

Searching for a place: Identity and displacement at the Maitisong Festival *Lebogang Disele*¹

Abstract:

This paper examines two contemporary theatre productions that were staged during the 2014 Maitisong Festival in Gaborone, the performed ethnographic narrative Morwa: the Rising Son written and performed by Tefo Omphile Paya and Keneilwe: a Dance for the Given choreographed by Tumisang Baatshwana. As examples of contemporary performances produced by Botswana youth, these productions give an insight into some topical issues that the nation is grappling with, specifically issues to do with constructions of identity and how identity is tied to place as well as normalized practices that inform Botswana gender politics. Morwa brings to the stage issues of masculinity and the search for the Self in contemporary Botswana society. Keneilwe, inspired by the removals of San communities from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, deals with issues of displacement. This production brings to light how the long-lasting process of ethnic stratification colludes with the silencing by Government through policies of displacement and relocation of the San. It dramatizes moments of displacement and shows how the displaced strive to create new identities and ways of re-connecting with each other as re-aggregated communities.

Key words: Botswana contemporary theatre, displacement, identity construction, Maitisong Festival, national narrative, patriarchy

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Introduction

For the past twenty eight years Gaborone, Botswana's capital city, has played host to the Maitisong Festival. The festival showcases artistic excellence across different modes of performance, and has played host to a number of international and local performances. The 2014 Festival broke from this tradition, and focused solely on local productions. Through their resident company, The Company@Maitisong, Maitisong Theatre produced three performances: *Blue, Black and White* written by Donald Molosi and directed by Gao Lemmenyane; *Keneilwe: A Dance for the Given* choreographed by Tumisang Baatshwana; and *Morwa: The Rising Son* written and performed by Tefo Omphile Paya and directed by Warren Nebe.

Blue, Black and White is about the history of Botswana's first president, Sir Seretse Khama, the development of his relationship with Lady Ruth Khama and his journey to the presidency. Through this journey we encounter the formation of Botswana's national identity; the country's coming into being as an independent state. Moreover, the play displays how much the country and its citizenry have tied imaginings of national identity to Khama's successes. This includes controversies caused by the couple's interracial marriage, particularly the initial rejection of his wife, Ruth Khama, by the Bangwato people, Khama's ethnic group. Although the production is celebratory, it also demonstrates how Botswana's leadership fails to let the personal inform the national by continuing to uphold a patriarchal system that oppresses more than it empowers the individual.

Keneilwe and *Morwa* are concerned with topical issues, with *Keneilwe* exploring a scenario that has occupied Botswana popular consciousness for the past decade. The year 2013, especially, was marred by newspaper headlines detailing the protracted battle between the Botswana Government and San communities living in and around the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR). The battle centred around the Government's insistence on relocating the San to settlements outside the CKGR, while the San defended their right to remain on the land. This struggle was the inspiration for *Keneilwe*. Using the removals of San communities from the CKGR as a case study, the performance explores issues of displacement and how the process constitutes a threat to the San's sense of communal collectiveness. The production raises questions about both individual identity and the identity of the larger community.

Morwa is a coming of age production that explores issues around masculine identity in Botswana, touching again on the patriarchal nature of Botswana society which places the majority of power in the household with the father as the centre of authority. This hierarchy is often challenged at the national level, but not in the home where, arguably, and as *Morwa* suggests, it is reinforced and maintained. Through an exploration of his journey through puberty, Paya begins to raise questions about how male identity is constructed in Botswana, and how this can be disempowering for the young man growing in such a context.

Despite their differences, the productions have one thing in common—they address the notions of identity, cultural norms and practices, and state orchestrations of nationhood, suggesting a new direction in Botswana theatre. Theatre has both the power to educate and to empower by creating a space for introspection and dialogue. These productions raise pertinent questions about Botswana's cultural identity, and how it relates to national identity; it talks to how the personal needs to inform the national and the way patriarchy mediates life experiences both at the individual and the national level. Faustin Kalabamu (2006: 239) describes patriarchy as “both a system and an ideology that shapes and determines gender relationships and rights in a society.” The Meriam Webster online dictionary further defines patriarchy as:

- “1. social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly*: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power.
2. a society or institution organized according to the principles or practices of patriarchy”.

In both these senses, Botswana is a highly patriarchal society, with the government taking on the role of the father who determines the needs and rights of the people. Where ideology is “a set of social values, ideas, beliefs, feelings, representations, and institutions by which people make sense of the world” (O’Shaughnessy & Stadler 2002: 191), the dominance of patriarchy as an ideology has become repressive as it maintains the status quo that favours the few at the expense of the majority. The productions demonstrate how young theatre practitioners are beginning to question patriarchal ideology as a function of nationalism and culture, and how it operates in modern day Botswana.

***Morwa*: disruptions between gender and culture**

The play poses many questions and looks to interrogate masculinity, gender roles and identity. Who are you? What are you? What makes a man? How does one become a man? How do men relate to women? How does an individual relate to society? What role or purpose do you have in life? (Paya 2014)

Despite the advances made since independence, Botswana continues to maintain a patriarchal system which places the elderly, married man (the father) at the centre of power and pushes most other voices to the periphery, including those of young men. Thus, young people are often seen but not heard. Young people are raised in silence. These are the issues that *Morwa: The Rising Son* explores, focusing in particular on the father-son relationship.

Morwa: The Rising Son is a one man play, written, designed and performed by Tefo Paya. It examines masculine identity and the construction of masculinities in Botswana. The performance opens to an empty stage, decorated only with a pile of clothes laid out in a circle on the floor and a laundry basin placed centre stage. Stage left of the circle is a clothing rail, and just off stage left, in front of the curtain sits a percussionist. As the percussionist begins to play, the main character, Morwa, played by Paya, enters- a lone figure dressed in a suit and tie. He is subdued, seemingly weighed down by life’s responsibilities and expectations, perhaps the result of the role he finds himself having to play in the society. The weight of this role and its associated responsibilities seem to become heavier and heavier as he approaches the clothing rail, which suffocates him. There is only one release: to remove the clothes. With each item of clothing he removes, Morwa is relieved; he can breathe, and he begins to find his voice. The ritualistic act of undressing introduces the theme of the performance, highlighting how people play roles in their everyday lives in order to fit in somewhere, even if these roles are restrictive. It is a silent ritual, the only sound being Morwa gasping for air as he removes each item of clothing. It echoes a situation in which the individual’s identity is constructed for them, denying them the agency to construct their own identity. It also highlights how patriarchal culture is reinforced through silence and silencing.

Finally free from the shackles created by his clothing, Morwa enters the circle of clothes. It is warmer there, as suggested by the lighting design—warm yellows and oranges as opposed to

the cold shadows of the clothing rack. Warmer is not necessarily safer though, as *Morwa* is closed in by these clothes, which are pieces of his childhood, memories he needs to confront. For the most part, *Morwa* is performed within this circle of clothes. Paya recounts memories from his childhood, each signified by a piece of clothing and marking his transition from boyhood to manhood. At the end of each anecdote the piece of clothing is put into the laundry basin and washed. The implication is that he is trying to wash away the hurt or the feeling of confusion, which only increases as the performance continues. At the same time, it signifies a piece of the young boy lost with each traumatic event. The memories become less cheerful and more painful, emphasizing the sense of lost identity.

Further, the circle of clothes echoes the idea of the *Kgotla* [indigenous court arena] a cultural icon in Botswana which is the meeting place of the village. This space figures as the centre of cultural power in most Botswana communities. The 2014 performance of *Morwa* occurred within a backdrop of a cultural uprising of sorts in which a number of *diKgosi* [cultural leaders] became more rigid in their requirements for *Kgotla* meetings. Of note was the dress code in which men had to wear trousers and blazers, with some *diKgosi* even insisting that men's hair be cropped short. These attempts to return to culture echo a response to the rise in alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, unemployment and crime that the country is currently battling with. However, what these strategies often do is silence the youth, as they do not necessarily identify with the cultural ideal that is prescribed. This approach stems from the patriarchal structure of Botswana society, which continues to place one figure, often a male or masculine figure, as the centre of authority (Kalabamu, 2006: 239). This authority's truth is often seen as the only truth, and thus the only source of knowledge. Paya argues that, "there is a massive generation gap, conflict between the traditional African way of life, Westernisation and a new contemporary way of life where the youth are far more aware of various cultures that influence how they define themselves" (2011: 11). There is an act of displacement as young men are expected to dress and act in a certain way, while their individual identity is denied and spaces for self-expression are limited. Young men and youth in general are thus disempowered through the denial of their knowledge and agency. Thus *Morwa* highlights how patriarchal culture thwarts the formation of new ideologies, hence the inability to address issues facing the youth. Youth have become stuck between what they think they are supposed to be or what is expected of them culturally, and what they want to be or feel they should be. This creates a rift between the individual and the community, further displacing the individual. Paya captures this at two points during the performance, first when he describes an incident in which his father catches him watching pornography and the second when he goes to the university. In both these incidents his father expresses that he expects certain things of the son, in terms of his behaviour and his achievements. Besides the voicing of these expectations, the father is presented as a silent figure of authority. There is no room given to the son to question these expectations or to gain clarity on how to go about them, yet there is the insistence that they be lived up to.

Worth noting is the fact that although the *Kgotla* is meant to be a central meeting place for the community to discuss issues affecting them, there are restrictions on who speaks and how they speak. As previously discussed, those who do not fit the prescribed notion of a *Kgotla* attendee cannot be given audience, if at all they are allowed into the space. *Morwa* challenges this as it is only after he sheds this prescribed attire that *Morwa* can truly speak. This is an articulate dramatization of how he resists the expectation to submit silently to what is prescribed for him. Paya (2011) states,

I realised that when it came to personal relationships, sex, drinking, image and teen culture I had no guidance and support. I was raised to be like a man, to fend

for myself when it came to my personal issues as an individual and as a teenage boy (12-13).

Central to Morwa's exploration of his childhood memories is his father's conspicuous absence from it. In the performance he is presented as a silent figure who speaks only to reinforce his authority or expectations of his son, as described in the previous example. It is this silence around the young man, Paya contends, that has left him confused and unsure as he cannot get guidance from the person who can offer it. Such silence is reinforced as a means to discourage dissent, but tends to achieve the opposite. This is evidenced by the increase in problems such as underage drinking and teenage pregnancy. Kalabamu suggests that patriarchal culture often works to maintain the power balance and safeguard the interests of the male figure of authority, and often pushes other parties to the margins (2006: 242-244). Thus, as per the *Kgotla* example given above, issues affecting the youth are addressed only so far as they maintain the status quo. There is a failure to discuss these issues and their consequences with young people beyond telling them that they are bad, which serves only to exacerbate the problem rather than resolve it as young men are left to their own devices in solving the issues that affect them.

Morwa's greatest strength is that it breaks the silence around masculinity and the individual's struggle with masculine identity in Botswana, an issue which is rarely discussed or interrogated in Botswana. "Traditional Setswana values place a lot of emphasis on the community and often the individual is neglected, especially amongst adolescents," (Paya 2011: 13). This ideal is often reinforced in the home, discouraging the questioning of and dialogue around the role of the father in the household or the man in society. Thus patriarchal ideology is reinforced through silence and fear. This maintains the silence around maleness which continues to displace young men as they have no outlet for their individual struggles with identity and culture.

***Keneilwe*: displaced by our search for identity?**

It was really meant to explore displacement at the individual level, at the human level – what people feel or have to deal with mentally and spiritually and emotionally because of these outside circumstances (Baatshwana 2014).

Another problem with patriarchal ideology, that is the social acceptance of the rule of the father, is that it vests power with the leadership to decide what is best for everybody without necessarily consulting them. According to the Meriam Webster definition given above, patriarchy reinforces the dependency of citizens on the Government in a way that diminishes the individual's capacity for autonomous action. Chebanne (2010: 92) and Kamwendo & Mooko (2006:118) point out that the nation state of Botswana came to be as a result of political orchestration in an effort to maintain national unity upon achieving independence in 1966. While this was a noble endeavour at the time, it has become problematic because national identity was built around the cultural identity of eight dominant groups at the time, all of which were Tswana speaking (Chebanne 2010). This has resulted in the exclusion of other cultural identities in favour of the Tswana culture. In reality this has translated into a governing system which tells people who to be as seen by the teaching of the Tswana language and culture in all public schools. It has also manifested in the land management system in which certain sections of the country are said to belong to certain groups while at the same time, customary land is said to belong primarily to the government. The patriarchal nature

of this governing system has become most evident in the treatment of San communities, who have been and continue to be relocated from their ancestral land in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR). This idea of geographical, cultural, and ethnic belonging, and how it affects the individual is what sparked the conception of *Keneilwe – A Dance for the Given*.

Keneilwe – A Dance for the Given is a contemporary dance production choreographed by Tumisang Baatshwana. *Keneilwe* grows in three ‘movements’. It opens with a lone figure on the stage, seemingly searching for something. A voiceover, extracted from an interview, sets the tone for the themes being explored:

“A name you know, it is given to something, something that cannot stand for itself, something that is perceived through different eyes... There’re no people like Khoi-San, it’s like saying Sotho-Tswana... We’re saying we have our names. Why should you be aspiring to be calling me what you want to call me? (sic) In my heart there is something that cries for the identity. Language is a vehicle of culture. If you kill language you kill culture... Your home will always be where your heart is. You will only understand that if you have been uprooted... I will call it ‘identity voidness’ (sic). You’re neither a Motswana you’re neither a Mosarwa(sic)... We don’t support displacement of Basarwa for development,” (Mogodu: 2014).

Mogodu’s voice-over cross-fades with an audio of traditional music as the lone figure exits the stage. Other performers enter, moving in their own space, seemingly oblivious to each other, gesturing in their own way, “giving birth” (Baatshwana 2014) to the piece. Slowly they are joined by other performers, as they collect slowly and deliberately, until they come together in a cluster. The trope of clusters is used often in *Keneilwe*, suggesting a community or communities. In the first movement the community seems rooted in the place, connected to each other as suggested by one of the dancers who moves around the stage, weaving between his colleagues as though calling them into the community. The dancers make their way into a cluster before moving in unison to the traditional dance music. The use of traditional dance and folklore music provides a contemporary re-imagining of “Tsutsube”, a popular traditional dance appropriated from the San music and dance traditions during which performers are said to draw on the spirits of animals, and often go into a trance. Tsutsube is a celebratory dance which often involves the whole community. The use of elements of Tsutsube in *Keneilwe* gives a sense of connectedness at this point in the performance, poignantly evoking a collective identity in which everyone knows who they are and where they belong.

However, this community begins to break apart as the first movement transitions through a return of the mystical figure that initially seems to join in the dance. She then proceeds to mark off the stage, creating a boundary around the stage with sand, evoking the apportionment of land in Botswana. This is further echoed through the use of poetry, “Of land and other things” by the poet Ntshabele. The poem draws on the resettlements of the San to address the issue of land ownership, an issue many Batswana [citizens of Botswana] are currently contending with. It highlights the beginnings of displacement as the cluster breaks away leaving one dancer on stage, whose movements build from the traditional dance to become more and more erratic, while the mystical figure demarcates the space. A second dancer enters the stage, also with erratic movements suggesting an internal struggle – perhaps confronting the decision of whether to fight for the old way of life or to accept the change. This echoes an issue addressed by Paya in his production of the friction between modernity and tradition affecting young Batswana.

The second movement begins with the two dancers awakening to the realization that they are stuck in this space together, which leads to restlessness and disagreement as they fail to understand one another. The second movement best captures the sense of displacement as experienced in Botswana today as it speaks to the way people have been grouped together even though they do not necessarily identify with each other. While the national identity 'Motswana' was initially meant to create unity among residents of Botswana, its connotations of a homogenous culture has resulted in the neglect of other cultures in favour of Tswana culture which is reinforced through Setswana language education in schools (Chebanne 2010: 92). The second movement thus echoes the experiences of the San through the relocations, but also speaks to the larger national fabric – the idea of the 'Motswana' [a generic term for 'citizen of Botswana'] and what it really means to those who come from different ethnic groups but are forced to identify as Tswana in terms of ethnicity.

The movement is erratic and disjointed, with dancers sometimes moving together and sometimes breaking apart, suggesting individuals trying to find themselves within a new group identity. Although a new community is suggested through the return of clusters in the transition to the third movement, there is a sense that this community is different, possibly changed by the new self-awareness of the individuals that constitute it. The third movement returns to the celebratory feel of the first movement. However, the music is contemporary, again echoing the shift in the use of idioms and cultural markers to construct both the group and individual identities. The third movement celebrates both the individual and the group as each person is given an opportunity to express themselves and own their identity. This is presented most perceptibly through the use of solo performances. The piece suggests a need to accept and acknowledge the changes in the community, and thus the individual identity, and celebrate that change rather than focusing on something that seems lost.

Keneilwe thus suggests that we may be displaced by our search for identity. The San conflict has been borne by the Government's need to define the individuals that form the fabric of Botswana society in the name of 'national unity'. While national unity in itself is a great ideal, when it subjects one cultural and/or ethnic identity to another it becomes problematic as it denies the country's multicultural history, most notably by denying the existence of different languages (Chebanne 2010, Kamwendo & Mooko 2006). Further, Botswana themselves are rarely given the opportunity to define themselves and their nationality and instead become forced to fit into the politically constructed paradigm from the country's independence. The individuals that form the nation do not have or are not afforded the agency to form their own structures of identification, thus remain subjected as they "submit to a higher authority, and [are] therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting submission" (Althusser 2000: 37).

As a patriarchal country, Botswana is defined by speaking and doing everything for the people, as demonstrated in the relocations of the San. The problem with patriarchy is that it has very little space for difference, and it operates in an "either/or" (Soja 1996: 5) kind of logic. Such logic maintains an oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, which in turn maintains a system of domination creating a situation where individuals begin to validate their identities at the expense of other(s). What *Keneilwe* suggests, particularly in the second movement, is that non-Tswana language speaking groups have become residents of Botswana, but not Botswana [in the sense of ethnicity] because they do not come from one of the dominant ethnic groups. There is no room for the individual's sense of self – hence displacement. An idea of nationalism that does not account for the individual is thus problematic because it creates unequal power relations among people and between people and the government and subsequently creates a vicious power cycle of

marginalisation and discrimination. In the third movement *Keneilwe* advocates a more fluid conception of identity, both at the individual level and the community level. It proposes the creation of a national identity that takes into account each individual's difference and fuses this difference to create a cultural and national identity that is inclusive and heterogeneous. Such an identity is dynamic as it evolves with its people.

Conclusion

It is not by accident that both *Morwa* and *Keneilwe* were created by people who fall within the category of Botswana youth. This captures the growing sense of disruption between culture and identity for young people. It is no longer easy to marry one's idea of themselves with cultural perceptions of who they should be. Further, culture as it exists in Botswana at the moment is a vehicle of patriarchy, and this is no longer productive for moving Botswana forward. Botswana's patriarchal ideology has served to silence the voices of Botswana, particularly the youth who have been exposed to cultures from different parts of the world and are now more self-aware. Theatre and performance creates a space where these voices can make themselves heard, challenging the patriarchal status quo that has left many Botswana citizens feeling out of place. It is through theatre and performance that we can now begin to create and embrace the dynamic nature of our culture, as we try to define ourselves for ourselves.

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