Quett Ketumile Joni Masire: Some Notes By His Biographer

Barry Morton*

Being a historian at times feels like being a Catholic confessional priest. Most of the time, when you show up at someone's door to conduct an interview, the person you are interviewing is a little wary. Do you know anything? How much should they tell you? Can you be trusted with the information that they will give? Will you write about them and their friends and family in a friendly way once your research is completed? It is my personal experience, having done hundreds of historical interviews with Batswana, that once you demonstrate some detailed working knowledge of their background (i.e. you know who they are related to, who they associated with, what kinds of situations they were involved in) then the caution quickly fades and all sorts of information comes pouring out. And you will hear even more when you turn the sound recorder off! Important government and establishment figures in this country are expected to be discreet, but when they have a chance to talk to a disinterested, sympathetic outsider like myself, they can feel a strong urge to reveal things that they have mainly kept to themselves over the years.

Quett Joni Ketumile Masire (later Sir Ketumile Masire) was not like this at all. Since he was a man with a plan for every situation, he was not really an easy person to interview. On a surface level, he was extremely easy to talk to. As a seasoned diplomat, he was a master of formal and informal discourse, and had the ability to put even the most brutal dictator at ease. Tyrants have even gone on record espousing their close friendship with Sir Ketumile Masire, despite the fact that he utterly detested them! As is well known, he joked constantly, and could interject proverbs and colloquial sayings rapidly into his comments. He had met practically every single world leader over the last fifty plus years, and told lots of funny stories, about all kinds of people and subjects, and he laughed constantly. His memory, even in the months leading up to his death, was unusually strong. Despite all these things that would typically make someone an extraordinary interview subject, it was impossible to get him to say things he did not want to say.

My first encounters with President Masire were in 1993, when Jeff Ramsay and I wrote an 8-part biographical series on him for the *Botswana Gazette* newspaper. At this time, Masire had been President for thirteen years and yet practically nothing had ever been published about him. Clara Olsen, who had been a minor protégé of Masire's in her days with the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), obtained clearance for the project as well as several interviews with the President himself. As an eager young man who was wrapping up his PhD research, I used the opportunity to stay on in Gaborone for two more months. The *Gazette* articles were printed between July and September 1993 and then later published as the first Masire biography, *The Making of A President* (Morton and Ramsay 1994). Writing the book was enormously fun. Ramsay and I did the entire project, from the research through the writing, in eight weeks—a real whirlwind effort.

We found people who knew Masire as a baby, as a child, as a teenager, and in other aspects of his pre-political life. We combed through his school records, and also found his traces in a number of obscure agricultural and educational files. We travelled deep into the southwest Kgalagadi to talk to his brother on his ranch. Additionally, we found it exhilarating to go through security at the Office of the President and talk to Masire in his suite. The allure of the task was heightened one day when noticed that I was being tailed by plain clothed security personnel while I was doing my research. The only downside of the whole experience was being humiliated by the aging Morulaganyi 'MLA' Kgasa, Masire's secondary school Setswana teacher, at a funeral we had tracked him down at in Kanye. At this venue, where we had arrived uninvited, he refused to talk to us and went into a nasty diatribe against us in front of a large gathering!

* Barry Morton, Historical Consultant, Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation. Email: mortonb@wabash.edu

Although *The Making of A President* was not a serious academic venture, it was a book that needed to be written. Masire had been Vice-President for 13 years and President for 18 years by that point and nothing had been written about him beyond a few newspaper articles. Almost all the people we obtained information from about Masire did not live much longer. Many of the files and sources which we found him in are also now lost or misplaced.

It was only in 2006 that the now-retired Masire's autobiography was published. *Very Brave or Very Foolish: Memoirs of an African Democrat* (Masire 2006) was a detailed account of his life and presidency. The strongest part of the book deals with explanations relating to government policy issues, since Masire retained excellent recall on matters going back decades in this regard. Always a man who understood there were trade-offs in any policy choice, he liked to sit back and hear all sides of a problem before arriving at a definite opinion. So on serious matters Masire's autobiography provides a deep and honest insight into the thinking of the man at the centre of Botswana's government from 1965 to 1998.

On the other hand, I found *Very Brave or Very Foolish* disappointing. Like Masire himself, the book was apparently open and inviting although it was actually very guarded. Much of it reads like a diplomatic communiqué, trying its hardest to get the message across without offending anyone. You never get a sense of his strategy and tactics, of who he loved and hated, or of how he operated. Unlike Masire's oratory and writing for Domkrag, when he went after his opponents with vitriol and wit (Masire 1962; *Botswana Daily News* 1969), his autobiography is dry. The reality is that Masire was not someone suited to an autobiographical style. Quite simply put, he was not particularly self-aware. Because he was so insanely busy and active throughout his life, he did not engage much in self-reflection. In other words, the best way to describe and depict Masire is through the words of other people –especially those who worked closely with him in the various spheres of his life.

In early 2017 I received an offer to write another book for Masire. On arrival in Gaborone, I found him in what I thought was good health for a man in his nineties. He was sharp and incisive and witty, just as he had been in the 1990s. He had a book which he wanted written. He knew the topics that he wanted covered, and he knew his point of view on them. A lot of this material was not necessarily exciting, so as I interviewed him I kept trying to prod him for new insights into his relations with many of his top associates. Looking for hints of scandal and intrigue amongst the old guard BDP leadership, at times I tossed out stories from the Gaborone rumour mills and occasionally pursued salacious matters in an attempt to obtain some more sensational material. Based on the look in his eyes, it was obvious enough to me that he knew everybody's business, but he was not going to say anything about it –other than to confirm facts you already knew! He was utterly inscrutable, a man who had clearly dealt with practically every possible scenario in life in one way or another, but who was capable of deflecting any inquiry into matters he thought sensitive or below his dignity as a President to discuss. To get rid of an uncomfortable line of questioning he would smile, laugh, and indicate it was time to move on to another topic. As already mentioned, he was a tough man to interview.

During a period of four weeks in April and May 2017 I sat down with Masire over ten times for extensive interviews relating to his vice presidency and his early involvement in the BDP. He was highly unhappy with the direction that the party he had co-founded had gone. The advent of primary elections (*Buleladitswe*) in the late 1990s, he believed, had created a situation in which the *Domkrag* leadership lost control over the selection and quality of its candidates. Instead of the party platform, funding now became the central issue and too many politicians who were motivated by the desire to "eat" were now in parliament and cabinet.

We dined on numerous occasions, and I also visited to his farm in Lobatse. By the time I left Botswana we were halfway through the project. Later in the year we were to spend another month discussing

his involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and other Africa-related peacekeeping missions that he had not really talked much about before. Unfortunately, Sir Ketumile passed away about a month after my departure, and I would be forced to complete the project without extensive use of his own memories.

Quett Masire's death sparked a nation-wide period of mourning, which I followed closely on social media from the distant shores of the United States. As the last of Botswana's founding fathers was laid to rest, it seemed like an entire era had come to an end –the man who had dominated Botswana's political scene since independence in 1966 was gone. The incredible rise from dire poverty to relative affluence that his policies had engendered, along with Botswana's long-standing commitment to democracy and the rule of law, were all celebrated in conjunction with his death.

Looking at the festivities from afar, it was comforting to see the esteem his memory generated because his accomplishments have been largely underrated. Quett Masire, from the perspective of an outsider who has talked to him extensively and has spent considerable time investigating all his activities, was quite simply the most accomplished person I expect to ever encounter in my life. His range of achievements, based on the fact that he worked two to three jobs simultaneously for much of his life, is astonishing.

Rather than focusing on well-known events that Sir Ketumile was associated with, such as his role in the early years of the BDP or his leadership as the Minister of the pivotal Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFPD, it is worth highlighting some aspects of Masire's career that are not well understood.

A good way to assess Masire is by analogy, since his political career in many ways parallels that of the American Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton. To those unfamiliar with the founding fathers of American history, Hamilton was the gifted underling of America's revolutionary leader and first President, George Washington. Known for charm, broadness of intellect, and his capacity for long work shifts, Hamilton was central to the foundation of the new American state once the colonial forces of King George III of Britain had been ejected from the mainland. Not only was Hamilton's writing and thinking key to the formulation of the Constitution eventually adopted in 1787, but he subsequently devised a wildly successful combination of banking reforms and industrial policy once he was appointed as the nation's first Treasury Secretary in 1789. On top of all of this, Hamilton was the leader of the Federalist Party, which transformed America from near anarchy into a world power between 1789 and 1800 (Chernow 2005).

For all his accomplishments, Hamilton was never admired and loved in the same way as his patron, George Washington. The latter, a man with impeccable democratic credentials who initially refused to assume power after leading America's revolutionary army to victory versus the British imperialists, was a unifying figure with immense prestige and charisma. When the post-revolutionary period descended quickly into economic chaos and political disunity, Washington was unanimously voted in as President by the electorate, a position he relinquished voluntarily after two terms. That Hamilton was the central figure creating and executing policy for the Washington administration and the Federalists, no serious historian can contest.

In other words, Washington was the great nationalist figure and unifying President in early American history, while Hamilton was the tireless bureaucrat who ran the government for him, who developed new financial institutions such as the Bank of the United States, and who fostered a new, fast-growing economy. Does any of this sound familiar? It seems clear that the Seretse-Masire partnership in many ways echoed that of Washington and Hamilton. Botswana's founding President Sir Seretse Khama, like Washington, was a man of impeccable integrity who refused to ever compromise with his democratic ideals. As a leader, he was extremely astute in judging and promoting talent and in also keeping his team happy and focused.

Although not a particularly hard worker, he nevertheless oversaw an efficient administration (Magang 2008 and Rhodehamel 2017). Additionally, Seretse was, like Washington, an extremely talented farmer and businessman and one of the richest men in the country. Masire, meanwhile, like Hamilton, was the government workhorse and party organizer who was always assessed suspiciously in certain quarters, no matter how effective or brilliantly he performed. Like Hamilton, who also never used his position for personal gain, Masire was often believed to be involved in shady and unsavoury financial dealings.

Masire, after watching a documentary about the Caribbean-born Hamilton with me, remarked, 'the major difference between Hamilton and me is that he was born a foreigner', implying that he could never have survived in Botswana politics had he been born outside its borders. One might also add that Masire was not nearly as self-destructive as Hamilton, whose career ended in a lurid sex scandal.

Turning away from analogies, another point about Masire that has been overlooked but is becoming increasingly apparent is that he (as well as Seretse along with the BDP leadership) was a political conservative. This is a term that he only began using himself after his retirement, for instance in explaining why his government was slow to react to the calamitous AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. In the last few years Jeremy Seekings's research has made the term far more common, with his innovative recent writing on the Botswana government labelling it 'a conservative welfare state' (Seekings 2016).

Masire and the Botswana government did not appear conservative when they came on the scene in the early 1960s. Masire and other leading lights in the BDP such as Moutlakgola Nwako and Amos Dambe were known as being harsh critics of chiefly autocracy. After independence, the term 'moderate' or 'liberal' was commonly used as an adjective for the BDP and the country. Political scientists such as John Holm used the term 'paternalistic' (Holm 1987). Surrounded by fascist, minority-ruled governments and their Bantustan stooges, democratic Botswana appeared quite radical in comparison. Moreover, regional governments led by King Sobhuza II in Swaziland or by Hastings Banda in Malawi outdid Botswana in terms of their adherence to monarchical government or autocracy. Nor did Masire and the BDP's stated goals openly assert their conservative credentials, although over time they came to rely primarily on the rural vote. An additional factor that seemingly militates against BDP conservatism is the fact that Seretse and Masire consciously and slowly undermined the system of chieftainship and communal land tenure. Hence, they were seeking to reform the countryside rather than conserve it.

Despite all these things, Masire, Seretse, and the BDP leadership nevertheless fashioned the Botswana government along clear, classic, Western liberal lines. The government was to be based on a constitution along with representative democracy, separation of powers, and the rule of law. Much of this was adopted, unchallenged, from the colonial British power. Unlike in the rest of Africa, however, this arrangement was not a sham and was closely adhered to. Masire and his compatriots saw this as a wise and natural arrangement, because in their view, Botswana had always been democratic and had always been governed by a clearly defined code of customary law. While it was true that certain *Dikgosi* (chiefs) had abused their powers in various ways in the past, nevertheless all adult men traditionally had the right to speak their minds in public forums and to sway the general consensus.

Quett Masire began attending Kgosi Bathoen II's (of Bangwaketse) *kgotla* before he was even six years old in the early 1930s, getting up early most mornings and walking a kilometre with his elders to make the 4am start. The truth is that he continued to attend daily for almost thirty years whenever he was in Kanye, since, in his words, 'a man who does not attend *kgotla* is an idiot, since he lets other people determine his affairs' (Masire 2017). Masire, along with most of the BDP leadership, was thus highly versed in traditional government –all of them 'were masters of public affairs' (Masire 2017). While away from Kanye (his hometown) at Tiger Kloof boarding school, the teenage Masire learned about representative democracy from his conservative missionary teachers. As an old man, he still remembered reading, debating,

and discussing Pericles and other classic democrats while in school. Although he and his fellow Batswana were doing this in apartheid South Africa, none of them found Pericles remarkable since in ancient Athens, all male citizens were expected to attend the Assembly every day and exercise their vote. To Masire, then, Tswana democracy was an ancient tradition that needed to be maintained and strengthened for the country to prosper. As perceived by Masire and the BDP, western-style constitutions and institutions were merely an upgrade, an improvement, on what had already existed. 'We did an excellent job at nationhood because we built through existing structures and institutions' (Masire n.d.: 10).

In economics, Masire and the government were committed to 'an open economy' based on the free market. Beginning in the 1940s, when radios and newspapers became more common, Batswana intellectuals had been exposed to both socialist and capitalist thinking. Beyond any doubt, Masire and practically all the men who came to lead the BDP rejected socialism almost automatically. Kwame Nkrumah was an inspiring Ghanaian nationalist, to be sure, but his main economic ideas were dismissed immediately as being disastrous. Masire did not believe in the productive potential of the Tswana peasantry any more than Josef Stalin did of the Russian peasantry. Even so, he told Julius Nyerere that his socialist *Ujamaa* programme to collectivize the countryside would be a calamity. Likewise, when Seretse Khama attended Frontline States meetings in the 1970s he used to bag oranges from his Tuli Block farm and take them with him on his plane. When the meetings began, according to his Private Secretary, he would hand out these bags to fellow leaders such as Samora Machel and Julius Nyerere, saying, 'here, you are a Socialist. Accept this gift from a Conservative capitalist' (Legwaila 2017).

Instead of making radical changes, Seretse, Masire and the BDP carried out an unstated, long-term project to undermine the communal land tenure system with a view to turning all the land in Botswana into private property. The thinking was that ultimately, once the process was completed, the country would become a wealthier and more prosperous place as Batswana gained complete control over their resources free of the guiding hand of their chiefs and their government officials. 'Evolution, not revolution', was always the basis of this thinking, as was equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. Since former communal land is only now becoming freely salable, the effects of this slow land privatization policy will only be known in the next decade.

For Botswana, the free market and an open economy would be the basis of future prosperity. To promote these objectives, the MFPD that essentially ran the government was 'fiscally conservative' (Messac 2017). The ministry believed that if the government remained frugal and used its resources properly, all citizens would be educated, healthy, and would 'equalise the opportunities for Batswana to better their circumstances' (Masire 2006:219). Those with the most talent would flourish and the country would grow richer. Even before independence, when the country was reliant on food aid from abroad and was ranked among the poorest countries in the world, Seretse, Masire, and the BDP leadership believed that Botswana would one day be wealthier than Rhodesia and South Africa by following this approach.

Masire's conservatism ran beyond politics and economics in the sense that he wanted the government to protect the core aspects of Tswana culture and to prevent it from being undermined by either poor policy choices or by the effects of rapid economic growth and modernity. On a personal level, for instance, he always attended family *bogadi* (bride-price) negotiations in the capacity of family elder, and unrelentingly harassed all of his closest male associates into developing their own cattle posts if they did not have one yet.

As an old man speaking at Botswana's 50th Independence celebration in 2016 he remarked of his country's policies at independence: 'As a conservative, [I] felt that it was too early to be rushing for change, lest we spell doom for some of the things that augured so well for us' (Masire 2016). This conservatism was expressed through the early BDP 'ideal' of *kagisano*, or harmony, a policy seemingly at odds with the

emphasis on free market economics. Not only was *kagisano* the basis of programmes such as *Ipelegeng* ('self-help') but it was also the thinking behind a number a lot of conservative social policies such as the maintenance of traditional courts, immigration restrictions, marriage legislation, and reducing the rate of urbanisation. This social conservatism was rooted partly in the need to preserve longstanding cultural values, but also rooted in Masire's lifelong membership of the *Lontone* (London Missionary Society) church. If, as a committed Christian, Masire refused to ever bring religion overtly into politics or public policy, nevertheless his faith undoubtedly affected his outlook on social affairs (Masire 2006).

Tremendous amounts of ink has been spilt debating the reasons for Botswana's relative economic and political success since independence. One factor that has been overlooked in a lot of this writing has been the strength of the conservative politics in the country. As the political scientist Daniel Ziblatt has noted, democracy has generally worked best in those parts of the world where conservative parties were strong and part of the system:

> 'Where conservatives in Western Europe have developed strong party organizations –maintaining control over the selection of candidates, the financing of campaigns, and the mobilization of grassroots activists –democracy has historically tended to be more stable' (Friedman 2017).

Conclusion

Quett Masire will always be remembered, along with Seretse Khama, as the key architect of the modern nation-state of Botswana. While one could say that he probably retired a few years too late, that some of his later rural development strategies were not particularly successful, and that he was slow to clamp down on growing corruption in the parastatal sector, nevertheless the plaudits he achieved in his lifetime were well deserved.

Following his retirement, Masire also remained active, and blazed yet another new trail for Botswana by tackling a number of challenging Pan African peacekeeping assignments. Although he faced considerable innuendo and occasional accusations of using his position for supporting his personal farming interests, Masire was actually not corrupt in the slightest. Ultimately, it was his discretion and private nature that led to some of these unfortunate rumours flourishing, since he kept these matters so quiet that even his family members did not know what he was engaged in.

Despite the fact that Masire encountered huge numbers of people during his long career, only those who worked closely with him really understood him well. Hopefully, the forthcoming publication of a new biography will change all of that.

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