

James Denbow, Penyo C. Thebe. *Culture and Customs of Botswana*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. xxi + 244 pp. No price listed, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-33178-7.



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In its scope and style, this book presents a wholesome interfusion of the panoramic and variegated terrain that is Botswana's heritage of desert dunes, rock outcrops, river valleys, sparse vegetation, periodic rains, treasure troves of precious minerals, all under the stewardship of a people that have fashioned for themselves a brand of democratic governance that is truly all-inclusive, tolerant, and thus able, pragmatically, to accommodate the typically African diversity that its population represents. If the book should be faulted for providing no dictionary definition of "culture" and "customs," then its pages more than compensate for this by the comprehensiveness of the topics that it covers, all the way from the apparently mundane to the decidedly definitional. From pottery to architecture; dance to hunting; education, both traditional and modern; to work, love and marriage, to marital bliss to divorce to death, then to funeral rites; all are premised on the authors' recognition of some religious belief or other as the underpinning ideological lens by which the individual and the community as a whole navigate their paths through life.

Here are some stylistically telling passages from the book, reminiscent of some of the best linguistic representations, of people, manners, and nature, as well as peoples' impact on nature, from the literary canon "[Apart from Setswana] more that 20 other Bantu languages are also spoken in Botswana. These can be divided into two linguistic subdivisions eastern and western Bantu. Speakers of western Bantu languages live in the northwestern sandveld, west of the Okavango Delta. They include the Herero, Mbanderu, with relatives in Namibia and Angola, as well as the Yeyi, who live in the Okavango and the neighboring Caprivi Strip of Namibia. Eighteenth-century oral traditions describe the arrival of Yeyi farmers and fishermen among the Khoisan of the Okavango as being like 'a scattering of flies across a milk-pail' as they migrated southward from the upper Chobe River region" (p. 8).

The simile here is inappropriate only to the extent that it compares the migratory populations to flies that have drowned "in a milk-pail," whereas, although they did not know it then, the people concerned had arrived in an almost literal land of

milk and honey. Otherwise, it is an apposite and pleasing description of that almost primordial scene of multitudes of an as yet incoherent and incohesive group, newcomers to a country known for its expansive, sparsely populated, and largely dry terrains. The vivid graphicness of the simile bears comparison with Virgil's hordes of dead seeking admission into Elysium. "As numerous were they as the leaves of the forest which fall at the first chill of autumn and float down, or as the birds which flock from the ocean-deeps to the shore when the cold of the year sends them in rout across the sea, and sets them free to fly to sunshine lands." [1]

The forced migrations of the Bantu and other peoples before the establishment of contemporary southern African territorial boundaries have here been attributed to the Mfecane wars (p. 28), parallel to the cold that, in Virgil's poem, forced leaves to fall from trees and birds to migrate "to sunshine lands." And what is Botswana partly famous for, if not for her year-round sunshine?

Authors James Denbow and Penyo Thebe continue, "As one moves southward, rainfall gradually decreases from a high of 800 milliliters per annum along the Chobe River in the north to a low of approximately 250 milliliters per annum in the Gemsbok National Park on the southwestern border of the country where windblown sand dunes slowly drift across a dry desert landscape interspersed with brush and grasses. Along the more heavily populated eastern side of the country, tertiary cycles of erosion have removed the overlying mantle of Kalahari sands, exposing more fertile and better-watered soils over a variety of geological substrates that include, near the capital of Gaborone, exposures of some of the oldest rocks on earth. These hardveld soils support most of the country's population" (p. 5). This reads like an advertisement but, being factual, does not titillate the senses with the sometimes-frivolous hyperbole of publicity fliers.

Compare this with Alan Paton:

"There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa. About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the forlorn crying of the titihoya, one of the birds of the veld. Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its way from the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond and behind the river, great hill after great hill; and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand." [2]

Further, as do Denbow and Thebe, Paton sees the symbiotic co-existence between nature and its human inhabitants:

"The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and the mist, and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams in every kloof. It is well-tended, and not too many cattle feed upon it; not too many fires burn it, laying bare the soil. Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed.

Where you stand the grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too many fires have burned it. Stand shod upon it, for it is coarse and sharp, and the stones cut under the feet. It is not kept, or guarded, or cared for, it no longer keeps men, guards men, or cares for men. The Titihoya does not cry here any more.... The great hills stand desolate, and the earth has torn away like flesh. The lightning flashes over them, the clouds pour down upon them, the dead streams come to life, full of the red blood of the earth." [3]

Part of the reason why critics dismiss Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, as patronizing and unempathetic, arises from his failure to acknowledge and project the underlying causes of the environmental degradation that he so evocatively describes. For neither the cattle nor the "arsonists" were too many. Rather, under the insensitive racist laws of Apartheid, whole populations of cattle-rearing and subsistence agriculturalist black people were confined to small pieces of land, where they were overcrowded; whereas their white counterparts were overlords of vast expanses of land divided into paddocks which ensured that there was no overgrazing. Yet the poetic quality, and photographic detail conveyed on the opening page of his novel, interlaced as it is with the lexicon of the local dialect of English and (as in the passages from Denbow and Thebe) with place names both of vernacular and Afrikaans origin, cannot be denied. In both sources of these texts, one factual and the other "fictional," the authors manage to elicit that curiosity in the reader that soon persuades him/her to tour. Those who observe life empathetically soon find the power of words to express that cohesion and coherence which quintessentially defines the Creator's handiwork.

Almost from the outset (p. 22ff) and later in the book (pp. 92-95, 153), the authors focus on the critical topic of traditional gender roles, citing examples from the distant past but which, except in the rural areas, today read like discourses that have no resonance with contemporary practical, lived reality (pp. 22ff, 92-95, 153). For in present-day Botswana, *woman* is fighting back. Note that the book does not, in this context, cover the recent ugly phenomenon of so-called "passion killings," which attest to the woman asserting her right to choose, against an emergent but, for Botswana, uncharacteristic, periodic resort to violence in settling disagreements between partners. Today women own homes and vehicles, and play promi-

nent roles in all sectors of the economy, in education, in industry, and in government.

Before the introductory chapter, the book carries a chronological list of important historical events beginning "40 000 years ago ... in the Middle Stone Age," and running to 2005, when Kenneth Good was deported, the national currency was devalued, a Motswana woman was crowned Nokia's Face of Africa, and "Botswana government officials removed almost all of the remaining Basarwa residents of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve." Although much later the authors mention the fact, Mpule Kwelakgobe's crowning as Miss Universe in 1999 is not included in this list (p. 218).

The first chapter covers the history of the country, its economy, and the role of diamonds in it, one that has seen Botswana achieve some of the highest growth rates in the world, and of agriculture as a source of livelihood for "more than three-quarters of the country's population" (p.2). The authors rightly take cognizance of the government's wise stewardship of the wealth accumulated from mining, as it has clearly identified its priorities by investing in the construction of roads, and providing safe drinking water, as well as health and education facilities for the population, both in the cities and villages throughout this vast country. Other topics covered here are the natural environment and its implications for the country's development, peoples, and languages; population distribution; education; resources; occupation and economy; government; and how it has developed from its traditional roots, where Chiefs played a pivotal role.

The matter of patriarchy in traditional society is highlighted here, where the authors quote a proverb that sanctioned the practice of excluding women from the Kgotla, and thereby from participating in making decisions that vitally affected their lives (p. 22). But while they mention the exceptional "Queen Ntebogang Gaseitsiwe, who stood in as acting chief for kgosi Bathoen 11 ... be-

tween 1924 and 1928" [p.22], the authors seem to be unaware that the Balete, whose tribal capital is a mere thirty-seven kilometers from Gaborone, have a substantive woman Chief, Mosadi Seboko, who is the Leader of the House of Chiefs in the National Assembly. Besides her, there is now a woman Chief for the BaTswana in northwestern Botswana. While the exceptionality of a woman becoming chief was so remarkable that Rogers Molefe wrote a dissertation on Gasitsiwe's interregnum, it seems that Batswana no longer have any qualms about installing women in this critical role, all things being equal.[4]

The rest of this first chapter is devoted to the attainment of independence in 1966, which is then followed by a section headed "History," with sub-sections on "Prehistory," "Early Chieftdoms and Kingdoms," and so on.

This part of the book is in sharp contrast to the "Chronology" in its being placed in *medias res*. The history provides a context in which the present can be read and should therefore come first. Nevertheless, an important issue addressed here is the transformation of Botswana's traditional governance systems to "a modified Westminster framework that established a republic with strong executive, parliamentary, and judicial branches." It is here also noted that "freedom of speech is highly respected in Botswana, and political parties have considerable freedom to critique the government in both Parliament and through independent newspapers and even street corner gatherings (sometimes referred to locally as 'freedom squares'") (pp. 23-24).

In saying that the constitution of Botswana is "a *modified* Westminster framework" and yet still seeing value in it, the authors adopt a pragmatic view of governance systems, which is essential if are going to appreciate the notion of difference in sameness. The ideal of contemporary times is that of constructing a global village of states that subscribe to and practice democracy, but with each defined by its own version of that system neces-

sary for it to be seen and to function as different, different because of its own unique history. To arrive at this ideal requires that we go through a process, rather than simply receive an executive edict. And variety, similar to that in the Creator's handiwork, will be the defining feature of that village, functional only if it parallels the structure found in Nature, of which language is part.

Listen to Edward Sapir when he says of the unity in difference of individual sounds of language, by way of comparison to music, that, "even the most resplendent and dynamic symphony is built up of tangibly distinct musical entities or notes which, in the physical world, flow into each other in an indefinite continuum but which, in the world of aesthetic composition and appreciation, are definitely bounded off against each other, so that they may enter into an intricate mathematics of significant relationships." [5] Note that the modal verb in "so that they may" means that without their distinctiveness, the sounds would not serve any purpose. This is how the individual sounds of language manage to convey meaning at all. That difference between them is not so much one of contradiction as of complementarity in function. Sapir also uses another metaphor in which he sees the relationships among the elements of language as constituting a dance, and which we can extrapolate to those among countries in an ideal world. A step of the foot cannot constitute a dance unless it is viewed in relation to other steps that serve to define the dance.

Botswana is unique because of its brand of democracy. The "Freedom Squares" referred to by the authors are an object lesson to those who come from other parts of this continent. The crowds that fill them up are invited by party officials driving through the streets with loud hailer, and in the most unholy of morning hours, announcing the venue and time of the meeting, and the speakers who will address them and on which issues that vitally affect their lives, issues about which "the government has done nothing," or

words to that effect, if the campaigners are from the opposition. And all this within hearing distance of anyone from the President, the Commissioner of Police, the Commander of the Army, all the way to the most menial of government faithful. Political parties regularly hold such meetings in neighboring spaces, after which their members often gravitate towards the same drinking holes, where they amicably engage in spirited discussions of pressing issues, in sharp contrast to the skullduggery that is the hallmark of political practice elsewhere on this continent. Urban folklore has it that the first President of the Republic, Sir Seretse Khama, would periodically join such opposition gatherings incognito, announcing his presence through interjection only when he thought his government's policies were being misrepresented.

Chapter 2 is a short but comprehensive discussion of the religion and world-view of the various communities in Botswana. It recounts religious beliefs that underpinned individual and communal life prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries, the inevitable initial conflicts between these systems of worship, and the subsequent rapprochement which today has led to almost complete conversion to Christianity among the educated, or has been replaced by some kind of syncretism among others, but with some, particularly in the tradition-bound rural areas, still devoted to worship of the Almighty through the ancestral guardian spirits.

But there are some matters of fact that need highlighting. First, the authors correctly state that the Catholic Church and the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC) are among the most popular, but then erroneously claim that "Anglican, Seventh-Day Adventist, and numerous other small Zionist and Apostolic churches are found in the rural areas along with Methodist, Lutheran, and Dutch Reformed churches" (p. 39). Does this mean that the Anglican and Seventh-Day Adventist churches belong with "numerous other small Zionist ...

churches?" Yet one of the authors is said to be affiliated to the National Museum of Botswana, which is a mere five-hundred meters from the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Cross, a most vibrant and devotedly socially engaged headquarters of several dioceses scattered throughout Botswana. The Lutherans, though in recent years beset with schisms, have a long history of mission in Botswana, and are famous for their specialist Balete Lutheran Hospital in Ramotswa, apart from having many well-supported congregations in the country, as do the equally "popular" Seventh-Day Adventists, who also run a much valued and patronized medical facility in Kanye. Most of these churches hold two services each Sunday, one for English and the other for Setswana speakers and, in the case of the Anglicans, with their three hundred-seat cathedral church full to capacity.

Secondly, while the authors are right to see the ZCC as possibly the biggest church, they curiously state that it has "headquarters in Moria about 800 miles northeast of Johannesburg" (p. 39). This would place Moria way beyond Zimbabwe even. And as for the numerousness of the ZCC's membership and its recognition as a potential source of votes by politicians, the authors might have pointed out that, on the eve of the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the leaders of all the major political parties, including Nelson Mandela of the ANC and F. W. de Klerk of the hitherto dominant and exclusively White National Party, joined the exclusively black pilgrims at Moria, where they occupied prominent seats during the proceedings.

Thirdly, the discussion of the relationship between the Kalanga (p.43) and their guardian spirits is reminiscent of that offered by Fortes [6] about the Tallensi peoples of Northern Ghana, specifically a relationship characterized by hostility through the authors' focusing on the negative. Here they write that among the Batswana "Spirits reveal themselves through droughts, illnesses, or

other calamities and may be appeased through worship," (p. 43), just as Fortes says of the Tallensi that, "The relations between men and their ancestors are a never-ending struggle. Men try to coerce and placate their ancestors by means of sacrifices. But the ancestors are unpredictable. It is by their power to injure and their sudden attacks on routine well-being that they make men aware of them rather than [by] their beneficent guardianship."

In response to Denbow and Thebe, it will suffice to point out, as this reviewer (Pongweni 1996:17) did to Fortes, that "since the totem is inherited from the ancestors, and since through that totem and the praise poem associated with it, the ancestors influence man's fortunes from birth until death, the so-called struggle cannot, by definition, cease. It is the so-called struggle because by highlighting the antagonistic, confrontational aspect of the ancestors' attitude towards their progeny, Fortes distorts the relationship. The ancestors are predominantly provident towards their offspring, and that is the basis of the reverence extended to them." [7] In fact, well-being cannot become "routine" without the continued beneficence of the guardian spirits in their mediatory role between the living and the Creator. They vent their anger on "routine well-being" that is informed by values which are antagonistic to the *modus vivendi* that has survived the tests of time, and which *modus vivendi* remains encapsulated in the proverbial lore of all Bantu communities, including the Batswana.

In the third chapter, the authors turn to literature and media in Botswana. The literature parts naturally focus first on oral traditions, particularly praise poetry and folktales. Their selections are adequately representative of each genre, but, given that culture and traditions in general are their main concern, without much critical examination of either. Further, while proverbs are quoted here, as in many other parts of the book, to illustrate the Tswana and other groups' worldview,

they are also not discussed at length. The one issue to raise here is the authors' observation that, "perhaps because of its complexity of metaphor and detailed historical referents, southern African praise poetry is often overlooked in more general studies of African oral literature where it has 'tended to be ignored, or ... mentioned only in passing under the heading Brief Forms, which is an odd way of classifying such elaborate and lengthy poems'" (p.56).

First, the complex, epigrammatic and historical references that are found in the praise poetry of this region are also to be found in such poetry in all other parts of the continent. This is an index of their orality, their terseness making it easy to commit them to memory, and of the fact that they were composed and performed for what Ruth Finnegan (1970: 352) has termed "a responsive audience." [8] The audience is responsive in the sense that it consists of insiders to the history and manners that have inspired the composer-cum-performer. That is why no individual can claim copyright on these forms. They are like wild fruit, which the Shona of Zimbabwe call *muchero*, "that which belongs to all and to whosoever."

Secondly, it is not quite accurate for Finnegan (1970: 121), as quoted by the authors above, to say that praise poetry from the region "has tended to be ignored." While this may be so in the sense that outsiders had then not conducted as much research on this topic in our region as they had done elsewhere, some seminal work had already been published by local scholars. Consider Marcel Jousse's (1924) *The Oral Style*, G. P. Lestrade's (1935) "Bantu Praise Poems," B. W. Vilakazi's (1938) "The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu," H. I. E. Dhlomo's (1947-48) *Zulu Folk Poetry*, and Trevor Cope's (1968) *Izibongo Zulu Praise-Poems*. These publications were in turn to serve as models for subsequent work on the praise poetry of other languages in the region Daniel Kunene's (1971) most insightful *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho*, A. C. Jordan's (1973) ground

breaking *Towards an African Literature The Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*, and A. C. Hodza and George Fortune's (1979) pioneering and definitive *Shona Praise Poetry*, which in turn inspired my own (1996) *Shona Praise Poetry as Role Negotiation The Battles of the Clans and the Sexes*. All this is evidence of a continuous engagement by researchers in the region and in the light of which the earlier claims about this genre being ignored cannot be sustained.

The rest of this part of the chapter is devoted to the writings of early missionaries and colonial officials, and to the emergent literature in English by both local and outside authors, with particular attention to Bessie Head, Alexander McCall-Smith, Unity Dow, Barolong Seboni, Andrew Sesinyi, Moteane Melamu, and others. The point is made that the work of Batswana artists "is less widely published and so difficult to obtain internationally" (p. 68), whereas that of McCall-Smith "has made Botswana well known in the West" since his "books have generated great interest in Botswana culture and tourism, and some safari tours now advertise that 'visitors can come and have tea on the hotel veranda of the President Hotel where Precious Ramotswa first met her fiancé, Mr. Matekoni'" (p. 56). As far as the Batswana writers' fate is concerned, the situation described by the authors is a classic example of the prophet not being lionized among his own people. Where literature is concerned, it is nations themselves that make their own heroes, by buying, reading, teaching, and talking about it, before it assumes pride of place in the international canon. This is not always the case with many nations in our region, Botswana included. It means that none of the above-mentioned local writers and others can make a living out of their work, especially when their books are not on the school syllabus, and when some education systems do not offer literature at school level at all. So there is no reading culture, particularly reading for pleasure. Writers such as McCall-Smith thus owe their success largely to their own home readership, in a reversal of

the fate of the prophet. Here the university, and this is not unique to Botswana, is partly to blame, since Literature departments rarely prescribe books written by serving colleagues.

The sections on various aspects of the media are comprehensive, and focus mainly on freedom of expression, which in Botswana is not as constrained by government as in other countries. However, this reputation for an unfettered press leaves one wondering whether, besides the country's traditional democratic credentials, the fact that Sir Ketumile Masire, who was in the thick of the struggle for independence and subsequently became the first Vice-President of the country before assuming the presidency, had himself been a leading journalist, has something to do with the current conducive dispensation under which the media operate. Whatever the explanation, the point still has to be made that it is a matter of wonderment that there remains no apparent threat to freedom of expression in the media even though the newspapers in this country regularly gratuitously sensationalize issues they report on, or simply get the facts wrong, yet without any instances of litigation arising therefrom.

The fourth chapter, as do all the others, begins with a framing quotation from some author who came into contact with the Batswana either in the distant past or in more recent times. Here John and Jean Comaroff (1997) are quoted as attributing to nineteenth-century evangelists the view that, "a residence with no internal divisions," such as those of the Batswana of the time, "no rooms given over to particular kinds of activity, signified savagery," by contrast to one "with living and dining rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, pantries," which "might give access to the Mansion of the Almighty" (p. 79). In the matter of art and architecture therefore, as in other spheres of their lives, the worldviews of the natives and of the newcomers gazed at each other with incomprehension across the cultural divide.

Further, whereas the Westerner had a clear distinction between art and craft, Denbow and Thebe point out, the Batswana did not. The aesthetic and the functional aspects of an object were and still are fused in a continuum along Keats's Grecian urn, "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever." The discussion of basketry among the Batswana is indeed a joy to read, for that empathetic accuracy and detail that insider knowledge of topic rarely inspires the observer to convey successfully (p. 83). This pictorial accuracy is especially so if one reads the authors' description here along with viewing Paul Rantao's illustrations.[9] The same holds true when it comes to Denbow and Thebe's discussion of pottery. The names of pots, which are linked by their shapes and sizes to function, are parallel to those found among the Shona of Zimbabwe. But an even more educative revelation to me, which the authors mention as if in passing, is the custom among the Batswana by which the mother passes on the art of making pots to her daughter. It had never occurred to me why, in order to accuse a woman of practicing witchcraft without incurring the wrath of the law, the Shona say "She moulds pots," in a culture that "knows" that witchcraft is inherited from the mother's side of the family.

There are sections on many other arts and crafts of Botswana, including weaving, woodwork, and so on. But the one on beadwork stands out as a gem in its informativeness and delicacy of expression (p. 86). The section on contemporary arts provides ample evidence of generous government, non-government organization, and private sector support of this aspect of Botswana culture and traditions.

Both the demographic and logistical structuring of the traditional village in well-defined enclosures occupied mainly by kith and kin with their chief served to enhance a sense of belonging and security (p. 91ff). The authors contrast this to the settlement patterns in modern urban settings, where one's neighbors could be as remotely relat-

ed to one as aliens from space. On this matter, the authors could have included one means by which solidarity to the village was manifested on the streets and highways of Botswana not so long ago. For it seems that government may have initially but perhaps unintentionally catered for citizens' nostalgia for the old ways through a vehicle registration system that was abandoned only a few years ago. Vehicles registered in a specific administrative district had a distinctive letter of the alphabet coming after "B" for "Botswana." For example, BA was for those registered in the area with Francistown as the headquarters, while BD was for Gaborone. This made it possible for a perfect stranger to greet another with "Dumela Morolong,"—"Greetings, you of Barolong origin."

Apart from their discussion of what made the dwellings of Batswana architecturally distinctive, the authors also remark on the division of labor in their construction, with "women play[ing] the largest role" and "men contribut[ing] labor by cutting poles needed for the wall and roof supports, but women ... responsible for cutting, laying down and tying the grass on to roofs, collecting and mixing in proper proportions water, earth, sand, and fresh cattle dung; and plastering this mixture onto walls and floors and the outdoor lolwapa"(p.95). This history serves to put what happens today into perspective for the newcomer to Botswana. For if this division of labor at building sites was at some point in time to be found in neighboring states such as Zimbabwe, then the Western model must have been imposed there long before the attainment of independence. There, women do not engage in strenuous construction work beyond plastering floors and cutting roofing grass.

A significant feature of contemporary housing discussed here is that of the security of the home in the urban context, where the outdoor lolwapa has been replaced by concrete walls, burglar bars and alarms, to fend off what the authors call "rampant crime." But their comment that the police do not always respond expeditiously to dis-

tress calls from victims of crime, "They usually take hours, if not days," is rather sweeping and hyperbolic (p. 102). When this does happen here and in other countries in the region, it is often due to the police being overstretched or not having enough vehicles to respond as expected, and not to some unprofessional work ethic.

An exception in my experience of this is the case of a female colleague at another university who, on pay day had her money stolen from her office. When she called the local police station, she was asked whether she had any suspects. She replied that she suspected the male office cleaner who was still on the premises, and the policeman at the other end asked her to tell the suspect to come to the phone, because the police station did not have a vehicle available at the time!

The chapter on cuisine and traditional dress is comprehensive in its coverage of important aspects of both areas. It is correctly pointed out that food and dress are the most definitive indices of cultural distinctiveness. What they eat and how they dress, as opposed to what we eat and how we dress, have often been taken by anthropologists as reliable markers of difference between peoples. And even today when the Batswana have become acculturated, the authors observe, they still have not lost their taste for things traditional, both in food and dress. But, where food is concerned, one wonders about the extent to which the fetishism surrounding the proscription on children eating certain parts of an animal or bird, apparently prevalent in traditional Botswana society and in our region, is still in force. For the authors state that children used to be denied the tongue of an ox, "lest they become 'talkative' or 'liars'" (p. 113). Among the Shona it is the chicken gizzard, intimidatingly called "chikangamwahama," or "the forgetter of relatives." As children we were told that if we ate it we would forget who our relatives were, but especially our mother, and that in a society which "knows" that mother is supreme. A person who does not provide for mother is dis-

missed as behaving like, "one who ate the gizzard."

The chapter on gender roles, marriage, and family is prefaced by quotations from the writings of people who studied this aspect of Botswana life in 1806 and 1997 which, despite the nearly two hundred years separating them, seem to be describing a community in stasis. Yet later Denbow and Thebe focus on developments that have seen Batswana appropriate many cultural paraphernalia in their contacts with peoples of other cultures, and this to varying degrees depending on which of the many groups that make up Botswana's multiethnic population they belong to, and on where, in this vast land, they come from.

The topics covered include the bride wealth and polygamy in the history of the Batswana, and how these have changed in contemporary times; betrothal; the wedding in both traditional and modern settings; the married household; and the fact that the marriage establishes a relationship not so much between a man and his wife as between their two families. Among the Shona this is reflected in their reference to the woman as "the wife of sub-clan X," and to the man as "the son-in-law of sub-clan Y," "of" in the sense of belonging and placed or placeable by reference to X or Y, thereby defining and identifying the couple by their acquired status. Note that the material on bride wealth beginning at page 136 is repeated verbatim at pages 145-146 under "Customary or Traditional Marriage."

The section on death and family continuity provides information that has often made outsiders view the bride wealth as the purchasing price for the bride paid by the bridegroom (p. 154). For among the Batswana as among other Bantu peoples, a widow might, and was expected to become the wife of one of her late husband's relatives and, with the Batswana, the children born of this union were called "children of the [bride wealth] cattle." This literally suggests that the widow's parents owed cattle to their in-laws.

But for those who practice it, the essence of this social, and not commercial, transaction lies in the metaphorical and symbolical domains.

In agreeing to their children's marriage, the parents intrinsically acknowledge the inevitability of their own eventual death as mortals, but celebrate the prospect of continuity immanent in marriage leading to offspring. Otherwise, why would it be the done thing in matrilineal communities for the woman's family to pay dowry? In patrilineal ones the man provides the bride wealth as a token of appreciation since the children from the union will assume his name. It should not be forgotten that the bride's father is also son-in-law to his wife's parents. The Shona disabuse the son-in-law of the notion of purchase by telling him at the outset that it is only the woman's legs that now belong to him, but that her head remains theirs for eternity. Perhaps because, when it comes to identifying a person, the head and the face are the person's fingerprint! That means that her parents see the continuity of their lives after death through both their daughters' and sons' offspring. For the English metaphor "a chip off the old block," the Shona say of the parent "S/he gave birth to himself," and with their eyes focused on the child. The relationship of consanguinity between her parents and the woman is not severed by her marriage to an outsider.

In their discussion of marriage and child bearing, the authors present an ideal sequence of rituals. We are left asking the question, "what happens when the marriage is not complemented by offspring due to the impotence of either party?" Among the Shona, for example, the death of the husband is not the only reason why young brothers "come into the house." If the senior members of the family come to the conclusion that it is their son who is impotent while, to all intents and purposes, his wife is a good woman, they arrange for one of his brothers to enter the house, a practice called *kupindira*, an ambiguous expression. It translates "to enter for" or "to enter

with the purpose of." In the first sense it means the young brother is acting on behalf of the older, whereas in the second it announces that the woman is his target. This is done when the hapless husband has been sent on an important errand some five-days' walk away. The seniors justify this by saying of him, "after all, he never committed a crime when he was a bachelor." That is, he did not "sow his wild oats when he was still a bachelor," which normally led to the payment of damages to the parents of the girl made pregnant by one who subsequently refused to marry her.

The chapter on social customs and lifestyle foregrounds the miracle of an African state characterized by a complex ethnic diversity, and yet with each group bound by loyalty to *nation*, a loyalty buttressed by each having access to the benefits of a democratic dispensation, such as unfettered voting rights, social services including education, health facilities, housing, and so on, all these in a country where transport and communication networks are continuously being extended from the main centers to the remotest areas. President Mogae is quoted as having used the analogy of "scrambled eggs" to describe the unity in diversity that his country's demographics represent, but which the authors think is not as expressive as their suggested "salad bowl," because in the latter "the ingredients retain their distinctiveness even as they are incorporated into the same salad" (p. 162). Are we not splitting hairs here? What about Archbishop Tutu's "rainbow nation?"

The chapter is prefaced by a quotation from John Comaroff (2002) writing about Botswana that, "beneath its surfaces, hiding in the light of everyday life, lies a world of enduring fascination, a world of quiet cultural depth in which indomitable people fashion coherent, meaningful lives, shoring up their meager material resources by seeking to create social wealth"(p.161) From personal experience, I have come to calling it the Botswana "national temperament." They are a non-excitabile people, unwilling to react before

making a considered assessment of a development, but decisive and uncompromising, once they have weighed the issues. An anecdote will do here. While waiting to be served at a foreign embassy recently, I saw a notice in the reception hall to the effect that "Gentle words have more force than crescendos of indignation," which could have been an apposite motto for this country. Yet the diplomat who was attending to a Motswana at that point was being anything but polite. After he had had enough of this, the by now incensed customer read the words above with a pitch that gradually rose to just this side of screaming point.

But this chapter is not an unbridled glorification of Botswana society. In the section on greetings, the authors correctly point out that the ethnic and racial stereotyping, which historically manifested themselves even in differential dress based on social stratification, are still to be found here (p. 163). Yet they themselves are in danger of being accused of stereotyping when, after observing that, "Generally, Batswana are friendly and welcoming," they qualify this with "although in towns and cities one must keep an eye out for pickpockets, thieves, and troublemakers, sometimes known as *tsotsi*" (p. 167). I find this juxtaposition of the good and the evil about Botswana rather indelicate and capable of misleading. In fact the word *tsotsi* is of South African origin. Towns and cities the world over have their own secret underbellies. But Botswana is not anywhere near being the crime capital of the world. It was John Steinbeck who wrote, in one of the philosophical and didactic parts of *East of Eden*, and in recognition of postlapsarian human failings that, "Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite changes we may impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners.... evil must constantly re-spawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a fresh new face, while virtue is venerable

as nothing else in the world is" (my emphasis). [10]

The exchange of greetings has a greater significance for Batswana than what sociolinguists call "phatic communion," such as the English "How are you?" said when in fact the speaker has no immediate interest in the other person's health. To greet someone is to announce that you have no evil intentions towards them, and so when you arrive at a place you say "Dumela!" to those you find there. Otherwise they will not co-operate, as when you go into a shop and you ask to be served before you have greeted the shop assistant. For the word *dumela* comes from the verb *duma*, or "sound," "make the sound of thunder," as if to say, "let me hear you make a sound which tells me that you are alive and well." You would not say this if you were about to crush your interlocutor's skull. One day while jogging through the streets of Gaborone just before sunrise, a man met a lone woman walking through a forlorn and overgrown patch of the city. On seeing him approach, she froze where she was, her eyes bulging and her body aquiver with fright. But she underwent a magical transformation into a cheerful and friendly person on hearing his "Dumela mma!" to which she heartily responded "Dumela rra!" before proceeding on her way.

But while it is true that people in northern Botswana employ the honorific plural "You" when greeting an older person, while southerners use the singular, it is not correct to say that the Setswana equivalents are distinguished by tone, since "Le" and "O" are both pronounced with a low tone (p. 168). And the authors call the first pronoun "third-person", whereas it is, like the other one, "second-person."

The last chapter is on music, dance, and theater. These Botswana arts elicited much the same reaction from the missionaries and other newcomers to the country as those of other African countries. As Paul Berliner has reported, their response to the music of the natives of Zimbabwe

was the dismissive, "All they have is rhythm." [11] Here this attitude is parallel to J. Chapman and E. C. Tabler writing of Bamangwato music and dance in 1849-1863 that, "the only musical instruments the bechuanas (sic) have are reeds, monotonous and discordant at their moonlight music dances, and a musical bow" (p.191) The authors here observe that because of "missionary activity, colonial censure, and the impact of radio, television," and other factors, "the drums, flutes, songs, and traditional chants of religious prayer and thanksgiving ... are now largely silent" (p.191) Where religion is concerned, uncompromising Christian doctrine has led to the emergence of indigenous Christian churches practicing a hybrid, golden mean religion in valleys and on hill tops, places removed from the center. Yet dance and music were inseparable elements of traditional religious practice, and they served to define the individual, so much so that, as the authors observe, even today a Motswana asks another, "What do you dance?" in order for the addressee to say what his/her totem is.

This chapter is rich in the range of topics it covers and because of its empathetic treatment of each. It has sections on traditional musical instruments, both percussion and wind; traditional rites that incorporate music and dance, all the way to modern folk music, kwaito, jazz, kwasa kwasa, rock, and street music. But while the section on theater is also educative, it omits the sterling work of Victor Mtubani, for more than a decade the energetic and prolific Director of the University of Botswana's Traveling Theater (UBTT) before Patrick Ebewo, whose recent work the authors acknowledge. Mtubani wrote four of the twenty or so plays that he directed, all four of which have now been published by Vilvia Publishers in South Africa. During his tenure, he and his colleagues had the UBTT perform at various schools in the country. They also took UBTT to Zimbabwe and Namibia, on each occasion staging performances at a number of venues in different cities. The end of each season was marked by performances at

Tsholofelo Hall, and with the President of the Republic attending each without fail. Because of this public endorsement of his work, and because of his dedication to socially responsive academic engagement, Mtubani is Chief Judge at the annual inter-schools drama competitions, which came into being partly due to the work of UBTT. Further, the annual Maitisong Cultural Festival is given due coverage here. But because it is preceded by many months of preparation, the names of David Slater and Mhlanga, the cogs in the theater and music engines, respectively, need to be highlighted in a study such as this.

For something exceptionally delicious and welcome, whether food or fortune, the Shona say, "This is the essence of honey, (unintentionally) mixed with grains of sand." That is how the minor editorial slips in this book have to be viewed. The effort to separate the little amount of sand from the honey using the tongue itself "tastes" delicious. Overall, this book is a welcome addition to the literature on Botswana, and is destined to occupy pride of place, in both public and private libraries, among works that serve to articulate this country's efforts to make a contribution to the construction of a global village that is truly cohesive, being herself a model of the efficacy of the ideal of co-existence underpinned by unity in diversity. There have been some strident denunciations of Botswana's governance in recent times, which clearly ignore the fact of arriving at the ideal through a process rather than by presidential edict. Experience has shown that, even in relatively small institutions such as universities, implementation of declarations of intent, such as those enshrined in a country's constitution, is often responsive to circumstances not previously anticipated. "What a pity that the provisions in this document have to be implemented by human beings!" commented my senior colleague, Professor Marshall Murphrey, after we had revised a document setting out the conditions of service for academic staff at the University of Zimbabwe. The parallel at national level is the amendment of

laws that, at the time of legislation, seemed to breathe eternal life.

Notes.

[1]. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1956; 1966 reprint), book 6: 305-316.

[2]. Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948): 1.

[3]. Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*.

[4]. Rogers Molefe, "The Regency of Chieftainness Ntebogang of the Ngwaketse 1924-1928" (B.A. diss., Gaborone University of Botswana, 1980).

[5]. Edward Sapir, "Language," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York Macmillan, 1933), vol. 9: 155-169; reprinted in David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Edward Sapir Culture, Language, and Personality Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970): 4-5.

[6]. Myer Fortes. *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945): 145.

[7]. Alec Pongweni, *Shona Praise Poetry as Role Negotiation: The Battles of the Clans and the Sexes*(Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996): 6-7.

[8]. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry in Africa*(London: Clarendon Press, 1970): 121, 352.

[9]. Paul Rantao, *Setswana Culture and Tradition*(Gaborone: Pentagon, 2006).

[10]. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (London Pan Books, 1963): 391, 393.

[11]. Paul Berliner, "Political Sentiments in Shona Song and Oral Literature," in *Essays in Art and Science* 6, no. 1 (1977): 5.

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