Boipelego and Ipelegeng Before and After Independence

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Boipelogo and Ipelegeng are virtually interchangeable words, the one being a noun and the other a verb – meaning self help or self reliance in one or another form. Traditionally, the two words referred to the undertaking by the mephato or age groups of a wide range of community projects. In each instance, the projects in question were selected by the Kgosi and the mephato were deployed entirely at his discretion. Involvement was mandatory and the modern notion of volunteerism was entirely absent.

Independence, as a generality, saw the almost instantaneous replacement of those old traditional forms by a new imported ideal, the wish of an individual, many being foreign, to contribute for little financial gain, to community need. This new ideal found most startling expression at van Rensburg's new school initiiative, Swaneng from where it spread throughout the country.

When foreign aid became increasingly available a country-wide network of NGOS came into existance which sought to add greater professionalism to the earlier idealism and sense of volunteerism. But with diamond wealth becoming increasingly available, the NGOS which had come into existance and been excessively dependent on foreign aid were left high and dry when this support was withdrawn.

There followed the HIV/AIDS scourge and Boipelego/Ipelegeng once again emerged in new form. And then came the Ian Khama Presidency and his deliberate incoporation of the boipelego / ipelengeng ideals into his very personalised programmes to eliminate poverty and uplift the poor. Whilst it is still to early to know the long term effect of this this new development, it is is clear that the old ideals are more strongly secured than ever before.

Typifying many of the comments made about this country at Independence was that it possessed just three miles of tarred road, in Lobatse. Its soils, in many parts of the country, were lacking in nutrients. A large proportion of its male population was absent from the country working in the mines in South Africa, and a significant number of its women were engaged in domestic service there. Its radio and telephone systems were of the most rudimentary kind. It had only seven secondary schools, three being the tribal Junior Certificate Schools in Mochudi, Kanye and Molepolole. Less than 50 students passed Cambridge O level in 1966 and many students in primary schools were aged in their late 20s. It had seven modest hospitals, with Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone being added at the 11th hour. In sum, Botswana was put across to the rest of the world as a more or less empty space on the map between South Africa, South West Africa (Namibia) and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in which, in remoter parts, according to the author and mystic, Laurens van der Post, the ancient Basarwa were to be found, but not a great deal else. This was a place about which the rest of the world knew little and which supposedly had no history and little information about itself.

In an odd way, this was an image which was drawn by President Seretse Khama himself in two of his most frequently quoted observations. The first statement was that, 'we were made to believe that we had no past to speak of, no history to boast of. The past, so far as we were concerned, was just a blank and nothing more'.

The second statement was one which he was to make twice – in his speech dissolving the National Assembly prior to the 1969 general election and again, shortly afterwards, in his major speech in Stockolm - that, the administration was without 'the facts on which to found our plans for the future' (Botswana – A Developing Democracy in Southern Africa. A seminar arranged in Uppsala on 11 November 1970 by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation and the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies)

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Nobody in subsequent years has questioned the validity of those two statements and perhaps they never will do so. But there are always different ways of looking at any given situation even if this was one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of less that US$50 a year. Steenkamp, for instance, has argued, almost as a lone voice, that Britain did more to develop the Protectorate than is commonly acknowledged (Steenkamp 1991:292-308). Similarly it is possible to put a slightly more positive spin on the situation at Independence than is usually the norm.

For a start it could have been (and was) noted that the country had enjoyed 81 years of relatively unspoilt peace, that it had a sense of unity and identity, that it a functioning High Court and a dual legal system, that it had both a working railway line running from north to south, and an all weather gravel road and that it was well known to many people in the UK and Commonwealth because of Tshekedi and the enormous publicity generated by the marriage of Seretse and Ruth only 18 years earlier.

As of now, there are still contrasting, arguments about the extent of British ignorance or knowledge regarding this country's known mineral resources. If the British had known about this country's mineral riches, they would never have left it, runs one argument. The counter argument, usually of less popular appeal, is that the British were sufficiently informed about the country's mineral prospects to be reasonably confident that its longer term prospects could be bright. The discovery and exploitation of mineral resources is always a long process so that the beginnings of the Phikwe copper/nickel mining project had its obvious origins in the historic 1959 agreement between the Bangwato and Sir Ronald Prain's Rhodesia Selection Trust. Only six months after independence the Central District Council agreed to cede to the government its rights to the huge copper and nickel deposits that RST had found there.

There were also other assets that this country possessed. It was a huge cattle country, frequently compared with the Argentine, and it had in Lobatse what was claimed to be one of the most modern abattoirs in Africa. It also had in its bag, in historical terms, one of the most remarkable attempts to alter British colonial policy – and one of the few which were eventually successful – the famous visit to the United Kingdom of the three Dikgosi in 1895. It also knew a great deal more about itself than Seretse's comments may have suggested. Isaac Schapera's most productive years may have been behind him in 1966 but of him and of his achievement, and in reference to this country, Meyer Forte observed that, 'he has given us the most complete and comprehensive body of knowledge of any single group of African people' and thus suggested that, even though this country undoubtedly needed to more know about itself, it nevertheless knew more than nearly every other colonial dependency in Africa.

Independence Day in 1966 therefore presents us with two very interesting problems. Firstly, why did the British leave without making the slightest attempt to demonstrate what they had done to develop the country? (Steenkamp 1991:292-308). And secondly, why did the new government fall in with this line of thought and tacitly agree that Batswana too, in those 81 years had done little or nothing to develop the place?

It may be that the British had long forgotten their abrasive Resident Commissioner, Charles Rey of the 1930s but anyone who today reads his Diaries can be in no doubt of his enormous drive to achieve development and change (Rey 1988). By 1966, was there nothing at all left of his efforts – even those strange little road-side structures which used to baffle so many visitors because they seemed to have no obvious use or purpose? These were Rey's monuments, the cool storage pick up points for the dairy industry he tried so hard to develop.

But if the British had little to boast about, why did the newly independent government also keep quiet? It may be that Seretse and his Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) wanted a break with the past because the new Botswana, despite its name, had to be perceived as being something more than just a confederation of the old Tswana tribal states. The future Botswana therefore was to be focussed on a brand new capital, Gaborone whose existence would owe absolutely nothing to the past.

The past, however, was not so easily to be disposed of. At independence, the government adopted *boipelego* as one of its four national principles and by doing so implicitly recognised how much had been achieved by the self help efforts of communities in the past. The problem was that much of this effort had been led by the *Dikgosi* who had mobilised the *mephato* (age regiments) to tackle a whole range of development needs. Not only were the Chiefs out of fashion, after independence, but so too was the traditional process of initiation from which those same age groups were formed. The post-independence need was to move away from the old self help mechanisms to more genuinely voluntary forms of community development. By a quite extraordinary coincidence, however, two of the places which had most effectively used the *mephato* for development purposes in the past – Serowe and Mochudi –were those which were most able to establish major self help projects in the years after independence.

The three largest projects be undertaken by the *mephato* in the years before independence were the building, between 1921 and 1923, of the Bakgatla National School (now the Phuthadikobo Museum) and the house for its first principal, the construction of Moeng College in the Tswapong area in the then Bangwato Reserve in the late 1940s and 1950s and of the King George V Memorial Hall/ School in Kanye. These projects were enormous undertakings which required the raising of huge sums of money – in the case of Moeng, in the region of £100,000. But they were also very different kinds of projects. Moeng, a remote site, was a project which involved only men. In contrast, the building of the Bakgatla National School involved the entire Mochudi community with women carrying water and bricks up the hill. But what was so exceptional about Serowe and Mochudi was that their *mephato* carried out so many other important development projects, apart from those two just mentioned. They constructed roads, and dams and built primary schools, and in Mochudi, even cleared the village of prickly pear.

Seemingly, no other centre in the country deployed its *mephato* so often or over such a lengthy period of time. In Serowe, the mobilising of the *mephato* came to an unsurprising end with Tshekedi's fall from power in 1949/1950 which more or less coincided with his completion of the enormous Moeng project. Thereafter, none of the five succeeding caretaker *Dikgosi* –Rasebolai Kgamane, Leapeetswe Khama, Sekgoma Khama, Mokgacha Mokgadi or Sediegeng Kgamane have had the necessary authority (or perhaps even the wish) to call out the *mephato* in the old way.

In Mochudi, however, the situation was very different because in 1975 Kgosi Linchwe II, with the support of the Bakgatla, revived the old practice of initiation but in a modernised and adjusted form (Grant 1984:7-17). Between then and 1988 the five new men's *mephato* were formed were all engaged in a variety of community development projects and needs. The initiative by the Bakgatla to revive this traditional practice, albeit in modernised form, was not however, imitated elsewhere in the country and the old style form of *boipelego* demonstrated by them during that short period proved to be an exception to the new norms.

But to track down more modern forms of *Boipelego* or *Ipeleng* it is necessary to return to Serowe and Swaneng Hill School. In late 1962 the South African refugee, Patrick van Rensburg, having earlier experienced a Pauline conversion, was given land and a go-ahead to start a secondary school on the outskirts of Serowe by Tshekedi's elder son, Leapeetswe Khama. During the next few years, Swaneng became the supreme example of *boipelego/ipeleng* in action. Given a lead, a well stated need, an opportunity to contribute and help others, Swaneng in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, was a magnet which drew to it people of all ages, but especially the young, who arrived from everywhere, including Serowe, to dig trenches, mix cement, crush stone or teach those younger than themselves. It also attracted from outside Serowe those with skills, architects, crafts people, builders, and mechanics who, almost over night, were involved in a vast array of projects providing training, jobs and opportunities. And then from Serowe, van Rensburg's *boipelego* mission took him first to Shashe for the establishment of another secondary school/Brigade complex and then to Mahalapye and Madiba.

At very much the same time that Swaneng and Serowe were enjoying that extraordinary burst of activity, the new Community Development Centre in Mochudi was attempting something similar but on a more modest scale. It's perceived role was to try and meet obvious need and to provide support where support was most needed. The result was a wide range of community initiatives which embraced a small youth club (which eventually became Mochudi Centre Chiefs Football Club) and a women's group, emergency feeding of the young (during the famine conditions of 1966/67), the organising of food for work projects, night school classes, sport, printing, craft projects, cooperative societies, and horticulture.

The Development Centre, was not alone in pushing the *boipelego* idea in Mochudi because it earned itself a new neighbour, just across the road, Henderson Tlhoiwe's Linchwe II Secondary School, a self help school par excellence, from which a past Vice Chancellor of University, Professor Bojosi Otlhogile was to emerge as one of its earlier graduates. Tlhoiwe had been involved in establishing the opposition Botswana National Front (BNF) in Mochudi in 1969, and it was this initiative which prompted one of the most extraordinary demonstrations of the *boipelego* ideal – the race that same year between the BDP and the BNF to raise funds and build classrooms at Mochudi's Segale Primary School.

Idealism is catching. Many of the British and American volunteers who arrived after independence, for instance, adopted the van Rensburg ideal and started important new projects all over the country. Mochudi was the first place to establish a 'Swaneng Brigade' but there were a host of other important initiatives which were undertaken by a whole range of actors and institutions, not least in Molepolole with David Inger's huge Kweneng Rural Development Association (KRDA) and in Gabane with Frank Taylor's Pelegano Village Industries (PVI).

In the new Gaborone, the situation was very different. There are convincing reasons for suggesting that as *boipelego* in Serowe and Mochudi was profoundly influenced by the idealism emanating from the northern hemisphere and in particular from the effervescent Europe of the 1960s - despite van Rensburg's South African origins In contrast, the idealism that was driving the new Gaborone derived almost entirely from the south, from the old Mafikeng staff, both white expatriate and black Batswana Unsurprisingly perhaps those two very strong influences, the one being rurally-based and focussed and the other urban, enjoyed little common ground. Indeed it may not be too fanciful to suggest that those two forms of the *boipelego* ideal were on opposite sides in the enormous controversy attending the establishment of Maru-a-Pula in 1972/3 with Deane Yates, representing the one ideal and Patrick van Rensburg, the other.

Prior to the establishment of Maru-a-Pula, the creation of the new capital, Gaborone had seen a number of remarkable *boipelego* initiatives which included the establishment of the National Museum and Art Gallery as an NGO project, the setting up of Botswanacraft as a Trust, the launching of the Botswana Society, the founding of the Notwane Club and various sports clubs and even the construction of the National Stadium. Outside Gaborone, there were any number of exciting new *boipelego* initiatives In the early 1960s the Harvard Kalahari Research Group, following on the earlier visits by the remarkable Marshall family, began its anthropological and archaeological programme of visits. This in turn was followed up by the University of New Mexico. All three were involved with the San both in research but also in a varied range of *boipelego* projects.

Under Bishop Urban Murphy's leadership, the Catholic Church started training projects, principally for girls, in Francistown, Serowe, Mahalapye, Palapye and Kanye. In Thamaga, Fr. Julian Black initiated the Botswelelo Craft Project. The Botswana Christian Council (BCC) provided support for a huge array of new development initiatives and initiated several of its own, including the opening of its dental clinic in Gaborone. The first community news sheets and newspapers were produced, the Broadsheet of Trinity Church, in Gaborone, Mmegi in Serowe, Lentswe in Mochudi and Puisano in Selebi-Phikwe. Libraries were opened in Serowe, Lobatse, Mochudi and Maun. The first efforts were made to care for refugees, and the first attempts were made to provide for the needs of the

handicapped and the poor – Dr G Teichler's eye clinic in Mochudi, for instance, which eventually became the Leseding Centre and School for the Blind, the School for the Deaf in Ramotswa, the various programmes of the Vincent de Paul Society and far from least, the inspirational efforts of Mrs Minnie Shaw to help the elderly and poor in Palapye. In Mochudi too there was started the first of the community museums, the Phuthadikobo Museum which was one of the last boipelego initiatives of that early period.

About the same time, there occurred in Gaborone a national self help initiative which differed from anything that had gone before. In 1976, Lesotho suddenly decided to pull out of the the jointly shared University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS). The newly created crisis situation prompted a remarkable response – the establishment of the one man, one beast fundraising campaign or Botswana University Campus Appeal (BUCA) which was speaheaded by the late President Sir Seretse Khama. The campaign, launched to raise money for the construction of the Botswana Campus, galvanised the country with people making contributions that included cash, cattle, grain and even eggs. In a relatively short time the target of one million South African Rand, the currency then used by Botswana, was reached. By 1982, the University of Botswana became a reality.

Sometime in the mid-1970s the country began to experience profound change. Diamond money began to filter through the system and the aid scene was significantly altered by the opening of offices in Gaborone by the major Scandinavian aid agencies. Inevitably the nature of the boipelego effort also began to change. Not only was there a subtle shift away from the amateur enthusiast towards the professional development aid careerist but there was also a move towards the establishment of different kinds of institution and organisations, some of them of a specialist nature and many being centred in Gaborone. Amongst these new projects were Maitisong, CORDE - Cooperation for Research, Development and Education, Emang Basadi, Ditshwanelo and Botswana Technology Centre in Gaborone, Rural Innovation Promotions Company in Kanye and Metlhaetsile and Motswedi in Mochudi. Most if not all of these new projects had permanent and properly paid staff.

Boipelego/ipelegeng takes many different forms but there has been an obvious relationship between many of those projects and external aid agencies. Some projects during the period between 1975 and roughly 2000, were locally initiated and later obtained financial assistance from one or another of the aid agencies. Other projects were locally conceived but brought into existence only when foreign staff and finance was made available.

Perhaps ten years ago, many of the aid agencies began to shift their interest elsewhere and to leave this country. The effect on a number of boipelego type NGO projects which were over-dependent on donor funding was devastating. The womens' project in Mochudi, Metlhaetsile, for instance, disappeared almost overnight and the Forestry Association, bassed in Gaborone, ceased operating.

Boipelego/ipeleng flourished long before the advent of foreign funding. But can it survive today without such support? The dependence of so many NGO projects on foreign donor assistance meant that they were always vulnerable to every change of preference and policy in the headquarters offices of those organisations. When the country, because of its diamond wealth, ceased to be classified as one of the poorest countries in the world, the foreign agencies re-deployed their staff to other parts of the world where, they felt, needs were so much greater. The result was that this country and its varied communities were made dependent once again on their own resources. This time around the needs were undoubtedly much greater than they had been in the past –the result of both massive social and economic change and the considerable increase in the size of the pepulation. But the resources for meeting such needs had also increased so that the response – which was impossible to quantify – appeared to be both significant and varied.

Newspapers are regularly reporting how a school has raised funds to help a disabled student, or the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) has built a house for a destitute or the Islamic community has contributed cash for a destitute widower in Ramotswa or Maitengwe among other places. Seemingly,

the ideals of boipleego/ipelegeng are very much alive and well although surprisingly, the country's political leadership continues to lament the demise of what it believes to be the country's old spirit of self help.

Clearly this country is now in the early years of its third boipelego/ipelegeng phase which seems, for the moment at least, to be completely dominated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the efforts to combat it. Initially this appalling scourge brought out both the best and the worst in many people. On the one hand there were many cheering demonstrations of individual compassion and care. On the other, there was also a chilling absence of care and an eagerness to exploit programmes of assistance for personal and monetary gain.

In the last few years, the situation has once again dramatically changed. Since 2007-2008, the Ian Khama Presidency has absorbed boipelegeo/ipelegeng into its own priority programme for what it calls 'poverty eradication'. To do so, however, it has had to rejig and adjust those old notions and values so that what had been in the past a more or less conmmunity-based bottom up ideal has now become a more or less government directed top down strategy. The concept of 'Ipelegeng' has been used to serve a number of different needs and purposes over the years but today is applied to a large scale government programme of social relief whose participants, it is claimed, are involved as part of their individual efforts to help themselves.

Despite differences of emphasis, today's Ipelegeng programme is not dissimilar in its aims to yesterday's food for work programmes. Similarly, boipelego as an ideal has been taken over and personalised by President Khama with the predictable result that his appeal for houses for the poor has been spectularly supported. But what cannot now be known is the long term effect of so comprehensively personalising what had previously been community practices and ideals.

Despite such concerns, an entirely subjective view does suggest that in its extent and range the expression of biopelego/ipelegeng today far exceeds anything that happened in the past. The ideal may start, stutter, and hesitate – but the last twenty or thirty years have witnessed a massive reaching out to those in need which has no precedent in this country's history.

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