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Education in Lesotho: School, Gender Roles, and Sexual Negotiation

The inspiration for this project conducted in the small landlocked southern African country of Lesotho oddly enough came from a family vacation to Tanzania in east Africa. I spent a week living with the Masai tribe, and I became fascinated with their culture and beliefs. When I got back to the United States, I knew right away that I wanted to return to Africa. I became involved in an organization called Touching Tiny Lives through the Notre Dame Anthropology Department. Founded by Notre Dame alumni, Touching Tiny Lives is a safe home for vulnerable babies in rural Lesotho. Nearly one third of Lesotho's population is HIV positive, and the epidemic has altered every facet of life in Basotho culture. Touching Tiny Lives (TTL) fulfills a pivotal role in the lives of many young children in Lesotho by providing nutritional and medical services for families in rural areas in addition to taking in the sickest babies in order to rehabilitate them until they are well enough to return to their families. I was given the opportunity to intern for two summers at TTL, helping with daily care of the babies and administrative tasks as well as conducting independent anthropological research.

During my first summer in Lesotho, I conducted preliminary research on education in rural Lesotho. Each day I traveled over Lesotho's mountainous terrain to interview families about their experiences with education and attitudes towards schooling. Being brand new to anthropological methods, I found each interview as exhilarating and engaging as the last. My interest in gender roles also pushed me to ask questions about relationships between men and women in Basotho culture. I found the culture to be very patriarchal. Men are always

considered the head of the household and the primary decision-maker. One of the interviewees listed her husband as the current head of household even though he died ten years ago.

It definitely took a while to adjust to life in Lesotho. Having spent time on a Native American reservation in my youth, I had witnessed poverty before, but not like this. We treated malnourished children daily. Some even died. Some returned to the arms of family, but I still worried about them constantly, imagining only their mud-walled huts to shield them from Lesotho's bitter cold wind. Despite it all, the Basotho were some of the kindest people I've ever met. I grew to really consider them my friends, and I wanted to do everything in my power to ease their suffering.

One of the most remarkable moments during my first summer in Lesotho came while I was watching a group of primary students playing soccer in a barren field during recess. At home children were usually gender segregated because certain chores, such as cooking and caring for younger siblings, were only attributed to girls, while older boys were exclusively outdoors looking after the family's livestock. Here on the soccer field it was definitely different. The boys and girls played together as equals, and I sensed a comradeship among the school children that I hadn't felt among siblings I visited at home.

When I returned to the United States, I had a hard time using my broad preliminary research to narrow down a topic for the next summer. It wasn't until I read an article for my Gender and Health class with Professor Smith-Oka that I knew what I wanted to pursue this summer. The article's premise was that education could provide women in developing countries with greater access to power in an increasingly globalized world.

I returned to Lesotho on my Kellogg grant to research whether or not the educational environment and the benefits reaped from an education had affected gender roles in Lesotho and perhaps increased women's power to make sexual decisions in their marriages.

Most of my ethnographic data was derived from a set of comprehensive focus groups and one-on-one interviews with nine high schools from the village. At first I attempted to maintain a professional distance from my participants, but soon I found that I had developed close and compassionate friendships with them. I hope to do justice to the genuine and colorful lives of these young men and women, who were so open and honest. Sometimes I was shocked by how much they were willing to share about their sexual experiences. My research would not have been possible without these vibrant young people who so patiently answered my questions and allowed me to follow them around day after day.

My results were not as black and white as I originally had anticipated. One thing that this research project has taught me is that reality is full of nuances and divergences. Each person has his or her own story, and my interview participants were no exception. At first my results frustrated me because the answers weren't always what I expected or they were unclear, but now I see that these answers paint an authentic reality of what life is like for young people in Lesotho. The collision of traditional Basotho culture and the ever-expanding influence of globalization complicate life in Lesotho, especially for this generation. They emerged in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and in many ways they are left to pick up the pieces of a shattered culture. Many of the men and women I interviewed were my age and had already lost both their parents to AIDS. Some had spent time on the streets. The epidemic vastly altered the way people interact with each other in Lesotho, particularly in respect to romantic relationships. The men and women I interviewed seem caught in the middle of a struggle between their elders and Western values and lifestyles.

I also interviewed several married adults, both educated and uneducated, about their relationships with their spouses and their ideals regarding sexual norms and gender roles. I asked one uneducated husband what he would do if his wife refused to have sex with him, and he

told me that she would never refuse. He married her so he could have sex with her any time he wanted. Uneducated married women supported this notion. One woman told me that her husband had actually kidnapped and raped her before their marriage. I later learned that this was common practice fifty years ago, and sometimes still happens in rural areas, especially areas that do not have access to secondary schooling. Educated people tended to vehemently detest this tradition, while uneducated people might say that it was not good but seemed more resigned to the situation.

I also studied the differences between initiation school and formal education in Lesotho. Initiation school is an ancient custom in many African tribes. In Lesotho, boys and girls are separated from the community for up to a year and brought into the mountains to learn cultural customs from village elders. Boys and girls go to separate initiation schools and emerge separately as men and women in society. I came to understand that the division dictated by the initiation school system is conducive to continued gender segregation and the perpetuation of a patriarchal gender order. The details of initiation school are very secretive, and it was difficult for me to glean descriptions from my informants. Some simply would tell me that they learned Basotho traditions, such as basket weaving, but I heard rumors that young men were taught how to have intercourse with women. Villagers I interviewed reported attacks on local girls perpetrated by young men who had recently returned from initiation school. Educated young people distrusted the traditional education system, saying that they were afraid or thought that initiation school was “useless”.

I found the formal education environment to be extremely cooperative and democratic amongst pupils. The uniform and hygiene code was written in such a way that boys and girls were barely distinguishable from each other; hair was cut to the scalp, no makeup or jewelry was allowed, and all students wore a pantsuit uniform. Boys and girls attended coed classes, played

together during recess, and walked home side by side. Girls reported feeling safe at school and told me that they felt as competent as their male counterparts. Boys seemed to respect their female classmates. Most of the boys indicated that they had close friendships with girls who attend their high school. One told me that he joined a coed soccer team in order to spend more time out of class with his female friends.

It is extremely important for HIV infection prevention programs to take cultural dynamics between men and women into consideration when planning intervention. I hope that my research might be used by a prevention program in some capacity to better understand how to prevent HIV in a specifically Basotho context.

The Kellogg research grant made my enriching summer in Lesotho possible, and I wish to convey my sincere appreciation for the Kellogg Institute's generosity in both time and resources. Without their support, my research would not have come this far. I plan on spending my senior year writing a thesis with the data gathered from my last two summers in Lesotho, as well as presenting my results at the American Anthropological Association's conference this winter and the Society for Applied Anthropology conference in the spring. Eventually I hope to use this research as a foundation for a graduate level dissertation. This entire experience has been absolutely life altering, and I hope one day to use what I learned in Lesotho to better the lives of those I met on my journey.