My Academic Career at the University of Botswana and Beyond

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One day, not so many years ago, a colleague retorted to a secretarial staff member who had called me Dr. C: 'Why do you call Prof. Chebanne, Dr. C?' To which, with composure, she said, 'There is no one called Prof. C!' And that response settled the argument. This is how a certain section of the Faculty staff called me. I, even myself, accepted it without protest. This, I assumed, was how fondly they preferred to call me. In philosophy, when time flies, it is always relative to our existence or our plans. Sooner our present becomes our past, and the rest is the history of a man. In opening a leaf of my academic life at the University of Botswana (UB), let me freely quote William De Witt Hyde on his reflection on the *Aristotelian Sense of Proportion* (page 175), which goes as follows:

> What, then, is this good, which is neither a sum of pleasures, nor conformity to law; nor yet superiority to appetite and passion? What is this principle which can at once enjoy pleasure to the full, and at the same time forego it gladly; which can make laws for itself more severe than any lawgiver ever dared to lay down; and yet is not afraid to break any law which its own conception of good requires it to break; which honours all our elemental appetites and passions, uses money and honour and power as the servants of its own ends, without ever being enslaved by them?

In many ways, academic life can respond to these questions. I hope to do justice in my exposé of my academic life at UB and elsewhere as an attempt to respond to these philosophical interrogations. An academic career has two major components: teaching and research. The third component is service; albeit it is taken as commonplace –who cannot serve? Because no academic has ever been advanced on account of service. So, essentially, teaching and research make an academic profession. Yet, my life at UB is punctuated with stints of service, some longer, yet some shorter. I was one of the long-serving faculty tutors for three Dean terms of two years each; and also a long-serving Deputy Dean, for Dean Dr Joseph Tsonope, Dr Brian Mokopakgosi, who later was promoted to associate professor, and Dr Nobantu Rasebotsa. So, I have served the University for a long time, even becoming in my turn Dean from 2014 to 2020.

I was retrospectively appointed Staff Development Fellow (SDF) of the French Department at UB in 1984. Retrospectively, because the year 1983 was when I successfully obtained my License in Language Sciences (BA Linguistics). I started lecturing in French in October 1984. The first semester was about to end. UB then had year-long courses. It was my great excitement when I joined the French Department. Until then, the Department ran courses only up to the second year, since the departmental staff were volunteers sent by the Embassy of France resident in Lusaka, Zambia. These volunteers were called language and culture cooperation service staff (*les coopérants linguistiques et culturels*). The language and cultural volunteer assigned to UB then was Mr Serge Villas, who had taken over from Mr Arnaud Dornaud, who also had taken up the running of the French language and cultural activities from Mr Michel Thérond. It was Michel Thérond who in 1979 had actively inspired me with the love for French through his monthly activities of French culture and language, and evening language classes. I had switched from Science studies to take 'softer' courses in the Humanities. My recruitment, after I had completed a degree in French, was aimed at

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strengthening French language teaching and ensuring that the French Department offered French in a double major program. So, I can say I was recruited to establish the French Department at UB.

For an apprentice without proper mentorship, participating in establishing a department can be a very onerous and gruelling task. I recall, in 1986, when I was left alone after the departure of French *Coopérrants*, I held a meeting by myself, recorded the minutes, for myself, and submitted them to the Faculty Board report documents. The whole faculty board observed a moment of laughter! I had made a point though. For a department to develop academically, it required staff members, but I was solo. Those years were prodigious years of outspoken professors in History, Prof. Leonard Ngcongco, in English Prof. Felix Mnthali and Prof. De Beaugrande (and Dr Victor Mtubani graced them), in Theology there was Dr Noko, Prof. Harvard-Williams in Library Studies, and prof. Ernest Sedumedi Moloto in African Languages and Literature, and they were essences of intellectuals and academic excellence. French studies lecturers were no match. Humanities lectures and their professors in other departments cartelised social commentaries on radios, newspapers and conferences. Celebrated were the Humanities disciplines, representing the liberal arts too. To grow Social Sciences and Natural Sciences, Geography (now Environmental Science) was moved to the Faculty of Science, and Sociology was moved to Social Sciences, much earlier, towards the end of the University of Botswana and Swaziland (UBS) expiration. When one should talk about the comprehensive nature of the university, the basis is here, in the Humanities.

In hindsight and recollection, my entire service to the UB should be associated with the 40 years since the establishment of the University, after it parted ways with the University of Swaziland in 1982. 40 years is a lot in academic time. 40 is also an emblematic number, 40 years of the departure of Israel from Mizraim to the Promised Land, Canaan. However, the comparisons could carefully be stopped there because Mizraim was the house of bondage and slavery for the Israelites, and 40 years in the wilderness was owing to their dread and scepticism to take the Promised Land by power. However, if witlessness and illiteracy could enslave the mind and intellect, maybe the comparison is in order. 40 years in academia are analogous to growth and maturity and the growth in academic freedom! Yes. Academic freedom is liberating, intellectually gratifying, and makes a self-made erudite, a free thinker. Taking an academic journey is consequently tantamount to taking an education and training journey, up to the level that one is qualified as a professor. There is where Canaan is, the land of milk and honey. For Israel, milk and honey symbolised the land of plenty and of many divine provisions. For an academic, it is research and publication that make an academic a free philosopher, a liberated and nifty professor. That is how research and publication can be qualified as innovative.

Notwithstanding, my objective here is to say something about my academic life spent at the UB. First of all, I must hasten to say that as a lecturing member of the Department of French, my experience is a little less than that of an outsider to the dynamics and mouldings of larger departments with competing and exemplary members. My joining the French Department was not very much spectacular. Although it quickly led to the grand ideas of developing French Programmes in 1985 when Mr Thomas Kwami was at the helm of deanship in the Faculty of Humanities. Kwami was such a fine Dean, he guided and counselled, and importantly made the introduction of French as a minor programme his personal agenda as Dean. The success occurred in 1986 and allowed the French language to be taught as a minor from the first year to the second year. I retained the services of the Faculty as a Faculty Tutor, a very burdensome service that entailed looking after the affairs of all students in the Faculty of Humanities. I was responsible for students' academic advice, registration, and acting as a liaison officer with different heads of departments on matters concerning students' life and

academic welfare. There was a modest allowance for that service. The price of petrol was 45 Thebe a litre, and the Faculty tutor remuneration used to allow me a petrol tank refill.

Faculty Tutor life put me into the core of Faculty academic business and its intricacies. I reported student issues sometimes after the Dean, or after heads of departments, during faculty meetings. Those days, students' reports on performance were rigorous. No student could go uncounted for. There were fewer truant students, and therefore fewer failures. Every lecturer acted like a departmental tutor, advisor, and counsellor. Most of the modern UB ancillary services such as guidance and counselling, student service were not there. There was a post called the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs, and any member of staff could be appointed to that post. The Dean of Student Affairs had a broad mandate in the area of student accommodation, managing wardens, students' clubs, students' moot courts, the rag queen festival, and all the life experiences of students. The Student Representative Council (SRC) operated under the Office of the Dean of Students Affairs. The University felt like a family. Students knew each other across faculties. Lectures interacted across faculties. Management was one with lecturers, and rare were upheavals that involved management and lectures. Students would sometimes foment a strike; however, most of them were associated with political issues outside campus. Occasionally, when the food was too much, students would complain that it was not nicely cooked, and then threw it away. One time, the Domestic Bursar, Mrs. Euphemia Tokozile Dichaba retorted to the students' waste of food resources, 'You do not have such delicacies at your home!' That was a good point. UB had such sufficiency that budget allocations to it were comparable to none. UB staff salaries were increased every financial year. The government financial cornucopia was sufficient for all university workers.

I left for further studies in 1987 to pursue a doctorate at the University of Grenoble in France. Maybe I left too early. I had no clear focus in terms of my research orientation. My would-be supervisor, Prof. Denis Criessels, took advantage of the free time I had adopted for myself in France. My supervisor had an idea of exploring the Setswana language, the first Bantu language he came across, south of the KiSwahili of East Africa. We worked together on data collection, attending African linguistics conferences in Leiden, the Netherlands. The *Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage* at the University of Lyon, to which Prof. Denis Criessels transferred, has one of the best collections of Setswana texts. We even ventured into a French-Setswana dictionary, the first such dictionary with French and a Black African language south of the equator, and with a language not spoken in a Francophone country. The work was exciting, albeit challenging. I had to translate language structures, especially the verb structure. We published the dictionary, *Dictionnaire Français -Tswana, suivi d'index Tswana Français*, belatedly in 1999. These linguistic data collections and research on Setswana led to some important and excellent research on the tonology of Setswana. The results of all these research activities were crowned later, in 1997, with the publication of the *Tonal Morphology of the Setswana Verb*, a pioneering theoretical linguistic work that is yet to be challenged or surpassed. My thesis, defended in 1991, bearing the title, *Etudes Contrastives des Structures Verbales en Tswana et en Français*, derived significantly from the linguistic and dictionary data. It is the similar lexicographical skill that led me and Prof. Hirosi Nakagawa to underwrite Prof. Anthony Traill's, *!Xoon-English Dictionary in !Xoon-English – English-!Xoon with Setswana Glossary Dictionary*. The language !Xoon, belongs to Taa languages, otherwise known as Southern San. Taa is the last viably spoken language in this group of Southern San languages.

There is no need to feel like an underdog if you belonged to the French Department (although in the early 2000s, I formally requested a departmental transfer to African Languages and Literature, which was turned down). Maybe the departmental transfer was not necessary after all. I had learned to work closely with my departmental colleagues and had redefined myself as a linguist outside of French Studies, lecturing within the Department of French. I

first engaged in collaborative research across departments and faculties in education, social science, and environmental science –my CV can attest to this. Collaborative research is highly productive, profitable, resourceful, and innovative. At times, our disciplines can become restrictive, limiting our intellectual potential. It is not criticism of the reader of my story to acknowledge that what is valued in one discipline may not be in another, which almost complicated my path to achieving a professorial promotion. However, I learned to appreciate and explore other disciplines. My linguistic studies of Khoisan languages were undertaken with top scholars in Khoisan studies from South Africa (Profs. Anthony Trail, Jan Snyman, Edward Elderkin), Germany (Profs. Rainer Vossen, Thomas Güldemann, and Karsten Legère), Japan (Profs. Hirosi Nakagawa and Akira Takada), and the USA (Profs. Christopher Collins and Dr. Bonny Sands, and Amanda Miller) led me to delve into linguistic social issues related to Khoisan anthropology, language rights, ethnology, and ethnicity. I also delved into policy matters and the discourse on mother tongue education, now encompassing all ethnic languages of Botswana.

An ordinary Motswana will be staggered to hear that there are over 30 languages spoken in Botswana, and that among them there are over 16 Khoisan languages, alongside Setswana, Shekgalagari, Ikalanga, Chiikuhane (Subiya), Thimbukushu, Shiyeyi, Otjiherero, Sebirwa, Tjetswapong, Shona, Isindebele, and Chinandzwa representing Bantu languages. Khoisan languages belong to four different language families –Bantu and Indo-European language families will be comparable as they have such impressive differences as there are in Khoisan language groups. These language family groups are the Khoe-Kwadi (majority in Botswana with Nama, Naro, G‖ana and G|ui, Khwedam (Buga and A‖ni), Ts'ixa, Shua, Cirecire, Tsua and Cua (North and South Cua), Tshwa, Kua, Tshila, G‖oro, Danisi (Danisani), |Haise and Haicuare (highly endangered)), the Taa-Tuu (with !Xoon, Tshasi, ǂHua) family, the !Xun (ǂKai‖ein, Jun|'hoasi or Kaukau) family, the minority and endangered N‡ariya (Sasi, with only 8 fluent speakers remaining at Mokgenene, Poloka and Artesia) family. All of these language families exemplify phenomenal linguistic typologies that are worlds apart. I cannot dare say I understand completely all these linguistic families that exist in Khoisan. However, I am confident enough to be able to make an impartial commentary on their relationships.

By my own reckoning, by and large, Botswana should treasure this linguistic heritage with its diversity and the rich tapestry of the grammatical intricate structures found in these ancient languages. Khoe-Kwadi languages have a Person-Gender-Number system that makes the Latin language a summer day field walks for babies. Look a bit into the nominal system, and how the Person Gender and Number (PGNs) are reflected. The equivalents of the English pronoun WE has 12 persons, genders, and number pronouns. An attentive linguist will marvel at the multiple grammatical categories of the infinitive, the voice, and indeed the intricacies of the Khoe-Kwadi syntax. Taa-Tuu languages have over 200 sounds and think how they can be catered for in orthography, and a nominal class system that has nothing comparable to the Bantu noun class system. Had we invested a bit in Khoisan studies, we could be some of the finest world linguists, with contributions in the descriptive and theoretical linguistics, and indeed in the anthropology and archaeology of ancient societies. Already archaeologists are now leading in discovering their ancient pre-existence to the Southern Africa sub-continent, and this points to Khoisan as the remnant of that prehistoric human. Alas, for me -there is a lot to be done than a man can accomplish in one life. However, perhaps I should not lament stridently as what still remains in Khoisan linguistic research is now amply and principally contributed by foreign linguists.

My penultimate years of service to the University have been the most challenging in administration. As a Dean overseeing staff welfare, I witnessed a mass departure of the professoriate from the University, specifically from my Faculty of Humanities. They were Prof. Joyce Mathangwane, Dr. Pearl Seloma, Dr. Renyane Dikole, Dr. Victor Mntubani, Prof.

Moteane John Melamu, Prof. Alfred Matiki, Prof. James Amanze, Prof. Priti Jain, Prof. Jean-Raoul Austin de Drouillard, Prof. Tunda Kitenge-Ngoy, Prof. Fang Xujun, Prof. Part Mgadla, Prof. Fred Morton (retired voluntarily), Dr. Bruce Bennett, Prof. Herman Batibo, Prof. Julius Oyegoke, and Prof. Arua Arua. Some left almost at the same time as I and they were Prof. Setumile Morapedi and, two years earlier, Mr. Barolong Seboni. Prof. Kgomotso Moahi, from whom I took the deanship, left voluntarily after a short stint as Acting Vice Chancellor. This exodus of professors and lecturers was a heavy loss. I witnessed tears of consternation and heartache from academics forced into retirement due to denied contract renewals based on age and dwindling funding for their academic units.

Notwithstanding, these colleagues had such intellectual energy in research and teaching that their departure undermined the very essence of scholarship and the heritage of wisdom that defines a university. We fought a losing battle. With their departure, the University of Botswana's academic memory was diminished. A cloud of angst and mortification hovered over the University community. There was despondency, and colleagues were profoundly affected by the loss, leaving us all in a state of shock. Every Faculty meeting became an excruciating experience as heads of departments reported denied incumbency of posts and those who had left the University. Even promotions were halted, distressing academics yearning for upward mobility. I felt a personal sense of guilt, as if all depended on my determination and decisions. When such catastrophic events occur, one feels a deep sense of failure. The inevitable can often be averted, or so we believe. However, when fate intervenes, loss occurs regardless. Cry, beloved University of Botswana, established in 1982 with lofty ideals of academic excellence and permanence.

At a personal level, towards my departure, there was something fulfilling in research and publishing. Most of my publications in reputable journals and appearing in trustworthy indexes have been contributed in the final 10 years of my service to the university. As of 2024, I have 64 journal articles, 62 chapters in books, 10 books, various research projects, technical reports, and consultancies. My publications are essentially co-authored and widely spread across different disciplines. The co-authorship configuration essentially testifies to my collaboration and mentorship drive in research and publication. I have attended international conferences in Africa, Europe, America, China, and Japan. I regret that I have never been to Australia for a conference; however, I had fruitful collaboration on minority ethnic groups' studies with Australians. In summation, active research hones an academic, resulting in a refined publisher and valuably contributing to theoretical debates in disciplines, thus becoming innovative and inexhaustible. Research collaboration and publication contribute a lot in these matters.

I regret that I will no longer have anyone to teach my acquired knowledge. As academics, we often do not read each other's work. Some announce their research and publications, but otherwise, we remain unaware of what is happening across the University. It is unfortunate for academics not to recognize the worth of their peers within the same institution. It is also problematic for colleagues to work and publish in silos or be confined to their own disciplines. This issue is now more apparent due to a lack of academic leadership and mentoring.

I left UB on 30 December 2023. I felt somewhat fatigued, but not catatonic. I had this professional lethargy, somehow, yet not feeling despondency. I was the last of the three professors (Profs. Tunda Kitenge-Ngoy and Jean--Raoul Austin de Drouillard) that the Department of French ever had. Being the last among them left an arduous and anxious task on one's shoulders. As it has been palpable from the above narration, that my presence in the French Department did not so much build the scholarship of the French, but African languages and linguistics, I have some bit of culpability as an academic. At a critical time of high-performance organisation, it is better to build academic units that are concerted and that chorus

with academic units' mission and values. So, before the swags are pulled down and reckoned, it is decent and courteous to leave quietly. Delaying departing does not buy any time, for anything worthwhile. I am now a professor at large, in a self-styled manner. I do some supervision in African languages in South Africa and Namibia and spend my time promoting or evaluating professorial candidates in Africa and beyond. I do a lot of journal article reviews. To put it otherwise, maybe as an academic an escape is not conceivable. Perchance an academic can be remade. I shall see. Yet, I am not a phoenix. When all the decorum is poured out on a man for his academic exploits, there are always certain quarters, at a turn where exordiums are passed upon him. I prefer to ignore such and accept myself with equanimity of an existentialist, and say, I entered, I performed, and I exited.

Whatever the reasons, academia has not yet outgrown the romanticism that professors, even when retiring, must be honoured and not left to wander far from the academic world without celebration. On that point, I was given a very honourable send-off by the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Prof. Thapelo Otlogetswe, in consort with the French Department and the Faculty of Humanities in April 2024. A festschrift had already been published in my honour in *Studies in African Linguistics volume 52, Supplement 13* of 2023, edited by Prof. Otlogetswe, and into which I also published an uncommon article on Setswana onomatopoeia. Many friends and colleagues in academia also published in my festschrift. I am very grateful for their charitable efforts. Prof. Otlogetswe is my dear colleague and seems to have found equilibrium in his research and publication promoting Setswana linguists. Linguistics is an altruistic science, as it always draws one in and enjoins one to start with one's language, contributing to theoretical debates from a grounded base. It has always been my pleasure, my leisure, and my resource in research and publication. Many publication titles focus more on African language studies than French. This was once observed when I was being promoted to full professor. Maybe they felt that it was more important to be an Africanist than a French scholar. In the Aristotelian sense of proportion and virtues (I am speaking about academic virtues), they cannot be learned or taken from books one reads but must be acquired through research and publication practice, as is the case with practicing an art. These virtues do not belong to us until they become inspiringly impactful to those who read us. Such then becomes the accomplishment of a professor, their inalienable lasting tenure in academia.

The French Department composed a special and touching farewell message to me and I end this note with it:

Le temps des adieux est résolu	*The Time of farewells has been decided*
Car l'infini nous appartient	*For the infinite belongs to us*
À nous de lui frayer un espace de retrouvailles	*It is for us to make a space for meeting again*
Cette plaque, symbole de nos transmutations à l'infini,	*This commemorative plaque, symbol of our infinite transmutations*
Nous réunira à jamais:	*Will unite us for ever*
Jadis notre professeur, le Doyen de la Faculté	*Past professor, Dean of the Faculty*
Tu es devenu collègue et frère pour la vie	*You became a colleague and brother for life*
À l'éternelle amitié!	*To the eternal friendship!*