History in Danger: The (non) Quest for a National History in Botswana

Lily Mafela
Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education
University of Botswana

Abstract

The socio-political context for history teaching in postcolonial Botswana did not provide for multicultural history approaches, and in fact it discouraged multiple approaches to national history. One of the ways in which the government sought to do this was through constant discouragement of what was regarded as tribalism, and an emphasis on a monolithic, monoethnic and homogenous national history. Part of this has to do with the government policy and practices that propound and subscribe to a monoethinic and monolingual society and education system, where history's role in that education system has been to tow the monoethnic line and to present a singular view of the country's origins and evolution. In all syllabi in the formal education system, national history is presented as a singular one, with the predominance of a Tswana ethnicity as the national curriculum's defining characteristic. This situation is deeply embedded in history, and reflects the social tensions that are generally being articulated in the wider society, particularly by minority groups, which are dissatisfied with the total neglect of their histories, cultures, and traditions. Hence, as communities continue to reflect on their place in Tswana society, the history syllabus will become highly contestable ground, and requires a rethinking and repackaging in order to avoid this pitfall. This paper seeks to explore the historical dimension of this current scenario, and reflects on curricula control and urges a rethinking on the question of a national history within the multiethnic and "multi-historied" Botswana.

Introduction

Following independence, the newly independent state of Botswana became concerned with nation-building, whereby it sought to forge a united, monolithic nation within the new nation state. In this regard, the country's leaders were particularly keen to tackle the issue of

tribalism, which was regarded as a threat to a singular nationhood. Due to the historical developments hitherto, there was indeed a general manifestation of tribalism, which had increasingly festered during the period of colonial rule. The colonial government however, had merely exacerbated and entrenched existing tribal differences through their system of indirect rule policy. Indirect rule relied on a collaborative partnership with established structures of rulership, which depended on the use of *dikgosi,* or traditional leaders. The Indirect rule system that was adopted by the colonial government relied mainly on the use of *dikgosi* to rule their people, to ensure stability and continuity. It was a cheaper alternative, and it was potentially quite efficient as it relied on use of existing channels of power and control.

The colonial government recognized only eight principal ethnic groups, which had been given prominence by various colonial practices and policies.[1] Although they were a colonized people and had many of their powers circumscribed,[2] *dikgosi* were partners to, and collaborators with the colonial government. The division of Batswana land into reserves further consolidated this state of affairs, as it re-legitimized the control and authority of Batswana principal groups over the "subject" groups, where the latter was placed under the custodial over-lordship of the former. Up until 1934 when *dikgosi* powers were curtailed, the latter had enjoyed a period of relative and collaborative engagement with the colonial government, where few if any stops were placed on their rulership of other *merafe*. Following the report of the Masarwa Commission set up to investigate the general treatment of Basarwa, chiefly rule was generally unfettered.

Following attainment of independence, this state of affairs was entrenched and given legitimacy by the type and nature of policies, which were adopted by the government. Essentially, the government sought to forge a nation around the concept of a singular Tswana ethnicity, in conformity with the idea of a single state or nation of Botswana.

1 For example, the colonial government had elected to apportion land according to a system of reserves, which were assigned to particular chiefs of the recognized (usually numerically) superior ethnic groups. This system had no inbuilt provision for recognition of groups that were either had no chiefs (Basarwa), or which were otherwise regarded as "subject" groups even if they had distinct areas of their own land, disctint cultures, traditions and histories. They were simply all lumped for administrative convenience, and all deliberations were conducted with "principal dikgosi".

2 Proclamations number 34 and 35 were particularly far-reaching in terms of changes hitherto unfettered powers of dikgosi.

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ethnic identities were submerged by and subsumed under a common "Tswana[3]" identity.[4 5]

It was in the education system generally, and the history curriculum in particular where the effects of these policies were manifested. These broader societal ideals were translated into the education system.[6] The new nation state was geared towards the goals which were identified as unity, self-reliance, democracy, development and social harmony. The social studies syllabus particularly was re-oriented to reflect this concern, as well as to specifically serve the wider socio-political needs of the newly independent state, which centered on the notion of a common Tswana identity. These needs reflected an interpretation of the deficiencies of the colonial education system and colonial curricula, whilst seemingly discouraging manifestations and expressions of separate ethnic-based identities. Henceforth, both the content and emphasis of the social studies and history curricula came to reflect this thinking. This is the background which partly explains the evolution of history as a school subject in Botswana, and against which we should partially endeavor to understand its current status. It is necessary to give a brief background of the changes that have occurred in the Botswana education system, to tease out the core issues of concern of the two post-colonial commissions of education, within which we can situate the history syllabus and history teaching scenario.

The concern of the first commission on education therefore, was the eventual realization of social harmony-kagisano, which name became reflected in that commission's report Education for Kagisano". The four national principles of democracy, self-reliance development and were all designed to work towards achievement of social harmony. Hence, the teaching of subjects across the curriculum reflected, and was geared towards this target, and hence formed part of that menu.

3 The word Batswana has two meanings. The first meaning relates to the groups which speak the seTswana language. This refers to the groups which share a common ancestry that can be traced back to their founder father, Masilo. They comprise mainly Bakwena, Bangwaketse, Bangwato, Batawana, and include Bahurutshe, Barolong and Bakgatla. The word also has another meaning, which is derived from the country name Botswana, in which sense it refers to the people of the country of Botswana (See attached map of location of various Batswana groups).

4 There are other ethnic groups in Botswana who make up the collective Batswana, such as Babirwa and Batswapong whose ancestry is linked more to Bapedi, as well as Bakalanga, Basubia and Bambukushu

5 The fact that the country was named boTswana clearly illustrates this point.

6 This tallies well with the view that educational problems and movements are a reflection of social changes" (Boyd Bode, p 25, quoted in J. Stephen Hazlett, in Conceptions of Curriculum History, Curriculum Inquiry, 9:2 (1979).

On another occasion he observed that:

> Our (secondary) schools tend to be Botswana in miniature. That is to say they are multi-tribal communities. It is therefore essential that our children should not be exposed to influences which might lead them to place tribe before country…But let us all recognize the value of all the different elements which together make up the culture of our nation because they are equally part of our national heritage and we should be proud of our diversity, proud that different tribes and cultures can live together in the spirit of Kagisano.

Hence, social harmony was to be achieved at the expense of articulation of diversity. The use of seTswana as a medium of instruction[7] was part of the grand scheme, which aimed at nation building. SeTswana became both the medium of instruction and the second national language to English. In one of his numerous national appeals for a united Tswana nation, the first President of Botswana Sir Seretse Khama urged that:

While we must all appreciate the value of each other's language and culture, we have rightly made Setswana a compulsory subject in all our schools for all our citizens, irrespective of race or tribe. We cannot afford to educate leaders who cannot communicate with the majority of our people in a language they understand…

Forging nationhood was necessarily fostered through a monolingual medium of instruction. While English was the official language, and the medium of instruction in varying degrees in the education system. Setswana was the national language and the medium of instruction in lower level classes. In this scenario, open expression of diversity was strongly sanctioned in all official and sociopolitical discourse. Sir Seretse Khama again stated:[8]

It becomes a threat to the stability and security of our state when it is carried to the point when a man in a responsible position thinks of himself as a tribesman before he thinks of himself as a Motswana.

This stance on language, also filtered down to curricula processes, especially that of humanities and socio-culturally inclined subjects such as history. The unified stance against "foreign" influences on the Botswana curriculum was only equaled in measure by the strong

7 Up to the late 1990's, seTswana still served as the medium of instruction up to Standard 4, which marked the last year of the lower primary level. It is currently the medium of instruction up to the second term of Standard 1, after which English takes over.

8 Botswana Gazette 11th October, 2000, p.10.

sanction against anything that might have looked like diversity on the socio-cultural or historical front. For this reason, the Botswana history syllabus has never articulated a need for teaching diverse histories, because the official view is that Botswana history is a singular history, thereby subsuming the histories of diverse peoples and cultures within a monolithic and hegemonic historical perspective. This has basically continued into the present syllabus orientation, which was informed by the findings of the second national commission on education.

History within the education system in the globalizing world

The report of the second Education Commission highlighted the concern of the education system with global competitiveness and socio-cultural relevance.[9] The needs of society had shifted and changed in many ways since the first commission was undertaken. That is, it was important to build on and strengthen the earlier foundation, and quality and relevance were still regarded highly. However, the in the new dispensation, educational quality and relevance came to be judged on the basis of narrowly conceived and skewed nationalistic objectives.

The question is, to the extent that history teaching should form an integral part of a national curriculum, to what extent is it being enabled to do that? There are two main points to make here. The country started well and had a sense of the role of history. This role was geared towards serving both nationalistic purposes, as well as curricula needs, where history was also supposed to play a complementary role to other subjects. The way in which the history curriculum evolved shows that a whole lot more emphasis has been placed on the academic side of things and a whole less attention has been placed on the "inclusive history" side of things. This distinction is crucial to make as the two objectives are not necessarily mutually inclusive. This is not somehow suggesting that the quest for an inclusive history should overshadow the teaching of historical skills, because that is always paramount.

My contention is that while people do understand and they do make a lot of speeches made in the public domain, which reflect an awareness that history is important as a documentation of our past, that it is an important repository of people's unique histories, customs, values, of

9 As enunciated in the National Commission on Education, 1993.

our traditions, which they profess to hold dear, this is not matched by an awareness of a direct link between the importance of history as subject in the national curriculum and its teaching of diverse histories. Hence, there is a general absence of public course over the importance of history as a school subject, and what its teaching should entail pedagogically. However, there is need to delineate the purpose of its teaching, particularly in relation to highlighting its importance as a nation building tool that recognizes and acknowledges diversity.

This may be due to the laissez faire manner with which the country has approached history generally, and as a school subject in particular. This laissez faire attitude is partly linked to the socio-political genesis of the Tswana nation, as previously alluded. Botswana's colonial past is largely bloodless, and the country's independence was achieved peacefully, as set against other colonial pasts, where nationalistic upheavals and wars of independence provide a nationalistic basis for reconciliation through reflections of their social diversity. For example, South Africa's Curriculum 2005 was predicated upon an inclusive and wholly embracing education system, at least in theory, but one that was a direct reflection of, and articulated acknowledgment of diversity. In the United Kingdom, there is open and varied discourse around the question of inclusive history, particularly the histories of minority groups, such as specifically that of Blacks.[10]

The examples given here are of countries that have come full circle, the countries that have come around to acknowledging that history's role and scope have to be wider, and has to reflect not only the pedagogical objectives, but should also be more reflective, and more in tune with society's pulse. In this way, they should necessarily have to acknowledge diversity. History then should be viewed, and must be allowed to play this role as an important platform for articulation of diversity. However, in order to do so, there should be enough public discourse generated around it to give it the necessary platform to re-launch itself as an inclusive and relevant subject, from a socio-cultural perspective. This will not only comprehensively serve the nationalistic ideal but will also be good for the survival of the subject in the school system. When history becomes more in tune with the way society evolves and when it gets to be more in tune with the changing political economy, and the socio-cultural

10 See for example, Rozvina Visram, "British History, Whose History?", in Hilary Bourdillon, Teaching History, and Andrew Wren, "History and National Identity",

discourse-and hence when it reflects political correctness, it will attain better relevance. The delineation of the parameters of this relevance needs to be a joint endeavor between the various stakeholders-history practitioners such as historians, history educators, syllabus developers, history teachers, the public in its varied forms, as well as the media and the legislators who should be brought on board to appreciate this.

In acknowledging the point, one writer noted that:

> So it is in no spirit of caricature that I say that school history now stands in need of a fundamental rethink as far-reaching as the one that the SCHP undertook thirty two years ago. Why? Firstly, because change is coming whether we like it or not. Change in education does not usually come from teachers; it comes from those with power and influence in the quarters where it matters: MPs, journalists, public commentators, and so on.

This engagement is important because part of the problem of delineating "history's relevance" has to do with the fact that the parameters and criterion for it have never been debated publicly. It is important to acknowledge, however that this can only be a continuous process of reflection rather than a onetime event served by some sort of all encompassing process or document. This is due to the fact that in its nature, historiography is dynamic, revisionist, depending upon (incorporation of) new findings, new ways of looking at old data, ideological underpinnings of knowledge. But it needs to always be responsive to needs of the society it is based on n order to maintain its relevance, and thereby to ensure that it credible and is able to sustain itself. We need some standards of measure, but the standards will need continual revision and adjustment in line with those things, which the society holds dear and integral to it. This will entail being quite specific about what content areas and emphasis, which should be in line with forging of an inclusive nationhood.

Control of education

The nature of educational control in Botswana further diminishes the chances of having flexible approaches to the syllabus. Whilst in other countries such as the UK and South Africa there is a measure of local variation of historical content, the Botswana curriculum is centrally controlled. All curricula decisions are made by the Ministry of Education

and teacher representation in syllabus formulation is minimal.[11] Even then, the curriculum proceedings and syllabus discussions are largely driven by a predetermined policy, at least in terms of the general ethos of the syllabus. Hence, syllabus content remains outside the purview of many teachers and communities in which they function. For a subject such as history which is closely linked to people's origins and identities, the danger is that its relevance for the lives of learners cannot be immediately apparent. In this way it may actually alienate minority communities and learners from these contexts from selecting the subject out of a menu of several options.[12]

Comparison with other contexts

There has been along history of dialogue about inclusion of minority historical experiences in Britain (Visram 1994; Wrenn 1996) . But even there the debate is far from over, as attested to by recent studies on this subject (See Wrenn, 2001). Even in that context, the dominant ideologies still loom large, and dislodging them is easier in rhetoric than in reality. Even when it is generally agreed on the principle of teaching varied historical views, the practical implementation of such a program proves extremely difficult, in terms of what to include of the previously excluded and how much to include of the socio-cultural diversity, bearing in mind the need for selectivity that is central to historical writing and teaching, since everything cannot be included, as well as balancing contending views on representation. Whilst the school curriculum can be used to correct past mistakes, if care is not taken it can also be a site for not only ideological abut real conflict (See Wrenn 2001), where it can easily give rise to serious ethno-cultural tension. Similarly, while national history can be oriented to teach unity, the total exclusion of minorities can breed resentment and disharmony. For example, in Botswana the national curriculum concentrates on a Tswana nationalistic (ethno-national) view of history. A similar situation occurs in Israel in relation to teaching of ethno-Jewish history rather than a multiethnic history (Majid 2005). Majid refers to what he calls ethnic democracy, which is

11 It generally comprises regional representatives who are not able to consult widely enough with their constituencies.

12 History has been an optional subject for sometime and its position in the curriculum has remained quite tenuous.

predicated upon ethno-cultural domination, and cautions that it is very difficult to maintain democracy in such a situation, but not impossible if certain individuals and group rights are vigorously upheld. Of course the Palestinian-Israeli situation is much worse, as it is characterized by open and constant physical confrontation, but fundamentally it bears similar markers of ethnic democracy.

In South Africa, the curriculum provides for some measure of regional variation also. More importantly, it provides for teaching of diverse and previously silenced histories. This obviously derives from the evolving socio-political context where following centuries of subjugation racial discriminations of some groups by others, there has been a need to give a voice to these "others", as part of the process of reconciliation and nation-building. Hence, rather than view nation building as a requirement for singular historical perspective, South Africa has adopted a different stance to Botswana's, in no small way because the historical context dictated it.

Currently in Botswana, in order to counter ethno-Tswana dominance in the education system, debates have arisen around the need for incorporation of minority languages into the education system. However, there has not been a complementary realization of, or a call for the teaching of diverse histories. But the link comes in due to the fact that languages embed histories, cultures and customs, so it may be that there will be a natural progression towards that goal.