A Note on the Circumstances, Challenges and Opportunities in the Origins of the University of Botswana

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Introduction

This Note was inspired by a talk I gave to the Botswana Society on 3 September 2024 at the University of Botswana campus in Gaborone. It is based on my memory of circumstances and events when I was employed by the progenitors of the University of Botswana –the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (UBLS) and the University College of Botswana (UCB), a constituent of the University of Botswana and Swaziland (UBS). The key events during that time (1973-1978) were the creation of Part I campuses in each of Botswana and Swaziland teaching the first two years of the UBLS degree in 1972, Lesotho's withdrawal from the UBLS in 1975 and resulting establishment of full four-year programmes in both Botswana and Swaziland under the umbrella of the UBS. Ultimately in 1982 the University of Botswana (UB) was created as the flagship public institution of higher education in Botswana, an event after my time. Subsequent to that talk I came across several memos I wrote at the time related to the issue of the future of the University. This Note therefore is based on my recollection of these events and the documents I retrieved.

Circumstances, Challenges and Opportunities in the Origins of the University of Botswana

It is important to remember the circumstances of Botswana in those days. When we (Nancy and I) arrived in 1973 the population of Botswana was only about 800,000. It was concentrated in the east along the line of rail where permanent water was to be found and most of the population lived in one of the large villages in traditional housing. Gaborone, the capital, was newly built for the most part and had only about 25,000 people when we arrived. Gaborone had the beginning of a developed infrastructure but was permanently under construction. The University was definitely under construction. The national economy was extremely poor with a large segment of the population as a result forced by circumstance to seek employment in the mines of South Africa, a pattern which by then a long history. And yet, the politics of Botswana stood in stark contrast with my previous experience in Uganda where in Botswana there was a peaceful liberal democratic system with little in the way of ethnic divisions, at least in comparison to Uganda. The prospects for development in Botswana and for the evolution of a democratic political system turned out to be much brighter than had been the case in Uganda. Over the years, those prospects and that contrast have more or less been borne out.

The most important domestic dynamic in those years was the beginning of a thirty-year period of rapid economic growth that was to be the foundation for Botswana moving from one of the poorest twenty-five countries in the world to an upper middle income one. Fueled by aid donors and revenue from, initially, the Shashe Project, a copper/nickel mine at Selibi Phikwe and in the long run the diamond wealth from the Orapa and later Jwaneng mines, the government made large public investments in schools, roads, health clinics and other facets of infrastructure creating a large demand for Batswana professionals in both the public and private sectors. The University was to meet this demand so that in the shortest possible time Batswana

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would be in a position to call the shots regarding development eliminating, or nearly so, the reliance on expatriates (like me). It was an exciting and optimistic time, an environment of great enthusiasm and, for the most part, with a common commitment to the purpose of development and increasing prosperity.

The external environment was more mixed and less secure than the domestic one containing as it did both powerful allies as well as foes. Among allies were its former colonial master, Great Britain, and a range of northern, rich countries like the USA, Sweden, and Norway. On the continent of Africa, Zambia and Tanzania were significant allies recalling that this is the period before the independence of Angola and Mozambique (1975), Zimbabwe (1980), Namibia (1990), and South Africa (1994). Over time Botswana, along with Zambia, the former Portuguese territories and Tanzania -and then in 1980 joined by Zimbabwe - constituted The Frontline States.

The most important fact motivating these alliances was their relationship to a common enemy, The Republic of South Africa. South Africa at that time was still in the heyday of the apartheid system denying to Africans in South Africa any political or economic power. Its regime was committed to using all means, including military ones, in South Africa and in the region to maintain the apartheid system. South Africa was in principle and practice hostile to the non-racial society and polity being built next door in Botswana. Botswana was particularly vulnerable being surrounded by white minority states until 1980, with the single exception of a relationship with Zambia materialised in the form of the Kazangula Ferry. As a result, Botswana had an interest in maintaining good relations with Britain, the USA, and others as a counterweight to its economic dependence and vulnerable strategic situation. In addition to anything else, those allies were supportive partly out of guilty consciences as they maintained and profited from their continuing relationship with South Africa. Botswana skillfully leveraged this fact to secure significant aid funding and built upon this ability by using and accounting for aid very well.

These were the circumstances when I arrived in Gaborone to be a Lecturer in Government and Administration in about July of 1973. The previous year I spent as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. During the fall semester I signed a contract to come to Botswana beginning with the 1973 academic year. The previous four years (1968-1972) I was at Makerere University in Kampala Uganda conducting research for a PhD degree and teaching part-time. It was there I met Dennis Cohen who preceded me to UBLS but at the main campus in Lesotho and who only moved to the Botswana campus in 1974 upon the departure of Alan Macartney who had pioneered the Department's establishment in Botswana.

Otse Close, a street of eleven university houses in the Old Village where we lived for almost five years, exemplified the diverse multi-national and multi-cultural community at the UBLS. We all worked at the University or Institute of Development Management and over time our neighbours came from the US, UK, Ghana, Canada, Sweden, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Botswana. Eight nationalities and eleven houses. When we left, I missed and continue to miss to this day the sociability, solidarity, and community life of Otse Close and miss the diverse if yet small and intimate community that was the town of Gaborone and country of Botswana. In those early days we experienced in Botswana what life could be like when for the most part individual differences could be put aside and mutual respect and a sense of a common purpose structured social and political relationships.

These sentiments are not only the sentiments of an expatriate like me. Festus Mogae, President of Botswana from 1998 to 2008, in his 'Foreword' to Sandy Grant's *Botswana: Photographs of a Country in Transition - People and Their Places 1965-2016* reflected on the 'changed sense of time which again and again these photos captured. Here are two or three people talking together by the roadside, sitting in the back of a truck …walking between

thatched rondavels or chatting when carrying buckets of water. These photos taken together with those of kgotla meetings, ox wagons and donkey carts capture the essence of a society which moved at a pace which enabled it to readily blend'. But he hastens to add that 'this is not to be sentimental about the past. There was much about it that needed to be changed and discarded. But there is always a paradox about change which gives with one hand and takes with another'. He notes, for example, that 'generally, peoples' lifestyle was healthier in the pre-diamond years when medical and health styles were at best, meagre. Today, there is a clinic within reach of everyone in the country. Our lifestyles, however, have become sedentary and many of us are a lot less healthy than we used to be'. As the President noted, change 'gives with one hand and takes with another' (Grant 2020:v).

I am, on the other hand, less nostalgic and quite unsentimental about the built environment of the University when we arrived in Gaborone in 1973. Permanent buildings for the university campus were, like our house, under construction. We slowly migrated to offices, classrooms and a library during that first year from temporary space that was close to our house on Otse Close.

I soon became involved in administrative issues as well as my teaching responsibilities. We were so few faculty in number that it was hard to escape. We were only about six faculty initially in sociology, politics, public administration and economics and I was prevailed upon by my colleagues to be Chairman of that modest School of Economic and Social Sciences (SESS) and represent it to the wider Faculty of UBLS and the local administration. I also eventually headed the renamed Department of Political and Administrative Studies and was acting Dean at one point when the campus became UCB.

The role that was the most tedious and intellectually deadening but brought the most gratitude from the administration was chairing the University Catalogue Committee formed after the administrator charged with the task of producing the catalogue for the new University College of Botswana failed to do so. The most ironic committee I chaired was the Committee to Review Committees. Imagine a committee devised to review the work of other committees. Sounds like an administrative Ponzi scheme. But it was productive for once a year we sat down and decided whether we should keep the current committees or perhaps eliminate or change the mandate of committees. It was a committee that sought to prevent the committee system from perpetuating itself unchecked ad infinitum.

Much more importantly very early on we faced the first of many debates about the concept, mission and operation of the University. 1973 was the second year of the campus. We taught Part I, the first two years of a four-year degree program. Our students would then go to Roma, Lesotho to complete Part II at the campus of the federal university of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. The role and future of the Part I campus in Gaborone was from the beginning a matter of debate. Shortly after I arrived in Botswana a consultancy report (the Loken Report) on tertiary education argued for the creation of a 'National College' in which the UBLS Part I Centre would be a constituent. Its programme would be based on the American community college two-year model combining vocational with academic training with two-year qualifications. In the words of my report on Loken to the rest of the faculty in September 1973, 'UBLS Part I (Botswana) courses should be redesigned for two year terminal programs, research should be greatly de-emphasized, teaching loads should be increased to 25 hours per week or thereabouts, and technical students could be included with potential Part II students…. It is said that this reorientation of Part I could occur "without lowering academic standards or reducing quality" and "would in no way change the function of UBLS (Part I) Centres"' (Parson 4 September 1973).

The issue galvanised the small staff into an Academic Staff Association (ASA) that presented a response to the Loken report. The ASA argued for the value of a traditional university higher education and institution including the autonomy of the Part I Centre because

–in my words – ‘Botswana needs broadly trained, sensitive, humane decision-makers that can only be produced by a liberal education in Botswana’. In the end the recommendations of the Loken Report related to UBLS were not accepted and I would like to think it was because of our arguments and their forceful presentation defending the development of the traditional university but I think not. Our advocacy was no doubt important, but two additional factors were at work: One was the long-term vision of the political leadership that in my opinion insisted on the value of higher-level professional preparation independently of vocational training which was also badly needed. It was the shortest route, expensive though it was, to creating a cadre of expertise that would allow dispensing with all but the most specialised expatriates and also avoid dependence on white South Africans. Only in this way could Botswana’s intellectual independence be achieved and imbedded in the process of planning and development. This investment in the University and an enormous programme of sending people abroad for advanced study after working for two or three years, meant that within thirty years a process of ‘localisation’ in the public service was nearing completion and by the 1990s government and much of the private sector was almost 100% Batswana from top to bottom. And so the decision in 1973 rejecting the recommendation of the Loken Report turned out to be a far sighted one.

In addition, a second factor supporting a traditional model of higher education was a rejection of the colonial attitude toward the appropriate education for Africans. That attitude was that Africans, except perhaps a very few, were candidates only for an education that was strictly vocational. In apartheid South Africa, next door to Botswana, this was legislated in the form of ‘Bantu Education’ of 1953. Racist in ideology, the design of this system of segregation and subordination maintained and reproduced monopoly control of both economic and political power in the hands of the white minority. The new government of Botswana correctly recognised that the achievement of independence ultimately hinged on the rapid development of Batswana professional capacity in all spheres and at all levels.

The challenges to the development of the university did not end with the Loken Report. At least two additional challenges had to be faced in those early days. First, in October of 1975 Lesotho with no notice pulled out of the UBLS by creating the National University of Lesotho. The government of Botswana determined that its students in the third and fourth years would finish the year in Lesotho but that beginning with the 1975/76 year all four years would be offered in Gaborone.

One response of the government was to launch the *Motho-le-motho-kgomo* (‘One Man, One Beast’) campaign encouraging everyone to contribute a ‘beast’ (cow) to help finance the necessary investment in facilities. Every day for weeks in government-owned the *Daily News* was published a list of who had contributed what. Not just cows were counted but sometimes, many times, some chickens or buckets of sorghum and maize. It was, of course, somewhat discomfiting for all of us working at the University comfortable with our subsidised housing, car allowances, and gratuities while very poor people were giving up, say one of the dozen chickens they owned, a sacrifice that could be very real. The One Man One Beast campaign, in my opinion, reflected a strong sense of national identity, unity, and pride in support of the country’s future as well as reflecting a history of community self-help. It also helped galvanise popular support for Seretse Khama and his ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP). There is today a statue of a man with a ‘beast’ outside the library at UB commemorating that time.

It is difficult to imagine such a programme being successfully launched in 2024. The spirit of common interest and purpose and the sense of national unity of earlier times seems a distant memory. Divisions, factions and competing interests would inhibit any such effort. The social and economic stratification wrought by 50 years of economic change have eroded that sense of common purpose and common destiny of that earlier time and that is both predictable if lamentable.

But the resources generated by One Man One Beast together with government and donor support allowed us to meet the challenge of putting on the final two years of study within six months, hiring staff, figuring out space, stocking the library and wrestling with the issue of the future governance of what had been two-year campus of UBLS. These were eventful but heady times for young academics and we all felt a sense of common purpose and mission. And we were able to keep to the timetable and graduate our students on time despite the disruptions caused by the withdrawal of Lesotho from the University.

At the same time it would be foolish and mistaken to leave the impression that this was a complete triumph, at least not from my point of view. I recently came across a memorandum I wrote to the Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC) on 2 January 1976 complaining about a story in the *Daily News* that said that 'an emergency recruitment programme for the Gaborone campus…has gone off smoothly and several lecturers are expected to arrive soon' and that 'adequate arrangements have been made to cater for the former Roma campus students who will be resuming their studies in Gaborone'. Venting my frustration I told the PVC 'I take strong exception to those particular statements and the publicly expressed attitude in general from some members of the administration that all of this has come off well. SESS in particular will be seriously understaffed for the rest of this year with an inevitably negative effect on quality. In particular there is not as yet one single lecturer for Accounting. During most of the next semester I will be responsible for four different courses encompassing all four years of studies. The students will live in cramped and academically unacceptable conditions. The library will not be in full operation for some time and its holdings in any case [are] inadequate'. Nonetheless, we did succeed in graduating the class.

The second challenge posed by the withdrawal of Lesotho and establishment of UBS was the debate about how the UCB would be organised. What would be its relationship with the Ministry of Education and how would it be governed. With the breakup of the UBLS the goal of the Academic Staff Association was to maintain the autonomy of the University in order to protect academic freedom and shared governance when it came to faculty matters, curriculum, and research. The tendency at the time in the Ministry of Education and in the Office of our own PVC (himself a former Chief Education Officer), was to view the University as an extension of the Ministry of Education, as a normal part of the public service whose personnel and programmes should be subject to Ministry directives. That led to a series of struggles most of which were won for the integrity of the University.

Two instances related to this time still stand out in my memory. One was a meeting of the faculty with the PVC where the Academic Staff Association laid out its critique of the proposed regulations for the new University College of Botswana (UCB) after the breakup of UBLS. The PVC was paternalistic and dismissive, as was his normal style, and in the face of persistent criticism essentially said, 'go ahead and say what you want but it won't make any difference'. The tension was palpable, and the meeting ended in silent confrontation and ill-will.

In the second incident, the PVC promulgated a draft statute in August 1976 related to the appointment of Deans. Neither that nor any of the statutes for the UCB had been discussed or approved by then. Up until then the appointment of Deans was decided entirely by the faculty. The draft statute provided for faculty nomination or self-nomination but the authority to appoint was ultimately an administrative (the PVCs) one. In this case our response was passive resistance where we collectively simply did not nominate anyone. As a result, there were no candidates for his selection and hence no Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences. The PVC called three of us (Nelson Moyo, Marcus Balintulo, and I) to his office, sat us down, and in his characteristic passive-aggressive whisper said, 'one of you will be the Dean. I don't care which of you, but one of you….. so you decide'. Marcus became the Dean.

This was a small but important step in institutionalising the principle of shared governance, a bedrock principle in the larger mission of protecting and furthering academic freedom.

During this time we sometimes discussed among ourselves whether the PVC's views were the views of government and if so what would that mean for the future of the University? Would the University in the longer run become an instrument of the Ministry of Education? What I did not know at the time and only learned about three decades later, in 2008, was that the PVC actively reported on the 'troublemakers' to the Ministry of Education. For instance, in a confidential memorandum from the Permanent Secretary of Education to the Permanent Secretary to the President in October 1976, the PVC was quoted as saying that 'the problems which we face stem from a very small group of men and women; they refer to themselves a the Soweto group that is determined to disrupt the smooth operations of the University, and they act in the name of the Academic Staff Association, and any small excuse they can find for destructive criticism, they will make use of it….and the University cannot continue in this way any longer' (Mokopakgosi 2008:41). The list of 'troublemakers' reported to the Ministry included Marcus Balintulo, John Melamu, Ntombi Setshwaelo, Mbulelo Mzamane, and me, Jack Parson (Mokopakgosi 2008:41). In reality there was no 'Soweto group'. We were simply the Academic Staff Association doing what we needed to do from our point of view to secure the future of the University.

The troublemakers were not removed and the PVC's views did not prevail. I attribute this to the fact that there were on the faculty individuals, like Tom Tlou and Phineas Makhurane, who were close to and had the confidence of the most senior advisors to the President and Cabinet and who themselves were academics that understood the value of and need for an autonomous University. While not active in the Academic Staff Association, they knew that the criticism of the PVC was not just 'any small excuse' for destruction but was rooted in a commitment to the long-term health and role of higher education in Botswana for generations to come. They let a largely expatriate cadre lead the charge and often take the heat, expendable as we were should things not work out, but in my opinion they played a quietly deciding role in the outcome.

Beyond the quagmire of university politics the most original and creative work I did was stimulated by the opportunity and need to reform the curriculum. The curriculum for the major in political science did not initially have a single course devoted to Botswana. Not one. The introductory year-long course was essentially a comparative politics course introducing political concepts through the study of Britain, France, Germany and the United States. This seemed to many of us to be a particularly egregious hangover from the colonial era. The message of this course was 'forget about learning anything useful about politics by studying your own country, look to England, France, etc'. It was the sort of message that was famously conveyed in the opening line of a history text used in French African colonies that said: 'Our ancestors the Gauls'. In the US it would be unthinkable not to require students to master a basic course in American politics very early in a major in political science often as a prerequisite for other courses. For instance, In 1980 at the College of Charleston, American Politics 101 was a prerequisite for every other course in our curriculum including, inexplicably, African Politics. Surprisingly, it took several years for me to successfully argue that it is possible to study politics in African countries without first of all understanding American politics.

Part of our curriculum reform in Botswana was the introduction of a course unit system more like that in the US where degrees are built by accumulating credits for each course taken. In Botswana the system was a hybrid of this model and the British model of a year or more of study of a subject and then a summary comprehensive examination of all subjects at the end of four years. The hybrid was complicated and always controversial but it did create the space for

new and innovative courses including in our case a semester long course we called Politics and Society in Botswana.

The problem was there was no textbook and in fact few secondary sources of any kind related to the history and current structure and practice of politics and political institutions in Botswana. Dennis Cohen and I set about to do something about that by scouring the secondary literature for enough bits and pieces to have something resembling text material and then doing some original work to fill in the blanks. Standing over an offset printing press for hours on end eventually resulted in the first edition of *Politics and Society in Botswana* self-published by the University. A second edition in 1976 benefited by the increasing attention Botswana was getting in the academic world. Eventually, long after I left, a volume like these prototypes was edited by faculty at the University and commercially published and used as a text.

When I look back on the years in Botswana and these events in which I played a small part I am reminded of a conversation I once had with John Daniel at an African Studies Association conference. John, a white South African, was forced into exile from South Africa having been a leader in the National Union of South Africa Students opposing Apartheid. He earned a PhD in the US and returned to teach at Waterford School in Swaziland and later our department in Swaziland in UBLS days. John was also an ANC activist. The extent of his participation in the movement was only revealed in an autobiographical article about teaching politics in exile (Daniel 2013) published not long before John's untimely death. He was eventually deported by the government of Swaziland (now Eswatini) at the behest of the South African Special Branch and went to England where he worked for Zed Press until he returned to South Africa around 1990.

My conversation with John at the ASA revolved around the recognition that by luck and coincidence we were both caught up in events of historic import and that it was a privilege to have been part of those events. I certainly feel privileged to have witnessed the end of apartheid in South Africa. But I was especially privileged to have played a part in the formative era of higher education in Botswana. I did not realise it at the time and did not give it a thought at the time. But it was a rare privilege to be in that place at that time.

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