

UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA'S HISTORY STUDENT RESEARCH AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW GENERATION OF HISTORIANS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract

Since 1976 the Department of History at the University of Botswana (UB) has run a course that for a long time was unique in the Southern African region whereby final year undergraduate students conducted field research and produced dissertations. These were bound and kept in the UB's library for consultation by local and international researchers. The quality of some of these essays was so good that they were revised and published in scholarly journals. This paper looks at brief biographies of two students who were in the course in the past five years, their preparation for the course, research topics, awards, and publication of their projects. We also indicate how they went on to attain MAs in History of Botswana at Trent University and later enrolled for PhDs at Calgary University in Canada.

Keywords: Undergraduates research; new generation; History teaching; field work; Michael Crowder Prize, BA dissertation, New Millennium

Introduction

Like with any other academic discipline, there is need for new generation of historical scholars to emerge and become torch bearers as the older generations of professional historians give way one way or the other. At the UB a long held tradition of passing the torch to a new generation of local historians through an undergraduate history research course (fourth year level) has been in place since 1976 when the university education began to be offered in the country. A good number of students who graduated from the course went on to become scholars of note in various fields. All Botswana history lecturers at the UB are products of this research course. The course was unique in the Southern African region and has over the years been heartily praised as a gold standard or 'signature course' by different history programme reviewers who are historians of international repute from outside the country.

This history student research course has already attracted respectable scholarship on its origins, pioneering students, and some of their lecturers (Morton 2016) as well as its development from 1976 to the new millennium (Bennett 2016). According to Bruce Bennett, who has also been associated with the course for decades at UB, through the 1990s and beyond 'the student project continued to be the jewel in the crown of the History programme at the UB' (Bennett, 2016:405). In the 1990s the Department of History introduced the Michael Crowder Prize for best performing student in the course. The prize is awarded by UB vice chancellor during the University's graduation ceremony normally held in October. The prize is named after the late, prolific and eminent Professor Michael Crowder, who was the head of the Department in the 1980s.

In the past when student numbers taking history courses, particularly major courses which were the prerequisite for the research course, was quite high there was a lot of interest on the part of students to enrol for the course. However, only a small number of students (about 10) whose research topics were deemed viable, were nominated for course. From my

personal experience from the 1990s, most students who could not be nominated tended to be saddened. Unfortunately, in the past 10 years or so the numbers of students enrolling at UB has declined drastically as a result of greatly reduced funding from the government of Botswana (Makgala, 2018).

A few students upon completion of the course independently sought scholarships at overseas universities to pursue history of Botswana at a graduate level. A small number even managed to get doctoral qualifications in this way. In the past 10 years or so the Department of History had an arrangement with the History Department at Trent University in Toronto, Canada, for former students to acquire scholarship and pursue MA in History at Trent. Professor Tim Stapleton coordinated and managed the arrangement at Trent University.

The two former students of the course we are concerned with here are Bafumiki Mucheregwa and Simon Isaac Bayani.

Bafumiki Mucheragwa

I first encountered Bafumiki Mucheregwa in my third year course HIS 333 (Introduction to International Relations, Foreign Policy and Diplomacy). He instantly struck me as an intelligent, disciplined, unassuming and hardworking student: a perfect material for the history research course. I have over the years encouraging my students to pursue the History research course, and even assisted some with viable topics for their research proposals. Mucheregwa was instantly taken by this idea and came to my office to consult on the way forward. I recommended to him a topic on the introduction and development of artificial insemination in Botswana's cattle industry. He took to topic like a duck to water and did very well under my supervision and scooped the coveted Michael Crowder Prize for his final research essay (HIS 472) in 2012.

Mucheregwa also exhibited leadership skills and initiative when alongside other History students they revived the History Students Society and he was voted the Society's president (Email communication from Mucheregwa to Christian John Makgala, 10 January 2019). Mucheregwa was also a research assistant for some lecturers in the History Department. Most impressively he presented a paper on milk production in Botswana at the hugely successful international conference jointly held at UB by the Southern African Historical Society (SAHS) and the Department of History in July 2013. The conference was being held for the first time outside of South Africa in about half a century.

He successfully applied for scholarship to pursue an MA at Trent under Professor Tim Stapleton. His research focused on the underdevelopment of colonial Botswana and the use of the Mafikeng-Bulawayo railway in the eastern part of the country. During this time he was also able to revise his BA dissertation (now called research essay) for publication in volume 48 of *Botswanan Notes and Records* journal's special issue on Botswana's 50th anniversary of independence and Humanities at the UB (Mucheregwa, 2016).

Upon completion of his MA Mucheragwa managed to get a scholarship for PhD at University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, where Professor Stapleton had relocated. His doctoral thesis was on aspects of the evolution of the Botswana Defence Force.

Simon Isaac Bayani

I first encountered Simon Bayani in my third year course HIS 333 and HIS 334 (mentioned above) during the 2012/2013 academic year. Just like Mucheregwa, he immediately impressed me as intelligent, disciplined, unassuming and hardworking I also advised Bayani on pursuing the History research course and he was instantly interested. I advised him to write a proposal on the conflict in Botswana's Lutheran Church that started in the late 1970s and led to its violent split in the late 1990s. He greatly liked the topic and got on to work to produce a draft proposal which I helped him revise a few times.

Alongside my colleague Dr Bruce Bennett, who was the Head of the Department at the time, I was assigned to supervise Bayani's research project whose oral presentation to the History Department was again highly impressive. His final product (HIS 472) earned him the Michael Crowder Price in October 2014. Despite the highly demanding history research project he did not neglect his English programme in which he was also the best performing student, and scooped a certificate and a collection of all Shakespeare's best works.

Armed with an impressive transcript Bayani applied to read for an MA in History at Trent where he was duly offered a scholarship with Professor Stapleton as his supervisor. He says that:

I applied for an MA in History at Trent University in Canada and an MA in International Relations through the Chinese Government Scholarship. With well written and solid references from Prof. Makgala and Prof. Part Mgadla, I was offered both scholarships and I soon found myself in a bitter-sweet dilemma. I was caught in between two attractive offers but I chose to go to Trent for two reasons. First, was the fact that even though I liked International Relations (IR), I loved History as a subject which interestingly involved some IR in it as well (Email communication from Bayani to Christian John Makgala, 28 September 2018).

While awaiting to head for Canada I invited him to my third year classes to share his research experience and passion with the students in order to inspire them. I also had him as a research assistant in an international project which I jointly undertook with a political science scholar from Oxford University and funded by the British Academy. While at Trent I requested him to revise his BA research essay into a journal article for consideration by the *Botswana Notes and Records* which he did and the paper was published in volume 47 of the journal (Bayani, 2015).

At Trent he submitted an MA thesis with the title 'Civil Aviation and Scheduled Air Services in Colonial Botswana, 1935-1966: A History of Underdevelopment'. He defended the thesis which was accepted with no revisions requested. Simultaneously, he received two offers for a doctorate in History from the University of Manitoba and University of Calgary respectively. He chose Calgary University where his compatriot Mucheregwa was already pursuing a PhD on an aspect of history of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF).

Conclusion

This is a brief note on the History research course that started when UB was established in 1976 and continues to be the gold standard of the department. In the process many gifted historians have emerged and become respected scholars in History and other disciplines. However, here the focus was on just two former students who pursued History from BA through MA and PhD, and in the process flew the flag of UB and Botswana high internationally.

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