

Unmasking Simon ‘Selefu’ Seisa the Senior Citizen of Botswana’s Cartoon World

*Tshireletso Motlogelwa**



Mr Simon ‘Selefu’ Seisa (photo from *Mmegi*)

Staff writer Tshireletso Motlogelwa tells the life of a quiet man with a loud alter-ego, *Mmegi* veteran cartoonist Simon Seisa. He was a shadowy figure who would drift in and out of the newsroom, sit down at a desk far from everyone, draft something on a pad, drop it off at the Editor’s office, grab his briefcase and leave. No word. No introductions. Quiet. Methodical. Anonymous. Only a few people in the newsroom knew who he was. Junior reporters at *Mmegi* came to know the man who signed his cartoons, Selefu.

For decades *Mmegi*’s political cartoonist Simon Seisa remained incognito and only a few people—editors knew his real name. This was for the simple reason that Seisa was a civil servant and any controversial cartoon could be detrimental to his professional interests. In fact, before he got underground Seisa once got into trouble for his work.

‘In the 80s when I started to draw cartoons for *Mmegi* I was still employed at the *Daily News*, my boss Ted Makgekgenene (then Director of Information Services) heard about it and called me: “I hear gore [‘that’] you are the one who draws those cartoons...stop it!” Selefu sits back and pauses.

The morning breeze is uncharacteristically chilly even for June, and from upstairs in Khwest restaurant, the temperature is lower, and thus Selefu has shrunk back into his couch so that he looks smaller, and even more boyish than he is. He goes on to say: ‘However, another boss of mine, I won’t say his name, called me up and said, ‘Did Makgekgenene call you?’ I said, ‘yes’. He asked, ‘Did he tell you to stop drawing the cartoons?’ I said, ‘yeah!’ He said, ‘Don’t stop it man. Draw those cartoons. Just change the name’.

Now Selefu is surprised, pleasantly surprised. He smiles at the realisation, as if he has been thrust back to that encounter three decades ago. ‘Then I thought, “Ok, I will use Selefu’,” then he sits back on his couch again. Seisa has what would have been called boyish looks, but at sixty he looks the way

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all men with boyish looks do when the years pass: puffy cheeks dropping a bit and bright eyes behind drooping eyelids. Which provides for a cheeky almost naughty look. However, for a cartoonist Seisa is quite reserved and even sweet in a reverend way almost. In a grey jacket, white shirt, a black vest over the shirt exposing only the collars of the shirt, sprinkles of grey hair and a relaxed disposition, Seisa looks more like a pastor than a satirist.

But Seisa is the senior citizen of Botswana's cartoon world, and to a certain extent even a chronicler for an older generation of Batswana. Juxtaposed with the post-ideological, post-religious and post-modern sardonic works of *The Monitor's* cartoonist Billy Chiepe, Seisa is a don of old conservatism.

His works often reflect a certain respectability, a controlled expression of disapproval, if ever. On 6 August 2012 Seisa will be celebrating his 60th birthday. He has recently retired from the Department of Broadcasting Services whose many incarnations he has worked for in the last 37 years. Seisa went into the arts at a time when being an artist was seen as capitulation to laziness and a lack of professional ambition.

The 1950s to the 1970s Botswana was not a place for artistic development, after all there were engineers, nurses, doctors and teachers to train. And soldiers too. The young Seisa started drawing just for a while in Sebina village where he started his primary school. In 1960 the highly mobile Seisa family moved to Francistown, and he was enrolled at African School. In 1961 he was back in Sebina. 'I started drawing when I was at Primary School. People used to like my drawings. I would sometimes illustrate the concepts I was being taught, that helped me absorb them better', he explains.

He joined St Joseph's College where boarding school granted him some freedom. It was a strict Catholic college where boys and girls were not allowed to mix and the young Seisa spent his free time drawing. 'Art was always a hobby. Something you did to pass time. Even the school curriculum didn't have art as a taught subject. *Go ne go tsewa gore dilo tse ke bomatla* ('it was thought to be stupidity'). I am basically self-trained', he explains.

When it was time to choose a course, Seisa in the early 1970s went for economics at the University. It wasn't long before he quit, having performed badly in his academic work. Being out of University was a trying time, the time when a devout Christian questioned the very existence of God.

'I went through a trying period and during that time I doubted if God existed. I was thinking, 'Well if he does exist, he wouldn't have me in this type of situation', Seisa recalls. However, the 1970s was not a time for unemployable secondary school leavers, and it was not long before he was employed. The following year he got a job at the Labour Department. However, in 1974 he met one of his contemporaries, Bapasi Mphusu who told him that the Department of Information was hiring. 'I applied and I was hired', he says.

Botswana was then a young nation, and it was being run by young people. One of those was a man called Ephraim Setshwaelo, who was then Director of Information. 'He was a very progressive, very able boss', explains Seisa. Setshwaelo and Makgekgenene formed the core team that was then the Department of Information. Young, vibrant and full of ideas, they set about utilising and developing the young talent at their disposal. Seisa, who joined as a reporter soon shone as a graphic artist. 'I made a cartoon at the time, I think it was about crime. I had a police officer over-ran by criminals', he explains. The cartoon ended up in the hands of then Director, Setshwaelo. 'When he saw it he said "I think we have our cartoonist",' recalls Seisa. That was the beginning of Seisa's journey as a cartoonist. He joined the Graphics Department under Phillip Segola.

In 1972 Seisa was up for further training. He left for England to pursue a BA in Film, Television and Graphic Design at the then Hull College of Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK). In the aftermath of the liberation in many regions around the world, the UK was still struggling with the new state of racial relations. 'There was racial discrimination. At Norwich where I did my foundation they were racially prejudiced, but at Hull (a smaller town) they were openly racially discriminatory', he says.

‘To them you were more of a savage, they would look at you and wonder whether you were a real human being’, he recalls. But Seisa found a way to survive; he engaged with fellow Africans and spent most of his time on his studies.

It is interesting to note that unlike most of his generation who were in their prime in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, Seisa did not become a political animal. The Christian in him always doubted the efficacy of politics in solving worldly problems, he says. However, he did go through an atheist phase. ‘It was around the time when I was at University. I started interrogating the existence of God’, he explains. However, any doubts about his own Christian faith were renewed when he met a Zimbabwean colleague while he was in London. ‘He was a communist and he was heavily involved in the liberation movement in Zimbabwe. He told me just because you cannot see something does not mean it does not exist’, he said.

Nevertheless, at that stage, Seisa pondered the challenge that an apolitical man had if he was to make a meaningful contribution to Botswana and indeed Africa as a whole. ‘I then concluded that I could use my cartoons to shed light on the many issues facing our people. I have been doing that since then’, he says. At any rate, even at that early stage Seisa found Film a much more rewarding enterprise, artistically at least, for it combined all the artistic talents he possessed.

He returned home in 1982 and joined the Information team, but it was a changed team. Setshwaelo was no longer at the head of the organisation. He became part of the early team of filmmakers to work on documentary films for the government. Seisa recalls the works of photographer Phagane Tladi, one of Botswana’s first photographers. He credits Tladi with training him in appreciating visual communication, including cinematography. Nonetheless, Seisa’s dreams of developing a film industry in this country went up in flames because of a combination of misfortunes. He says the first problem was that there was no policy direction on developing the sector; the second was the involvement of the national broadcaster Botswana Television (Btv) starting in 2000. ‘Btv inadvertently worked against the establishment of a viable industry’, he says. He doesn’t blame the broadcaster for its lack of sustained commissioning process, but rather the political leadership who had to cut the station’s budget right to the bone.

He would later further his studies obtaining an MA in Film and TV in Brisbane, Australia. On his return, he says, he found that there was a split between the two teams trained and deployed at Btv. ‘Those who were trained at Mafikeng [in South Africa] came back earlier, and some of us who studied abroad came back a bit later, we found that the two teams had different views of where to take the station. So that did not help matters either’, he said.

Just then during my interview with Seisa a call comes in on his phone, he excuses himself and answers it, cupping it away from the chilly breeze at the top level of Khwest restaurant. Seisa, in the aftermath of his retirement has had time to get involved in his two other passions -music and church.

‘There will be an all night prayer...’ he says and then listens nodding every now and then. For a moment the cartoonist gone and now Seisa is the churchman. ‘Do that please...’ he says louder. ‘Do that ...yeah. No, they want a proper keyboard. We will need it and a bass guitar of course’, he says and hangs up with a satisfied look on his face.

Seisa was engaged to draw cartoons by former Managing Editor of *Mmegi* Methaetsile Leepile. That was in the 1980s. Soon after that he quit drawing cartoons for the *Daily News* when the newspaper’s editorial direction was becoming more ‘safe’. He coined the name Selefu to avoid being known, and to pay tribute to his late grandfather whose name it was. Throughout the years he has encountered many subjects that he cartooned. Like every cartoonist he says he finds certain individuals easier to cartoon. ‘Internationally, I enjoyed cartooning [the late Palestinian political leader] Yassir Arafat, he had such a distinctive look. Locally, I think President Khama is also very unique. He is therefore easy to cartoon’, he says. He finds difficulties in drawing the President of the Botswana National Front (BNF) Duma Boko, who he says does not have a distinctive look apart from when he smiles. ‘When he smiles his eyes become

smaller and he somehow looks cheeky’, he adds.

Seisa’s cartoons have a particular simplicity. In an era characterised by visual over-stimulation his cartoons epitomise simplicity -he does more with less. Seisa masters the use of indigenous symbolism. His cartoons are loaded with subtext that can only be dislodged through an understanding of not just Botswana society but its sayings, proverbs and even urban myths. So he says more with less and says he tries to avoid what he calls vulgarism. Seisa’s cartoons also, at least in recent times, show a certain ‘middle-roadism’ not just visually but editorially. So I ask if he plays it safe, trying to remain the ‘good boy’. He freezes in deep thought for a moment. ‘I think I have produced serious cartoons that say a lot about our society. I don’t set out to censor myself,” he concludes.

Acknowledgement

This article appeared as a two parts series in *Mmegi*, 12 and 26 January 2012