

REVIEW OF MURRAY'S FAMILIES DIVIDED

Colin Murray. Ravan Press. 1982 xvi + 219 pp. R 9.95.

by M. G. Whisson

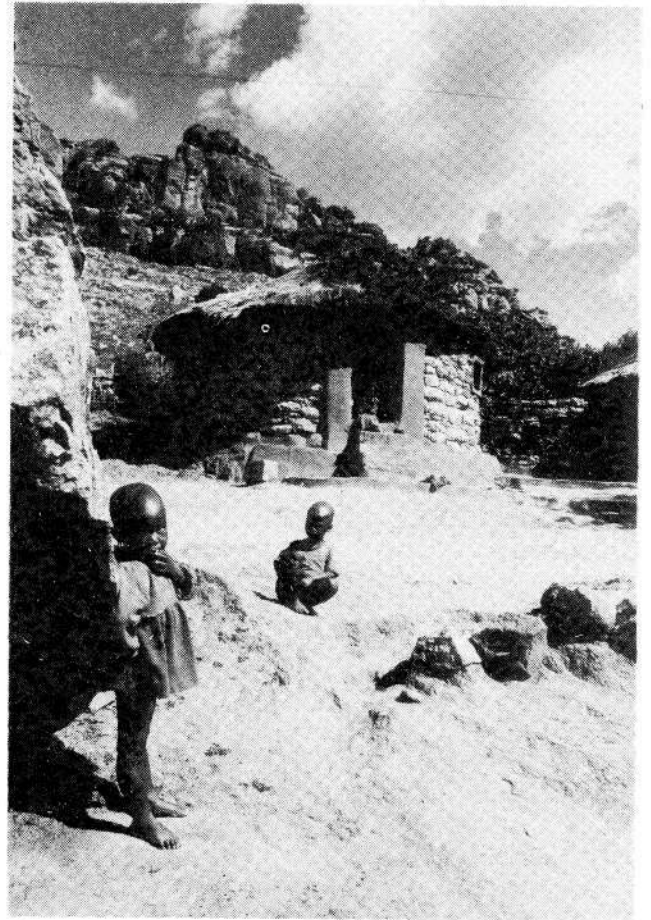
Ravan Press is to be commended and, one hopes, supported for its entry into the field of serious academic publications, at prices which do not deter the serious reader. Marion Lacey's *Working for Boroko* and Jeff Peires' *The House of Phalo* have set a high standard both of presentation and content, which is well sustained in Colin Murray's account of the impact of migrant labour in Lesotho, published in association with Cambridge University Press.

Murray sets out to answer a question more often asked of political economists rather than of anthropologists — why did the migrant labour system not end with the political independence of Lesotho? The blurb calls this a "fundamental question", although one might equally ask what formal political independence has to do with economic dependence at all, for migrant labour, more or less systematised, exists in all sorts of situations, whose common feature is only that the receiving area can provide the worker from the exporting area with what he perceives to be a better overall economic deal than he can get by staying at home. Boundaries defined in law complicate the issue mainly through their existence enabling the importing area to export unemployment where necessary, and to evade any moral responsibility that it might otherwise have for the circumstances of the families of its guest workers. The more fundamental question is surely — why is it that workers from an independent state, established without discrimination against them at home, should strive desperately to enter into contracts which remove them from

their families for the greater part of their working lives, provide them with material rewards adequate only to keep them from dire poverty while they are actually working, and house them in barracks when they are not engaged in their dirty and dangerous work? More, why should they risk harassment, jail and deportation under the most humiliating circumstances in order to get away from their homes and find work?

Murray examines the problem from the exporting end of the system, from three small villages in different parts of Lesotho, where he confronts one of the major problems of modern anthropology — what is the boundary of the social system which is being studied? By training and predilection, he is inclined towards the smallest possible unit for study, the family or village, for it is within the smallest group that one can reach the most intimate understanding of what motivates people to behave the way they do. But since each family and village is dependent upon a set of relationships which its members have with the economy of southern Africa as a whole (and even, as he observes, with the world economy when the oil price takes a leap) it is impossible to treat the village, or even Lesotho itself, as a functionally integrated whole. Murray's solution to this problem is to adopt a neo-marxist view of the political economy of southern Africa, and to explore in some detail how the individual family and village fits into that simplified structure. The general picture is presented in the opening chapter, thereafter he explores the migrant's way of life, the manner in which the land is managed





in the absence of about 60% of the able-bodied men (and a rather smaller but still significant proportion of the institutionalised decision makers in the community), changes which have taken place in the class structure, family structure, marriage and the place of women in the community. A substantial amount of comparative material is indicated, and the general statements illustrated with detailed cases. The analysis will interest the broad range of marxist scholars in this field, and also provide academic anthropologists with some detailed material and intriguing arguments in their traditional heartland of kinship and marriage.

Since he concentrates his attention on the pressures experienced by Basotho to go out to work, the author should really have asked himself some of the harder economic questions about Lesotho. Can the collapse of agriculture be blamed simply on the machinations of white capital and its political formations? Surely the truth is more complicated and hence the solutions less simple than those implied in this sort of analysis. The boundaries of Lesotho were fixed (to the disadvantage of the Basotho certainly) before the production of the considerable exports of grain. Thereafter the population grew steadily, but the amount of land remained static, leading to a Malthusian problem regardless of any involvement between the Basotho and the mines. Further, due to ignorance (and lack of appropriate guidance from agricultural officers) and increasing human pressure on the land, the capacity of the land itself to provide crops has presumably declined. As Murray shows, the yields from the land depend very heavily on the input of fertilisers today, rather than on fallowing or crop rotation. Further, the system of land tenure, under which land may revert to the local chief for redistribution upon the death of its user,

means that land cannot be used as a negotiable capital resource (i.e. mortgaged in order to obtain capital for development) and probably inhibits the user from making heavy investments in a resource so subject to chiefly cupidity upon the user's death. This is not to under-estimate the significance of the restrictions placed upon blacks, who have been prevented from moving into South Africa and from buying land there. Nor does it ignore the impact upon the cash crop farmers of Lesotho of the policies of South African governments to subsidise (protect and assist) white farmers at the expense of the black. It does suggest a point at which it is possible to start improving the situation, which is through the most rational use of the resources of the country, including enormous water resources — the white gold of the 21st century.

The weakness in Murray's approach lies in the confusion which seems to exist in his mind between the evidence that lies before him and the moral stance which he takes. In order to have a moral stance, it is necessary to have some assumptions about what is good and hence desirable. To write of "family breakdown" implies a moral judgment — that the changes which have taken place in the social structure have been bad, and that some alternative form of family organisation is better and should be sought. One's immediate emotional reaction is - of course the separation of husbands and wives is bad, we think so, and they think so, and that's that. But if one is to be constructive, rather than merely helplessly outraged, then one must ask questions about the structure of the ideal family (or the range of structures) as far as the Basotho today are concerned, and the ways in which it can be brought about. If academics

are going to go beyond the traditional line of "pure" research, and incorporate moral judgements based upon their own ideological positions, or even upon what they perceive to be the ideological positions of their subjects, then they must take the matter the logical next step, by incorporating realistic i.e. possible proposals about what their subjects can do to improve their situation and bring it closer to their ideals.

Murray presents us with an excellent picture of the situation of the Basotho today, which is his area of expertise. The analysis is partial, and riddled with both explicit and implicit value judgements which flow from his ideological stance, so that we have a simplistic account of how they came to be in their present position. Of their future options, we have virtually nothing, other than the likelihood of "devastating consequences" (p99) if mine wages continue to rise at the same time as the number of Basotho employed in the mines is falling. Given vigorous attention by the people and insti-

tutions to the problems of agriculture which are essentially internal, an alternative scenario is possible. Lesotho lacks capital and suitable labour to invest in its land – the productivity of which can be vastly increased – hence an increase in the net flow of remittances into the country from higher wages paid to fewer people (the proportion remitted tends to rise with the wage) will provide more agricultural capital than it does at present, while the presence of a substantial number of men who do not look across the border for work, but know their only hope of survival is to make the best of things at home, can provide the labour necessary to maximise productivity. In short, the truly scarce resource is probably enterprise and the most inhibiting factor the existing social hierarchies within Lesotho itself. It is, perhaps, the greatest tribute to Murray to note that it is through the comprehensiveness of his data that an alternative hypothesis can be presented and constructive debate conducted. □



(Photographs illustrating this review by Joe Alfers).