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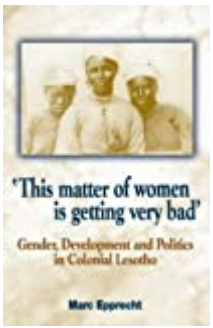

Marc Epprecht. *'This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad': Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho.* Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000. ix + 281 pp. R170 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86980-953-2.

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Marc Epprecht is known among Africanists for his balanced and perceptive social histories of gender and homosexuality in not one but two locales, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. With *'This Matter of Women Is Getting Very Bad'* Epprecht has given us a book-length history of women in the former, joining Colin Murray, Judy Kimble, Phil Bonner and Eddie Maloka in the effort to provide a gendered social history of twentieth-century Lesotho. The book aims especially to restore women to the dominant trends of the colonial period as discussed by these and other mainstream scholars. To do this Epprecht mainly concerns himself with the history of women, rather than working within the theoretical apparatus of gender as an historically constructed relationship via Joan Scott, Judith Butler or others. His is a fine study all the same.

The first part of the book is a standard treatment (standard since Elizabeth Eldredge's *A South African Kingdom* [Cambridge, 1993]) of precolonial South African women, outlining the jural status of women, their removal from their previous ownership over peasant production, and their frequent subjection to violence (p. 18). Men were nevertheless "obliged" by custom to care for women within patriarchal structures that colonial overrule in some ways strengthened and in some ways weakened (p. 48). The coming of the Paris Evangelical Mission and the Roman Catholic Church created a "political Culture" in which women might both assert themselves and find themselves unprotected at critical moments in their lives.

EpprechťÃs book finds its voice in the 1880s and after. Environmental damage, mine homosexuality and family conflicts are all briefly discussed. As "placed" chiefs asserted transformed "customary" power, many women converted to Christianity to escape the solutions to family stresses they offered. At the same time women were paid half men's wages on Orange Free State farms, others – especially "undesirable" women – sold dope and alcoholic beer, pissed in public, and learned how to brawl with shivs. Such women were tolerated because they helped lower farm wages for Sotho men. In a country with a 700-mile porous mountain border, the 1915 law debarring women from leaving Lesotho without a male guardian's consent could scarcely be enforced. And because gold-widows paid no taxes, many chiefs were happy to see the back of them. The Agricultural Corps of Lesotho remained utterly male-focused until independence in 1966. Still, no clear senior male alliance controlled colonial Lesotho. For instance, while chiefs wanted migrants to defer their pay so as to increase land-based accumulation in Lesotho, the administration disallowed it (pp. 100-104). By the 1930s, white magistrates

were overruling chiefs on "custom," and in the 1940s the institution of chiefship was, over chiefs' protests, finally "reformed."

Several times I found myself wishing for a more sustained theoretical treatment of Epprecht's interesting material. For example, the discussion of the youthful, heterosexually active regent 'Mantsebo records her claim to be a "social man" because she was "paramount chief." She waged legal battles with the administration and even appealed to the U.N. Yet she relied on weeping fits to win points against white officials. Accused of sorcery by the administration, she decried the charge as an attempt to "castrate" her chiefship. Epprecht offers no comment on these phrases, and little discoursive or materialist roadmap to his intriguing account.

A major theme of the latter half of the book is the place of "kopanos" or WomeńÃs Christian societies in Lesotho. Essentially, Epprecht follows Deborah Gaitskell's nuanced yet ultimately descriptive approach, in which the kopanos are prayer groups, self-help organizations, banks, and moral police. What of Phil Bonner's classical Marxian suggestion that such organizations retarded urban women's class consciousness in the critical inter-war period? Certainly "Homemaker" societies sought to bourgie-up rural areas, to combat poverty "in the appearance of the house" (p. 155), but this was not the same as actually combating poverty. Epprecht does not judge these organizations, does not determine whether their main thrust was to repossess agriculture for women or to prop up "tradition" on fresh-scrubbed linoleum floors. Quite apart from making balance sheets, however - to draw on an approach associated with Pierre Bourdieu and Carol Pateman - "homemakers" and kopanos were also, fundamentally, about transforming domestic space into public space, and so about refashioning the political culture of Lesotho. But in the book "aesthetics" are not problematized and recourse is instead had to weak terms like "proto-feminist."

New in the last sections of the book is an attention to the relationship between Canada, Roman Catholicism and trends in emerging Lesotho, including an interesting section on A. M. GrangerÂ¹s reactionary text *Preparation for Marriage* (Montreal, 1945). While at times the material feels less than fully digested, Epprecht ends his book with a convincing argument that the party of the government-in-waiting, the BCP (Basotho Congress Party), badly miscalculated the (newly permitted) political muscle of women at the polls and needlessly alienated them with its misogynist (and especially anti-nun, anti-clerical) propaganda. The League of Saint Anne expanded its work as a kopano on behalf of Leabua JonathanńÃs BNP (Basotho National Party) and when the votes were counted in 1965 the BNP squeaked into power. Subsequently the BNP's unfaithfulness disillusioned women voters, who rebuked it at the polls, leading to the suspension of the constitution for 28 years. Rather than testify to the political astuteness of women, as Epprecht remarks, such an outcome might just as easily be taken as an indication that the political relations between men and women were on full boil at the close of the colonial period.

Epprecht's approach varies between different forms of analysis, united by a focus on events. A richer analysis would embrace not just women but also the transient patterns of gender in molding the path by which Lesotho became one of the most important labor reserves in the South African economy with almost no internal market infrastructure. We have become accustomed to the idea that men's experiences in South African workplaces were critical to cementing and even creating their national identities. To travel by rail to Kimberley or the reef to sink shafts, labor in the tubercular mines, see "town wives" or "matekatse," develop male friendships, and come home with cash–for men these things made a community of sameness among diverse backgrounds. The Moshoeshoe monarchy channeled such sameness into a rural archetype: the Sotho man, pony, blanket and gun. Thus the very processes that impoverished women, but that also allowed women to survive on exhausted soil, also produced the androcentric identity that the Cape Colony and Great Britain printed on maps and assiduously taxed. Basotho identity was thus gendered at the roots. Epprecht's is a valuable book which succeeds on its own terms, and is recommended to anyone interested in the social history of inland South Africa. But one still requires companion readings–say, Eddie MalokâÃs and David CoplanńÃs work on male migrants–to round out a fuller picture of the history of gender in colonial Lesotho.

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