

A Note on the Defunct Morwa Forestry Plantation and a Very Strange Pattern of Development in Mochudi

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Last week (in March 2008) I went to have a look at the old Brigade plantation at Morwa. I had not been there for years and it took two false starts even to hit the correct road. And even then I arrived at what seemed to be a wrong, certainly unfamiliar, angle. But then it was not just the angle of approach that was wrong. The entire place was a total disaster. Fortunately, I had been warned what to expect but it was, nevertheless, incredibly sad to see what had become of a once thriving project. For a start, the trees had nearly all gone which, in a plantation, would seem to be the last thing that could have happened because when chopped they simply burst into renewed life. But here they had been chopped and died leaving a few scattered trees as evidence of what once had been. The old staff houses were ruined shells; all of them having had their roofs, doors and window and door frames systematically looted. The bush had encroached and it was hard to imagine that this had ever been a vibrant project with life, and hope.

What on earth had happened to bring about such sad change? When my own involvement with the Brigades in Mochudi (the Kgatleng Development Board) came to an end many years ago, I lost touch with what it was doing. I was unaware, therefore, that at some stage, a decision had been taken to let the Morwa plantation go; in effect to abandon it. Perhaps, it had been decided that Kgatleng Development Board (KDB) no longer had the capacity to run a forestry nursery in Mochudi as well as a substantial outreach programme in Morwa. Whether or not the project was formally handed over to Morwa, perhaps to its village development committee (VDC), the people there were clearly of the opinion that the plantation was of no real value to them and that whatever had been left by KDB was theirs for the taking, trees and all. I am unsure whether that process occurred overnight or occurred over a period of time.

But it seems like only yesterday when I last drove through Morwa and looked at the dense mass of trees in the middle distance. How come that I had not even noticed that the dense mass had been replaced by a few isolated tree remnants? A friend recently commented to me that it is rare for a non-governmental (NGO) project here to last as long as 30 years. So the Morwa forestry project, born in the early 1970s, seems to fit that pattern. But then so many of Mochudi's projects, NGO and otherwise, have an extraordinary track record.

The old Bakgatla National School became Isang Primary School but was resuscitated as the Phuthadikobo Museum when the school was transferred to a new site and there became Molefi Junior Secondary School. Within a few years, this school was transferred yet again – this time to a new site across the river, in Boseja – whilst the buildings that it had abandoned became Seingwaeng Primary School.

The house of the principal of the national school became first a Homecraft Centre as from 1945, and then a hostel for blind children. A purpose built Homecraft Centre was opened in the late 1960s. It was closed in around 2007. The two large buildings were then totally destroyed by an arsonist who, by report, was totally mad. The last time I saw the burnt out shells of the two buildings, they appeared to have been taken over by baboons.

Nearby, Linchwe I Primary School, having been abandoned by the Kgatleng District Council has now become the privately owned Cornerstone Academy Primary School. A new site was long

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ago identified for a replacement for the Deborah Retief Memorial Hospital which will presumably be abandoned one day or converted into something else. But what?

The Show ground was first in the Iketlo area in Mochudi, in the 1930s, then when the Show was revived in the early 1970s, at Phaphane and is now, if it still exists, in the area known as Dipontshe. The Brigades were located bang in the centre of Mochudi, have been re-located to the new Mochudi-Molotwana axis and the old site and its buildings have been left vacant and effectively abandoned. The nearby clinic, originally the TB clinic is now Clinic 1. The District Council, having consumed half of the old Rovers football field then decided that it was still out of space, and split itself into two by moving to an entirely new site at Phaphane which had been previously used for the Mochudi Agricultural Show.

Metlhaetsile Women's Information Centre, the Women's' 'Help Me' Centre initiated by Unity Dow, came and went. The Metlhaetsile rented from the Phuthadikobo Museum the small prefabricated building which had once been the Barclays Branch office in Mochudi. In around 2005 the project was closed down so fast that everything was abandoned including hundreds of confidential files which were transferred by the museum to the personal safe keeping of Mohumagadi MmaSeingwaeng. It was then sold and became an Information Centre.

People were compensated and moved out of the Mochudi kgotla area and their old houses demolished in order to make way for a major new tribal office which will never have enough parking space or appropriate access roads. Work began on the construction of an ambitious new structure in the kgotla itself but when funds ran out, work stopped and the kgotla has since then remained unusable. Elsewhere, the old Mochudi Trading Store and adjacent house were demolished to make way for a vast new three-story building – the largest ever commercial investment in Mochudi – remains locked and unused, years after it was completed because the District Council insists that a great many buildings regulations were ignored.

Overall, it is a very strange pattern.

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