

**EIGHT**

**HOMEMAKERS, COMMUNISTS AND  
REFUGEES: SMUGGLING ANTI-APARTHEID  
REFUGEES IN RURAL LESOTHO IN THE 1960s  
AND 1970s<sup>i</sup>**

**John Aerni-Flessner**  
Michigan State University

**Abstract**

This article tells the story of Maleseka Kena, a woman born in South Africa but who lived most of her adult life in rural Lesotho. It narrates how her story of helping apartheid refugees cross the border and move onward complicates understandings of what the international border, belonging, and citizenship meant for individuals living near it. By interweaving her story with larger narratives about the changing political, social, and economic climate of the southern African region, it also highlights the spaces that women had for making an impact politically despite facing structural obstacles both in the regional economy and in the villages where they were living. This article relies heavily on the oral testimony of Maleseka herself as told to the author, but also makes use of press sources from Lesotho, and archival material from the United States and the United Kingdom.

*Keywords:* Lesotho, Refugees, Apartheid, Gender, Borderlands

Maleseka Kena lives in the small village of Tsoelike, Auplas, a mountain community of no more than four-hundred people in the Qacha's Nek District deep in the southern mountains of Lesotho.<sup>ii</sup> When I first met her, 76-year old 'Me Kena was wearing a pink bathrobe over her clothes on a cool fall morning, cooking a pot of *moroho*, the spinach dish that is a staple of Basotho cooking.<sup>iii</sup> I had come to Auplas on the encouragement of a friend who had tipped me

off that her husband, Jacob Kena, an influential member of the Communist Party of Lesotho, would make a great interview for my research on independence-era Lesotho. As a tall, blond-haired, white, male American researcher, I stand out in most places in Lesotho, but especially so in a rural village like Auplas. My friend, Chris Conz, was an American Peace Corps volunteer who was stationed in the village, teaching at the local secondary school. Conz had been interviewing Jacob Kena extensively for his own oral history project, and after he met me and learned about my research, Chris suggested I should come to conduct an interview with *Ntate* Kena. After eight hours of bus rides from the capital Maseru, and a mile walk down the dirt road that leads to the village, I found that *Ntate* Kena was out of town that week. As it turned out, this was to my great fortune. Communist Party members, even old ones, are common in Southern Africa, as are accounts of their role in the liberation struggle (Lerumo, 1971; Maloka, 2002; Edgar, 2005). The South African Communist Party played an integral role in the fight against apartheid and is today part of the governing ANC-coalition government. In a case of research serendipity, this allowed me to interview *Me* Kena instead. Her story of life, child-rearing, border crossing, refugee smuggling, and political involvement as a woman in rural Lesotho turned out to be more compelling from the standpoint of understanding how apartheid and issues of local identity impacted lives in communities on the periphery of the apartheid state. Her story illuminates larger narratives about belonging, citizenship, and understandings of ethnicity in Southern Africa during the 1960s and 1970s.

*Me* Kena raised seven children in Auplas, while also helping to smuggle political refugees from apartheid South Africa into Lesotho, an enclave country completely surrounded by its larger neighbor. These individuals came looking to escape arrest and detention, and to move onward to more hospitable locations, both within Lesotho and beyond the borders of this small land-locked country. She did much of this with the intermittent physical presence and economic support of her husband, who was often engaged in clandestine work in South Africa, spent two years in jail in Lesotho

for his political work, and then fled into exile in the 1970s because of a crackdown in Lesotho on political opposition. ‘*Me Kena*’s story is remarkable for her personal strength, but also because it is emblematic of the challenges faced by women on the periphery of the apartheid regime, who often had to raise families in the absence of men, gone for political or economic reasons. It also highlights how the global struggle against apartheid played out in the local politics and daily lives of individuals in border communities. Finally, it shows how definitions of citizenship and belonging were much more contingent, fluid, and up for negotiation on the border than a view from the state capital would have us believe. People in border communities, but more especially women who made up a majority of the population, had space to allow, accept, and challenge who could be or become a member of their community—belonging—that has ramifications to the present. This is ‘*Me Kena*’s story, and to her I owe a great debt for sharing it with a total stranger. *Kea leboha, ‘Me!’*<sup>iv</sup>

### **Personal Background**

In the middle of our interview about how she and the community in Auplas viewed independence for Lesotho (which came in 1966), I asked Maleseka how she heard information from outside her community. I was taken by surprise when she noted that much of her information on the political situation in the region came from “others who were fleeing the country...I would help them get to Maseru.” This revelation changed the interview from one about general perceptions of politics in Lesotho, to a wider conversation about political refugees in Auplas, and how Maleseka helped them escape the apartheid authorities.

When I knocked on her door, ‘*Me Kena* had no idea who I was or what motives I had for being there. She did interrogate me (in Sesotho) after we went through the formal greetings that are necessary for polite conversation in Lesotho, and I explained myself and my research. I mentioned that I was staying with *Ntate* Chris, an American Peace Corps Volunteer in Auplas who had spent significant time with her husband talking about his history with Communist

Party politics, both in South Africa and Lesotho. During this period (while she was cooking), she was feeling me out and quizzing my on my involvement with Lesotho, which had previously also included a year teaching high school in the rural Maseru District, a fact that helped me better understand rural life and likely appealed to a woman who put so much stock on formal education for her children. She consented to an interview with me, but did not want it recorded. This may have been in part because I was a stranger, because of her long involvement with clandestine politics, or perhaps just to give some plausible deniability to statements that might be attributed to her. In oral history, this is not an uncommon phenomenon, and she was not the only person I interviewed who did not want the conversation recorded (Abrams, 2010). I was taking notes during our conversation in shorthand, which I then typed up into a full question-and-answer script when I returned to my house in Maseru. This is why there are so few direct quotations from ‘*Me Kena* in this piece, and why I have tried to set up a conversation between what she told me, and the other histories that I narrate throughout this paper. This is both to stay true to her story, but also to allow me, as narrator, to tell a story without devaluing or attempting to speak too much “for” ‘*Me Kena* (Alcoff, 1991).

Maleseka Kena was born Maleseka Letsie in a township outside Matatiele in what was then the Cape Province of South Africa, but is in today’s Eastern Cape Province. Her parents were ethnically Basotho and related to the royal lineage in Lesotho, but they resided in South Africa. People speaking Sesotho and practicing Sesotho culture had lived in the area for generations, even as the formal border placed them in South Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Maleseka completed primary and some high school before Bantu Education policies forced her from school in 1954. In that same year she took a job as an assistant teacher in the remote region of Mashai (Qacha’s Nek District) in colonial Basutoland. It was there she met Jacob Kena, who had been born and raised in Tsoelike Auplas, but who was working away from home as a government agricultural demonstrator. Until 1963, there were no formal border controls between Lesotho and South Africa, so individuals could cross and

work without a passport (Ambrose, n.d.). Maleseka and Jacob were married in 1956, and the first of their seven children was born in the same year. The Kena family moved back and forth between Lesotho and South Africa from 1956 until 1964, following jobs and Jacob's budding political career. In 1964, however, they moved to Lesotho permanently as Jacob, who was active in the underground African National Congress (ANC) as well as the South African Communist Party (SACP), feared arrest. Maleseka, also politically active, was a member of the ANC and involved in its Women's League. Maleseka noted that both of them were unable to return to South Africa as they were banned/feared detention from some point after the Sharpeville Massacre and subsequent State of Emergency in 1960. Thus, moving to Lesotho afforded them a chance to keep their family together, and to stay out of apartheid prisons.

The Kena family settled in the small village of Auplas as it was Jacob's home and they moved in with his mother. Jacob was gone from Auplas, however, for long periods of time. He maintained his positions in underground South African political organizations, but was also a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lesotho (CPL) from the early 1960s. He would later run unsuccessfully for Parliament on the Communist ticket for the Tsoelike constituency in the 1970 elections. After the 1970 coup, Jacob spent two years in jail in Lesotho, fleeing the country after his release and winding up in exile in other southern African countries and the Eastern Bloc. Thus, for much of the 1960s and 1970s, Maleseka was left to fend for herself in a rural mountain village in a country she did not originally call her own, with seven children to support.

### **The Lesotho Context and Refugees in Qacha's Nek District**

Female headed households in Lesotho, especially the rural areas, were (and continue to be) quite common because many working-age men were away. They took labor contracts in the factories and mines of South Africa that ranged in duration from six to eleven months a year (Murray, 1981). Though Maleseka's situation was slightly different because her husband was off on political work rather than a

labor contract, the fact that she was left to raise children and manage the family homestead with only intermittent income coming in from her husband made her situation quite common in the village. While her husband was away, Maleseka supported her family by selling farm products that she raised like grain, beans, and peas, as well as small animals. She had a grain mill where she charged a fee to turn her neighbors' maize into flour, and ran a dress business sewing clothes that served local people as well as postal customers as far away as Johannesburg and Sebokeng in South Africa. While her range of economic activities was, perhaps, wider than many in rural Lesotho, her strategies were quite typical for female-headed households in the region. Sharp and Spiegel (1990) found that women in the rural Transkei, directly across the border from the Qacha's Nek District, utilized similar strategies to supplement the meager earnings of their migrant-labor husbands (538-539). The money that she earned from these ventures went to inputs for farm production, staple good purchases, and, most importantly, to the education of her children, all of whom she put through high school and beyond. She also used some of the money to support the refugees that came to her house in the village. While her work with refugees clearly differentiates her from most of her neighbors, her economic position was similar to that of other women in the village and across the region, and is emblematic of the structural problems that female-headed, rural households faced.

Maleseka channeled her political work into groups on both sides of the South Africa/Lesotho border. Despite her husband being a key figure in the Communist Party in Lesotho and South Africa, she never joined either party. Maleseka was always a committed ANC supporter, and she participated to some extent in party politics in Lesotho around the time of independence. She mentioned that her husband was friends with members of the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) and she was a rank-and-file member of the party, as well as a member of its Women's League. She quit the BCP Women's League, however, as "they were just there, not doing anything." To my best understanding, this happened shortly after Lesotho's independence in 1966. Her disillusionment with the BCP came to a head in 1974 and

she quit the party after its leader, Ntsu Mokhehle, went into exile in Botswana. He received support from the apartheid regime for his underground military, the Lesotho Liberation Army, which was attempting to overthrow the undemocratic government of Lesotho. As Maleseka said, she could not support a party that was “working with the Boers.” By 1974, however, the internal political situation had drastically changed in Lesotho as the BCP and other opposition parties were banned in the aftermath of the 1970 coup by the Basotho National Party (BNP). Whether her exit from the BCP was in part strategic to help her continue her work with refugees was unclear (Machobane, 1990, pp. 302-6; Khaketla, 1972; Weisfelder, 2002).

Intimately tied up with political questions in Lesotho was the question of how the independent state would interact with the apartheid regime, in particular in the realms of diplomatic relations and economic assistance. A key factor in determining these relations was the role that the state of Lesotho and Basotho individuals would play with the liberation movements in South Africa. The founder of the BCP, Ntsu Mokhehle, was active in the ANC and its militant Youth League alongside future luminaries like Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela, and Oliver Tambo in the 1940s and 1950s (Mphanya, 1990, p. 2). The BCP had been the first explicitly political party founded in Lesotho in 1952 (originally called the Basutoland African Congress, though it changed its name in 1957) and at the start it was closely aligned with the ANC. By the end of the 1950s, however, the BCP was moving toward a closer alignment with Sobukwe’s Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), largely because both Mokhehle and Potlako Leballo, a BCP and ANC member who was born in colonial Basutoland, had close relations with Sobukwe. Leballo would rise to the leadership ranks of the PAC after Sobukwe’s imprisonment on Robben Island, and his position cemented ties between the PAC and the BCP in the early and mid-1960s. Before this, Sobukwe came to Maseru to address the 1957 BCP Party Congress, and his speech signaled an early shift in BCP orientation away from the multi-racial ANC toward the PAC (Sobukwe, 1958). This shift away from the ANC might in part explain Maleseka’s reluctance to continue her membership in the

BCP Women's League, as she remained a staunch ANC supporter throughout. Her disassociation from active involvement in Lesotho politics was likely also an offshoot of the BNP repression after the 1970 coup. Mountain districts like Qacha's Nek were a stronghold for Leabua Jonathan's BNP, and Auplas was no exception. She recalled at least one occasion when BNP activists came to her house. While they threatened her, they eventually left without harming her or the children as they were looking for her husband. The political orientation of the BCP with the PAC might have made leaving the party easier for Maleseka, but not being identified with the Lesotho political opposition in the lawless period after the 1970 coup also certainly had benefits for her. The unelected BNP government held power until 1986 when they were overthrown by the military.

In terms of being a location suitable for assisting refugees, Auplas was fortuitously located. Nestled on a ridgeline just to the south of and overlooking the Orange (*Senqu*) River, it was separated from the eastern portions of the Cape Province and western Natal by mountains that made effective and regular border patrol impossible. Auplas was close enough to official border gates at Ramatseliso's and Qacha's Nek that refugees whose papers were in order could cross legally, but it was far enough away that it was quite possible to slip across the unguarded frontier illegally. There was no police post in the village, and the nearest garrison was at the district administrative center of Qacha's Nek, about a fifteen to twenty kilometer walk away. Until it was paved in the mid-2000s, a rough gravel road constructed by volunteer labor in the 1960s served as the only overland connection to other districts and the capital, Maseru. There was, however, an airstrip at Qacha's Nek with regular mail flights. The planes would, for a fee, carry passengers back to Maseru in a relatively quick and easy journey, and it was possible for individuals to travel down from Maseru this way as well. The weak link in this system, however, was the police in Qacha's Nek. They sometimes interdicted the refugees while waiting for the flights, and according to Kena's account, some ended up imprisoned in Lesotho or being returned to the apartheid authorities. However, the vast majority of refugees were able to arrive safely in Maseru through the efforts of



Maleseka and her collaborators in Qacha's Nek. This highlights the danger that the refugees faced every step of the way—from their initial journey from South Africa, to crossing the frontier, and even once inside Lesotho—as well as the risks Maleseka was running by using her homestead in this way.

The two southern districts (Qacha's Nek and Quthing) were situated close to areas of deep unrest in South Africa. The Transkei Bantustan, a center of anti-apartheid activism in the 1960s and 1970s, took control of much of the South African side of Lesotho's southern border at its "independence" in 1976. Urban areas that provided much of the support for the Black Consciousness Movement like Umtata in the Transkei, Grahamstown, East London, King Williams Town, and Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, and Durban in Natal, were close enough to make flight to Lesotho feasible. Southern Lesotho was the closest space free from the apartheid regime, and was thus a popular destination for political refugees who had to flee quickly. The South African border districts were also sparsely populated and without a dense white population, which also helped make this an attractive escape route. On the northern and western borders of Lesotho, most of the land (outside the small QwaQwa Bantustan) was white-owned farms, while on the eastern side of the country, the Drakensberg Mountains, separating Lesotho from Natal, were virtually impassable. The southern border, thus, was an attractive option for refugees fleeing apartheid both because it was close and because it offered many relatively safe places to cross. Once in Lesotho there were also organizations set up to help the refugees either settle there or move further north into Zambia, Tanzania, and other independent African countries. The capital Maseru housed offices of the PAC and ANC in exile, which were charged with coordinating local activities in the struggle against apartheid, as well as helping refugees who found their way to Lesotho. They were joined by an ever-growing number of civil society and development organizations from the 1970s which offered refugees a range of educational, vocational, and support services (Rwelamira, 1990; Polhemus, 1985).

Maleseka was not the only one to see the benefit to anti-apartheid organizations of the southern districts. Patrick Duncan, who

was a South African exile, ex-administrator in colonial Basutoland, editor of the anti-apartheid journal *Contact*, and member of the PAC, purchased two trading stores in 1962 in the rural Quthing District. He purchased these with the expectation that they would be used by PAC refugees as a safe haven and staging area for attacks on South Africa via the Transkei (Driver, 1980). Anderson Ganyile, who had been a leader in the Mpondo Revolts in the rural Transkei in 1960, had been banished to the rural Northern Cape area of South Africa. Escaping, he fled to Lesotho where he was by 1961 living in a hut about 600 yards from the Qacha's Nek border post with two other refugees, Ingleton Ganyile and Mohlovu Mtseko. On 26 August 1961 South African policemen illegally crossed the border, kidnapping Ganyile and his colleagues and holding them without charge or notification to relatives until January 1962. It was only after an international outcry involving the British government and legal petitions to the higher courts in South Africa that Ganyile and his peers were freed. Ganyile returned to Lesotho where he was granted a residence permit in 1963 (Butler, 1966, pp. 247-248, 274-275; Basutoland Central Control Board (1963, May 31). [Note to Residential Commissioner]. National Archives of the United Kingdom (Collection Foreign and Commonwealth Office 141/575 Basutoland Refugees), Kew, London).

The Ganyile case highlights the danger that refugees and their supporters faced in the border districts from apartheid security forces who did not recognize the international boundary in the colonial or independence eras. While the Ganyile case showed that the forces were not above crude 'smash-and-grab' tactics, the most devastating raid in the independence era took place in Maseru in December, 1982 as South African Defense Forces raided ANC and PAC safe houses under cover of darkness, killing forty-four. At least thirteen of the dead were Basotho from Lesotho not connected with the liberation organizations, showing the danger that the apartheid security forces posed whether Basotho were politically active or not. Additionally, the Ganyile case highlighted the ambivalent feelings that people in Lesotho had toward refugees as the residence pass that Ganyile received in 1963 was actually opposed by the Paramount Chief—the

highest Basotho authority in a constitutional monarchy system (Memo of conversation between Resident Commissioner and Paramount Chief (1962, Nov. 26). National Archives of the United Kingdom (Collection Foreign and Commonwealth Office 141/937 South African Police Activity and Liaison in Basutoland), Kew, London). Likely the Paramount Chief was worried about political activists undermining the political system in Lesotho, or causing more South African raids on the territory. This ambivalence toward refugees from positions of authority continued after independence when Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan threatened to evict refugees, particularly PAC members, over their support for opposition political parties in Lesotho, though he never carried through on this threat.

The police force in Lesotho was also divided in their feelings toward refugees. Some officers would work with the South African authorities to send refugees back to face prosecution, while others would assist in efforts to keep refugees safe within the territory. Maleseka noted that the police had this divide at Qacha's Nek and that she had to be cautious when dealing with them. In the late 1960s, many of the top officials in the police force were still British officers held over from colonial times, and they would in many cases work closely with the South African authorities. The apartheid regime paid for an expansion of the most elite security forces in the country, the Police Mobile Unit, in the late 1960s (Graham Cairns, interview, June 2, 2007; Matlosa, 1999, p. 7).<sup>v</sup> The divide within the force was resolved, in part, by the government's need for South African support after the 1970 election. After losing the elections, the BNP government refused to hand over power to the BCP opposition, and this decision was supported and encouraged by the South African government and its handpicked advisors to the security forces (Khaketla, 1972). A partial purge of the civil service and the police force followed the coup, which made the force more reliable from the standpoint of the Lesotho government, but even this purge did not completely rid the security forces of those who sympathized with the South African liberation movements, as Kena's memories of police support in the 1970s attest (United States National Archives, Record

Group 59, Records of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, Box 1, File: Lesotho Government Emergency).

Kena's house was a crucial way station as it was the refugees' first stop outside the borders of apartheid South Africa. While she was not particularly forthcoming about how refugees came to hear about her safe house, it is fair to assume that because of her husband's high level political work with the SACP and the Lesotho Communist Party, their location and willingness to help refugees were likely well known among activists in the eastern part of the Cape Province and Natal. Kena noted that she received money from Chris Hanu, the SACP and ANC/MK leader, to support her work. Hanu's father, Gilbert, had been an ANC activist and he had fled to Mafeteng, Lesotho in the late 1950s. Chris was a close family friend with the Kenas and he lived in exile in Lesotho in the mid-1960s and then again from 1973-82, working for the ANC/MK (Gibbs, 2011). These connections suggest that the Kena family house was part of an established and known route into Lesotho for exiles.

Despite being an ANC supporter, however, Maleseka helped all who walked through her door as she stated: "[They] knew to come and find me and I would help them." Those who arrived came unannounced and found food, clothing if they needed it, shelter, and assistance for further travel. An interesting feature of this is that despite there being very public rifts between leaders of the ANC and the PAC, in particular, and later between the ANC/United Democratic Front (UDF) and supporters of the Black Consciousness Movement of Steve Biko, refugee need trumped ideology at Kena's house. As she stated: "It was very simple, really. They needed stuff." The refugees would often stay with her for a couple of days while she arranged transport. With transport secured, she would have them walk to the district capital at night in order to be there to catch the morning mail flight to Maseru. This operation was, on one level, a humanitarian one, but by helping all comers Maleseka was also making a subtle political statement. She was ignoring the acrimonious public rifts between the various liberation groups, declaring that all those opposing apartheid were worthy of her assistance.

### **Maleseka Kena: Gender, Ethnicity and “National” Identity Intertwined**

This vignette—a mother of seven finding the resources and time to not just survive in an adopted country, but also feeding and sheltering refugees—is compelling as a human story. It is also noteworthy for its brushes with important political leaders from the South African liberation struggle, and the interesting light it sheds on the role the police in Lesotho played in both aiding and thwarting refugees from the apartheid regime. Some of the more interesting theoretical questions that Maleseka’s case raise, however, focus on the role gender played in her ability to successfully shield refugees, how refugees complicated local politics, and how local people in Auplas viewed the international border and those crossing it. The Basotho who lived in Auplas, like many rural villages in Lesotho, supported the ruling BNP by a large margin (Weisfelder, 2002, pp. 29-31). Maleseka’s early support for the opposition BCP thus put her in the minority in the village. Political contention in Lesotho during the first five years of independence (1966-70) were marked by an extreme partisan divide and bitter rhetoric, centering mainly on the concept of development as a proxy for “the nation” and “nationalism” (Aerni-Flessner, 2014). Part of the BNP policy of engagement with South Africa meant that the government was rhetorically hostile to political refugees from 1965 into the early 1970s. The Lesotho government was ostensibly attempting to acknowledge the realities of being landlocked within apartheid South Africa, but in reality the policy was a way for Prime Minister Jonathan to attempt to garner South African support, while also attacking the opposition and limiting their support from these savvy political refugees. In Lesotho, PAC members from South Africa tended to support the BCP, while ANC members were in alliance with the smaller, royalist opposition party, the Marematlou Freedom Party (British National Archives, CO 1048/866 Visit of Basutoland PM to London 1965, Southern African Department Brief for Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1966). Very few supported the conservative BNP, which had the Catholic Church as its key backer. It was only in the mid-1970s that the church strongly came out against apartheid. Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan

repeatedly condemned refugees in Lesotho during the late colonial and early independence periods, saying that they had been “abusing the hospitality which had been granted to them” by “engaging in subversive acts against Lesotho” (Anonymous, 4 Jan 1966, “Refugees in Basutoland”; Anonymous, 14 Feb. 1967, “Alien Control Legislation”). While Jonathan never forced refugees out en masse, his administration did start cases against individuals and tried to arrange for the most troublesome refugees to be airlifted out of Lesotho (National Archives of the United Kingdom (Collection Foreign and Commonwealth Office 141/577 Refugees in Basutoland) Kew, London; National Archives of the United Kingdom (Collection Foreign and Commonwealth Office 29/188 Status of Refugees in Lesotho), Kew, London). The choice by Maleseka to shelter political refugees from all political groups was, therefore, a decision that carried risk as she knew full well that the government was rhetorically opposed to active ANC, SACP, and PAC members sheltering in Lesotho. Kena ran special risks with this work as she lived in a village dominated by supporters of the ruling party.

So why was Maleseka able to successfully carry out this work for many years? She faced a seemingly inhospitable climate because of her status as an outsider born and raised in South Africa, her support for the opposition which placed her in the political minority in the village, and the national opposition faced by refugees in Lesotho? There are three analytical threads to follow that help explain how Kena was able to be successful, and give rise to larger theoretical questions that help better understand social dynamics on the periphery of the repressive apartheid state: gender, ethnicity, and kinship connections.

Lesotho in the 1960s and 1970s featured a society that was still strongly patriarchal, despite significant female majorities in most towns and villages on account of labor migration (Epprecht, 1993; Murray, 1981). Kena had lived in Lesotho permanently since 1964, but she had been born and raised in a similar cultural milieu among a majority ethnically Basotho population in South Africa. While there were female chiefs in Lesotho, their position was tenuous and they usually only came into power when husbands died or if there were no

male heirs. In community groups, women were not often leaders unless the organizations were exclusively female, and Maleseka had experience with this in the political parties and the Homemakers Association. She had no outward complaints about this setup, but the initiative and determination she showed in conducting her dangerous refugee work suggests that she was intent on finding ways to support political causes in which she believed, even if there were gender-based restrictions on her activities. She did talk about occasionally using gendered norms to protect her family and shield her work from scrutiny. One day in the early 1970s, a group of BNP supporters came looking for her husband, and were loudly expressing their displeasure with the work of the family in politics. While they did not harm her, the chief of the village found out about the incident and expelled the offenders. In Maleseka's telling, the chief's rationale was that "she [was] not a politician. Her husband [was] a politician, but she [was] just there taking care of the children." While it meant that she had to conceal her political activities, basing refugee work out of her home allowed her to reserve some activities from the domain of acknowledged public politics. This suggests a creative use of space similar to that described by Francois Hamlin in her work on women like Vera Mae Pigeo in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Working as an NAACP youth organizer, Pigeo relied not on a heavy public presence, but rather on her behind-the-scenes efforts to recruit young people through her beauty salon. Embracing the spaces that were open to her as a woman, Pigeo utilized images of nurturing black motherhood and of independent black businesses to recruit young blacks in Clarksdale into the Civil Rights Movements and she became one of the key local organizers in the 1950s and 1960s, Pigeo and other women like her "utilized their everyday social roles...to promote activism and radical change by example and in conjunction with her other role as branch secretary" (Hamlin, 2012, p. 60). While Maleseka's case is not completely analogous as she was *concealing* her work from the local community, she was similarly using gendered discourses in ways that allowed her to continue and shield her work from criticism. The local chief could at least partially protect her in the name of upholding gendered norms as long as she portrayed herself outwardly as a

mother and homemaker. While Maleseka ensured that the refugees were not seen around the community—she kept them locked in a particular *rondavel* in her home compound—surely most members of the small, tight-knit community were aware to some degree of her activities. But we must dig deeper than just gendered dynamics to explain why Maleseka’s neighbors tacitly allowed her refugee work to continue for so long.

Maleseka’s claim to being ethnically Basotho played a large role in allowing her to continue her political work. People who identify as Basotho through their written and spoken language (Sesotho), and their cultural practices, reside on both side of the Lesotho/South Africa border. Kena’s family hailed originally from Lesotho, even if she was born outside its formal borders. Birth in the country, birth to parents born in Lesotho, or marriage to a (male) Lesotho citizen was required to obtain citizenship at the time of independence. Maleseka’s marriage to Jacob, who was born in Lesotho, thus, gave her access to citizenship. She was, however, an outsider in the village and, to some extent, dependent on the support of her husband’s extended family for social protection in the village. She did bring her own family name, which was linked to the royal line as well, which gave her an added layer of protection. Chris Konz, in personal communication, also noted that Jacob’s father had been an advisor to the local Chief Makhaola, which also helps explain the chiefly protection that Maleseka enjoyed for her activities. This experience was also seen in the cases of other refugees coming into Lesotho, as getting permission from a local chief to settle in his/her area gave residency rights, local protections, and, in some cases, the ability to access land for farming (Basutoland: Entry and Residence Proclamation, 1958). In the case of many refugees coming into Lesotho from the 1950s onward, their ability to successfully assimilate enough into a rural community seemed to be the main criteria used by local chiefs to welcome (or not) outsiders. Thabo Mofutsanyana, for example, was another SACP organizer who had fled to Lesotho in 1959. Despite having no firm claim to citizenship because he was born in South Africa, he was still able to live successfully in the country. He first found shelter among extended



kin in villages near the Caledon River, but fearing a raid as had happened in the Ganyile case, he moved to a small community in the mountains of the Leribe District. There he lived among supporters of Josiel Lefela's *Lekhotla la Bafo* (Council of the Commoners) until the 1990s, despite the fact that the apartheid security forces were still looking for him, and the undemocratic government of Lesotho also found his presence threatening. While he never had a formal residency permit, the shelter of the village and local chief show the ability of people in rural areas to quietly ignore and subvert the formal laws, thus determining who 'belonged' in the community regardless of citizenship status (Edgar, 2005).

The question of political refugees was also intertwined with long-standing animosity toward the South African government, and its white citizens in general. Most Basotho viewed the South African state as having stolen their nation's best farmland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lelimo, 1998). While the BNP government tried for a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s to negotiate on an equal footing with the apartheid state, on the ground in the border districts, most Basotho were more likely to side with those attempting to flee the apartheid state because of the nature of the repressive policies. Further, most Basotho had experienced apartheid rules and regulations first-hand crossing the border for shopping, visiting relatives, or work. Still, Maleseka said that on occasion people would alert the authorities to the presence of refugees in Auplas and then they would be taken away to Qacha's Nek and turned over to the South African authorities. Maleseka identified those who would identify them as pro-BNP supporters, suggesting the revelations had less to do with people being pro-South African, but were rather using the refugees as part of internal political battles in Lesotho. Most people in the village, however, demonstrated a subtle rejection of their government's mildly pro-South Africa policy by at least turning a blind eye toward the presence of refugees in their midst.

It would be easy to overstate the meanings of the silence of the majority of Maleseka's neighbors in Auplas in regard to her activity with refugees, but silent they were most of the time. While she did not give a sense of how many times refugees were turned in

by her neighbors, only saying that it was “very bad” when it happened, she gave the impression that this was a rare occurrence. With Auplas being so close to the border, and the South African security forces having a proclivity to disregard the Lesotho-South Africa border whenever it was convenient for them, Maleseka was putting herself and her family in considerable personal danger running her operation. However, her work with refugees would not have been possible if the majority, or even more than a slim minority of the population, had felt strongly enough about the work to turn her in to the authorities. Part of this was surely rooted in the amount of time and energy it took to simply survive in rural Qacha’s Nek. On another level, however, it is tempting to speculate that local people, and especially women with whom Maleseka was interacting on a regular basis in community groups, were unwilling to fully buy into the idea that these refugees were so fundamentally different that they warranted a call to the authorities. Coplan’s more recent writings on Basotho pilgrims crossing Lesotho’s northern border to re-colonize spiritually sacred spaces they were denied access to in the apartheid era, has some relevance. Coplan suggests that the pilgrims see these journeys as not just individually significant, but also attempts to enact community ownership of the lands for all Basotho (Coplan, 2003). In other words, Basotho are seeing a human community that crosses international boundaries and was greater than the territory represented by demarcations on maps. While none of the refugees stayed in the long-term, as Mofutsanyana had done in the Leribe District, formal citizenship was less important, seemingly, in the minds of most people in Auplas than willingness to integrate into the local community. In this, Maleseka was part of a deep tradition of women moving to the villages of their husbands in Lesotho and her activities and community engagement, taken as a whole, were considered to be in keeping with the values of the community such that her activities with refugees never garnered any widespread backlash.

A key way in which Maleseka joined and participated with the local community was through her membership in the Homemakers Association. The most animated Maleseka was during the interview when she described her membership and participation in the

Auplas chapter of this group. Here, women came together in social and practical activities. They taught each other and learned how to can and preserve foods, prepare foods in more nutritious ways, sew, help elderly or sick community members, or just visit with each other. On paper, these sorts of groups were models of Victorian domesticity (Bain, 1970). In practice, however, these groups provided women with a sense of empowerment and community in a way that political participation, for instance, did not offer in the patriarchal society (Epprecht, 1993). When asked why she liked being in the Homemakers Association, Kena responded that the group had power, brought an “energy” to the women, and that the group and its leaders “knew how to get things done!” The group offered support to women whose families often lacked male heads of household for large parts of the year, with some even facing the daunting prospect of having male members go off to South Africa to work and never return (Murray, 1981). She contrasted her membership in the Homemakers with the leadership of the Women’s League of the BCP, saying that they were “not doing anything for the nation so I left it.” Without more detailed explanation from her, however, it is impossible to know exactly why Maleseka chose to disassociate from BCP activity, but it does stand in stark contrast to the usefulness she saw in the Homemakers Association. The group, similar to the *kopanos* (unions) that Epprecht describes, functioned not just on a practical level, helping women stretch household production and budgets further to cover lean times, but also as a place to gain knowledge, fellowship, and support from others in a similar situation (Epprecht, 1993). Her eager participation also suggests again that her refugee work, no matter how unpopular it might have been in some quarters, was not enough to place her outside the bounds of community membership. She hinted that others in the village, at the least, “did not want to see [the refugees],” but they were not willing or able to ostracize her from the community or turn her in to authorities.

Maleseka’s familial ties, both through marriage and from her own family, also aided this community acceptance. She noted that the local chief turned a blind eye to her activities: “I didn’t tell the chief and he didn’t want to know. I just went about my business and didn’t

try to talk about it.” Maleseka’s father was a son of Letsie, the son of Moshoeshoe, the founder of the Basotho Kingdom. Many chiefs in the Qacha’s Nek District are descendants of Lerotholi, Letsie’s son from his second wife, so her family connections carried considerable cachet in the region. Additionally, Jacob’s family had long been advisors to the Makhaola chiefs of Auplas. This chiefly protection from both sides of the family would have been helpful in ensuring at least tacit support for her activities, and suggests that ties of kinship and ethnicity could and did cut across colonial and national borders. In this case, it also helped Maleseka quietly subvert some of the laws of the colonial and independent state of Lesotho in regards to belonging and the local community.

### **Conclusion**

The story of Maleseka Kena is intensely human, but it also highlights the spaces for and limitations on for women’s political activism in the apartheid era. On one hand, her story highlights the struggle to raise children in difficult situations, while also living out her political convictions from a rural home in the mountains of southern Lesotho. Her story illuminates issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, borders, and belonging in her adopted homeland. She was, like many Basotho women and other women regionally, forced into the role of supporting a family because of the absence of her husband for long periods of time. The story of Kena and other Basotho women like her is a narrative about women responding to the structural inequalities built into the regional apartheid labor system. Analyzing the lives of individuals, especially women, living near international borders can help us better understand the nature of the impacts of the apartheid system on those who lived near it. This history is important because the questions that Kena and other members of the community in Auplas faced in the apartheid era are still relevant today. As James Ferguson (2006) notes, the rhetoric of “national economies” and “bounded culture” that is the current language of the developmentalist state and neo-liberal ideology still elide regional systems of inequality (p. 68). Seeing how women like Kena faced and overcame such obstacles in the past could, perhaps, provide new

ways of thinking about governmental service delivery and questions about the meaning of borders and national citizenship in the present.

The questions of borders and citizenship run through Kena's story because, despite her South African upbringing and outsider status, she was able to smuggle refugees for years. This delicate operation was carried out without the open knowledge or support of her neighbors. She participated in some aspects of community life, like the Homemakers Association, but also performed her political activities behind closed doors and in the dark of night. The tacit acceptance by most members of the community can be read as a subtle challenge to territorial nationalism and the state. Even though she was born an outsider and gained citizenship through her marriage to a Lesotho national, the leadership in the community and most of its members clearly felt that her activities did not rise to the level of reportable to the authorities. While theorists like Crawford Young (2012) still dismiss the idea of African territorial nationalism as being "limited in depth" because of its "original sin of derivation from the colonial partition and its shallow historical narrative," Kena and the local community in Auplas challenge this characterization (332-3). The willingness of the community to overlook place of birth and divergent political views was a rebuke to the idea that Basotho recognized the border, ill-marked and arbitrary as it was, as being reflective of two "nationalities" when it came to people who self-identified as part of the community. The ability to use gender roles, ethnicity, and family ties to integrate into the community allowed Maleseka and the other residents of Auplas to subtly redefine who "belonged" to their own community. While this acceptance could not change the bureaucracy in Lesotho, distance from the central government allowed the local chief and some residents to alter local practice enough to accommodate a more expansive view of belonging. While there are certainly elements to Maleseka's story that make it unique to her, the volume of refugees crossing the border during the apartheid era suggests that the general outlines of the story were playing out in similar fashion across not just Lesotho but the wider southern African region. More research on the historical meanings of borders holds the potential to help us better understand

ethnicity and gender as lived phenomenon, and their relationship to formal citizenship and belonging.

---

<sup>i</sup> I want to thank my former colleagues in the History Department at SUNY Cortland for the support they gave me while writing this paper, in particular Laura Gathagan, Scott Moranda, and Randi Storch. They helped a new faculty member negotiate academic publishing and I am forever grateful. A version was presented at the 2012 conference *Race, Resistance, and Reason* sponsored by CGIS at SUNY Cortland. The funding for this research came from a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship in 2008-09. I am grateful to Chris Conz for facilitating the interview and correcting my misconceptions about Auplas and the Kena family, as well as to the reviewers and editor of *Wagadu* for their helpful suggestions. All remaining mistakes are my responsibility alone.

<sup>ii</sup> The present-day country of Lesotho was named Basutoland by British colonial authorities. People within the territory, however, always referred to it as Lesotho—the land of the Sotho people—and I will follow this convention throughout the paper unless explicitly referring to the colonial administration. Similarly, the language and culture of the people in Lesotho are known as Sesotho, while an individual is a Mosotho, and “the people” in a plural construction are called Basotho.

<sup>iii</sup> *Me* is the term of respect for married women in the Sesotho language. The term of respect for married men is *Ntate*. I refer to her by her first name, Maleseka, for much of the paper so as not to confuse her work with that of her husband Jacob. All of the direct quotations come from my interview with Maleseka that took place on 17 March 2009. A few clarifying details came from conversation with Chris Conz.

<sup>iv</sup> Translation: “Thank you, Ma’am.”

<sup>v</sup> Cairns, a South African of British descent, was the Assistant Superintendent of Police from 1968-71.

## References

### Primary Sources:

The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London:  
Colonial Office CO 1048/866 Visit of Basutoland PM to London  
1965.

Dominions Office DO 35-7356 Basutoland: Entry and residence  
proclamation 1958.

Dominions Office DO 35-7357 Basutoland: Entry and residence  
proclamation 1958-60.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office FCO 29/188 Status of  
Refugees in Lesotho

Foreign and Commonwealth Office FCO 141/575 Basutoland  
refugees.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office FCO 141/577 Basutoland  
refugees.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office FCO 141/937 South African  
police activity and liaison in Basutoland.

### Interviews:

Graham Cairns, Malealea, Lesotho, June 2, 2007.

Maleseka Kena, Tsoelike Auplas, Lesotho, March 17, 2009.

### Lesotho Newspapers:

Anonymous. (January 4, 1966). Refugees in Lesotho. *Basutoland  
News* [Ladybrand, South Africa]

Anonymous. (February 14, 1967). Alien Control Legislation Under  
Consideration." *Lesotho News* [Ladybrand, South Africa].

Sobukwe, M. R. (July, 1958). The Dog and the Wolf. *Mohlabani*  
[Maseru, Lesotho].

United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland:  
Record Group 59 General Records of the Department of State,  
Bureau of African Affairs, Office of Southern African Affairs,

Records Relating to Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, 1969-75  
Box 1 Folder: *Lesotho Government Emergency 1970*.

Secondary Sources:

Abrams, L. (2010). *Oral history theory*. New York: Routledge.

Alcoff, L. (1991). The problem of speaking for others, *Cultural Critique*, 20(1), 5-32  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/i258520>

Aerni-Flessner, J. (2014) Development, Politics, and the Centralization of State Power in Lesotho, 1960-1975, *Journal of African History*, 55(3), 401-21  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000395>

Ambrose, D. (n.d.). *Origins and growth of Maseru: Volume 3, chronology of important events in the history of Maseru*. Maseru: Department of Lands, Surveys, and Physical Planning.

Bain, S. (1970). *Homemakers training manual: For trainers in African women's clubs*. Salisbury: Rhodesia Literature Bureau.

Butler, J. (1966). South Africa and the High Commission Territories: The Ganyile case, 1961. In Carter (Ed.), *Politics in Africa: 7 Cases*. New York: Harcourt.

Coplan, D. (2003). Land from the ancestors: Popular religious pilgrimage along the South Africa-Lesotho border, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(4), 976-993  
<http://jstor.org/stable/3557397>

Coplan, D. (2010). First meets third: Analyzing inequality along the US-Mexico and South Africa-Lesotho borders, *Journal of Borderland Studies*, 25(2), 53-64.



- Driver, C.J. (1980). *Patrick Duncan: South African and Pan-African*. London: Heinemann.
- Edgar, R. (2005). *The making of an African Communist: Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana and the Communist Party of South Africa, 1927-1929*. Johannesburg: UNISA Press.
- Epprecht, M. (1993). Domesticity and piety in colonial Lesotho: The private politics of Basotho women's pious associations, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19(2), 202-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637343%20>
- Ferguson, J. (2006). Paradoxes of sovereignty and independence: "Real" and "pseudo-"nation-states and the depoliticization of poverty. In J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gibbs, T. (2011). Chris Hani's "country bumpkins": Regional networks in the African National Congress underground, 1974-1994, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37(4), 677-91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2011.622947>
- Hamlin, F. (2012). *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The black freedom struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Khaketla, B.M. (1972). *Lesotho 1970: An African coup under the microscope*. London: C. Hurst and Co.
- Lelimo, M. (1998). *The question of Lesotho's conquered territory: It's time for an answer*. Morija: Morija Museum and Archives.
- Lerumo, A. (1971). *Fifty fighting years: The Communist Party of South Africa, 1921-1971*. London: Inkululeko.

- Lissoni, A. (2010). The PAC in Basutoland, c. 1962–1965, *South African Historical Journal*, 62(1), 54-77.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02582471003778326>
- Machobane, L.B.B.J. (1990). *Government and change in Lesotho, 1800-1966: A study of political institutions*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Matlosa, K. (1999). Aid, development, and democracy in Lesotho: 1966-1996. Paper presented at the Center for Southern African Studies, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Maloka, E. (2002). *The South African Communist Party, 1963-1990*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa.
- Mphanya, N. (2004). *A brief history of the Basutoland Congress Party: Lekhotla la mahatammoho*. Morija: Morija Printing Works.
- Murray, C. (1981). *Families divided: the impact of migrant labour in Lesotho*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Polhemus, J. (1985). The refugee factor in Botswana, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 4(1), 28-45.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619288.1985.9974595>
- Rwelamira, M. (1990). *Refugees in a chess game: Reflections on Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland refugee policies*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.
- Sharp, J. and A. Spiegel. (1990). Women and wages: Gender and the control of income in farm and Bantustan households, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16(3), 527-549

Young, C. (2012). *The postcolonial state in Africa: Fifty years of independence, 1960-2010*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

John Aerni-Flessner  
Assistant Professor, Residential College in the Arts and  
Humanities  
Michigan State University  
[johnaerni@gmail.com](mailto:johnaerni@gmail.com)