

Documentary history of the Basotho (Lesotho)

Ethnographic archives of the missionary David Frédéric Ellenberger on microfiche

A unique collection of mostly unpublished documents by David Frédéric Ellenberger completed by his son René Ellenberger, collected and partly edited by his grandson Paul Ellenberger, covering the history of the Basotho's from early times until 1854. With many maps, often handdrawn, accompanied by many additional documents on the subject.

The missionary David Frédéric Ellenberger, born in 1835, left for Lesotho in 1860, and during the more than 45 years of his ministry in Lesotho, patiently collected, on the spot, everything which could possibly concern the history of the people. By questioning every African, every individual with whom he made contact, he scrupulously recorded every scrap of information and a multitude of details from the vast collective memory of a people. He discovered that this memory went back in an amazingly exact way, sometimes as far as 22 generations, as it did to the ancestors of the Barolong or the Bakhatla, indeed even 32 generations for the ancestral branch of the Bafokeng (just as had been discovered elsewhere). Assuming an average of 30 years between two generations, this pointed to events going back as far as the 13th century, or in rarer, isolated cases, right back to the end of the 10th century. This memory, thus concerning more than 1000 years, allowed him to piece together accurate genealogies and to establish a history covering numerous minor incidents, revealing what had happened to this people throughout their long epic history; their localization thus reconstructed, seems to be just about the same as today's, all occurring between the Limpopo and the Orange rivers, as far as 30° latitude south by 30° longitude east, with various fluctuations

or local migrations (in the north-south and east-west directions and the opposite in following centuries, most probably for climatic reasons).

One can see in an active way how the different ethnic Sotho groups developed, evolved and met, either while remaining independent or by forming alliances in a variety of ways before finally, under the aegis of Great Chief Moshoeshe I, born around 1782, forming the people or nation known as the Basotho, inhabiting the vast Lesotho of old (reduced to a minimum today by the spoliatory conquests of white men).

Paul Ellenberger

Co-founder of the Morija Museum
Grandson of D.F. Ellenberger

Finding aids

The microfiches come with a detailed printed guide with all items, both printed works and manuscripts, related to the microfiches.

The archives of D.F. Ellenberger are housed in the Morija museum, Morija, Lesotho.



