groundless and wrongful. *Lebollo* is one cultural practice that has not received significant attention from church leaders and scholars among Basotho Christians. This has placed individuals in a difficult position, forcing them to choose between participating in *lebollo* or adhering to Christian traditions.

The Church expels from its services anyone involved in cultural practice schools, as well as the children who have attended them. These children may not return to their previous formal educational institutions after going to mountain school. They must undergo Church rituals of repentance and cleansing before being allowed back into the Church (Matobo, Makatsa and Obioha 2009, 105). This stance by the Church toward those who have participated in *lebollo* has fostered animosity between the Church and

the participants who felt anger towards the Church for refusing to permit young females and males to participate in them.

As Ellenberger (1997, 285) argues:

For, in the eyes of the elders, and indeed of the entire community, the prohibition of circumcision signified the decline of the tribe; and the Christians' refusal to uphold this practice was deemed an unfathomable act, disrespectful to the ancient customs of their ancestors and threatening to the basic principles of society..

Individuals who attended initiation school developed a hatred for the Church and its traditions. They began to look down on those men who had not participated in *lebollo*, labelling them with derogatory terms, including dog (*ntja*), boy (*moshemane*), or uncircumcised man (*leqai*). Uncircumcised men were regarded as having no status within society and received little respect from their peers. They continued to be treated as outcasts, and were unable to participate in specific societal rituals. *Lebollo* serves as a rite that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and instils a sense of responsibility among boys and girls regarding their roles in their families, communities and nations. The researcher was profoundly troubled by this ongoing conflict stemming from the strained relationship between the Church and traditional Sesotho religious and cultural practices.

## Theoretical Framework

Research into various world religions has revealed similarities between culture and belief systems, underscoring the fundamentally spiritual nature of humanity. Gnanakan (1992, 216) articulates this idea by stating:

Within them (humankind) exists a yearning for the ultimate, a pull towards God, a drive to return to their Creator ... However, there is an inclination towards God within each person, and God Himself is continuously reaching out to all men and women.

This perspective resonates deeply from an African standpoint with many ancestral beliefs and spiritual practices. Similarly, Boaheng (2024, 213) notes that numerous African cultures embrace the notion of a Creator or supreme being who actively influences individual lives as well as community dynamics. Such beliefs are often expressed through rituals, prayers and ceremonies aimed at maintaining harmony with the spiritual realm. The concept that God consistently draws individuals toward Himself aligns with the theme of divine providence prevalent in many African religious traditions. African cosmology exists with faith in a benevolent deity who cares for humanity's well-being and intervenes in human affairs (Boaheng 2024, 213). It is evident that across diverse cultures, people have experienced God's presence distinctly through general revelation, a means by which individuals can acknowledge God's existence via nature, moral conscience, and historical occurrences. Biblical references

support this understanding of general revelation as accessible evidence for comprehending God's essence (cf. Acts 14:17; Job 12:7–10; Psa. 19:1–2; Rom. 1:20).

## Methodology

The study employed historical retrieval and reappropriation methodology to formulate its recommendations and conclusions. According to Boaheng (2024, 111), historical theology investigates how doctrines have transformed over time within the Church's relationship with society at large while focusing on pivotal figures and theological developments shaping adherents' beliefs across denominations. Conversely, church history examines ecclesiastical growth against broader global history contexts, highlighting significant events affecting society overall. Falconer (2024) advocates using historical retrieval and reappropriation methodology for research endeavours within historical theology frameworks. Accordingly, Boaheng (2024, 111) outlines four main objectives achieved through this methodological approach, namely: (1) rectifying misconceptions surrounding past developments; (2) emphasising overlooked or underexplored individuals/subjects/time periods; (3) fostering dialogue among key figures previously unexamined together; and (4) leveraging insights from earlier topics/individuals/times frames addressing contemporary challenges.

## A Brief Historical Account of Catholic Missionaries' Arrival in Lesotho: 19th Century

The origins of Catholic mission work in Lesotho can be traced back to the early 19th century when missionaries arrived in the early 1860s. Individual Catholic missionaries were sent to be instrumental in disseminating Christian teachings among the people of Lesotho, heralding a pivotal change in the nation's religious and cultural dynamics. The introduction of Catholicism was not instantaneous but occurred gradually over several years. The Catholic missionaries founded schools and hospitals that served as centres for education, healthcare and religious guidance. Through these establishments, Christianity in Lesotho began to establish its presence and influence within local communities, particularly in Roma (Ha-Maama).

Furthermore, the effects of Catholicism on society in Lesotho have been extensive, impacting numerous facets of daily life such as social norms, family structures, and community values. In addition, the Church has significantly shaped the political environment, whereby many leaders and politicians have drawn inspiration from Catholic teachings and principles. Historical records indicate that the Basotho had a wealth of cultural and religious practices that facilitated the swift expansion of Christianity in Lesotho.

The Western missionaries opted to dismiss or diminish the significance of Basotho traditions, which centred around nurturing their children and acknowledging God as the Supreme Being throughout history. The cultural and religious practices of the Basotho created a strong basis for the conception, understanding, and acceptance of Christianity.

Nevertheless, the Catholic missionaries suggested that there were no existing religious traditions or heritage prior to their arrival in Africa. Therefore, the article engages in the debate that the cultural context of *lebollo*, which was dismissed by the Catholic missionaries, played a significant role in the raising of Basotho children. The propagation of lack of knowledge about religious diversity was further entrenched during what Manyeli (2001, 78) describes as Christian conquest, a term employed herein referring specifically to colonial dominance exerted instrumentally. The newly converted individuals were compelled to relocate towards established mission stations so they could be distanced from “unholy” influences (Manyeli 2001, 79).

## The Influencing Structural Plan: Missionary Education

Muzvidziwa and Seotsanyana (2002, 1) reveal that missionary education in Lesotho centred on Christian principles. They also point out that mission schools were specifically established to propagate Church doctrine. The introduction of classroom education was a deliberate effort to promote literacy in reading and writing, geared towards enabling the Basotho to study the Bible and embrace Christian values and teachings. Frankema (2012) echoes this idea, elaborating that Christian education served as a successful strategy to attract indigenous individuals to the Christian faith. Over time, this contributed to a rise in converts, as learned proselytes were able to disseminate the Christian religion in the local languages.

The British colonists created a favourable climate for missionaries from various denominations, which fostered competition among them and led to an increased availability of missionary schools (Frankema 2012, 336). The erection of missionary schools in Lesotho positioned Christian life and teaching as the major legitimate religion to be taught in formal educational environments. Dascal (2007, 4) contends that the Basotho were compelled to acknowledge their intellectual inferiority, thereby yielding to the colonisers’ reasoning as superior. By evaluating their own belief systems and truths against those of the colonisers, the Basotho generally favoured the latter’s perceived validity and embraced it wholeheartedly. This ingrained acceptance led the Basotho to consistently dismiss any knowledge that contradicted what they deemed the superior, pragmatic experience as unjustifiable. This highlights the persistence of Christianity as the exclusive religion taught in schools throughout Lesotho.

Furthermore, missionary education served as a means to transmit and enforce Western values onto Africans. For missionaries, Western education symbolised modernity and progress. It was employed to disseminate Western social, cultural, and economic principles. Missionary education promoted Western values while completely disregarding the African cultural context and traditions. Their educational approach did not recognise any Basotho cultural practices aside from their own Western culture, which they deemed superior and more advanced. In numerous ways, missionary education aided European dominance over the Basotho and consequently bolstered colonisation. To accomplish this objective, missionaries established mission schools

within Basotho communities and insisted that candidates convert to Christianity beforehand. Matobo, Makatsa and Obioha's (2009) analysis succinctly describes this influence: "Africans were introduced to European culture, read European literature, and learned about European methods." Moshoeshe I, the leader of the Basotho Kingdom, remarked to the French missionaries: "Just by observing your attire, your weaponry, and the large rolling houses in which you travel, I can grasp the extent of your strength and intelligence" (Matobo, Makatsa and Obioha 2009, 105). Similar to many African rulers, King Moshoeshe I recognised that the missionaries' influence was intricately linked to the forces that facilitated colonialism. Consequently, missionary education not only bolstered colonialism but also served as a tool for missionaries to undermine the cultural values of the Basotho people. Its primary goal was to convert those deemed "heathen" (which they labelled unholy) to Christianity and to teach them to read the Bible. Missionary education did not emphasise practical skills, such as carpentry or construction, but focused instead on reading, writing and scripture. As Mgadla (2003, 38) points out, "missionary education was crucial for the colonial agenda because the Basotho needed to become proficient in speaking and reading English".

Progressively, this type of education supplanted the traditional education system of the Basotho. It encouraged the youth to take a greater interest in Western education and moved them away from initiation schools. Practices, such as rainmaking ceremonies (*ho nesa pula – ho bapala lesokwana*), initiation rites (*lebollo*), and traditional medicine (*bongaka*), along with other cultural rites, were discouraged and regarded as opposing Christian moral standards (Amanze 1998, 52). Through the introduction of Western education, the missionaries endeavoured vigorously to replace Sesotho culture with Western values, which they anticipated the Basotho would embrace. These enforced practices fostered an environment that showed minimal resistance to colonisation. The Basotho were led to believe that nearly everything related to Western culture was superior and positive, while African traditions were deemed primitive (Tlou and Campbell 1984, 187). In this context, the article illustrates that, through misconceptions surrounding education in Lesotho, Catholic missionaries imposed their Western cultural values upon the Basotho.

### The Oblates of Mary Immaculate Found a Home in Roma (Ha-Maama): 1862

In 1862, the first Roman Catholic mission was founded by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) under the Apostolic Vicariate of Natal. King Moshoeshe welcomed the OMI, seeking British assistance to fend off Dutch invasions, and selected the location for their missionary work, which later came to be known as Roma (Ha-Maama). The study conducted by Henriques (2019, 1) declares that on 4 May 1843, the colony of Natal was founded by the British. As a result, the OMI started working with the native people of southern Africa after entering a British colony. Maliehe (2021, 24) notes that during the Basotho Wars (1858–1868), when the French missionary, Blessed Joseph Gérard (who was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 15 September 1988), sided with

Chief Moshoeshoe, there was additional assimilation with colonial society. This clarifies the choices made by the OMI to cooperate closely with the native people in their struggle to protect their land and independence, emphasises Henriques (2019, 7).

The Church benefited under British rule because religious freedom was guaranteed. Among other things, the colonists also contributed money to the Church for the construction of churches. Irish soldiers serving in the British army contributed labour to the construction of churches and erection of fencing for the Catholic population in the British controlled area. In some circumstances, the British government also made the land available to the Catholic community in the Colony. This mission, which benefited from the initiatives of Father Gérard, represented a pivotal moment in the development of Catholic missions in Lesotho.

The Apostolic Prefecture of Lesotho was formed in 1894 and elevated to an Apostolic Vicariate in 1909, signifying considerable progress in the mission's journey. In 1924, the OMI founded a seminary in Roma (Ha-Maama), dedicated to training Catholic priests, which was named after St. Augustine of Hippo. St Pius XII College, named after Pope Pius XII, was the original Catholic University College founded in Roma in 1945. It later became the foundation for the National University of Lesotho (NUL), which was established in 1975. In 1951, with the establishment of the Southern African Catholic Church hierarchy, the vicariate was elevated to the Diocese of Maseru. By 1961, Maseru had transitioned into an archdiocese and a metropolitan see. In 1959, the Church played a crucial role in founding the National Party (BNP), which contributed significantly to the region's progress towards independence.

Subsequently, in 1963, the NUL adopted a non-denominational stance. Nevertheless, the OMI continued to oversee St Pius XII College, which was affiliated with the university. In 1966, Lesotho achieved independence as a constitutional monarchy, and its national assembly collaborated with the region's tribal chiefs. By the late 1970s, thanks to BNP governance, Lesotho managed to stabilise its economy; however, the persistent influx of South African refugees escaping apartheid policies continued to exert pressure on its small economy. One reason for the Catholic faith's prominence in the region, aside from its active role in the Basotho nation's healthcare system, was the early establishment of a comprehensive network of church-operated schools. By the year 2000, over 490 primary and 75 secondary institutions, accounted for 75% of all schools in the nation. The bishops of Lesotho became part of the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), which was committed to promoting peace and justice throughout the Southern African region. Although theological disagreements between Catholic leaders and the Evangelical Protestant leaders of Lesotho made ecumenical efforts infrequent, the then Pope John Paul II, during his (ad limina) official visit in 1988, encouraged the SACBC to pursue such initiatives. By the year 2000, 78 parishes were served by more than 50 diocesan and 80 religious priests. Other religious institutions housed about 45 brothers and 600 sisters who particularly supported families whose members were working in South Africa. In the early mid-20th century, the

Church in Lesotho incorporated certain aspects of local culture, such as tribal call-and-response singing, into its services and conducted services in the native language. The pope emphasised that such inculturation should be monitored to ensure the correct interpretation of Church doctrine. At the start of the 21st century, Catholics maintained political influence due to their comparative wealth and status as the majority voice within the dominant BNP.

## The Use of the Bible as a Weapon to Evangelise the Basotho Nation

The Catholic missionaries utilised the Bible as a mechanism to colonise the thought processes of the African nations (Mokhoathi 2017, 4). It is suggested that the Bible was presented in such a manner that it depicted African traditions as pagan (unholy) in order to advance Western ideologies, teachings, values and practices. The Catholic missionaries had a particular aversion to practices, such as rainmaking ceremonies (*ho nesa pula – ho bapala lesokwana*), initiation rites (*lebollo*), bride wealth (*bohadi*), and polygamy, perceiving them as incompatible with biblical teachings and an obstacle to fulfilling their missionary mission. The Catholic missionaries employed the Bible as a means to politically, culturally and economically subjugate the Basotho. Mokhoathi (2020, 2) notes that, “in the early stages, the missionaries aimed to Christianise Africans and transform their lifestyles, which settlers from Europe deemed primitive”.

Mokhoathi (2020, 3) recounts a well-known tale concerning the Bible and colonial powers, stating: “When the missionaries arrived in our land, they possessed the Bible while Africans had the territory”. The missionaries invited the African leaders to pray. “After the prayer, the missionaries owned the land while our leaders held the Bible” (Mokhoathi 2020, 5).

Mokhoathi (2017, 7) elucidates how Africans link colonialism with the Bible. By collaborating with scientists and explorers, missionaries are perceived as agents of imperialism. Therefore, it can be deduced that missionaries adapted and interpreted the Bible to advance the goals of colonialism across various domains, making it a tangible reality through different means. The Bible served as the foundational text in missionary schools. Through the Bible, missionaries effectively instilled humility and passivity in the Basotho, thereby facilitating the colonisers’ encroachment and rendering it more acceptable. Furthermore, the missionaries utilised the Bible to significantly undermine the Basotho traditional initiation schools by branding it as unholy.

## Dismantling *Lebollo* and Ancestral Beliefs

Culturology is an interdisciplinary domain that investigates culture as a complex blend of social, material, spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic components. This field analyses how cultural values, norms and practices are formed, disseminated and modified across different societies. Cultural studies cover a wide array of topics, including language, art, religion, customs, rituals, and other aspects of human behaviour that contribute to the shaping of cultural identity (Vorova 2024, 29). Historically, missionaries have



discouraged and dismissed cultural ceremonies in Lesotho. Local pastors, who were familiar with both the Church's culture and teachings, inherited this aversion to cultural practices. Rituals, such as *lebollo*, and ancestral beliefs have often been labelled as pagan, superstitious and immoral. *Lebollo*, in particular, is a cultural rite that has largely been overlooked by the local priests and academics among Basotho Christians. This situation has created a conflict regarding whether individuals should adhere to Basotho cultural initiation or follow church practices and Christianity. The Church excludes from its services anyone who has participated in Basotho traditional initiation schools, including the children who attended these institutions. Furthermore, children could not return to their previous formal educational institutions after attending the initiation school; instead, they had to complete church rituals of repentance and cleansing before being readmitted to the Church (Matobo, Makatsa and Obioha 2009, 105).

The perspective of the Church members concerning those participating in *lebollo* fostered hostility between the two factions. Parents of those participating in the initiation rituals were frustrated with the Church for preventing their children from going through cultural rites. As Ellenberger (1997, 285) alludes:

For, in the eyes of the elders, and indeed of the entire community, the elimination of circumcision symbolized the decline of the tribe; and the Christians' refusal to uphold this practice was seen as an unprecedented affront to the ancient traditions of their ancestors, undermining the foundational principles of society

Those who attended the initiation school developed a disdain for the Church and its principles. They began to marginalise individuals who did not undergo initiation, labelling them with derogatory terms such as young boy (*moshemane*) or uncircumcised man (*leqai*). Uncircumcised individuals lack status in society and receive no respect from others. They are treated as outcasts, unable to participate in specific cultural rituals. *Lebollo* serves as a rite of passage that represents the transition from childhood to adulthood and instils a sense of responsibility in boys and girls concerning their roles within their families, community and nation.

Cilliers (2010, 12) describes identity as the "difference" of the "self" in relation to the "other", asserting that "the element of identity initiates the interplay of difference on one side while simultaneously being a product of that same process" (Cilliers 2010, 13).

Furthermore, Cilliers (2010, 13) goes on to say that

stating A is different from B implies that an alphabet A is not an alphabet B. To identify a difference between A and B, they must first be recognised as A and as B (in their individuality), and secondly, they must, at least to a small extent, share something that allows for comparison (there has to be an aspect of "identity"). Thus, identity relates to the process of identification. It needs to be perceivable as the "other" from the "self". In summary, it is the potential recognition by the self of the other as the other.

Such recognition requires a degree of “small similarity” (Cilliers 2010, 13) between the self and the other, or A and B in the previous example. Perhaps that is why Cilliers refers to identity as the “various forms of identifications individuals make from the specific stances they adopt” (Cilliers 2010, 13). This defines cultural identity as collective identity, which can be understood as the identity of a group of individuals, each having their own unique identities. Collective identity addresses the question of who we perceive ourselves to be (Mellet 2010, 4). Collective cultural identity encompasses one’s “affiliation with language, religion, customs (and) practices” (Spencer 2006, 35), which also includes “values, meanings, identities, traditions, norms of behaviour, and ways of interpreting the world” (Hodkinson 2011, 2). Kidd (2002, 3) argues that examining the collective cultural identity of a group involves exploring topics such as the relationship between individuals and the larger community, the extent of autonomy individuals possess in everyday life, the level of self-awareness individuals have regarding their actions, including the degree of influence that the larger social context into which we are born exerts over our lives.

According to Ohaja and Anyim (2021, 1), rituals play a vital role in Africans’ lives and are associated with every stage of life, from conception to death. Because they are connected to the human cycle from birth to death, rituals are significant to Africans and give their way of life meaning: “All stages of life in Africa are ritually celebrated” (Ohaja and Anyim 2021, 3). Rituals are also thought to have the ability to heal during times of crisis, illness, and other calamities, and they serve as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms. Similarly, Kyalo (2013, 36) substantiates the above statements that Africans place a high value on rituals because they provide order in their lives; facilitate the transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar; and “express our deepest understanding of the world”.

## The Religious Challenges

The initiation of missionary activities in Lesotho began in a disjointed and competitive manner, which caused a split among Basotho communities that either embraced the new religious institutions or outright rejected them, choosing instead to continue following their ancestral beliefs. In addition to the rivalries that arose from these missionary efforts, Germond and Molapo (2006) highlight the tensions sparked by the burgeoning Christian faith, which found it difficult to coexist with the African Traditional Religions (ATRs) practised during the rivalries. Nonetheless, the endurance of ATR beliefs supports Gill’s (2010) argument that such beliefs surpass these divides, as certain religious ceremonies that contradict official doctrines continue to be significant for some Basotho who identify as Christians. Gill (2010) further contends that the idioms, symbolism, rituals and dynamics of previous spiritual forms will persist and not simply vanish. Consequently, churches ought to be prompted to assess their doctrines and their relevance in the indigenous context of Lesotho. According to research by Germond and Molapo (2006), a substantial aspect of the religious landscape in Lesotho is the ongoing vitality of traditional Sesotho religious and cultural practices, which coexist alongside,

intertwine with, and at times compete with the much more visible Christian beliefs from a Western perspective.

Germond and Molapo (2006) note that a large portion of Catholics in Lesotho hold beliefs in ancestral customs and rituals but are hesitant to incorporate them into their liturgy due to the fear of the institutional teachings imposed by the missionaries. In this case, it appears that they are not fearful of being excommunicated; rather, they simply wish to maintain their connection with the Church. This scenario seems to foster division among certain members. For instance, an individual who is against African ritual practices could easily offend those who support such practices and vice versa. Members find themselves making personal decisions regarding what to believe and how to practice in relation to this matter. It could be argued that this is a doctrinal issue, as the historical actions of missionaries who suspended and excommunicated individuals participating in these rituals indicate that it should not be left solely to laypeople. There is a necessity for the Church to examine this situation, and it must engage in discussions regarding Basotho identity, culture, and ritual practices, establishing a definitive stance. This would provide guidance to ordinary members and further aid them in understanding what they believe and the rationale behind their beliefs.

Sarpong (2006, 12) asserts that “religion is intricately intertwined in the ideal African existence from birth to death”. Therefore, ATR is vital in shaping the future of Africans. Sarpong (2006, 12) underscores the necessity for Africans to comprehend their history to comprehend the current and strategize for the future. It is impossible to grasp African history without recognising their religious beliefs. It is essential to note that ATR is a critical component of African philosophy, which can lead to potential cultural or spiritual clashes when it intersects with Christianity. To fully appreciate African heritage, one must acknowledge its religious dimension. It is crucial to highlight that the Basotho have been significantly influenced by both Christianity and traditional ways of life, as seen in their customs. Even today, the Basotho who follow traditional lifestyles are regarded as deeply religious. It is very important to recognise that the transformation of the surrounding reality cannot occur without the ongoing recreation of cultural expressions.

## Harmonising the Religious Challenges through Ubuntu

According to Twala (2007, 26), the chief periodically summoned all boys within a specific age range (typically those aged 16 to 20) to participate in the initiation ritual. Nevertheless, the age at which boys can be admitted varies since eligibility is determined differently (Semenya 2010, 68). In support of the continuation of initiation and circumcision traditions, Tšiu (2001, 27) argues:

Why should we question this esteemed rite of passage into manhood? It is as intrinsic to our African identity as our skin colour. We even have designations for those who have completed it. It represented the highest honour that young males could aspire to. A strict set of procedures was adhered to, and fatalities were uncommon. Initially, they

would camp away from populated areas and seek a smooth, sharp stone by the river at dawn to perform the circumcision. Following this “procedure”, they would go to the nearest homestead and urinate in the same place where women did, based on the belief that this would accelerate their healing. If someone were to die, it was just one of those occurrences, and the family would learn of it much later.

The idea of *botho/ubuntu*, which reinforces family unity, is emphasised during the initiation ceremony. Setiloane (1976, 37) maintains that throughout the initiation, all the participants are gathered, irrespective of their lineage or socioeconomic status, and there is no distinction among them. Their faces are concealed with grass and reed masks, and their bodies are coated with white ochre. It becomes challenging to identify them since they are generally of similar age and physique. They are enveloped in a shroud of uniformity and will subsequently participate together in guilt and embarrassment, the joy and glory of their collective group. The goal is to foster a shared transition into adulthood. A good individual enhances the welfare of their community. The *mophato* (initiation school) educates the initiates not only on the pleasures of camaraderie through challenges but also on their responsibilities toward others, which are essential for community sustainability. Both men and women must understand that freedom cannot exist outside the essential bonds of the group. During the initiation, the initiates are also required to follow the numerous taboos that are taught before and throughout the process.

After completing the training period, the initiates abandon all their garments in the lodge, which is subsequently set ablaze by the instructors (Twala 2007, 28). The young men proceed forward without glancing back at their childhood, which has symbolically concluded with the destruction of the lodge. Coated in red ochre, they advance to the village, wrapped in blankets and accompanied by men and elders, where they receive a new set of clothing. A grand feast is hosted, during which each newly initiated man can recite his poem that defines his new adult identity and takes on a new name. Following initiation, the boy achieves manhood status and becomes “ripe” for marriage (Du Plooy 2007, 28). Through the processes of initiation and circumcision, the boy gains additional rights and privileges; for instance, he is eligible to participate in family court and, in some cases, can act on behalf of his father. Circumcision also grants a young man rights to inheritance and allows him to establish his own homestead.

## Recommendations

The above discussion has shown that there is a need for the Church in Lesotho to revisit its recognition of Basotho spirituality as essential to Basotho people. This is rather unfortunate, as this means that some Basotho members who practise their ancestral beliefs do not feel at home when attending the Church’s liturgies. From what has been discovered, some Basotho Catholics are tiptoeing between Christianity and their cultural practices. They are struggling with some issues, such as *lebollo*, but in order for them to belong, they must compromise their tradition, culture and African-ness to the Catholicised norms.

## Conclusion

Christianity in Lesotho has encountered challenges and controversies stemming from conflicts with ATR systems. The introduction of Christianity to Lesotho ignited modern debates and critiques, as it has often conflicted with existing ATR customs. These tensions between Christianity and ancestral beliefs have raised issues regarding cultural identity and resulted in societal discord. Such challenges and controversies have initiated conversations about the impact of religion on the social structure of Lesotho. The article has illustrated that Western missionaries eroded the cultural and religious practices of the Basotho. It has also highlighted that, in spite of this trend, the local expression of Christianity was rooted in and interpreted through the cultural traditions of the people. The approach taken by the missionaries imposed Western education and other Western values, which they deemed superior, on the Basotho. They embraced a sense of cultural superiority, thereby weakening the cultural, religious, social and political autonomy of the Sotho nation. They insisted that for Basotho communities to embrace Christianity, they had to abandon their customs and faith, which were thought to be unholy without any consideration. Christianity was redefined as an ideology that was used to justify colonial religious education by the missionaries.

In summary, the article argues that the Basotho traditional initiation schools hold considerable importance in various African communities in Lesotho. Firstly, they instil outstanding personality and character in the initiates. Secondly, they impart values such as loyalty, good morals, self-respect and diligence to the initiates. In spite of the criticisms, Christianity has also contributed positively to the nation, affecting various elements of Lesotho's society. Ultimately, Christianity remains a significant force in Lesotho, impacting the lives of its citizens and promoting a sense of unity and purpose. Christianity is deeply embedded in the social landscape of Lesotho, shaping its values and norms, but its future depends on its ability to adapt to contemporary challenges while maintaining traditional foundations. Given its role in Lesotho, its influence continues to shape the country's social fabric, illustrating a synthesis of faith and cultural heritage.

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