

Interview with Professor Thomas Tlou

*Alinah Kelo Segobye**

Abstract

This interview of Professor Thomas Tlou was first featured in the History Department's *Handbook* at the University of Botswana and was done by Dr Alinah Kelo Segobye in 1998. Professor Thomas Tlou had recently retired as Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana and returned to the Department of History to teach. He had previously served as Botswana's ambassador to the United Nations, after which he became the first Botswana Deputy Vice Chancellor and then Vice Chancellor of the University of Botswana. He had also been the first Head of the Department of History in the 1970s and had served as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities. He had spent decades away from teaching and was looking forward to teaching in the Department. His prolific scholarly research had, however, continued with several books to his credit.

Dr Segobye: Professor, you have been a historian for over 25 years now. What are your thoughts on the discipline as a whole?

Professor Tlou: I have been away from the Department for several years. I have now re-joined the Department and very much look forward to settling down to teaching and research. Due to the demands of my previous assignments I have not been able to keep up with developments in this field to the extent I would have desired. This is why I now look forward to getting back into the teaching and research environment. About the discipline, I believe our challenge is to continue improving the seminal historical studies made since the 1960s in the area of Africa history. We should strive to improve teaching and research and continue to explore new themes with a view to capturing the depth and breadth of the experience. History should continue to benefit from other disciplines such as Archaeology, Linguistics, Sociology and Anthropology.

Dr Segobye: What inspired you to pursue a career in History at the start of your career?

Professor Tlou: I was inspired to pursue a career in History by a wish to know more about the African people. In the colonial days we were not taught the "real" History like other people. Africans were treated as mere objects of History rather than makers of History like other people. In the USA I was exposed to aspects of African History which made African History alive, vibrant and exciting. I decided to deepen my knowledge about the African past and had ambition to contribute to the writing of our History eventually. I considered that knowledge of the past could make me better appreciate the present situation. It would give me that African cultural background we were never taught in the colonial schools.

Dr Segobye: You studied under some of the most eminent historians in the area of African History, what was it like reading History in the 1960s?

Professor Tlou: Reading African History in the 1960s, for young African students, was like opening a dark screen which had prevented them from seeing their true past. For the first time I knew that our past was rich and could be studied like that of any other people. A whole new world –the African world as it really was –was opened for us.

Dr Segobye: What changes have you seen in the historiography of Africa over the years?

* Alinah Kelo Segobye, Visiting scholar, Rotary Peace Centre, University of Bradford. Email: alinah.segobye@gmail.com

Professor Tlou: One has seen the writing of history change from that written predominantly by Eurocentric colonialists to that written by people –African and others –in the Africanist tradition which gave African people a voice to speak for themselves. Increasingly, the number of African historians has increased and there is a growing body of history works written by them.

Dr Segobye: History has now grown to be a diverse discipline, which areas interest you as you re-establish yourself as a full time History Professor?

Professor Tlou: My area of interest at this stage, having only just returned to History, is to carry on where I left off, namely the reconstruction of the pre-colonial History of Batswana states using oral traditions and any other available sources. I consider this important if we are to eventually come up with a synthetic or more comprehensive History of Botswana embracing all the people of this country. Other issues will emerge as I continue to teach and research. The work of archaeologists currently under way in the region and in particular Botswana should enable such histories to be written.

Dr Segobye: The Department has grown tremendously since you founded it. It now offers a range of historical studies including Archaeology and Museology, do you find this an interesting development in your department?

Professor Tlou: Certainly, the growth of the Department over the years is very welcome. We are now able to teach Archaeology, Museum Studies and the History of other parts of the world. This has enabled our students to widen their horizons and look at human experiences comparatively.

Dr Segobye: As former Vice-Chancellor, it must be a challenge to face the classroom again after so many years, do you anticipate any problems or challenges?

Professor Tlou: Having been away from teaching for so long and having not kept abreast of developments in the discipline, I have a lot of catching up to do! Although as far as the History of Botswana is concerned, I have tried to keep abreast and have been able to have a second edition of *History of Botswana* published [1997]. I anticipate problems in the initial settling in phase but I should eventually catch up. This is the challenge –to get back into the discipline again. I know that I have the support of my colleagues.

Dr Segobye: What plans for research do you have?

Professor Tlou: I intend to do research on the History of Babirwa who live in Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. As I gather the material, I shall determine whether the topic is not *too* broad. For a start, my aim is tackle the History of the entire group in the three neighbouring countries.

Dr Segobye: The Department is planning to introduce MPhil and doctoral studies, how do you see yourself influencing the development of these programmes?

Professor Tlou: I look forward to participating in the supervision of MPhil and PhD students. Together with other colleagues we should be able to plan carefully exactly how to launch the programme. A false start should be avoided to ensure credibility of our programmes.

Dr Segobye: How has being a historian contributed to your career as a diplomat and administrator?

Professor Tlou: Being a historian assisted me to some extent to deal with my diplomatic work. At that time the questions of South Africa and the then Southern Rhodesia were burning issues in the UN. So knowledge of Southern African History came in handy. Generally, History prepares one to better understand the nature of human beings and thus we are able to address issues facing humanity from an informed stance. My term as a diplomat also enabled me to see the History of the contemporary world in the making. In short, History enabled one to analyse issues as objectively as possible. As a diplomat, one needs that.

Dr Segobye: Do you have any last words to offer our prospective students from 1998/1999?

Professor Tlou: I say to them: welcome to a place of learning and intellectual development! You will find the study of History an exciting and enlightening experience. Our Department has high calibre staff to guide you in your education. You should be able to emerge from here better able to teach History and to contribute to its writing, especially the History of Botswana. This is the challenge for you.

Dr Segobye: Any last thoughts?

Professor Tlou: Yes, a pleasing feature that I would like to is the increasing number of citizen staff who have been trained at MA and PhD levels in the Department. Many of these young colleagues were students here at UB and joined the University as lecturers. I expect this to tremendously boost research on Botswana with the return of these young and well trained historians and archaeologists.

Dr Segobye: Thank you for your time.

Professor Tlou: It was my pleasure!

(This interview first appeared in the *Department of History Handbook, 1998-1999*).

Epilogue

Almost two decades after the publication of this interview Botswana celebrated her 50th anniversary of Independence on 30 September 2016. Sadly, Professor Tlou has since passed on, as have many eminent historians of his generation. The discipline remains vibrant and African history remains an exciting space for researchers and students. Professor Tlou's legacy remains vibrant at the University of Botswana through the Tlou Memorial Scholarship which enables several graduate students to undertake advanced research degrees with funding support.

Professor Tlou's seminal research on the oral traditions of Botswana's communities has become a cornerstone of research engagement particularly discourses of decolonising knowledge and decolonised methodologies. As Botswana's looks beyond this 50th year, it is important that historical studies critically interrogate how African epistemic knowledge systems contribute to broader discourses of decoloniality. Further, Africa's claim to the 21st century must be premised on the rich tapestry of knowledge recovered from Africa's past so that a more positive future can be envisioned for the continent and its people.