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Promoting multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue through institutions and initiatives of civil society organizations in Botswana

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Botswana is a multilingual and a multi-ethnic nation that has had a thriving multi-party democracy, peace, and stability since independence, in 1966. Despite the superficial impression that a casual observer may have of a so-called mono-ethnic and monocultural society, Botswana is in fact home to more than 30 tribes with diverse cultures. Over the past four decades, it has scored many successes in education, health infrastructure, and the economy in general. There is one area, however, where it still needs to make much progress, namely in the governance of cultural diversity. For many years after independence, official discourse has been in favor of a culturally and linguistically homogenous society. This was the legacy of the colonial administration that aimed at promoting only the culture and the cultural interests of the Setswana-speaking tribes. In recent years, however, the political and administrative leadership has begun to embrace diversity and multiculturalism, as can be determined from official pronouncements and participation in social events that celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity.

The present article attempts to show how attitudes have evolved in the course of time and who has been active in advocating for recognition of minority ethnic groups and their rights in matters of representation in the House of Chiefs, language use in education, collective land rights, etc. It shows the role of civil society organizations and cultural associations as well as that of the University of Botswana in the agitation for equality.

Keywords: multilingualism; cultural diversity; cultural pluralism

Introduction

The basic meaning of ‘multiculturalism’ is fairly transparent and easily inferred from the compound form of the word (‘multi + cultural + -ism’) denoting the concept. This polymorphemic word is made up of the prefix ‘multi-’ signifying ‘many’ or ‘several’ plus ‘cultural,’ the adjectival form of the root word ‘culture’ and the suffix ‘-ism’ which frequently occurs in English words denoting an ideology, a philosophy, a doctrine, a theory or a practice of some kind. The primary denotative sense of the term is, therefore, ‘co-existence of, or relating to, many cultures.’ However, as Tom Calma (2007, 3) correctly points out, there are three distinct usages of the term ‘multiculturalism’ in demo-political literature, namely, ‘multiculturalism as a demographic descriptor; multiculturalism as a set of norms; and multiculturalism as government policy.’

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The term first came to the fore and gained currency in the 1960s and, from the 1970s onwards, multiculturalism rapidly emerged in a number of countries as a theory of existence and a policy instrument to cope with the new challenges of increasing cultural diversity of society in the context of racial tensions and inter-communal conflict in many parts of the postwar world. Multiculturalism may also be seen as an approach to understanding cultural diversity. Similarly, the term 'multiracial' has two usages. One is a demographic descriptor referring to a society that is made up of several visible racial groups. The other describes a government policy that avowedly promotes harmonious racial relations among various racial groups living together within one country.

The expression 'intercultural dialog,' popularized especially in French and European sociocultural literature in the field of international relations, as 'dialogue des cultures' and, more recently, as 'dialogue interculturel,' refers to the interaction, cross-fertilization, and interface between individuals and group of individuals hailing from different cultural backgrounds, rather than to the simple juxtaposition or addition of several discrete cultures within one political unit. It also refers partly to cultural mixing (Fr. 'métissage culturel') and hybridity. Growing emphasis is therefore being put nowadays on the need for intercultural competence as an objective to attain successful cross-cultural fluency in the study of sociocultural aspects of modern languages in the humanities in several universities. The International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF: 'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie' in French) has become a champion and chief advocate of the dialog of cultures and cultural diversity, as its fundamental tenets. As a matter of fact, 2008 was designated 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue' by the European Union.

Multilingualism or polyglottism usually goes hand in hand with multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. It denotes a state of affairs where more than two distinct languages are used concurrently within the territorial perimeter of one polity. Typically, this is a consequence of 'several ethnolinguistic groups coexisting within one state in relatively well-defined territories' (Cluver 1993, 51). De facto multicultural societies are typically multilingual in character – language being the most salient defining marker of cultural identity and ethnic affiliation. In African nation-states today multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception, as there is hardly any country that could be said to be strictly monolingual or monocultural, for that matter. This is in fact normally acknowledged in official pronouncements and in policy documents. The 'One nation one culture' or 'One nation one language' equation hardly ever exists anywhere in the world.

A multi-faith (or multi-confessional) community is, as the term clearly suggests, one in which several religions are practised, e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, etc. The existence of several faiths accommodated within one single community presupposes, of course, a certain measure of religious tolerance, mutual respect, and acceptance in society.

General remarks on multiculturalism

Sardar and Van Loon (2004, 123) succinctly define multiculturalism as 'the common notion that describes diverse races living in pluralistic harmony . . . It sees diversity as plurality of identities and as a condition of human existence.' We may just as well add here that these plural identities are not always based on race alone. In some cases they are based on other factors or on a combination of other factors, such as ethnicity,

language, religion, etc. This is using the term *multiculturalism* loosely as a mere descriptor of a prevailing demographic situation in a given society; a mere observation of the racial and/or ethnic mix in the demographic dynamics of a given population, living within a well-defined territorial unit. This view of multiculturalism has often come under some criticism from some quarters for overlooking or glossing over the interaction between cultures in contact or in close proximity and the mutual enrichment that naturally results from such reciprocal influence. Cultures are dynamic adaptive human constructs and, in the course of time, and as circumstances of life dictate, they evolve and tend to borrow certain elements from other cultures with which they interact constantly. For individuals in a multicultural society, this usually leads to cultural mixing, the kind of phenomenon that some francophone cultural theorists, like Léopold Sédar Senghor, refer to as '*métissage culturel*.' Indeed, Senghor described himself as a '*métis culturel*' (a cultural cross-breed) and took great pride in the fact that he was the product of more than one culture. Even in his family background he was a product of a mixed marriage, a Serere father and a mother who was from the Peul ethnic group. He became one of the strongest voices advocating for dialog between people coming from different cultural backgrounds (Senghor 1992). This is multiculturalism at the individual level and it is in this sense that we can legitimately describe someone as being *multicultural*, especially when his perspective is characterized by a real appreciation of diversity.

Doherty and Claybourne (2001, 8) point out that 'multicultural societies often arise when groups of people migrate from one place to live in another, taking their culture with them.' They further observe that 'people have been moving around or migrating for thousands of years, so most countries have many different types of people living in them.' Most countries are therefore multicultural. In this regard, Botswana is a classic example since it is a territory that became home to various migrant communities who arrived in successive waves at various times in the past 500 years (Tlou and Campbell 1997).

In a cultural melting pot the challenge is to come up with a *modus vivendi* for people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds to live together peacefully and in harmony within the same geographical milieu.

Multiculturalism and national integration in Botswana

Some have wrongly equated multiculturalism with tribalism or clannishness, especially considering the spectre of tribalism and division (along ethnic lines) that tended to haunt many nations in sub-Saharan Africa shortly after attaining their political independence, in the 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, recognizing and affirming the existence of separate ethnic and cultural identities within one single national polity has often been perceived as being potentially divisive. It is *à propos* to cite, in this regard, the observation made by Kashoki (1990, 18), when he states that:

The tendency towards uniformity, sameness, or oneness . . . is understandable. It stems from a mortal fear of that dreadful pestilence, referred to in sociological, anthropological and political journals as *tribalism*. As is well known today, tribalism (believed to be an epidemic of continental proportions) has become a veritable paranoia on the continent of Africa. In most African countries, tribalism is a subject one would rather not talk about except on those frequent occasions when one wishes to impute its practice to others but never to oneself. In any case, the mere mention of tribalism prejudices even the most innocent of discussions about language in multilingual countries.

Good (2009, 85) observes that ‘the government has officially portrayed Botswana over decades as ethnically homogeneous.’ Indeed, during protectorate days, under British rule, the territory was called ‘Bechuanaland Protectorate’ (and ‘Botswana’ after independence) underscoring the point that it is ‘the land of the Tswana-speaking peoples,’ and thus giving a semblance of linguistic and ethnic homogeneity. However, in reality, there are today well over 20 ethnic groups living in Botswana speaking more than a score of different languages (Denbow and Thebe 2006, 20).

Upon attaining political independence, African states were faced with the mammoth task of building up and affirming their nationhood status and the prime prerequisites for this to be achieved were of course national unity and integration or cohesion. They needed to find ways of ensuring this through the kind of policies they were going to adopt with regard to the question of national unity and sociocultural integration. These can be classified broadly into two types:

One policy, which is described by some scholars as *assimilationist*, aims at culturally homogenizing society by consciously eliminating or effacing differences, as a means of achieving national unity and integration. This may take the form of a deliberate attempt, on the part of the dominant ethnic group in the country, to absorb the powerless or minority ethnic groups and forcing them to assimilate it. In the extreme case, this may involve actual suppression of cultural expression of other ethnic groups, in terms of language and cultural practices. Such a hegemonistic policy is of course incompatible with the active promotion or encouragement of multiculturalism. Some scholars, such as Good (2009) and Nyati-Ramahobo (2008b), consider that this is in fact the model of sociocultural development that Botswana adopted and pursued for several years after independence, and it remained unchallenged until the late 1990s. By the end of 2002, however, a number of cultural groups from non-Setswana-speaking communities had come together ‘to press for ethnic equality’ (Good 2009, 86).

Another policy, contrasting sharply with the first, and which may be characterized as pluralistic or accommodative, consists in taking into account the complex sociocultural diversity of the country and trying to accommodate that diversity (Kashoki 1990, 12). This is, in essence, the multicultural model of sociocultural development in a pluralistic society. It seeks to achieve national unity and integration in diversity, recognizing and valuing the specificity of every ethnic group and its cultural heritage. It is incompatible with the hegemony of one cultural or ethnic group over the others, in an unequal relationship of dominant versus dominated. This is the policy that the political leadership of Botswana now seems to prefer, following the agitation for tribal recognition and equality of representation in the House of Chiefs by various groups and individuals. In response to serious concerns expressed in some quarters by some members of non-Tswana groups about what they perceived to be discriminatory sections in the Republican Constitution, namely Sections 77–79, a Commission, that came to be known as the Balopi Commission, was setup by the then State president, in July 2000, to seek public opinion on these sections with a view to calling for their amendment if indeed they were found to be discriminatory, as alleged (Obeng 2001, 75). On the other hand, some people who supported the maintenance of the status quo feared that embracing multiculturalism would lead to the fragmentation of the nation and thus threaten national unity. Despite apparent initial reticence, public pronouncements by some of the members of the political elite, as well as *Vision 2016*, the

national vision for development, now all seem to be in favor of multiculturalism, without prejudice to national unity and integration.

Recognition by Botswana authorities of the multicultural character of society and the governance of cultural diversity

Today, multiculturalism is no longer a taboo subject in Botswana. In fact it is one of the topics taught in social and development studies in school. Here, for instance, is what one of the prescribed development studies textbooks says, under the rubric 'Multiculturalism':

We must try to understand the cultural background and experience of other people... Schools can help children to understand other cultures. Here are some of the reasons why this is necessary:

- Understanding different groups makes people more tolerant.
- All citizens from whatever culture, must be allowed to have equal rights and opportunities.
- A democratic society recognizes that people are different and allows the free expression of different ideas. (Beare 2004, 35)

With such sensitization of the young generation to multiculturalism, it is clear that the school system has began to embrace the concept and encourages educators to discuss it openly with learners. As a matter of fact, *Vision 2016* states that 'The system of education, supported by public campaigns must stress the value of a multicultural society, and the need for tolerance and understanding of the differences between people' (Presidential Task Force for a Long term Vision for Botswana 1997, 73).

As Nyati-Ramahobo (2008a, 2008b) explains, there have been encouraging signs in recent years, indicating a positive attitude, on the part of the government, in favor of a multicultural approach to sociocultural development. She cites the following, among others:

- (a) Increased funding for linguistic associations to support them in hosting cultural festivals.
- (b) The passing of a motion in Parliament in 1995 to review Sections 77–79 of the Constitution (alleged to be discriminatory against the non-Tswana tribes) and the subsequent setting up of a presidential commission, the Balopi Commission of July 2000, to seek public opinion on the matter and to scrutinize further the cited sections causing concern.
- (c) The expressed willingness, on the part of relevant government authorities, to provide mother tongue education to school children in primary school and to include other languages in the curriculum (besides Setswana) when circumstances allow.
- (d) Willingness to register and dialog with ethnically based associations that advocate for the rights (linguistic, cultural, educational, and economic) of minority unrecognized tribes in Botswana. More than a dozen such associations have so far been formed and are now operating under the umbrella organization, Reteng, the Multicultural Coalition of Botswana.

- (e) The holding of consultative meetings with stakeholders and national debates, initiated by the former president of the Republic of Botswana, Festus Mogae, on the institution of chieftainship and representation in the House of Chiefs.
- (f) The government's willingness to engage in dialog with the UN and the international community on issues of multiculturalism insofar as they affect Botswana. Such bodies like the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) were able to raise issues, make recommendations to government on matters of concern and to obtain certain assurances and commitments.

Other encouraging signs of these positive trends include:

1. Reference to the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, folklore, norms, and social values of non-Tswana tribes of Botswana in certain school textbooks, for example, those used in social studies.
2. Research and practical work being carried out by linguists on some of the minority languages: Writing of orthographies, grammar books, and compiling of dictionaries. This is actually encouraged by both the National Policy on Culture and the Botswana National Cultural Council.
3. Participation of government dignitaries and officials, as invited guests, in certain social functions and festivals organized by ethnically based linguistic associations in collaboration with the Department of Culture and Youth.
4. The proclamation of July as heritage month and the holding of competitions among cultural and linguistic groups.
5. In matters of faith and religion, Botswana is quite tolerant as it accommodates various religions: Christianity, Islam, Animism, Mormonism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. In that sense, Botswana can be said to be a multi-faith society. There is freedom of worship.

Multiculturalism and migrant communities: attitudes in society

Migrant communities resident in the country are an integral part of the national community and, in principle, they are entitled to equal and just treatment under the provisions of the law. Their main challenge is to learn to integrate socially in the host society and to be accepted without losing their own cultural identity. In Botswana certain migrant communities, like the Bazeduru (whose total population in Botswana is estimated to be in the neighborhood of 11,000) tend to isolate themselves in some kind of ghetto, shying away from mainstream society, with their own religion, cultural practices, and social values. Similarly, some migrant workers and expatriates of various shades sometimes have little social contact with the local inhabitants, outside the work environment, except, of course, their children who go to school and frequently interact with peers. There are also many temporary residents (including the so-called 'illegal immigrants') who are in the country in search of employment or business opportunities; sometimes pejoratively referred to as 'economic refugees.'

Previous studies on attitudes of locals vis-à-vis foreigners and migrant communities in Southern Africa in general have concluded that the former generally tend to be intolerant and resentful of the latter (Campbell and Oucho 2003; MacDonald and Jacobs 2005; Morapedi 2003; Nyamnjoh 2004). Botswana is no exception. Immigrants from other Southern African Development Community (SADC)

countries, especially those from Zimbabwe, have not always been well-received, as reflected in various media reports and in the Southern Africa Migration Project (SAMP) National Immigration Policy Survey, initiated by the University of Botswana in 2001. Interestingly, this cold attitude and antipathy is not extended to Westerners living in the country. Even the derogatory term for foreigners, *Makwerekwere*, is reserved for fellow blacks from certain African countries.

Some of the reasons suggested for this resentment or hostile attitude and xenophobic reaction, in the context of Botswana, range from the fear of the unknown, unemployment among locals, competition for scarce resources, plain jealousy, and the sentiment of being 'ripped off' in one's own country (Main 2007, 44–45). In some quarters, foreigners and migrant communities are seen as a threat to locals in various ways, like invaders (Lesetedi and Modie-Moroka 2007). With this kind of attitude, it is, quite understandably, difficult for foreigners and migrant communities to blend harmoniously in the host community.

Approaches to the promotion of multiculturalism in Botswana

It is important, at this juncture, to consider briefly the steps being taken to promote multiculturalism in the country today and the key players in this endeavor. In studying efforts to promote multiculturalism in Botswana, a distinction ought to be made between government-sponsored efforts and initiatives taken by civil society or non-governmental organizations. We may include in the former category initiatives taken by government institutions such as schools and institutions of higher education like the University of Botswana.

Government-sponsored efforts

The government has been sensitive to the arguments made by those who advocate for reform and ethnic equality by initiating debates on the issues raised and by setting up the Balopi Commission. As stated earlier, the government has increased its subsidy to linguistic associations to help them in hosting cultural festivals. Increasingly, school textbooks contain materials that relate to non-Tswana ethnic groups (history, traditions, folklore, etc.) and these are integrated in the curriculum. The national vision, as articulated in *Vision 2016* (73), advocates for multiculturalism by encouraging the education system to 'stress the value of a multicultural society.' Willingness to introduce minority languages and mother-tongue education in primary school for non-Setswana L1 speakers has been expressed by some government officials. Mother-tongue Day is celebrated every year in Botswana and all indigenous languages spoken in the country have their place in the celebrations.

The University of Botswana, a semi-autonomous state-funded institution, undertakes various activities which have the net result of enhancing multiculturalism, such as carrying out research in the languages and cultures of various tribes in Botswana and disseminating research findings. There is ongoing work on language codification and dictionary compilation, for instance. Moreover, the university annually organizes a Cultural Diversity Day showcasing talent from various ethnic groups in art, music, and dance as well as displaying variety in food and manner of dress.

Efforts by civil society and non-governmental organizations

Reference has already been made in the foregoing discussion to *Reteng*, the multicultural coalition of Botswana. It is the umbrella organization coordinating the activities of the ethnically based linguistic associations of Botswana agitating for ethnic equality, removal of any laws deemed to discriminate against non-Tswana tribes who are not yet recognized as such in the Constitution of Botswana. Its overriding objective is ‘to promote, nurture and preserve the linguistic and cultural diversity of Botswana’s heritage. . . and to cultivate an appreciation, knowledge and understanding of unity in diversity and the value of tolerance for multiculturalism. . . . To agitate for legal reform in order to create an enabling environment for the recognition and promotion of multiculturalism in Botswana’ (Reteng leaflet to this end, it organizes seminars and workshops for its members as part of an education and sensitization campaign).

Member associations include:

- Society for the promotion of Ikalanga language (for the Bakalanga).
- Kamanakao Association (for the Wayeyi).
- Cisiya Nkulu Trust (for the Basubiya).
- Lentswe la Batswapong (for the Batswapong).
- Babirwa Cultural Group (for the Babirwa).

One association, the Wayeyi Cultural Association or Kamanakao, even challenged the State in the High court over chieftainship issues and their collective right as a tribe to have equal representation in the House of Chiefs by their own chosen paramount chief.

Ditswalelo is the Botswana Centre for Human Rights. It also strongly supports the promotion of multiculturalism and it has actually championed various causes of minority and disadvantaged groups. It has, in particular, been in the forefront in pleading the case for the recognition of non-Tswana tribes and for their equal representation in the House of Chiefs by their own chosen respective traditional chiefs. It is against violations of human rights and opposed to all forms of discrimination: racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and gender.

Current concerns: the bumpy road to multiculturalism

Despite certain positive gains and official pronouncements by some government officials, seemingly in favor of multiculturalism, ethnic equality, and development of minority languages, much still remains to be done, as shown by Chebanne (2002) and Nyati-Ramahobo (2000, 2002, 2003, 2008a), to redress the imbalances and level the playing field. For instance:

- Only Setswana and English are used in the public media (Radio, TV, government newspaper, and magazine), in education and in public domains of communication such as the kgotla.
- Only the eight Setswana-speaking tribes (Bangwato, Bakwena, Balete, Bangwaketse, Batlokwa, Bakgatla, Barolong, and Batawana) have designated and demarcated tribal territories and have group land rights. By design or by default, this renders the other tribes ‘invisible’ on the national scene.

- Only the Setswana-speaking tribes may be represented in the House of Chiefs by chiefs with ex officio status and thus ensure some permanence.
- Government plans for language development are confined to Setswana. It is the only Botswana language that enjoys the attention of educational authorities and it is taught as a subject in public schools.
- The official language policy of the country recognizes only Setswana as the sole 'national language' and (supposedly) 'the language of national unity and cultural identity' (Nyati-Ramahobo 1999).

Conclusion

Scholars who have studied the post-independence policy of Botswana for the social development of her own people have observed that it was assimilationist in intent and outlook. Nyati-Ramahobo (2002, 17–18), for instance, points out, that 'for the past thirty-three years, therefore, the Government of Botswana has worked tirelessly to achieve the ideal goal of a homogenous nation state in which ethnic identities would disappear or would lose significance. For instance, the first President of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama . . . was calling for all tribes which are non-Tswana speaking to assimilate into Tswana speaking groups for economic benefit.' This was of course a negation of multiculturalism. In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable change in attitude on the part of the ruling elite with regard to issues of multiculturalism. Mazonde (2002, 57) explains that this change in attitude has come about as a result of pressure from various quarters.

This article has attempted to show that civil society organizations, the University of Botswana, cultural and linguistic associations, as well as some individual researchers have, in various ways, advanced the cause of multiculturalism in the country. Different approaches have been adopted, such as language research, language codification and norm planning, lobbying, advocacy, and even litigation in the High court.

Notes on contributor

John Lubinda, a Zambian by birth, studied at the universities of Besançon (BA and MA) and Strasbourg (DEA and Ph.D.), specializing in linguistics, phonetics, and phonology. He teaches French language courses as well as courses in the sociocultural aspects of French life. His principal areas of research and publication are phonetics, linguistics, lexicography, teaching French as a foreign language, and intercultural communication. He published a textbook on some aspects of Lozi culture (2001). Moreover, he co-authored six textbooks on Silozi (1995–1996). He has published articles in various journals, such as *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*.

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