

‘A People Without a Past is a People Without a Soul’: Sir Seretse Khama’s Vision of the Development of Botswana

*David Magang**

No Future Without A Past

In my 2006 autobiography, *The Magic of Perseverance*, I introduce Chapter Six with an epigraph in the form of a quote attributed to Sir Seretse Khama, our founding President, to set the tone for what is to unfold. The quote says, ‘A nation without a culture is a nation without a soul’. As rational, insightful, and truthful as the quote sounds, it is not accurate at all, a fact that dawned on me at a time when the book had long left the presses and now loomed large on the display racks in the local bookshops. It’s not that I phrased the quote wrongly or erroneously: I was simply misled by some scribe who had invoked it in a piece and whose credentials, at least *prima facie*, seemed above board. Yet that is not to absolve myself entirely of all blame. Had I read much more widely and, therefore, known history better, or had I not omitted to have the quote cross-checked by other historians of note such as Neil Parsons, Christian John Makgala, or Jeff Ramsay, I would have no doubt nailed it.

Seretse’s exact words, uttered way back in 1970, were these: ‘We should write our own history books ...because ... a nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul’. Seretse alluded not to culture as such as his underlying premise but to our past, our history, and underscored the imperative of documenting this past through the agency of our own people and not through the prism of instinctually jaundiced outsiders. The substitution, in due course, of ‘history’ with ‘culture’ maybe was done in good faith, but it does not crisply drive home the point Seretse was trying to put across.

Seretse was not a historian: he was a trained lawyer-cum-politician. Yet he was aware of the centrality and paramountcy to a nation of being acutely cognizant of its past, without which it would forever be groping in the dark, without which it would be soul-less, meaning it would be without a definitive identity –without unique or peculiar attributes that set it apart from other nations. Sadly, that’s the anonymity into which we’re headed, if we’re not there yet as Seretse’s concern fell on stone-deaf ears. A case can be made that history as a discipline is not only looked at with scorn by the relevant authorities in the structures of government: it’s verging on near-irrelevance. It’s like there’s a systematic and concerted effort on the part of the powers that be to plot into total oblivion the knowledge of our antecedents as if that smacks of treachery or perfidy of some sort.

Scope of History

If I may venture a layman’s viewpoint that may possibly step on some toes and offend sensibilities to boot, the orthodox conception of, or classical approach to history is blinkered. History is too superficially defined. Or rather, it is too lopsided in its thematic drift. When I was at high school at Moeng College between 1958 and 1962, I learnt precious much about Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Shaka the Zulu and the *Mfecane*, the Monumutapa Kingdom, a bit about ‘Khama the Good’, how the gun-wielding and horse-mounted Europeans made mince of waves of African warriors with their hopeless assegais or bows and arrows, and the various stages of the evolution of man –from a hominid known as *Homo Habilis*, or something to that effect, to *Homo Sapiens*, who I was taught I represented. I learnt close to nothing about edifying African history, of how the great King Sechele I of the Bakwena warded off a Boer incursion into Botswana and in fact had the Boers turn tail in the historic battle of Dimawe of 1852-1853.

But history, anyway, is not simply about the rise and decline of once mighty kingdoms and age-

* David Magang, Manor House, Phakalane (Gaborone). Email: dmagang@phakalane.co.org

old dynasties. It's not all about a nation's arduous and tortuous path to independence and the central protagonists thereof. History is not only about setting down the life trajectory and milestones of a David Magang, a Michael Dingake, or a Gobe Matenge. History ought to be more overarching than that. It must seek to answer questions such as this: after more than 50 years of nationhood, where are we culturally, politically, macroeconomically, socio-economically, educationally, inventively, innovatively, ethically, infrastructurally, and industrially in terms of our work ethic?

All told, to limit history to archeological excavations, to only seminal socio-political events of the past, to key developments latterly in the political and cultural firmaments, to factional dynamics in the ruling party and what the attendant fissures and schisms therein portend, constitutes, in my own considered view, myopia of the most morbid order. History must embrace and take stock of principal developments in a nation's every field of human endeavour, including economics, science, and technology, particularly in the context of how these impact the tone and tenor of national development, as its pace and magnitude. Thus if need be, history must attempt to blur the lines between rigidly delineated fields of inquiry without necessarily losing its quintessence in the process.

Lest you take me for a hypocrite who is simply quick to shoot from the hip, my own contribution to eclectic historical discourse is attested by three works to date, namely *The Magic of Perseverance*, a fundamentally biographical sketch which nevertheless weaves together a host of inter-connected themes into one comprehensive compendium, and *Delusions of Grandeur Volumes One and Two*, which are economic critiques informed by our macroeconomic performance since winning self-determination from Britain way back in 1966.

Why an Understanding of History is Key

Why is a study of a nation's history crucial and pivotal to national aspirations? Granted, I could posit a whole catalogue of reasons but I will only proffer a handful. History is the ultimate frame of reference in this pilgrimage we call life. It is the compass that helps us navigate the labyrinths, turbulences, snares and other such atrocious terrains of life. If you do not know your history, you will never know how far back your roots reach and, therefore, will define yourself only parochially and subjectively. You will never know how and why you find yourself in your present existential station within the larger vista of the human ecosystem, and whether the direction you are headed is indeed the right one in the greater scheme of things. You'll simply be drifting along, going with the flow without a proper grasp of your grand purpose in life, even if you may be under the illusion that you are actually the very master of your destiny.

The great African-American writer and author of the once highly acclaimed fact-based novel *Roots*, Alex Haley, knew the criticality of a reasonable degree of familiarity with his past. Although he was born and bred in the relative utopia that is the United States of America, he still felt a huge identity void and over 12 years of research and intercontinental travel retraced his roots back to his motherland, Africa, where he discovered and reconnected with his kinsmen in a country known as The Gambia. It is these living links with his West African ancestry going back six generations who helped him fill the jigsaw of exactly how he ended up a denizen of America –through the capture of a certain Kunta Kinte, who was torn from his homeland and shipped off to the state of Maryland in the US, where he was sold as a slave in 1767. His book was seminal: it led to a cultural sensation in the US and a radically new mindset on the part of African-Americans as to who they exactly were and how they should henceforth chart their destiny as a demographic.

History provides us the *raison d'être* to contemplate the greatest question that could ever exercise the human mind –*why?* In the quest for answers to this great enigma, we get to understand why we live the way we do, and why we are where we are as individuals, as a household, as an extended family unit, as

a clan, as a tribe, as an ethnic grouping, as a social class, as a society, as a municipality, as a province or district, as a country or a nation, as a region, as a continent, as a species, and ultimately as the human race.

Our own people take it for granted that Botswana is such an oasis of peace, that it is so economically buoyant by the standards of the Third World, and that democratic governance and the rule of law hold more sway than despotic impulses. Once again, this is all rooted, by and large, in our age-old cultural institutions such as the *Kgotla* system, which had the dichotomous aspect of regnal absolutism and a pluralistic tolerance of the commoners' viewpoint, and our innate predisposition as a race to be frugal and not extravagant. Economic prudence and a characteristically peace-loving bent on the part of Botswana are not recently nurtured virtues: they are for practical purposes integral to our genetic make-up. Of course we have over the years seen the emergence of a level of greed and self-aggrandisement in certain quarters that is eye-poppingly brazen and blatant –necessitating our putting into place graft-bursting institutions such as Directorate on Corruption and Economic Crime (DCEC) to provide the necessary checks and balances –but that is more of an anomaly than an all-encompassing national trait.

When we study history, we see societal patterns over the course of time which inform critical thinking and, therefore, form the basis for decisions about a viable course of futuristic action. Once we have understood the past, not only will we be in position to predict the future more or less but we will also be galvanised to help create it.

Much of the xenophobia for which countries such as South Africa have become a byword can be put to a peripheralising of history –the utter disregard on the part of the relevant institutions to emphasise the instrumentality of fellow African countries in freeing South Africans from the cruel yoke of apartheid. By the same token, the fragile potential for economic and political integration on our continent can in part be ascribed to a reluctance by our leaders to preach supranationalism, like the legendary Kwame Francis Nkrumah of Ghana impassionedly did, albeit in too precipitate a fashion, as opposed to statism, and the manifest failure by our leaders to articulate both our oneness as Bantus and that most cardinal of human virtues –*botho*. In places such as Europe, for instance, where the underlying racial homogeneity is underscored at high-level summits, we see fairly stable economic agglomeration in the form of the European Union and even glimmers of political convergence notwithstanding the aberration of Brexit. Whereas in Europe the buzzword is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, here in Africa we're busy reinforcing territorial barriers and keeping our own brothers and sisters at bay as though they are the very scums of the Earth. It is a shame that Europeans have been more empathetic to Arabs fleeing the conflagration in Syria than we have been to our own people who come knocking on our doors as fugitives from economic hardships.

Throughout history, there have been both great feats of success and horrific failures. Studying history helps us avoid the pitfalls of yore and build on our accomplishments. Experience is always the best teacher. A people who do not know the missteps in and the blunders of their history are fated to repeat them. History puts all life into perspective. A good grounding in the lessons of history puts us on the alert: it predisposes us to be ever on the *qui vive* so that we avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over again. The more we study history, the wiser we become. Doomed are those who can't interpret history well, who evaluate it shoddily, or who simply neglect to pay heed to it.

In Botswana, the one great lesson we have learnt is the belatedness with which it dawned on us that it was time we benefited our mineral resources, an imperative I obsessively kept calling attention to as far back as the early 1980s and to which the powers-that-be were so lackadaisically resigned. Sadly, there is a whole host of lessons we have chosen to simply ignore. For example, our examination-based educational system has on balance been resoundingly vain owing to its archaic emphasis on rote-learning instead of spontaneous internalisation of the inculcated knowledge. It should have been discarded a long

time ago, like the Scandinavian country of Finland has, but why we continue to cling to it so boggles the mind as to numb the senses altogether.

Botswana Rich with History

Africa is arguably the most vilified and scorned continent on the surface of the Earth. Just as the Samaritans of Jesus' day would scoff, 'Can anything good come out of Jerusalem?' much of the rest of the world today can frequently be heard to say, 'Can anything good come out of the dark, hopeless continent?'

Yet, there is more than ample evidence that Africa has produced larger-than-life paragons of accomplishment such as Nelson Mandela, Thomas Sankara, Phillip Emeagwali, and Mansa Mussa, who is thought to be the richest person of all time and whose fortune was so infinitely vast it has been described as 'incomprehensible'. Evidence also abounds of Africa having made a seminal contribution toward civilising the whole wide world. In his revelatory book, *Stolen Legacy*, the Guyanese-American historian George Granville James has made the well-buttressed argument that it is Africa, notably Egypt, which educated Europe, notably the Greeks, and that the likes of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras of the mathematical Pythagoras Theorem fame all made their intellectual mark thanks to the knowledge that was purloined from Egyptian literature and scholarship. The spark that lit their intellectual flames was stolen on their behalf by their Prometheus in Alexander the Great, who sacked the Alexandrian Library and carted off all its priceless wealth of books to his throne-city state of Macedonia. The Greeks appropriated to themselves knowledge that arose by the sweat of our brow folks. Africa is rich in an indispensable amount of epoch-making history and yet Caucasians, who document much of world history, typically dismiss the continent as inconsequential by any stretch of the imagination. This same cynicism was directed at Botswana by the colonialists, who regarded the country as far from historically worthwhile.

In the 1960s, Botswana (whose colonial name was Bechuanaland Protectorate) was perceived as a country which was virtually without history. A tagline went like this in that regard: 'Happy is a nation that has no history. By this standard, there can be few nations happier than Bechuanaland'.

In his 1970 speech already referenced above, Seretse took umbrage at this devaluation of our historicity in the following words: 'We were taught... to despise ourselves and our ways of life. We were made to believe that we had no past to speak of, no history to boast of. The past, so far as we were concerned, was just a blank and nothing more. Only the present mattered and we had very little control over it. It seemed we were in for a definite period of foreign tutelage, without any hope of our ever again becoming our own masters. The end result of all this was that our self-pride and our self-confidence were badly undermined'.

About 50 years since attaining sovereignty, we continue to buy into the same, colonialist-propagated drivel that our history is utterly of no consequence. Why do I say so? A paper by Professor Neil Parsons (2006) observes rather gloomily that there is hardly any enthusiasm these days for the study of history both in preparatory schools and at university level. 'History and geography in primary and junior secondary schools have long given way to civics-based studies in Botswana', the venerable professor regrets. 'Now history and geography have come under the same threat in senior secondary schools –greatly reducing the employability of history graduates and reducing history and archaeology enrolments at the University of Botswana from 2004-2005 onwards'. This is in contra-distinction to the situation obtaining in at least the first ten years of independence, when the notion of touching base with our history was the ruling mantra.

Yes, contrary to the unabashedly spurious assertion by some colonial cynic that Botswana had no history, there was ample history to tap into and reanimate with a flourish. Said Seretse: 'We did have a past, and it was a past that was just as worth writing and learning about as any other'.

Certainly, Botswana had a wealth of history that rivalled that of gem diamonds. There was the

history of Sechele I, the great Bakwena King who once was *de facto* Emperor of greater Botswana – incorporating today’s Botswana and Tswana lands that now form part of South Africa –and who in the historic Battle of Dimawe of 1852-1853 defeated the mighty *MaBuru* (Boers) and thus put paid to their menace. There was the history of Linchwe I, arguably Botswana’s greatest general ever since Sechele and his brother Kgosidintsi, who like Sechele single-handedly defeated the Boers during the 1900-1902 Anglo-Boer War (in recent years renamed the ‘South African War’ to reflect the fact that Africans too were part and parcel of this epoch-making war that led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910) when his British allies left him to his own devices. There was the history of the now iconic *Three Dikgosi* – Sebele I, Khama III, and Bathoen I – who travelled to Britain in 1895 with a view to prevail over the Crown to check Cecil Rhodes’ acquisitive designs over Botswana. There was the history of Tshekedi Khama, arguably Botswana’s sharpest statesman ever, who literally moved heaven and earth to prevent Botswana from being appended to the Union of South Africa. There was also a whole treasure trove of our cultural history which the inimitable anthropologist Isaac Schapera so prolifically set down for us in a number of high-quality works.

Until relatively recent times, history has occupied a special place in the hearts of Batswana, a passion which goes back two or so centuries. Neil Parsons notes that in the mid-nineteenth-century, King Sechele strutted a church rostrum with a backdrop, ironically, not of the ubiquitous cross but of a wall-painting of his genealogy all the way to Adam!

Popular History Must be Righted

Returning to classical history, is whatever is taught in the halls of academia forcefully punctuated or underlined? To what extent are efforts made to see to it that certain misconceptions or seeming ambiguities do not hold or are clarified? For example, why do most Batswana continue to cling to the erroneous position that *The Three Dikgosi* went to Britain to ask for British protection when the fact of the matter was that the protectorate –or a *profaketorate* as I call it –had been imposed on us, suddenly and unheralded, by the British government a decade earlier in 1885 and that the object of *The Three DiKgosi’s* mission was to register their revulsion at the planned handover of our country to Cecil John Rhodes? Why does the name Khama III straightaway ring a bell to practically every Motswana when that of Sechele, the earliest and most impactful defender of Tswana sovereignty at a time when both the Boers and Anglo-Saxons were intent at strong-arming us into their sphere of influence, rarely strikes a chord? Why does almost every youngster who has done history keep asserting that Khama III was instrumental in ‘protecting us from the Boers’ when it was Sechele who did that at a time when Khama III was a mere teenager?

It would also be remiss of me not to underscore the fact that the foundations of Botswana were laid not only by indigenous Batswana but also by people of a paler hue. This they did either directly or indirectly, morally or institutionally. Dr David Livingstone, for instance, helped Sechele secure arms which in no small measure assisted in his routing of the Boers. When *The Three DiKgosi* went to Britain to take a strong line with Westminster, they were escorted by the missionary Charles Willoughby, who was many things to them –mentor, interpreter, and advisor. The administrator-cum-historian of colonial times, Anthony Sillery, and who *ipso facto* had substantial political sway wholeheartedly supported the independence of Botswana when he was a citizen of the Crown. Peter Fawcus, another level-headed colonial officer who was entirely without bigotry, was a champion of our nationhood, a rallying point in the Legislative Council which paved the way to independence, and a maestro participant in the formulation of the Botswana Constitution. He jealously guarded Seretse’s confidence in him that Botswana had stumbled upon an Aladdin’s cave of gem-quality diamonds. If Fawcus had betrayed this trust and whispered it to Alec Douglas-Home at No. 10 Downing Street, believe you me Botswana would in all probability still be

Bechuanaland today! Or at the very least, our independence would have been attained not on the silver platter it did in 1966 but through the barrel of the gun. Patrick Van Rensburg was a pioneer educationist who founded the highly efficacious Brigades movement in Botswana at a time when our people were desperate for the barest vocational skills. If we had keenly embraced his concept of 'Education with Production', the country's unemployment levels would not be this acute. Although a vociferous proponent and practitioner of vocational education for self-employment, Patrick van Rensburg did not advocate for marginalisation or abolition of history in the school system as seems the case currently.

Yet all the above fair-skinned personages are not spoken of in the same glowing terms as the equally illustrious indigenous Batswana. None of them has been put on a particularly towering pedestal by the chroniclers and savants of our national history or merited a posthumous nominal honour after a national landmark. The blame, as far as I am concerned, lies squarely on those who devise the curricula in the history departments at both the high school and university level. I need not stress that those who perform sterlingly in any facet of national progress must be equally lauded and proportionally projected irrespective of skin pigmentation. Colourbar must not be allowed to factor into the appreciation and salutation of our national heroes.

My own hosts today, the University of Botswana authorities, bear their share of this oversight I regret to say. I'm given to understand that there is a long-held tradition at the national university whereby buildings and other constituent facilities are officially known by numbers instead of being named after national heroes some of whom I have just made mention of. Maybe the recent re-naming of the teaching hospital at the University of Botswana after the recently departed Sir Ketumile Masire is a signal on the part of the university authorities that they are intent on making amends in this regard.

Newer Lights of Knowledge Must be Taken into Account

I also note to my dismay that our historians don't seem to be that keen to give history a re-look in light of newer insights that have emerged regarding our origins as the Tswana race and certain of our totemic dogmas that we have all along taken as gospel truth. Researchers, some of whom are not even conventional historians, have turned up virtually incontrovertible evidence that we originate not from Cameroon or the Great Lakes regions of Mother Africa but from southern Egypt. In my own interactions with and observations of the South Sudanese, I have come to recognise that their traditions and customs as well as the cadences and inflexions of their speech patterns bear striking parallels with our own. To me, they come across as our veritable kith and kin with whom we hot-tailed it from southern Egypt at a time when the white-skinned Hyksos invaded that country and triggered a mass, multi-directional exodus of Bantus.

Mmegi newspaper columnist LM Leteane has demonstrated, with awe-inspiring originality, that Setswana is actually a primeval language that goes back to the Sumerian civilisation of 6000 years ago. It explains why Leteane is able to understand and interpret the Sumerian records much more sensibly and convincingly than scholars who trained in the swashbuckling, Ivy League institutions of the Western world. I appeal to our historians and other academics, including those in the scientific fields, to reach out to and compare notes with this remarkable, phenomenally gifted man. The local media, both public and private, should also demonstrate a readiness and keenness to provide a forum for profound historical motions as adduced by such percipient, self-driven pundits of history as Leteane.

The Ngwato totem of *Phuti* can also now be put into its proper context thanks to the ground-breaking labours of people like Leteane. *Phuti*, it turns out, has nothing to do with a duiker that scurried out of a thicket behind which a Ngwato royal had taken refuge whilst in flight, in the process deflecting his pursuers, as is the ingrained belief. It is actually an abiding reverencing of the great Egyptian god of yore who was known as *Ptah*, or Enki in the Sumerian chronicles, and who was the most worshipped on

the continent of Africa. Indeed, the BaPhuti tribe of Lesotho, the cousins, apparently, of our Bangwato, do not remotely recall the aspect about the duiker in their peregrinational annals. Even my own totem as a Mokwena, the crocodile, can also now be properly contextualised. It does not stem, I believe, from our miraculous crossing of a river once upon a time on the backs of witting crocodiles lined nose-to-tail to form a providential makeshift bridge to conduct us to safer shores. Rather, it emanates from our veneration of a water-borne dragon that was the most sacred animal in the Egyptian culture. This dragon, which in Setswana we call *kwena* and in English crocodile, was known as the *messeh* in Egypt or *mus-hus* in Sumeria. Since as a people we originally came from Egypt, we carried along these cultural lores and in the course of the centuries'-long, stop-go great trek from the north to other parts of Africa, they naturally assumed newer glosses, contexts, and embellishments bordering on sheer mythology.

I would love to see a new revisionist thrust on the part of our historians where this new enlightenment about our past is zestfully and zealously mainstreamed both in high schools and universities. History is dynamic, in terms of its elasticity and, therefore, capacity to yield newer lights: it is not meant to stand as unimpeachable testimony before the court of posterity through and through like some kind of Holy Writ. History does not have a tone of finality. It is not as unassailably factual as the hard sciences such as physics or chemistry. It follows, therefore, that to rigidly adhere to the history that was an article of faith decades ago is a serious indictment on the intellectual vigilance of people who brandish PhDs in history and on whose word we lay people are of necessity obliged to hang. If the new narrative about our origins as advanced by the likes of Leteane is peppered with cracks and so falls dismally short of verisimilitude, then our conventional historians must make their way to the dais and bravely debunk it instead of simply, nonchalantly and unscholastically dismissing it offhand.

Festivals, Dances, are for Show Only

Much has been said about the cultural revitalisation witnessed in recent years as a great leap forward in the accentuation of our historical heritage. On one level, this takes the form of popular dances such as *setapa*, *borankana*, *matshela-kankgwana*, *dikopelo*, *tsutsube*, *hosanna* and others. On another, it assumes the guise of cultural festivals such as *Letlhafula*, *Dithubaruba*, and *Domboshaba*. The revival of initiation ceremonies such as *bogwera* for males and *bojale* for females are also emphatic statements in the crusade for cultural reawakening.

Yet most of these spectacular assertions of cultural renaissance are driven in the main by ulterior economic motives: they are packaged for sale, to either the tourist or the ordinary reveler, and geared toward sheer entertainment. Instead of focusing on entrenching our history on the psyche of our people, they are tainted with commercial overtones, with the result that what is ultimately put on parade is cultural caricature rather than authentic historicity that reach back to our very genesis as *merafe*, or polities.

So whilst I applaud them –something is better than nothing at all –I am not that seduced, sorry.

The Cost of Western Perversion

What are some of the virtues and values we have lost on account of our being almost completely oblivious to our past? They abound. We no longer set much store by the primacy of the extended family system. We address elderly folk by their first names and even when we deferentially address them by their surnames, we do not respectfully prefix them. The specific roles of a female spouse and a male spouse in the household remains a moot point even when centuries of matrimonial ethics lay bare as to who is senior and who consequently should submit to the other.

The bone of contention stems from the intrusivist paradigms of 'modernity' and 'civilisation', either of which is simply code for the encroachment of Western value systems. Our own traditional forms

of therapy have completely been discarded with the result that we have to resort to Western-manufactured pharmaceuticals at the slightest sign of even a fleeting ailment. The white-coated doctors with stethoscopes slung from their necks just will never see common cause with the 'primitive' and 'benighted' herbalist. Our own spirituality which was based on the invocation of *badimo* has long been sidelined and forgotten: we're now Christians or Muslims because some missionary who came with the Bible or Koran in one hand and the gun in the other convinced us that our religion was 'barbaric' and 'primitive' and we had to convert to a new faith that was progressive and spiritually unsullied. What this new religion did fundamentally was to turn us into a docile lot eager to offer the other cheek when the white man viciously bludgeoned the other.

We were told that we should not mind a life of hardship and appalling lack in this world as it wasn't actually our home: our eternal and blissful home followed after death. Thus whilst the likes of Cecil Rhodes were living life to the full in this very world which was not their permanent home, we ourselves were enjoined to make do with prayer only! To cut a long story short, before we knew what had happened to us, we had lost our lands, our sovereignty, and our culture thanks to the blindfold called the Bible.

Even our age-old cultural practices such as *bogwera* were condemned as primitive and potentially harmful to our wellbeing when in fact it had advantages that disposed men to warding off sexually transmitted diseases as it has now come to light in recent times. One of our kings, Sebele II of Bakwena, was hauled over the coals by our colonial overlords for religiously enforcing the rite of circumcision: he was deposed, replaced by his estranged and conformist younger brother, and exiled to Ghanzi District, his Siberia.

All Hands Must be on Deck

If our history is not being effectually embedded in the value orientations of our people, the reason for this tragedy, as I deem it, are legion. They include the indifference on the part of government itself, which seems to relegate history to the very margins of curricula imperatives; the apathy of the private sector; the corruption of Western acculturation, which is more pervasive today than it was in yesteryears; the tendency to adhere to syllabi that have outlived their shelf life; and the lack of drive on the part of our major university to acquire its own printing press.

I remember once asking the late Professor Thomas Tlou why most of the theses of our indigenous historians were based on research conducted in other countries when ideally our own country ought to take pride of place. The professor laid the blame squarely on government: he told me whereas other governments were prepared to avail funding for research to even non-citizen historians, ours didn't seem to care an iota. Almost every University of Botswana lecturer I have had occasion to talk to over the years bristles at the stigmatic absence of a printing press at a university that prides itself as one of the best on the continent. An in-house printing press would make information dissemination by way of books easier and cheaper. It would open the floodgates of indigenous bibliographical output, which presently comes only in trickles as international scholarship arbiters repeatedly lament.

Equally culpable is the private sector, which is not playing its part in promoting the proliferation of historical literature, though that hardly surprises me anyway as most of the leading lights of Botswana enterprise are overwhelmingly domiciled from across the border and therefore their priorities cannot be expected to be evenly aligned. A few years ago, I was approached by one gifted writer who proposed a biography on Sechele. Since the project required funding and the idea captivated me, Phakalane Estates made a pledge and even set up an account in which to pool donations from sponsors. The proponent of the project then wrote to more than 100 leading companies in the country for the requisite financial assistance. Only one company made a donation and a very inconsequential one for that matter. More than five years on, the project is yet to see the light of day.

Contrast that with South Africa, where the private sector is typically the prime mover in initiating literary projects from which they do not even directly benefit. Most book projects of a biographical nature in South Africa are bankrolled by the private sector long before they arrive on the desk of the publisher. It goes without saying that our own, home-grown pillars of the private sector should emulate their counterpart across the Limpopo, who even when based here in Botswana and making money from Botswana continue to support book propositions in their home country whilst giving ours a cold shoulder. I appeal to the stalwarts of indigenous Botswana enterprise to join the bandwagon and help bring about an explosion of historical chronicling in our country from across the board.

Such a seismic shift in our view of history would certainly make our beloved founding President, Sir Seretse Khama, smile in his grave in that the ensuing cornucopia of historical literature would reverse the stigma so that we're no longer 'a people without a past and a people without a soul' but a people with an amply illustrated past and a people with a soul or substance.

In many African societies, the respect for and deference to fallen heroes not only is paramount but palpable. In our case too, kowtowing to the expressed wishes of our leading lights who have long departed the stage must take precedence over everything else. As such, let us in heed of this moral shine the spotlight on Sir Seretse Khama's concern and accordingly set about embracing and promoting our history with the zest and gusto he envisaged. Trust me folks, the socio-economic and political challenges that currently beset us as a nation would be overcome, not necessarily in one fell swoop but incrementally. History would be made and we would become a truly united and proud nation.

Acknowledgement

This speech was a Public Lecture organised by Public Affairs at the University of Botswana and presented at the university's new conference centre, 17 August 2017.