

## The Roles of the Elderly in Sotho Family System and Society of Lesotho, Southern Africa

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**ABSTRACT** As the global changes affect the roles of individuals and groups in their society, it becomes extremely necessary to engage systematic effort in documenting the original roles and societal expectations for the sake of posterity and policy formulation. Against this background, this study investigated the roles of the aged in the Sotho family system and society in order to document it thereafter. The study was conducted in five villages, namely *Matsieng*, *Phahameng*, Scott Hospital area and *Ha-Folene* in Morija, 41 kilometers south of Maseru the capital town of Lesotho. It made use of 20 purposively selected individuals from the population of the study which consisted of the elderly in their different ages and categories. The sample was reached through the use of snowball method as the target respondents were those who were sixty-five years old or above. Key informant and in-depth interviews were used as the main sources of data collection. Based on the motivation and objective of the study, found that the elderly were actively involved in some critical roles within their families and society. Their roles include socialisation and educational functions, protective and mystical functions, medicinal and healing functions, leadership, social functions and various contributions to the economic production of the Sotho society. They are specialised areas that are cut out for the elderly. For instance, rendering sacrifice to appease the gods can only be performed by the elderly because they are regarded as a link between the living and the past generations. This study concludes that these roles performed by the elderly place them strategically in scheme of things, which means the recognition of their relevance to the society still persists, even though they might look physically frail and weak.

### INTRODUCTION

The elderly encompasses all those aged, full-grown, mature or old individuals within the society. In other words, the elderly consists of ages surpassing the average life span of human beings and therefore facing the end of human cycle which is followed by death. The elderly concept is highly associated with aging; hence it is critical to show that aging is a fundamental process of growing old. According to Reichard et al. (1962: 9), aging is a gradual process during which critical emotional, physical and social changes occur. In addition, ageing is the accumulation of changes in an organism or object over time. In humans, it refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological, and social change. There are two major classes of aging, namely, the universal and probabilistic aging. The latter refers to the aging as a process that all people share, and the other involves changes that may occur to some individuals but not to others as they all grow up, respectively.

The aspect of aging that is taken into consideration in this discourse is social aging, which encompasses the social and cultural conventions, expectations and perceptions of the society about the ways in which people should act as they get older, rather than biological aging which means an organism's physical state as it ages. Social ageing is a process, which means that it is continuous, it starts from a certain point and it ends in another final point. This is often illustrated by the basic life span and life cycle course found in human's life. It is noted that all human life is often divided into various stages and ages. There are about seven stages which involve the infancy stage, the childhood stage, the adolescence stage, the young adulthood stage, the adulthood stage, the old age stage and lastly death stage. Apparently, there are changes which actually take place for one to be considered to be in a certain stage of a life cycle. These changes occur as one grows older and enter into another stage of the human life cycle. As individuals move to another level,

definitely the roles they perform and the expectations from their families and society on them change, especially in indigenous family systems. The indigenous family system 'to the traditional patterns and structures of the family, commonly known as the extended family. It is a big family structure that goes beyond one generation. In this case, among the Sotho people of Southern Africa, it may include relatives who reside together in one big compound or extended lineage space but usually composed of intergeneration of grandparents, parents and children residing together.

The family structure which encompasses people of different ages, sex, occupation and strength is usually organized along these lines and differences. There is division of labour and tasks in which individuals are expected to contribute towards the continuity and stability of their families, based on their social categorization of age, sex and other characteristics and boundaries. In acknowledging the above, this study focuses on highlighting the roles of the elderly and their expected contributions in the Sotho family system and society of Southern Africa. This study was motivated by observations on recent and ongoing global changes in roles and expectations of individuals and groups in different societies, especially the aged. In other words, as the global changes affect the roles of individuals and groups in their society, it becomes extremely necessary to engage systematic effort in documenting the original roles and societal expectation for the sake of posterity and policy formulation. At present time in Lesotho, the encroachment of westernization and western values appear to have gained ground in most of peoples' daily life issues. There is growing presence of non-familial organs that are strategically situated to take care of various needs of the family that were hitherto performed by families. For instance, in health issues where the members of the communities have evolved a system that fused the family and orthodox medical practice for the home based care. This care system has been proven to have gained ground, cheap and effective, though with numerous challenges as enunciated by Obioha and Molale (2011). Therefore, the extent to which the family system and to a more specific point the elderly still maintain their roles in keeping the family system cohesively is an issue

that deserves an articulate research investigation. Against this background, this study aims to ascertain and document the roles of the aged in the Sotho family system and Society.

## RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Morija which is 41 kilometers South of Maseru, the capital town of Lesotho between 2008 and 2009. The population of this study included elders in their different levels and categories, located in the five villages within Morija, namely, *Matsieng*, *Phahameng* and Scott Hospital area and *Ha-Folene*. From this population, a sample size of twenty (20) individuals was systematically but purposively selected. Precisely, five elders were selected from each village in such a way to portray a fair presentation to all. The sample was reached through the use of snowball method as the target respondents were those who were sixty-five years old or above. The study relied mainly on qualitative sources, where key informant interviews and in-depth interviews were used as the main sources of data collection, which are techniques where the lives of the people are fully observed, explained and discussed. These methods have the practical advantage of doing away with "do not know" answers, since the researcher will be there to clarify certain questions where necessary. They actually allow the researcher to probe deeply into questions. Besides, the nature of information required entails direct contact and details from the experienced and aged people themselves. However, for the purpose of standardization of information, some family members of the elderly were selected in order to illuminate on some issues that could only be described by a second person other than the elderly. The key informant interview and the in-depth interview guides consisted of checklist of questions that bother on the roles that the elders perform. As the study is exploratory and qualitative in nature, questions that relate to some assumed functions of the elderly such as how they are involved in the socialization, education, protection of offspring, medicinal issues and other areas were probed. The data collected were analysed qualitatively as was informed by the nature of data collected from the field.

## FINDINGS

### Socialisation and Educational Functions of the Elderly

Human beings are believed to be born in a clean slate, which means that humans are not born with culture but into specific cultures, which will be inculcated into them by other members of the society. Though socialisation process is a lifelong process that is conveyed to individuals through the agents of socialisation in the society, the role of the family and by implication the elderly cannot be underestimated, especially in a developing society like Lesotho.

This study found that the elderly play major roles within the socialisation aspect. This function is understandable with regard to their relationship with their children and grand children. In this process, they extend their wealth of experience and knowledge to the younger members of the family through various mediums, mainly the use of folklores and folk tales. One of the middle-aged women at *Phahameng* enunciated that, they still teach young boys and girls the proper ways of behaving, the good virtuous persons they have to be in the future, the kind of credibility, integrity, value, honor and responsibility they should develop. In Basotho culture this is often carried through story-telling '*litsomo*' by the elders.' The recognition and appreciation of this noble role by the elderly compels many young families to keep a strong link with their aging parents for the purpose of culture transmission. The study revealed that most young families still leave their children with grandparents as one of the family members of an elderly further enunciated: "*I always leave my children to stay with their grandmother because she is very knowledgeable and experienced in life. She is able to educate and equip my kids with the norms, values, customs and skills and knowledge of their society.*"

The elderly exercise their socialisation roles to the younger members beyond their immediate family. Specifically, with regard to the Sotho culture and tradition of initiation<sup>i</sup> ceremony, the elderly extend their socialisation role in these initiation schools<sup>ii</sup> where they educate initiates about sex, marriage and family issues and goodwill (Matobo et al. 2009). Their socialisation function transcends beyond the traditional issues, rather the elderly have been involved in

propagating religious doctrines as they serve as important agents in religious institutions. They are very active in the modern church organisation as teachers of Sunday school and catechism. There appear to be a carryover of function from traditional religious teachings to the western Christian religious values and beliefs in most instances. However, the underlying factor in the religious teachings, whether of Christian or traditional African belief is predicated on the propagation of acceptable social values and norms to other members of the society. The switch in the module or content of the religious teaching or perspective of religious teaching from traditional to western is linked to the present religious beliefs and convictions that the elders are involved in at the present age where most of the elders are already converts of Christianity. In correlation with this assumption and understanding, one of the research subjects, a seventy-seven year old grandfather evinced his role in the modern religion: '*I am the one who teaches young children the word of God. We are old hence our purpose is to pursuit the will of God by raising the grandchildren with love and endurance of God. I teach them that they should pray before they go to sleep. I make sure they attend Sunday schools, they get baptized and undergo through other religious practices.*'

For those who still subscribe to traditional Sotho belief of transmitting of behaviour and character through physical means rather than the evolving process of socialisation, their beliefs and practices are still strong and practices to the present time. In this regard, the study revealed interestingly that the elderly also transmit their knowledge, character and behaviours to the younger members of their families and society through some physical means known as '*lelomolo*.' This process is regarded as direct and physical instilling of character and behaviour into younger persons, rather than through the normal process of socialisation that involves teaching, learning and imbibing the norms and values of the society. Among the Sotho of Lesotho, it is an effective means of socialisation, where many parents believed that their children have inherited good character through *lelomolo*. One of the interviewees from *Ha-Folene* village proudly believed that his first son's character which is adjudged to be good was passed on to him from her late grandmother who did *lelomolo* for the son when he was born. In her words she

said, *'My first son is just like my late grandmother in personality. He has inherited all of her good characters. This is through the process of 'lelomolo.'* The people's consciousness in transmitting social values through the traditional *lelomolo* does not negate the fact that the elderly are actively involved and still have opportunity to contribute in making children what they will become in the future. This practice has brought a formidable challenge to the universally held notion that value inculcation can only take place through the reciprocal means of teaching and learning or imitation.

Notably, heroic and exceptional characteristics are usually passed on to grand children from their grandparents through this means. Among the Sotho, an elderly person who is a hero, a man of integrity, virtue, wisdom, intelligence, substance and dignity, among other qualities initiates the process called *'ho lomoloa'* so that his distinct qualities which he passes on lives after him. Individuals in this category initiate this process because of the love and trust they have in their society and also for the sake of continuity. The major question in this case to be addressed is the modalities and how this process usually takes place. An interested elderly is called to spit out his saliva in the food or milk of the child at infancy stage; the saliva is stirred with the mother's milk for the child to eat. The notion behind this practice is that the infant will grow up with all those good personality traits and attributes of the elderly man or woman who has performed this act. The explanation attached to a child who grows up to be a delinquent is that someone who spit in his food was of bad character or that the spitting ritual was not performed. This fundamental process is guided by the elderly within the Basotho indigenous family as an important vehicle of socialisation. The notion that an explanation for delinquency among children casts some reservation on the efficacy of this traditional character transmission and value transplanting because it is difficult to believe that parents of a child will intentionally allow a man or woman of questionable character to transmit his or her character to their child through *lelomolo* while they watch.

In the process of socialisation and inculcation of values to the younger generation in the society, quality information is also a very essential aspect. Usually, in societies with oral tradition the elderly who have logically seen more

years are believed to be more experienced than relatively younger others. The roles of the elderly in the indigenous Sotho family involve that of acting as the archives of information. They serve to maintain the traditional structure of the society and offer information which is needed but were not physically documented, which is an important aspect of their socialisation function in their families and society. This notion was specifically buttressed by a family member of one of the elderly who said: *"we are able to transmit the significant information about culture and its practices to the future generation through information we get from elders. They teach us about clans, traditional poems, songs, musical instruments, emblem and totems. This includes the knowledge about the various clans and their representative<sup>iii</sup> emblems and animals like hippopotamus, elephant, rabbit etc. These kinds of information only come from the elders who embody the information. This helps the future generation to deeply know themselves, identify and deeply become grounded in their nation. This enables them to have sense of belonging and confidence."* Undoubtedly, this kind of information are not usually documented in any paper and neither are they issues of daily discussions and debate, rather they are information and knowledge about people's identity which are archived by the elders, who are also the repositories of these kinds of knowledge and information.

### Protective and Mystical Roles

The protective roles of the elderly are of two main dimensions. First, it is concerned with protection of the younger members of their families and society against immoral behaviours and second, protection through magical and mystical means against evil harm. The latter has been proven to exist in many African societies such as the Ashanti people of Ghana, where the father is believed to possess a mystical protective shield, known as *'ntoro'* over his offspring. Without the protective roles of the elderly in most Sotho families or absence of elderly with these roles may lead to manifestation of various immoral and undesirable behaviours. Most Sotho people believe that the elderly protect the family because they are the 'backbones' of the family and their functional presence gives a family a very good image. In cases where children are parentless, it

becomes the responsibility of the grandparents, if they are alive or that of other close relatives to keep an eye on the behaviour of such children. A double orphaned, 25 years old girl expressed her experience, which corroborates the inalienable role and duty of the elderly as 'guardian angel' to the younger members of their respective families. From her experience, she understood that the power of the elderly is still known and revered by the youth in her society. In her words, she said: *"you know after my father died, I always thought that it would be easier to bring my boyfriends at home, to hang around and throw parties at home, shame to me, things were not like that. My boyfriends literally denied the offer. They told me they were scared of my grandmother. 'Batho ba baholo ba fana ka seriti', meaning elderly people portray a sense of respect to the family, I admit."*

The protective role of the elderly also includes various strategies to ensure that harm does not befall any member of their family. The elderly are regarded as crucial agents of medicine, healing and witchcraft. They are associated with the performance of some supernatural actions. Only good witchcraft is considered in this point in hand. In the Sotho society, the elderly secure and protect their family through 'good witchcraft' or what has been known universally as white witchcraft, which is believed to be only protective and defensive rather than being offensive and evil. This involves the elderly rooting up some strong traditional magical means (*muti*) which protects the family against some harmful events in the natural and supernatural realms, such as lightening, curses, misfortune, ill lucks and illness within the family. This may involve an elderly one being able to fly from one place to another on a rescue mission through the use of a sweeping broom. The mystical protective acts also include incising and depositing some substances in the bodies of children. This was narrated by one of the research interviewees, a sixty-five year old woman who mentioned: *"at home, my grandfather used to insert some Sesotho 'muti' through the cuts on our foreheads and hands for protection purposes. So we never got struck by lightning and never involved in car accidents, even today."* In African societies in general the elderly people are specifically attached with such deeds of witchcraft and sorcery, which was sufficiently exemplified in the Italian pre-Christian society as described by Baroja (1964).

### Medicinal, Healing and Ritual Functions

The elderly are found to be very knowledgeable in health issues. The elderly often act as medical care givers and nurses as they provide remedies for many sicknesses among their family members and relatives. The aged even have some locally prepared home remedies and syrups in times when the children and other family members go through pain and illness. An eighty years old interviewee corroborated the medicinal and curative functions of the elderly. She said: *"we use 'motsoako' which is mixture of water and sugar in warm water to cure a child with diarrhea, and snuffing of 'pohotsehla', as a remedy for headache. Most of the elderly are even traditional healers, diviners and practitioners at both societal and national level."* True life experience of one of the interviewee further illuminated the efficacy of this role when she narrated: *"my body was swollen all over; I did not know what happened to me. My mother was all stuck just like the nurses in the hospital. After two days my seventy-nine years old grandmother came in to see me. She told me I had 'borurusi' and fetched me some traditional herb named 'bobatsi'. All of a sudden I got healed and got back to normal, and believe me I will never waste my time and money for doctors consultancy in hospitals. I have got medical doctor in the house- My grandmother."*

The elderly also used their medical knowledge in midwifery. They provide their skilled labour during childbirth. Their role is not only restricted during child delivery for pregnant women but they also equip the pregnant women with health precautions and information during pregnancy. One of the interviewees in her reproductive age says in Sesotho language, *"na ha ke le mokhachane, .ke ile ka mamea nkhono Ke ne ke e bataola ka nyanti. Ke itlotsitse ka letsoku ke sa ichebe ka seiponeng. Ke apara selapa. Ha ke lirate empa ka li mamella ho qoba ngoan'a sehole. ka qeta ka pepisoa ke nkhono."*<sup>iv</sup> Most Sotho women of reproductive age appreciate and practice their culture, especially with regard to reproduction issues and child delivery. They believe that disobedience to the prescriptions and instructions of the elderly with regard to child birth can result to regrettable consequences. In other words, the roles of the elderly women with regard to issues of reproduc-



tion, childbirth and midwifery in the communities are still being upheld and regarded in high esteem up to the present time in many Sotho communities.

There are also other health related traditional rituals, traditional performances and practices that must be performed by elders. Mair (1969: 11) observed that in individuals puberty ceremonies held, involving the seclusion of the girl, the administration of strengthening medicines, sacrifices and ritual dances and some instructions are exclusively ordered by the elderly. In the Sotho families, when a baby is born, there is a process called *pitiki*, whereby strictly the elderly people fit into place to welcome the new born baby in a special way. They are all compelled to be completely naked, without even an underwear or bra on their body. It is only female elders who are allowed to participate in this ritual. The reason behind the nakedness is that they are receiving the neonates which also come naked to them from birth place named '*Ntsoanatsatsi*', and to avoid any contact between the elderly women with their clothes which might harm the new born. They all celebrate in honour of the child, they perform some rituals in order to protect and secure the child. The elderly people often instruct and perform such rituals. The validity of this practice as described by Mair even in the present society and culture of the Sotho people of Lesotho in particular and Southern Africa in general is observable and can be inferred from the continued reverence with the traditional initiation school system for girls, as it is connected with reproduction matters and child bearing, which has survived through the teeth and crutches of westernization.

### Leadership and Social Functions

These functions transcend the mere role of leading a group in the normal circumstances. The leadership and social functions further involve specific roles with regard to kinship issues. The findings of this study indicate that most of the vital roles of the elderly in the indigenous family system are often concentrated within the hierarchical structure of leadership, judiciary and kinship functions. Sotho elderly have leadership and kinship roles, especially in Lesotho where gerontocracy is observed, practiced and recognized as source of authority at the family and kinship levels, where grandfathers serve as

the patriarchs in families. Like in many other societies, patriarchal family structure is whereby the authority is held by the oldest male member, who may be a grandfather or an old uncle in an extended family, who has the final word in family decision. The elderly, particularly the males in this case serve as veritable authority sources because they possess the realms of authority and power in their respective families.

Their being sources of authority confers on them the powers to make decisions regarding marriage, which involves either giving out a young daughter of the family to another family or receiving a female member of another family into theirs on behalf of the younger male members. There was a unanimous position among the interviewees about the function of the elders especially in marriage matters. Their common ground is that during the marriage ceremony, the elders are often the ones who actually give the marrying couple a blessing. They are even engaged in the arrangements for the marriage, regarding the negotiation for what material resources to be paid by the groom family to the bride's family called "*bohali*". They perform some rituals during marriages to appease the gods to accept and recognize the marriage agreement between their sons and daughters.

Their roles in marriage do not end after the marriage ceremony and blessing which they usually preside over, rather these roles extend towards ensuring that the marriage is stable and successful. Settling dispute between couples has been regarded as a niche of specialization of the elderly, who possess all the wisdom, experience and patience required to make peace between couples, especially young and inexperienced ones. Responses from interviews conducted in different villages reinforce the understanding of the role of the elderly in marriage. One of the interviewees from Scott village substantiated that their family members usually come together to settle disputes, including those among married couples when the need arises. In the native Sesotho language, one of the young Scott villager couple vocalized in an exciting mood: "*Khele*"! *I always consult my grandparents whenever I have some misunderstandings about my parents, and believe me it works. We are a scattered family; we have relatives here in Morija, others are in Mokhotlong, Qacha's Nek and Butha-Buthe, but we used to come together in Morija to our elderly to solve our misunderstandings and disputes.*"

An important notion and generally accepted position in Sotho culture and tradition about the role of the elderly in social and leadership functions is that the presence of the elders in any ceremony appears to have closed the gap between the generation dead and alive, hence rituals performed by them are believed to be acceptable by the gods who are by the peoples' belief ordinary and deified ancestors who mediate between them and the almighty God. There is a common assumption that the elderly function as a bridge because they belong to a generation that have lived and interacted with the dead ancestors and presently living in the midst of the living generation of members of the society. This belief is not restricted to the Sotho people alone but to a large extent other cultures and societies in Africa.

#### **Contributions to Economic Productive Activities**

In further investigation on the contributions of the elderly towards economic production, the study revealed that most elders participate largely in handicrafts and manual work. Their expertise in handicraft cannot be underestimated, given the fact that they are patient and less mobile, unlike younger people in the society. It is remarkable in Sotho society that the grandfathers make the big baskets for storage of the harvested products 'sesiu', made of grass called 'loli' in local Sotho language. They also fetch thatched grass for house roofing and extract natural stones for building materials. The grandmothers also dug the soil from place known as 'khatamping'. They mix the soil with cow dung and smear or plaster the floor and the walls with that mixture, which makes the mixture function like building cement. The elderly are also involved in making of clothes and traditional sun hats named 'meko-rotlo' and other Sesotho house utensils like mats, 'meseme', 'thebe' and 'thethana'.

The ability of the elderly to be involved in the handicraft industry stems from their knowledge over the years, coupled with their high aesthetic value. A family member of an elderly in Metsing described the art of her grandmother in house beautification in the following words: *"my grandmother still uses the soil mud and cow dung for house painting....., she does it so good and draws patterns and designs using her hands which decorates the walls."*

There is no doubt that the elderly among the Sotho of Southern Africa were involved in active

economic production where they mostly engaged in handicraft industry. The importance of their engagement extends to livelihood sustainability, not only for themselves but for other persons that are involved in this cycle of production. Besides, their production activity creates employment opportunities and income for those who involve in the process of marketing the products that these elderly persons produce.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The finding of this study with regard to the socialisation and education functions that the elderly perform in the Sotho families and society is akin to what was the practice in the early African traditional family system, where the old people's role was to educate and socialise those that come after them and their grand children. It is important to argue that the knowledge and experience that each individual possesses was earned through an informal system of learning because the western and formal education system was either minimally available or non-existent. Even where the formal educational system exists, the informal socialisation system and education still remained an important role for the family. The old people were regarded as the custodians of culture, which they transmitted through socialization. In most cases, this type of socialisation and education was done through a systematic way of story-telling and folklores. The elderly told stories to the children and through those stories important messages of wisdom are passed to the younger ones in order for them to lead a promising life.

Besides the moral importance of these storytelling exercise, Lesitsi (1985) noted that the story telling works as an exercise and practice which helps children to develop the power of concentration and attentiveness. This process of socialisation was ably performed and carried out in the past because the children were made to be close to their grandparents and other elderly persons in the extended family, besides every child was regarded as someone that belongs to the whole family and not only to the direct biological parents. In the indigenous African societies, which were applicable to the Sotho of the Southern Africa, Lesitsi (1985) believed that this type of socialisation was performed easily because, the youth of those days, boys and girls respectively, had their own secluded places to

sleep. Thus, stories were told in the evening before they slept. The girls' secluded place was put in the charge of an old woman while boys were in the charge of an old man. In these places, boys and girls were taught all that was necessary for them to become responsible elders. The socialisation functions of the elderly, especially the females have been extended beyond their immediate extended families to other families that they assist to bring their children up. At present, many Basotho women in Lesotho are involved in domestic work, which includes care for the children. They perform this job on contract for both Basotho citizens and foreigners who have little or no time to stay at home with kids. Whether they are involved in this domestic work for a fee or not, what is important to be pointed out at this juncture is the fact that the elders are still important and useful to the society. Their socialisation functions are still valued and sought out for in the society.

The protective function performed by the elderly involves mystical and religious rituals and connotations. Even though the elderly are still living among their family members and society, the other members perceive them as persons that have communication with the gods and the dead from where they derive special powers in the form of guidelines towards healthier means of living. These special powers in form of witchcraft or socery among the Sotho people are regarded as embodiment of "*good witchcraft*," which connote a type of witchcraft that does not have any evil intention but rather being used for protective functions. In cognizance of only positive witchcraft, the elderly really play a significant role within the indigenous family system. This perception of the role being performed by the elderly makes most Sotho persons feel very safe and assured in the presence of the elderly in the family or society. Old people are also believed to be strong in their religion as they are believed to be moving closer towards their gods as they age. As a result of this assumption, younger people look up to the elderly in times of bereavement and other sad times as if the elderly can provide a satisfactory explanation to whatever that happened.

The leadership roles of the elderly and the structure and organisation of the society which were rooted in gerontocracy were never questioned in the Sotho society. Traditionally, elderly people were given an opportunity to lead their

societies in the capacities as chiefs or honoured men in courts. In Sotho culture, the assumption is that a leader would only be respected if he or she looked older than the followers, due to believe that wisdom and skilled leadership are endowed in grey hair. Traditionally, the elderly were respected for their wise advises and were trusted not to lead the society astray, which the younger leaders were believed would do. The elderly were also trusted for this role because they were believed never to deviate against the societal norms, and elderly state could therefore in this case be regarded as prestigious (Popenoe 1995).

The elders in Sotho families and societies were also looked upon to solve the societal and family problems. This is also because they were believed to be wise and shall never deviate. Among the Sotho, though with some exceptions, if a man beats up his wife, he will be taken to his wife's grandmother for disciplinary hearing. In some cases, the old grandmother would beat him and ask him whether he would beat his own mother (Lesitsi 1985). Similarly, elderly men would talk harshly to the man who had beaten his wife to make sure that he does not repeat the same ill attitude or behaviour. In the like manner, the elderly men were to be found at the, traditional courts, referred to as "*khotla*" to pronounce judgment and by implication punishment to those who have violated the norms. It is based on this that Reichard et al. (1962: 32) added that older people have greater ego strength- they are more realistic and responsible than those who are younger. Hence they are able to carry out several roles like protecting their families, leading and resolving the conflicts. These roles are pointed out by most of the respondents, thereby showing that elders are patriarchs.

From the findings, the elders played significant roles in social functions and social solidarities, especially during marriage ceremonies and traditional rituals. This is supported by an earlier study by Nixon (1962: 127), where it was espoused that '*the old played vital part in individuals.... some instruction; to instruct the bride to behave in the first day in her husband's home*'. Similarly, Adorno (1950: 49) also had pointed out that the elderly served importantly in puberty ceremonies held, which involved the seclusion of the girl, the administration of some ritual dances and instruction. During the marriage ceremony, the elders are often the ones who



actually give blessing to the new couple. They are even engaged in the arrangements for the marriage, right from the negotiation for the amount of cows or comparable material resources from the groom's family to the bride's family called "*bohali*". Even the whole process of demanding or seeking for the bride from her family was done by the elderly. There is usually an unexplainable euphoria of accomplishment as many young people feel secured in their marriages if they were blessed by the elderly people in their families. This was due to the fact that older people were considered to be closer to God, hence they can bring them blessings directly from God. In the like manner, the child who grew up in his or her grand parents' home is in most cases are found to be wise like the grandparents. They are also found to be more clever and obedient than their age mates. These types of children also in most cases are found to be respectful, thus the elderly were traditionally trusted in bringing out good citizenship in every child as they would have passed on blessing to such children through various means, both physically and spiritually.

### CONCLUSION

This study observed without doubt that the elderly perform very vital roles towards the growth and stability of their families in particular and the Sotho society in general. Their place in the web of social system in Sotho society is akin to the position and function of an important part of human organ. In other words, they perform some roles that are tangential and inalienable to the functioning of their families and society. These roles include socialisation and educational functions, protective and mystical functions, medicinal and healing functions, leadership, social functions and various contributions to the economic production of the Sotho society. An important dimension to these functions rendered by the elderly to their families and society is that their roles are indispensable and inalienable to the extent that persons of younger age and experience do not usually fit to perform them.

Most importantly, there are specialised areas that are cut out for the elderly. For instance, rendering sacrifice to appease the gods can only be performed by the elderly because they are regarded as a link between the living and the past generations. However, one cannot put aside the fact that these roles and notions about them

are increasingly changing as the society changes. With regard to socialization, lives of the children nowadays are increasingly centered around schools, day-care centers and peer groups, churches, mass media and other agents of socialisation that have become highly influential in the last few decades. In acknowledging these inalienable functions of the elderly in Sotho families and society, this study concludes that these roles performed by the elderly place them strategically in scheme of things, which means that the recognition of their relevance to the society still persists, even though they might look physically frail and weak.

### NOTES

- i. Among the Basotho, traditional initiation [*Lebollo*] has three meanings, which mark a change and a passage to maturity. It refers to a rite of passage into adulthood of both adolescent boys and girls. It is this type of *Lebollo* that presents challenges to the rural communities among various Bantu speaking people in Lesotho and South Africa.
- ii. In addition, the process of socialisation is continued in two main places for boys and girls. The elderly are still involved as the fundamental agents in those institutions. During the adolescent stage, both girls and boys are under taken through the process of socialisation in the initiation schools, the boys are attended at 'khotla', thus in the public-communal sector, while the girls' take place at the 'mokhorong' in the kitchen- the private sector. The principal individuals who train and educate the initiates are still the elders. In the initiation schools the boys often face severe punishment in order to be strengthened for future manhood and womanhood, there is vital education about the sex, marriage and family issues. *The old played vital part on a practice of a collective initiation ceremony for girls and boys who involved the infliction of hardships, sexual, magical rites to ensure fertility and an operation, not always on the sexual organ. The matters concerning womanhood, domestic and agricultural activities, sex behavior towards men,* (for girls) Mair (1978; 45).
- iii. *Bakubung*, their emblem is hippopotamus, *Batloung*'s emblem is an elephant, *Bafokeng*, their emblem is a rabbit, *Bakhatl*, their emblem is a chicken, *Bakoena*, and their emblem is a crocodile, the *Bahlapi* and a fish is their emblem
- iv. "when I was pregnant, I obeyed my grandmother's comments. I used to wear '*selapa*', a certain kind of blanket made from animal's hides, walking with bare feet. I was restricted to eat food like eggs and chickens feet and heads. She smeared me with the red ointment all over my face and body and I never stole a glance at myself in the mirror because I was told not to. My elders told me it is either I follow all those unbearable prescriptions; otherwise I

should get ready to raise a disabled or mentally retarded child. Believe me it was terrible but I did that because I did not want a disabled child. All those sorrows lasted only for that short period of time and joy covered for the rest of my life when I received a well, healthy, able child.' she said with her pale eyes shadowed with tears."

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