

Gaerolwe Kwerepe: The First Generation MP Who Paid Teachers from His Pocket

*Sonny Serite**

More often, our society tends to wait for heroes to shuffle off this mortal coil before they can eulogise them for the positive contribution they brought while still alive. I drove all the way from Gaborone to Maun to meet Gaerolwe Kwerepe and appreciate the positive role he played during his heydays as a member of parliament. His grand-daughter had told me, ‘Just go to Maun and you’ll find him relaxing at home’.

I arrive at his home just after lunch on Friday and indeed he is relaxing in the living room, over a cup of tea. Kwerepe lost his sight three years ago and being a blind person, he can only hear but not see me. We exchange pleasantries and I explain the purpose of my visit. I ask him to tell me everything he can still remember since he was born in 1929. ‘I was born at Lediba la ga Moxaisa just next to Komana village. I grew up in both Maun and Tsau’, begins the 86-year old. This octogenarian has a sharp memory and can still vividly remember his school days at Tsau back in 1946. He transferred to Maun in 1948 where he schooled at Batawana National School (now Moremi Primary School) and completed standard 6 in 1950.

He was diagnosed with pneumonia just before his final examinations but went on to pass his standard 6 with flying colours. He would thereafter, in 1951, work as a messenger and interpreter at Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (popularly abbreviated as Wenela). He was and still is, fluent in Setswana, SeHerero, English and Fanakaloo (the pidgin language of the South African mines then).

Figure 1: The legendary Gaerolwe Kwerepe in June 2015



Between 1954 and 1959 he worked as a store manager at one LG Deconus’s shop in Tsau, but fell out with him and quit the job because ‘he was trying to cheat me’, he argues. The fallout turned out to be a blessing in disguise as Kwerepe opened his own general dealer business in 1961. He would later open a butchery and restaurant in Shakawe while at the same time rearing cattle in Semboyo and Makakung.

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Kwerepe was elected the first MP for Ngami in 1965. He was part of the first batch of 31 elected MPs who made up Botswana's first national assembly at independence in 1966. He lights up when he reminisces on his 29 uninterrupted years as an MP. Perhaps, unbeknown to many, Kwerepe is the one who came up with a motion that allowed MPs to deliberate in Setswana. 'We had gained independence. We were Batswana representing Batswana and as such I found it befitting that we are allowed to speak Setswana in parliament so our people could understand us', he says.

He also successfully moved a motion that called for the erection of the buffalo fence, which was meant to curb the spread of the foot and mouth disease in Ngamiland. During his time in parliament, Kwerepe sat in several committees, among them the finance committee and the housing committee. He says during the 1960s it was not easy reaching out to the people and explaining to them what politics was all about. 'I went to some village and told the residents that we had formed a party called the BDP [Botswana Democratic Party] and all of them were in the dark as they didn't understand what politics, let alone a political party was', he laughs. He says the only person who claimed to know what he was talking about, proved to be the most ignorant as he asked, 'is it the same party as the stokvels [drinking parties] we used to have on weekends at the mines?'

Kwerepe remembers how he used to campaign on donkey back as there were no vehicles and good roads at that time. 'I would pack kabu (cooked corn grain) and madila (sour milk) and ride on my donkey to the furthest corners of my constituency to disseminate political education and campaign for my party. 'Oh and I packed my gun and 13 bullets', he seems to have just remembered. He rode 164 kilometres between Xaxa and Sehithwa spreading the BDP gospel. Kwerepe recalls how he fought hard to have the road that connects Maun and Ghanzi pass through Sehithwa as initially, the road was to leave out Sehithwa village. He personally paid for the de-bushing of the road between Kareng and Sehithwa. He extended the same gesture of benevolence towards the road that connects Semboyo and Sehithwa. 'I shared my salary with my constituents', he says, a sense of pride and achievement written all over his face.

A self-confessed advocate for education-for-all, Kwerepe recalls how he hired a retired teacher, Nicholas Joseph to teach children in Kareng. Kwerepe had travelled to Kareng and found 96 children idling because there was no school in their settlement. He hired another retired teacher, Kubuitsile Ledimo, to teach at Semboyo. He paid these teachers from his own personal coffers. 'During our time, politics was all about changing the lives of your people for the better. We were never there to enrich ourselves', he says. Kwerepe says they derived joy from making a difference in the lives of the people they served. He also says during their time, there were no political enemies but just political opponents. 'We differed in deference. We respected each other's point of view regardless of political affiliation', he frowns, for emphasis perhaps.

When the University of Botswana was established in 1976 and Batswana were asked to donate a cow each, Kwerepe went the extra mile and donated eight cows. I ask whether the BDP utilises his wisdom or even bother to check how he is doing and the response leaves my eyes teary. 'They have forsaken me. They do not check on me and the sad part is even the ones I recruited into the BDP no longer want anything to do with me', he says with a dejected tone. However, Kwerepe speaks highly of Sir Ketumile Masire. 'Only my friend Quett makes it a point to check on me whenever he passes through Maun or through the telephone. He even sends me money as he knows I'm now blind and helpless'.

He says it is painful to be blind, as he cannot do anything by himself. He says blindness is the most painful thing that you cannot even wish on your worst enemy. 'There is no confidentiality and privacy as I always have to rely on other people to help me out', he tells me. In fact, I can attest to his ordeal, as during our interview, he had to ask me to bring him something from his bedroom as his caretaker was outside doing home chores. I had asked to take photos and he had protested that his hair

was unkempt. 'Go straight through that door and take immediate left which leads to my bedroom. You'll find a comb on the bedside', he had directed me and that was exactly where I found the comb.

Kwerepe left politics in 1994 when Jacob Nkate became the next MP for Ngami. His children are grown up and, he knows where everyone of them works and the positions they hold. His wife is departed and he now stays with his aunt's children who take care of him. After two hours with this kind-hearted soul, I bid him farewell but I can see he still wants my company to soothe his loneliness.

(This piece is a revised version of the one that appeared in *The Monitor*, 15 June 2015).