Professor Neil Parsons: A Likeable Personality That Belies a Scholar Within

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Many accomplished scholars exude an air of composure about them; a cold and idealistic detachment that easily borders on disinterest and aloofness, but Professor Neil Parsons has something about him that resembles an ordinary man. He has a somewhat gregarious posture that makes him upfront, jolly and casual. A conversation with him is full of jokes that an ordinary mind can easily relate with. For a distinguished academic, he is neither a menace nor a turn-off. Far from it, he is neither a geek nor a nerd.

For most of his career Prof. Parsons' research specialty has been on Khama III, a topic on which he obtained his doctorate from the Edinburgh University in the early 1970s. And after many years of studying the legendary Ngwato King, one gets a sense that Parsons has developed such a close affinity to his subject that makes it impossible for him to see any faults on his subject. To say he has fallen in love with Khama III is an understatement. When we meet for lunch at a restaurant in Gaborone Main Mall, he tells me how much the country has changed since he first arrived in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, as the country was then called in 1962. He recalls himself as a young man sitting on the back of a truck as he drove from The Village part of Gaborone to the train station and into Gaborone Hotel, where he was to spend his first night ever in the country.

Except for a 'little row' of houses, all the infrastructure and developments that are today taken for granted were not there. 'Back then this mall was supposed to be European. Today it is very, very African', he says. Interestingly, just a stone's throw away is another old mall by the name 'African Mall'. When he arrived, Neil Parsons' job was as a teaching assistant at Moeng College, that bastion of learning that over the years churned some of the country's finest administrators and political leaders. He was barely 18. And as it were he found himself younger than a good number of students that were doing upper grades. As a

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teaching assistant, the list of students he met at Moeng College in 1962 included one Festus Mogae, David Magang and Lebang Mpotokwane. And as history was to later bear witness, Mogae went on to become the third President of Botswana. Magang became a long serving cabinet minister and one of the country's most celebrated businessmen while Mpotokwane, ever modest and self-effacing became the country's top administrator working as a personal aide to Sir Seretse Khama, the country's founding president (1966-1980). 'I did not teach them as they were doing Form 5. I was only teaching Form 1. In fact, all of them were older than me', says Parsons. At around that same time, Moutlakgola Ngwako was the school bursar of Moeng College. After going into politics, Ngwako became a cabinet minister and later on Speaker of the National Assembly.

Before the start of interview proper, I ask Neil Parsons just who he considers to be greater between Khama III and Sechele I of Bakwena. It is a fixating question with which many history students have over the years grappled without much headway, much less a definitive outcome. But Professor Parsons disposes of it with amazing ease. 'I don't think it would be fair to compare the two. As it is Sechele handed the baton to Khama. They lived during different eras. And in that sense it would be hard to compare them with any fairness'. While the answer is fair enough, one is left with a distinct feeling that the man's reverence for Khama III cannot be refuted.

By his admission nobody knows for sure when Khama III was born. There is, however, consensus among scholars that the great Ngwato monarch was born between 1833 and 1837. 'A comprise has been reached to say he was born in 1835', says Parsons. While Parsons has spent a lifetime doing research on Khama III, especially the time that the King of the Ngwato together with his contemporaries from Kweneng and Ngwaketse visited Britain, it is clear from our conversation that his appetite for the subject has not eased. 'To this day I am still doing research on Khama III. In fact, people are putting me under enormous pressure to write a large volume on him', he says with unmistakable glee.

After Khama, another of Parsons' admirations is Isaac Schapera about whom he speaks with a fondness that borders on worship. Schapera was a pioneering anthropologist-cum-historian whose long stay among various Batswana tribal groups, chiefly the Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela has become a cornerstone of all of the country's documented history. To understand the awe with which historians across the spectrum regard Schapera's work one has to look at the way the Christians regard the Bible. Parsons credits Schapera with what has been a rare ability to chronicle history without being ideological.

'If Schapera is the grandfather of Botswana's history, then Parsons is the father of that same history', one academic told me as I was preparing for the interview with Parsons. Parsons says Schapera was never a member of any fashionable theory. Rather he was a historian who was neither racialist nor colonialist. The end result of it all is that with time, Schapera has proved transcendental, says Parsons. 'It is a virtue that has allowed Schapera to be used by every researcher as a-go-to point of reference, without exception'.

Parsons, who is now retired and staying in England, looks back and divides his life in Africa in three phases. The first would be in the 1960s when he was at Moeng College. The second phase would be in the early seventies when he worked as a lecturer in Zambia. And the third phase would be in the mid-1970s when he worked at the University of Swaziland –a tumultuous time that preceded his final resettlement at the University of Botswana. During all those years he wrote a number of academic books that had particular leaning on the History of Botswana.

The 1970s was also a time of upheavals for the entire sub-region as liberation movements were gaining momentum. 'In Swaziland I met students who had just come out of Soweto following the upris-

ings there. I was astonished at how little they knew about their own country and Africa in general. In fact, they were totally ignorant of their own history. More shocking was that they did not know anything about the African National Congress. They thought they were the first people to resist apartheid', he says with a smile on his face. While the region was as a whole on fire –politically speaking, Parsons was at a personal level never far away from politics. In 1980 a petrol bomb was thrown into his house at Broadhurst. The entire house went up in flames. The target was his then wife Judy Seidnen who was closely involved with the liberation movements of South Africa. Thankfully, there was nobody in the house. Professor Parsons was away in Europe while Judy was away attending to one of her art and painting obsessions. As it were, the children had gone for a play somewhere in town. 'I seriously thought of moving out of the country the truth of the matter is that more people suffered far worse than us at the hands of South African commandos', he says. In the end only the children were relocated back to England as he chose to continue his time at the University of Botswana where he was having a good time.

At the University of Botswana early colleagues in the History Department included the legendary Professors Thomas Tlou, Leonard Ngcongco and Fred Morton. After a long and illustrious career, Parsons says he has a stack of thousands and thousands of research papers from never before published manuscripts.

I ask him his view of the current political climate in the country. Discreetly, he avoids open criticism, but comes to a conclusion that a lot has to change. 'I still like this place. But to be honest it lacks optimism. It has become a very complex society with a lot of cynicism. It is not squeaky clean, but it is a functional country', he says comparing conditions today to what he saw when he first arrived over fifty years ago. While reluctant to talks politics, it is perhaps not surprisingly that he is much eager to talk about the country's tertiary education system, which, one gathers has so fallen low of his ever high standards that he just falls short of saying it is in a crisis.

While he says the education system has become very weak, with bureaucrats looking like they are not sure of what they are doing, it is the University of Botswana that most pains him. 'The trouble with the University of Botswana is that it is clogged down because all academics seem to be of the same age. People are ageing and there does not seem to a plan to replace them with younger ones below them'. The trouble, he says, is that universities the world over have 'created walls around themselves'. Almost inevitably, he uses his subject of history as a case study to drive his point home. While during his time history was a 'Queen of subject' where one could move easily from being a history student to say becoming a lawyer that is no longer the case. His biggest worry is that while the subject used to be transcendental that is no longer the case.

And it is while talking about this deterioration that one senses a deep sense of passion in this distinguished scholar. 'During our time history provided the background for lawyers, scientists, media workers, administrators and political scientists. But now the subject has been reduced to a role of producing history teachers. People no longer take history as a discipline. And that is unfortunate. It is wrong to allocate a first year student for example to do media studies without first giving them a kind of background that can only be provided by history. This is all a result of funding that has become commercialized and privatized –basically calling on students to buy a degree. It is a universal problem, but is it much bigger here. The current setup teaches students that there are answers instead of teaching them that there are questions'.

Professor Parsons is of an adamant view that true history teaches students that there should be more than one answer to a question and also that one should be able first to question and interrogate their own answers to the questions. 'This is why debating is the finest basis for intellectualism'.

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