

## **‘A Name Tells a Story’: Botswana’s Place, Street and Landmark Names – A Layman’s Perspective**

***Bojosi Otlhogile\****

It is unusual to start a discussion with a disclaimer. I find myself in that unenviable situation where I should make a few disclaimers. I was invited in my capacity as Chair of The Botswana Society, it is now exactly a week since I stepped down from that position. So I am just an impostor. Let me state for the record though that The Botswana Society has since its inception been active in the retelling of the Botswana history and its heritage. We pride ourselves as one of, if not the only longest surviving indigenous Botswana non-governmental organisation (NGO). Since our inception in 1968 we have, without fail, produced the *Botswana Notes and Records* the only Botswana based journal on JSTOR. We have held seminars, symposia and workshops on topical issues concerning the country on an annual basis.

Second, I made a mistake of revisiting some of the articles written on place names that have appeared in our media. One such article is by Prof. Thapelo Otlogetswe titled ‘Ditimamodimo to Peolwane’. He makes two statements that made me tremble at the thought of speaking at this occasion. First he states that ‘Botswana doesn’t have an onomastician. Our only hope seems to lie in Goabilwe Ramaeba who is reading for a doctorate on anthroponomastics (the study of personal names) in Scotland, who upon completion will be the nation’s only anthroponomastician!’ What is a mere layman doing amongst people talking about such a specialised subject. Shouldn’t the organisers have invited our only onomastician to give this keynote? I consoled myself that it is always an advantage to be a layperson, you come to learn rather than teach.

Second, Prof. Otlogetswe opines that ‘There is nothing mythical about naming a place. People name places. They name them to reflect their beliefs, history, aspirations and culture. They name them after hills, rivers, heroes (and rarely after villains), leaders, famous stories, events, etc. Botswana need to be courageous in taking and dominating spaces’. Nothing mythical, really? If so, why are some names controversial? They name them after hills, rivers etc. What are these hills, rivers or leaders themselves named after? Did these names drop from heaven?

There is nothing as beautiful and exciting as giving a name to some object or person. Imagine new parents choosing a name for their yet to be born child. In the yesteryear they would not even know the child’s sex. The same excitement is more so, I believe, in naming a place, a name the place will hopefully carry into posterity.

Serious thinking must go into choosing a name for a place. Taking Gaborone as an example, one will notice that there was a pattern to naming of streets. It seems name providers worked from the generic to the particular. In Extension 9 (officially called Phologolo), for example, most streets are named after animals. In Village, most streets are named after rivers. Sometimes over time the reasoning behind the naming of certain places is overlooked or forgotten. Perhaps, a change of mind. During the Tenth Anniversary of Botswana’s Independence in 1976 the roads from Nelson Mandela intersection past Middle Star shopping mall, Avani Hotel, University of Botswana (UB) up to the old Lobatse Road were named after visiting Presidents. They remained so until the removal of the Maruapula circle (roundabout). What used to be Nyerere Drive was truncated and a new name given to the section from the new Maruapula traffic lights to UB circle. It is now called Chuma Road. Who, amongst African presidents, is Chuma? Which country did he represent during the Anniversary? Why, if at all, recognise him long after the event? Or is it just memory lapse? The significance of naming that part of the City was simply lost or forgotten!

Two other factors in my mind influence place names, namely industrialisation and migration (or

---

\* Bojosi Otlhogile, Botswana Society. Email: [khebetu@gmail.com](mailto:khebetu@gmail.com)

conquest). Sometimes the two merge into one. When the three sons of Kwena split up they founded GaNgwaketse, GaMmangwato and Kweneng. Ngwato's children later split in the process founding GooTawana. Interestingly, the Kalanga who did not believe in the clustering of villages have equally founded villages named after the founders after leaving the main group – Nshakashogwe, Moroka, Matenge etc.

With regards to industrialisation (or even migration) the British were the main culprits. They carried the names of their towns from United Kingdom to new settlements. Sometimes influenced not only by where they settled but by the dominant mode of production. Wherever the British found coal the place was named Newcastle. So you have Newcastle in England, South Africa (now called Emalahleni) and Australia. The same influence permeated into local toponymy and influenced place names, even if only colloquially. Those coming from Francistown's hinterland still refer to the city as '*toropo*' ('town'). And we know, there is only one *toropo*, its Ghetto. Mahalapye became kwaseteichaneng or Diponeng because of the lights at the railway station and 'gooraShoshong's' neon lights. Due to developments in the Mahalapye area, Diponeng gave rise to wards such as Xhosa 1 and 2, Flowertown and Dilaene (tsa ga Raditladi).

New and recent migrations too have influenced place names. While we still do not have a Chongqing or Beijing outside of Mainland China, today Chinatown occurs all over the world. It refers to a section of a town or city with a large concentration of Chinese or Chinese businesses outside of mainland China or countries with majority Chinese residents or citizens.

There are a few oddities, though, with our place names. One oddity I have wondered about is why some places have more than one name -sometimes official and unofficial. Yet both accepted. Artesia for Mosomane, Palla Road for Dinokwe, Extension 9 for Phologolo, Village for Extension 15. Some unofficial or colloquial yet revered Jinja, Kasi, Bobcity, Setlhaketlhake, Ghetto, Sjapi, kwa gae or kwa Motjing!

The second oddity is how some parts of the country have accepted hilarious (nay vulgar) names. This is true of our cousins in the south east and those south of Dibete. They have such names as Nnywane, GaMarete (this, I suspect, is equivalent of Durban, Thekwani or is it *marete* as in impossible or difficult, *go retela*) or Sebonwane. As Otlogetswe has observed, some places are named after leaders. Equally, some people are named after places –MmaBotswana, Masunga, MmaShakwe, Lobatse, Sikwane etc. I shudder to imagine anyone named after the above three places. In this country where parents take the name of the first born, what will the parents be called?

Perhaps today this will not be a big issue because the law permits the government to intervene and reject such names. The Children's Act gives the Minister authority to reject any name likely to embarrass or cause the child to be ridiculed. This was universally introduced as part of the rights of the child. Either the government can intervene or the child themselves can do so when they become of age.

I wish to refer to an interesting case I have come across. The case comes from England – Re C (Children) [2016] EWCA 367. A mother who had a history of mental illness, drug abuse and alcoholism named her twin babies – girl and boy – Cyanide and Preacher respectfully. The local authority intervened arguing that the names would in future embarrass and cause the children to be ridiculed especially by other children. The mother argued that Cyanide was a 'lovely pretty name' because it's the name of a pretty flower. Besides, Cyanide is such a lovely poison because Nazi leaders Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels used it to kill themselves. If it was not for it what will the world be like with Hitler? Preacher, she hoped, will make the young man to be a useful member of the community who will grow up to preach to and lead people. The court was not persuaded and could not accept any of this. The Judge recognised both the importance of a given name and the right of the parents to give their children names, and the fact that, ordinarily a choice of name for a child, even one which many would regard as outlandish, would not provide a reason for the interference by the state in private family life. The name may be the first, and only, act of parental responsibility and love by his or her parents particularly where the child cannot be brought up by his or her parents. It may be the only lasting gift from the parents. But, the judge reasoned that:

The naming of a child is not however merely a right or privilege, but also a responsibility; people, and particularly children, are capable of great unkindness and often are not accepting of the unusual or bizarre. It does not need expert evidence or academic research to appreciate that a name which attracts ridicule, teasing, bullying or embarrassment will have a deleterious effect on a child's self-esteem and self-confidence with potentially long term consequences for him or her. The burden of such a name can also cause that child to feel considerable resentment towards the parent who inflicted it upon him or her.

However, the court was mindful that a name that today 'is considered by a child to be an embarrassment at one age on account of it being different or unusual may well, as they get older and begin to assert their individuality, become a badge of pride for those very same reasons'. So, maybe I am too presumptuous that these names will not be acceptable.

The third oddity is the use of acronyms or a combination of place names. These have sometimes been accepted and in other cases rejected. The discovery of copper and nickel gave us the name Selibe Phikwe for the mining town. The most commonly accepted acronyms have been those given to schools serving more than one community eg, Borwa for Bokaa and Morwa in Kgatleng District, Mothamo for Moijabana, Thabala, and Motshegaletau etc. What makes names acceptable? What causes their rejection? I look forward to the discussions on both TUMASERA and Ditimamodimo.

The final oddity is this: what, in Botswana's lingua, is the difference between Stand, Block, Phase, Extension, Suburb, Peri-urban and Village. Phakalane and Gaborone North are suburbs; Mogoditshane a peri-urban, Tlokweng and Palapye are villages!!

To conclude, the question is 'what is in a name' and what story do we want to tell? Chair, here concludes the layman I am. Thank you.

### **Acknowledgement**

This paper was delivered as a keynote address at a one-day workshop organised by the Department of History at the University of The Botswana and Botswana Society held at the University of Botswana's Conference Centre, Gaborone, on 26 January 2020.



Dr Boga Manatsha, Prof. Fred Morton, Prof. Andy Chebanne and Prof. Maitseo Bolaane participating at the one-day workshop