My University of Botswana Days

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Just after Prof. Fred Morton's retirement in 2020, I also left the University of Botswana's History Department after a long period. I first came here in 1993 and have been here ever since, except for a year teaching at Chancellor College, Zomba. I have been here for just over half of the lifetime of independent Botswana, and more than two-thirds of the lifetime of the separate University of Botswana. I have spent my entire academic career in Africa, and when people here asked me what was done in Western universities, I sometimes had to say I had no idea.

I had finished my PhD in England and I was looking for a job, applying for whatever seemed plausible. I found an advertisement for a two-year contract position in Botswana, and sent my application off, together with many other applications. I heard nothing more until I was contacted by phone by Dr Part Mgadla, a member of the History Department, asking why I had not replied. Apparently, an offer had been made but somehow lost. I accepted, and set off as soon as possible, two or three weeks, I think. This is what historians sometimes call a 'Black Swan': an event of low probability and high impact. My life suddenly changed direction. The day after arriving at UB I went to see the Dean, Dr Brian Mokopakgosi. As well as being Dean he was the person who normally taught my courses: my position had been created because he had become Dean and the History Department therefore was given a position to replace him during his term. A day or two after that I started teaching, scrawling lecture notes in my room in the nearby Gaborone Sun Hotel, now renamed Avani. By a curious coincidence, I already knew one member of the History Department, the archaeologist Dr Alinah Segobye, who had been at the same College when we were working for our PhDs. (At the time of writing she is Dean of Human Sciences at the Namibia University of Science and Technology.) But my knowledge of Botswana was very limited. When I was studying in New Zealand and England, I never expected to come here. However, it did not take me long to realize that I had been extraordinarily lucky. I had an opportunity to be part of something exciting, working with brilliant scholars dedicated to developing the country. As Prof. Leonard Ngcongco, who served as Head of the History Department but also as Director of the NIR (National Institute of Research) once remarked, 'If you are not building a bridge or that kind of thing, people think that you are not involved in development. But you also have to develop people in the mind'.

Both UB and Gaborone have changed greatly since I arrived. I have throughout, however, been surrounded by colleagues and students who made me proud to be here. The department has had its internal disagreements as well, but there has always been mutual respect, and in times of trouble solid support. This is I believe *botho*.

In 1993 the History Department was somewhat smaller, and its Archaeology Unit was still at an early stage. There were more foreign staff in Faculty of Humanities than now, many a little eccentric, some more than a little. There were many older staff members whose personal histories were remarkable. Quite a few had been involved in the liberation struggle against white minority regimes in the Southern African region in various ways. Some had been imprisoned by authoritarian regimes elsewhere in independent Africa. I was often unaware of this background at first. As is often the case, those who had been involved in such things tended not to talk about it. On one occasion, I had to set a supplementary examination in European history which would be taken while I was away, and I checked the questions with Prof. Henryk Zins, a Polish member of the department. One of the questions was 'Compare the dictatorships of Hitler and Stalin'. He said, with a wry expression, 'You know, I could answer that one from personal experience'.

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But that was all he said. (Although he later wrote a memoir, in Polish, which refers to his experiences under Nazi occupation.) Prof. Felix Mnthali, a member of the English Department, eventually published a novel based on his experiences as a political prisoner in Malawi during the time of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Later I got to know the Malawian scholar and poet, Jack Mapanje, who had also been imprisoned by Dr Banda, and who wrote a remarkable memoir of his experiences. The History Department apparently earned the title of the 'Awkward squad', at least in later years, which I think is something to be proud of. Academics question everything, yet the UB authorities sometimes seemed puzzled that their ideas were not always received with uncritical delight.

UB was a dynamic intellectual environment. I was not the only foreign arrival to notice the positive attitude and energy, the desire to advance knowledge, contrasting with the point-scoring attitudes we had sometimes experienced in Western debate. This continues, though university policies have in some cases lost sight of what made UB special. The ideal of a university is 'a self-governing community of scholars'. This was more true in 1993 than now. Younger staff are amazed to learn that Deans used to be elected. More basically, a university is not a business, and education is not a product.

In the 1990s I became the faculty timetable representative. At that time the timetable was written manually—on *paper*, if younger readers will believe that—by a University Timetable Committee. In practice the University committee mainly just divided up slots, and timetables were written faculty by faculty by the relevant representative, with certain arrangements for co-ordination. The job was made tricky by the fact that students were allowed to register for courses without regard to the timetable: it had to be altered to fit them. This meant that I had to design the timetable with alteration in mind. I will not go into the technical implications. In hindsight it was an interesting experience. After semesterisation the University accepted that students would have to register for non-clashing courses, and for a while the timetable was run with blazing efficiency by Prof. Jamil Ahmad of the Department of Chemistry, who would often send you the solution to some timetable problem in an email twenty minutes later. Unfortunately, the university later adopted a computerized system that seems to be slow and cumbersome.

Around the end of the 1990s the World Wide Web reached UB. I wrote some notes for colleagues explaining how web pages worked, saying that a hyperlink was 'like a footnote' to another source. Faculties began experimenting with their own web servers, and the History Department launched a web site of 31 pages, half of which were Prof. Neil Parsons' Botswana History Pages, still a widely used internet source, and incidentally one copied without acknowledgment by some other sites. However, the University shut down these experiments to create an official University site. Correctly guessing that this would take many years, we moved our site to free web space and then to our own domain thuto.org. The site has grown to its present size of over 250 pages including a variety of valuable Botswana history resources.

In 2005 I married Dr Mary Susan Lederer, of Wisconsin, then a member of the English Department. Before the actual wedding there is the stage with the District Commissioner, who gave the most gripping wedding address I have ever heard, referring to AIDS, violence, crime, and infidelity. Holding a cellphone aloft she declaimed 'You must ring up all your old boyfriends and girlfriends and tell them: *as of one minute to midnight it—is—over!*' An elderly couple exchanged serious glances and nodded. We married at the Anglican Cathedral, supported by members of both departments. Neil Parsons was my best man, having described his relationship on the official document as 'friend and comrade'. Since we were not actually Batswana, and Mary's father could probably not have got actual cattle into his airline luggage, I had presented him with a set of twelve symbolic cows made specially at the Camphill centre in Otse. At the reception there were no speeches, unless you count the priest saying grace. This seemed to be generally popular though rather surprising: 'Can you do that?' we were asked several times.

Later Mary left UB to concentrate on writing and other projects, publishing books on Botswana literature and Bessie Head. Botswana literature has advanced remarkably. When I first came here a new

Botswana novel was a rare event, but the numbers gradually grew. While working on her book *Botswana Novels in English,* Mary managed to read every novel in English either by a Motswana or set in Botswana. The study ends in 2006, and after that it would hardly have been possible to keep up with everything. Faced with the problems of publishing, many Batswana have published their own work (including two novels by the historian Prof. Makgala) which has greatly widened what is available. Mary and I travelled around Botswana, visiting several places that should be on the tourist route but are rather neglected. Although Botswana is justly proud of the unique Moremi and Okavango environments, it has much more to offer in both scenic and historical/cultural tourism. The Makgadikgadi Pans are pure magic. We had visited when it was an endless desert, with the unearthly Kubu Island. Then it was reported, after rains, that there were flamingos, so we went up one weekend. I will never forget the moment when we saw that where there had been a desert a lake now stretched to the horizon as if we were on the shore of a great sea. Another experience was staying at Dqae Qare near D'Kar, a San eco-development project which is also an exceptionally pleasant place to stay. I believe it is important to encourage tourists to see the country more widely.

Over the years I taught a variety of courses. On one occasion I taught a special course about Brexit in historical context, which to my great surprise attracted interest from news media including the BBC. I had thought everyone would be teaching such courses, but apparently not. In later years I developed an interest in philosophy of history, and collaborated with a theoretical physicist, Moletlanyi Tshipa. Since coming to Botswana my views on history have widened. History is linked on one side to subjects such as the social sciences, but on the other side, and just as validly, to subjects such as philosophy and literature.

Some other projects never came to fruition. Dr Leloba Molema (English Department) and I had ideas for a course on the history of sexuality, but never got as far as a formal proposal. Dr Molema's classes on gender studies, while rigorous, did not all conform to the theories of teaching now being promoted by UB: she referred to one of her methods as 'teaching from the hip'. Students did not always appreciate it at the time, but it was remarkable how often, if you were out with her, former students would approach her and tell her how much they now realized they had gained.

I served as Head of Department from 2011 to 2014. I was very fortunate to have as my Dean Professor Kgomotso Moahi, someone I could always rely on. The job of Head has become an increasingly onerous one, more and more dedicated to fulfilling administrative demands from the University. The term of three years, more often six in practice, is far too long. In the old days a Head might serve for a prolonged period, but the role was different: Professor Ngcongco, a superb Head of Department, was the person who guided us to work together, rather than someone sitting at a computer terminal. I am inclined to think it would be better if the position rotated among the staff with terms of two years, but the question may be controversial. Email has a lot to answer for. At one time, if someone in the Administration wished to gather information from Heads, the enquiry would have to be typed up, duplicated, and distributed to pigeon-holes across UB. Since email, however, the administrator can quickly type a few lines and hit Send. It is remarkable how often I was about to go home at the end of the day when I received an email request for some information, the urgency or even usefulness of which was not immediately apparent, which was to be returned by the end of the day.

One of the more pointless duties of being Head of Department was the annual assessment, named, to the incredulity of female staff, as PMS. This followed a complicated point-scoring system, and my role was little more than adding up numbers. It was depressing when these rigid formulae marked down colleagues who I knew were doing good work. I did get one good thing from it, however: knowledge of the widespread contributions my colleagues were making in the community. After my term (and after a period in which Dr Morongwa Mosothwane was acting Head) Professor Maitseo Bolaane took over. By this time the environment for Heads had become even more stressful, but she was undeterred and fought fiercely for the Department and its members.

To return to a happier time in UB's administration: Professor Ngcongco was a remarkable man. (I still find it hard to refer to him without the 'Prof'.) He was a scholar who contributed to the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, but I remember him mainly as our Head of Department. His leadership was often that of a chairman, guiding and assisting us to find the way forward. In meetings he sought out everyone's input. Sometimes, indeed, he seemed disappointed when no one had further suggestions. The course allocations for the next year (this was before semester courses) were decided in a sort of horse-trading meeting where we would consider the various possible permutations, considering all the factors. One year there was a difficult situation, due I think to a colleague being on sabbatical leave. It seemed that someone would have to take a course out of their field, and after multiple proposals the meeting decided that things would work out best if I took the 'African Diaspora' course. I had very little previous background, and even after some intensive study my knowledge remained rather superficial. I learnt a lot, anyway. In the last ten years or so I have been involved with the new Chinese Studies programme, which Maitseo Bolaane and I spent much time getting off the ground. Over the years Professor Bolaane and I worked together on a variety of projects, both academic and administrative, but this was perhaps the largest. Following the University's decision to introduce Chinese Studies, a small committee held meetings in 2010, and teaching started in 2011. Looking at the minutes, I am struck by the tight focus. A large amount of the basic structure and content was decided at the first meeting, which lasted 45 minutes. The minute 'Members will begin seeking information on existing programmes from any sources available to them' conveys a sense of things. The original programme was intended to get Chinese Studies launched, and we expected the expert staff, when appointed, to largely rewrite it, but for better or worse a surprising amount of it is still recognisable. Professor Bolaane and I took on some non-language teaching, and I became very interested in Chinese philosophy, though I can only read it in translation. I learnt a lot there too. The Chinese Studies programme, now headed by Dr Sara Zumbika-Van Hoeymissen, has excellent staff, and is unique in the region. It does not just teach language but is a full areas-studies programme, complementing the different role of the Confucius Institute. But so far it is under-resourced.

One of the joys of working in the History Department was the student research project, of which Prof. Fred Morton was one of the pioneers back in the mid-1970s alongside the late Prof. Thomas Tlou. I have written about its research importance elsewhere, but there is another side: happy memories of working with a variety of students as they went about their research and analysis. Whether their memories of me are as happy is not for me to say!

I arrived at a time when AIDS was taking a terrible toll. When I left UB, the Covid-19 pandemic was affecting the whole world. In both cases, Western policies worsened the problem by treating Africa as an afterthought. Conditions for our students, who often commute long distances to get to UB, were already difficult, but they have kept on despite the difficulties. Not long ago, as online educational resources grew, there was speculation (and confident prediction from futurologists) that it would soon supplant the old form of face-to-face education. Then the pandemic forced the entire world into a sudden test of the idea. The result, as we can now see, is that while online education has a valuable place, it does not replace what teaching in person can offer. (I refuse to use the absurd expression 'teaching and learning'; cookery books are not described as 'cooking and eating', nor does a sales assistant say she is engaged in 'selling and buying'.)

The absence of common rooms, which serve a vital function in fertilizing academic thought, is a flaw in UB design. In the early days the numbers of staff were so small that there presumably seemed no point. Even when I first came, if you sat under the tree by the Old Humanities Building you would meet a lot of people, and the Staff Refectory also served to some extent. But the lack is now more of a problem. The older parts of UB are architecturally attuned to the environment: human in scale, open to the air, with walkways that shelter from sun and rain. As time has passed this insight has rather been lost; the new

teaching building (252) is reached by a vast plaza, unpleasant to cross in either rain or hot sun.

UB has a unique place in national life. Its foundation through the 'One Man One Beast' or '*Motho le motho kgomo*' campaign contributions is a part of Botswana identity, and I have been struck by the strong belief of Batswana that the University belongs to *them*, not just to the government, and certainly not to the University authorities. I was once told of a woman who a security guard tried for some reason to prevent from entering campus. 'Ah-ah. My eggs built this university', she said, and ignored him. I have often felt that the University should be building on this connection. I was surprised to learn that the university charges members of the public a fee for using the library which is exorbitant for many ordinary people. This may be because of a confusion between the question of whether users are trustworthy and the question of whether they are well-off. At any rate, it seems an odd way to repay all those cattle and eggs.

We do not know what the future will bring. I believe that in this increasingly fast-changing world UB's best option is to embrace flexibility, experimentation, and decentralisation. This is not, however, the direction which it seems to be taking. My hope for the future of UB is in its staff, who are dedicated and highly qualified, and its students. I also see great dedication among the support staff who keep the wheels turning.

The official neglect of history in Botswana remains a puzzle. History is not required as a school subject, which is very unusual internationally, for example. Yet there is great public interest. Oral tradition is a part of Setswana culture. Newspapers print a remarkable amount of history, some of it, such as the historian Dr Jeff Ramsay's columns, of high quality, though some rather more eccentric. History Department staff have appeared on radio and national television. However, this lacks support. It is also worth noting that we need to move beyond a monochrome history to acknowledge the varieties of experience of Batswana.

The History Department likes to quote the famous words of Sir Seretse Khama, 'A nation without a past is a lost nation'. But perhaps 'famous' is the wrong word because they are frequently misquoted as 'A nation without a *culture* is a lost nation' which is quite different. A culture can be commodified. A history is likely to be inconvenient sometimes, as the West is finding out at present. Eric Hobsbawm wrote that historians are needed because they are 'the professional remembrancers of what their fellow-citizens wish to forget'. Only an honest facing of the past can give us insight into where our problems come from. I have only had space to mention a few of the many people who have made my life here memorable. I hope the rest are aware how much Mary and I have appreciated their support and goodwill over the years. Although I am now retired from UB, I have no intention of retiring from the role of historian. We now have Botswana residence, so we will be around for a bit longer, and hope to see more of our friends and colleagues here.