

A Life Dismembered

2. Lesotho 1973-74

In the tourist brochures Lesotho is the 'magic mountain kingdom':

<https://www.thenomadicvegan.com/lesotho-tourist-attractions/>. It is the nation with the highest lowest point, if you see what I mean. I was there at a politically sensitive time: the Prime Minister had lost the election in 1970, but retained power, outlawed the opposition and declared a state of emergency. There was no Army, but he formed a Police Mobile Unit (PMU) which soon gained a fearsome reputation. The opposition leader was hiding out along the border, organising armed resistance. But we expats were only vaguely aware of this.

When I arrived at the university I lived on the Roma campus in a rondavel: a circular stone hut with thatched roof (as on the right in the photo linked above). It sounds romantic, but you try fitting a six-foot bed, furniture and a cooker into the curved walls. Later I moved to Maseru, the capital, sharing a house next to the Chinese embassy. The Republic of China, that is. This was a time before the People's Republic bribed African countries to expel Taiwan's mission and recognise Beijing. We would visit the young diplomats at weekends to play ping-pong and drink their unlimited supply of Hacker-Pschorr lager. It was a welcome change from the execrable Tassenberg rotgut wine we bought by the flagon from the Lancers Inn.

In 1843 the Basotho king Moshoeshe asked to become a colony of the British Empire, to gain protection against the Boer farmers in the Orange Free State further encroaching on his tribal lands. Until independence in 1966 it had been British Basutoland, and in 1974 there were still some legacies: all the car registration plates still began BA, BB, etc. The Government decreed that these would be changed to LA, LB, etc. Car-owners were given a couple of weeks to change their plate, or face a fine. In those days registration plates were made by screwing letters on. Garages were flooded with demands for L letters, and these soon ran out. Expats could cross the border and buy their letter L's in Ladybrand or Bloemfontein, but what could the locals do? Then it was realised that if you chiselled away part of the letter B, you were left with what looked remarkably like – an L.

Almost all the academic and senior admin staff were expats: British, US, Canadians, and Irish priests from its Catholic College days. The woke warriors of today would call us colonialists, exploiters, even racists, but almost all of us had drifted by serendipity and idealism into the Commonwealth Universities circuit: University of the West Indies (by my time almost completely local-staffed), then Makerere in Uganda (ditto), then universities in other former British colonies in Africa, and eventually new institutions in Oman, Brunei and Papua New Guinea. Many were veterans of the Peace Corps, Voluntary Service Overseas, etc. We enjoyed the lifestyle but were also happy to work - for not very much money, far less than the professional aid industry 'consultants' – to put ourselves out of a job eventually by training the local students who would become the lecturers and administrators of tomorrow. And some of us stayed away too long, and had to retire back home without a pension.

A classic example of the dedicated expat was the Head of Maths in Lesotho, David Ambrose. He had fallen in love with the country and its people, and immersed himself in its culture. He worked tirelessly outside his day-job to help the isolated villages in the Drakensberg mountains which form 90% of the land area. The dirt roads were rough, narrow and treacherous, and the aid agencies wouldn't venture outside the capital in anything less than a Toyota LandCruiser. David drove everywhere in his white VW Beetle, which he swore was far more manoeuvrable. You can see him and his Beetle in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf-vw2X3u0>

where he ensures that the financial reward from a meteorite which landed in 2002 goes to the village where it was found, rather than to foreigners such as himself.

Another legacy of Empire was that the university followed the British academic year calendar, from October to July. In 1974 the Vice-Chancellor produced a paper proposing that we change to a Southern hemisphere calendar (as in South Africa, starting in January). His first argument was "The university is in the Southern hemisphere", which seemed pretty conclusive – till he explained that the shift would be achieved by closing the university for six months, with staff on full pay. The three governments were not impressed.

Did I mention that this was the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS)? Its base was in Lesotho but there were smaller outposts in the other two nations. In September 1974, when I returned from holiday in Britain, David greeted me with, "One of the maths lecturers in Swaziland has resigned. I'm sending you there to replace him."