

Modern identity as an awkward attribute: tradition goes underground in Southern Africa

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'The anthropology of the (post-)colonial subject in Africa

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1. Introduction

— complement to Prof. Comaroff's paper which (supposedly) was largely on the colonial situation in Southern Africa and the way education played a major role in constituting the colonial subject

— limiting down to a different part of Southern Africa, notably Botswana

— while particular in Southern Africa the colonial period (which in South Africa ended only recently, but elsewhere in the region has been over for 15 to 30 years) made for great uniformity, after independence the various nation-states hived off each in a specific direction

— time of preparation was too short, considering my other commitments, to write a comparative paper

2. Method

Have a brief look at the colonial situation, known on the basis of historical and ethnographic documents and secondary sources

Confront this with the evidence from ongoing field-work in Francistown and the surrounding rural areas since 1988

3. Background

advantage of having Isaac Schapera: classic anthropologist but with a sound mistrust of theory, and enormous ethnographic output, a very keen interest in change, and a strong view of the acting individual as against the emphasis, at the time, on blind structural constraints

characterise Botswana's colonial experience: distant, benign colonialism

qualify this: Ghanzi, Tati: agricultural and industrial (mining) capitalism, land alienation, race relations, colour bar

indirect rule: chiefs very much in appearance, they were the interface between the population and the colonial state, the colonial subject in Botswana was first of all a subject of a chief

to this only Tati represented an alternative

chiefs as tribal innovators (Schapera): much of the historical socio-cultural order of the 18th-19th century was already under explicit redefinition, and was in the course of being abolished, under the influence of these chiefs

the court (kgotla) were their main instrument, very much a judicial outlook of society, the order and the subject

interesting multiplicity of dwelling historical pattern since at least the 18th century: chief's capital, field, cattle-post

extreme reinforcement of ethnicity:

— there were only Tswana chiefs

— these were divided over eight tribes

— Tswana sub-groupings taken for granted by colonial state: Ngwato, Maletse, Tswana, Ngwaketse, etc.

— all other identities subjects to Tswana chiefs of a particular designation, and therefore in theory integrated as equals, in practice as clients (e.g. Kalanga; San or Sarwa)

this also created a particular situation for the Christian churches represented by missionaries: virtual monopoly for a particular church each chief's area, and independent churches bitterly persecuted

except in Tati (= Francistown, the focus of my discussion of the post-colonial situation)

no mineral resources, mainly pastoral, little access to education except among the agricultural Kalanga of the North-East with contact and ethnic identification across the (then) Rhodesian border which was very permeable anyway

main financial (wages from migrant labour), material (commodities, life-styles), religious (independent churches) and political (models of political alternatives and contestation) during the entire colonial period came from South Africa, with which the majority of the Botswana male population (and quite a sizeable part of the female population) had first-hand experience

4. The transformation of the post-colonial subject in Botswana

We shall confront the picture built up about the colonial society with the evidence concerning the post-colonial situation, structuring the latter provisionally in terms of a number of distinct but related topics:

- 4.1. *space*
- 4.2. *time*
- 4.3. *perceptions of power*
- 4.4. *body*
- 4.5. *person*
- 4.6. *organisation and agency*

4.1. space

In terms of space the following transformations occurred:

— border to the North became much more difficult to cross, whereas South Africa and Swaziland formed a customs union with Botswana

— from rural space to urban space (new towns Orapa, Gaborone, or revamped colonial towns Francistown, Lobatse, or exploded tribal capital Mahalapye, Serowe, Molepolole etc.)

but not as a definitive choice but as a further differentiation of the pre-existing pattern of multiple residence; urban dwelling very much coveted both as a residential resource of the extended family (for urban employment, medical treatment and particularly education), but also as a source of cash through renting out

— access to such urban housing greatly expanded by the Self Help Housing Association formulae, which allowed many people, including many young women, to have their own plot in town and pay for its

— the reverse side of this coin: persecution and denial of spontaneous settlements, where people could reproduce rural patterns (e.g. surround themselves with neighbours from home) and rural material structures (the lolwapa)

— the new space also as a context to fill with new meaning by selective acquisition of material goods carrying the marks of a particular life-style and religious orientation: most of the cash wages of working-class inhabitants of Francistown is (through hire-purchase arrangements) put into the acquisition of wardrobes, beds, display cupboards etc.

— different patterns of negotiating privacy and sociability, in urban contexts surrounded by ethnic strangers who had no accepted place in the chief's capital's structure

— life in a spatial grid encompassing villages and town, but less of South African migrancy

— the far greater dominance over life by formal institutions such as schools, hospitals, the army — with their residential and temporary projections

— political space:

- definition of political units
- Freedom Squares in every urban and rural ward

— land boards

like the SHHA boards did they open up venues (venues highly open to manipulation, too) for the acquisition, by individual subjects, of personal space and modest but adequate real estate, in interaction with the institutions of a state which thus was seen as approachable and benign

the appropriation of personalised space goes hand in hand with the virtual denial of a commitment to public space: piles of cans and other garbage, absence of street names even nicknames, lack of public advertisement of informal sector activities including herbalists and churches; a virtual absence of the implicit sacralisation of space which had been part of the village situation — except in the very rare plots occupied by spirit mediums or church leaders

4.2. time

agricultural/pastoral cycle more and more in competition, or downright losing out to,

— patterns of time use in urban settings: jobs, careers, training cycles in formal institutions (school, hospitals, churches)

— differentiation of personal time from family time and agricultural time; although not totally so: many urbanites will continue to pay symbolic visits to the village at the time of planting and harvest — but the ecosystem is declining rapidly

time also political time: articulated between political meetings, annual celebrations of independence, elections,

4.3. perceptions of power

— the courts: from village kgotla to police court, while still maintaining the image of 'our traditional court as the pivot of our judicial and even of our entire social system'

yet even so, the underlying assumptions of a full participation in negotiations and in the hearing of a case can be seen to emulated spontaneously, as the properly Botswana way of handling and retaining tension, in any conflict in institutional settings (labour office, industry, schools etc.)

— the state and through the state: formal institutions

the unexpected relative affluence of the independent Botswana state allowed its government to greatly invest in institutions which during the colonial period had been neglected: education and health. This has had a tremendous impact on the perception of disease and on the restructuring of one's personal life orientation through the supposed blessings of education.

Traditional education in the way of puberty initiation had been largely extant already during the colonial period (with the exception of Mochudi, where it still creates vocal patterns of youth solidarity). But now, with the formal structure of government bodies requiring formal qualifications as conditions of entry for gainful employment, education is really the cargo cult of the Botswana young and not so young.

Likewise, the enormous growth of the medical sector created not only career opportunities especially for young women, but also has led to a very tangible decline of historical, local forms of medicine in the country.

Considering the enormous interest in medical attention the number of traditional medical events is still impressively high, and some traditional doctors do make a good living out of their trade. But many do not. A massive survey I have conducted in Francistown confirmed my impression that the availability and low costs of cosmopolitan medicine had really tilted the scales. Traditional medicine however is still frequently resorted to in cases which are considered very serious or hopeless: AIDS, cancer, mental disturbance, often involving profound fears of attack interpreted in a context of witchcraft. My traditional medical practice with these patients reveals much of their deep-seated fears and commitments which do not easily come out in formal, explicitly anthropological interviews. They strongly suggest that people are aware of the defectiveness and relative impotence of the symbolic system they have adopted since independence; they are struggling for a sense of meaning, redress and anchorage which the race for material acquisition and education cannot offer. In their worst fears, they show signs of interpreting their situation as living on the ruins of a destroyed life-world, and deriving no comfort whatsoever from its recent replacements.

— the place of churches, especially independent churches, and healers/priests: state tries to control them, but they turn a formal face to the state, in compliance with the Societies Act, while privately continuing with what they had always been doing;

thus there are now two independent churches posing as such but in fact forming front behind which the century-old Mwali cult continues to dominate the countryside of Northern Botswana and adjacent countries;

likewise, cultural associations function as professional bodies for traditional healers, protecting them from government interference but also letting them share in government power (in the eyes of the public)

4.4. body

it is around the body that a whole range of new fashions, life-styles and modes of acquisition and modes of status distinction are arranged. From lavish dress styles hopelessly faithfully emulating cosmopolitan (i.e. South African middle-class) patterns, to the consumption of electronic music and images, to a gradual and shocking shift from home-produced to shop-bought food. it is as if the transformations of time and space have deprived the body from a historical, local context, and force it to seek refuge in global forms.

The fact that these forms are rather difficult to acquire except through cash (of which employment is the main source) delivers people then out to formal organisations, where the new patterning of space and time is further reinforced

Independent churches and other, non-Christian cults however, directly confront this development. (Leg uit)

4.6. organisation and agency

— ethnicity: Tswana identity not captured in one political party; BDP (Botswana Democratic party) Ngwato and wider support due to access to capital means in an affluent economy, yet over recent years has seen its majority position gradually crumble
BNF (Botswana National Front): mixed class/age/ethnic support
BPP (Botswana People's Party): mainly regional support, Kalanga

ethnic conflict is now on the increase, Kalanga and San becoming more and more vocal; challenging the constitution which only defines eight Tswana subgroups and no other ethnic identity

but more important is the class conflict of unemployed youth, who see their dreams of education not come true

— political parties
: see above

— churches: zie boven

The emphasis has been, not only on formal organisations controllable by the state (political parties, churches) but also on a particular kind of institutional power, of unaccountable paternalism, which is very much an inheritance of the patterns of political control (both by Whites and by chiefs, both in administration and in industry and forming) of the colonial period.

If one thing is clear it is that the emphatically democratic structure of Botswana, stressed in the constitution and until the early 1990s completely eroded by BDP supremacy and (wherever voter support was less massive) secret political manoeuvring, did not lend real agency to the people in the sense of democratically, from the basis, controlling the conditions of government and the critically testing the conditions for elite hegemony in the Botswana state. The party system, Tswana ethnic and linguistic identity, the cornucopia of health facilities, junior secondary schools and housing, was

there to buy, not to critically involve, the ordinary people, whose awareness of their constitutional rights and alternatives was deliberately kept very low.

5. Conclusion: From political subject to existential subject

IN this respect it can be said that only in the last few years is the post-colonial subject in Botswana really becoming just that