

Critical Fabulation: Where Do We Come From and Where Do We Go?

“But you’re a Motswana. How can you not speak Setswana?”

This line follows me today, through the living room of my multilingual household to my small room in a Providence apartment, surrounded by roommates from around the world. For me, language was treated as a marker of citizenship and in my poor mastery of Setswana, I was made to feel like I didn't belong. Yet, English is the officially recognized language of Botswana, and my Botswana-born grandmother was Kalanga - the largest minority group in the country. Despite this, her language is not officially recognized in Botswana, as are many other ethnic groups. Native speakers do not have the option to be taught in their mother tongue, instead having to learn two new languages (English and Setswana) to adapt. This shared exclusion from official recognition spurred my interest in language and its role in defining one's cultural identity.

Botswana translates to “Land of the Tswana”, and is essentially the nation-state of the Tswana tribe. In their paper, indigenous language scholars at The University of Botswana, Kemmony Collete Monaka¹ and Anderson Monthusi Chebanne² quote, “The Constitution of Botswana recognizes a monolithic, homogeneous Tswana state” (Monaka and Chebanne 75). The government of Botswana defines tribes as “major” or “minor,” with “major” meaning the eight dominant Setswana-speaking tribes and minor as the non-Setswana-speaking groups. While “Motswana” would normally refer to a person of the Tswana tribe, it is now a demonym for citizens of Botswana. Motswana is a unifier, connecting all people within the country across race, religion, and ethnic lines. However, this national identity is not inclusive and results in the culture and language of minor tribes being erased in favor of a “Tswananized” identity. Fourth President Seretse Khama Ian Khama’s government celebrated “our unity in diversity” through arts and culture. However, this only recognized the visual aspects of cultural diversity and failed to uplift language as part of heritage. Previous presidencies also emphasized the dominance of Tswana culture over other groups, with the second president Sir Ketumile Masire, stating that incorporating other indigenous languages into primary education would be “spoiling the prevailing peace and unity in the country” (Botswana Daily News, June 30, 1989, no. 123:1, cited in Nyati- Ramahobo 2004:19). Why then would my mixed cultural background make me any “less Motswana” than someone whose ancestors lived in the land for decades?

I view the world from the eyes of a Third Culture Kid - a Zimbabwean girl born in Botswana who constantly felt othered in both countries. Language and its ties to cultural identity and

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belonging are the driving forces behind my research. Despite being raised in a Zimbabwean Ndebele household, English was my first language. I questioned why perfect enunciation in English was emphasized in school, over fluency in our local language. I struggled with my Ndebele homework but excelled in a language that afforded me a higher social status. My heart was in Zimbabwe but my blue passport showed the gold foiled outline of the Botswana coat of arms. I struggled to wrap my mouth around Setswana words and was met with confusion when immigration officials glanced from my passport to my face.

Because gogo (my grandmother) married my Zimbabwean grandfather, all of their children were raised as Ndebele-speaking Zimbabweans, imbued in Zimbabwean culture. I wish my grandparents had been firmer in teaching me Ndebele. I wish I had asked more questions about my grandmother's childhood in Botswana and for her to teach me new words every day. Both my grandparents were teachers and I draw this link to the role of education in nation building. Education is a way of preserving and sharing language and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Education is not limited to formal education but through the sharing of indigenous practices and oral history. I wish I could hold the memories of my grandparents and wrap their stories around me when I feel homesick. Even my mother's Setswana name "Oreditse" couldn't hide her foreignness in her mother's birth country. Slipping between Ndebele to English to Setswana, she locked away her experiences of discrimination, exchanging our warped army-green Zimbabwean passports for the navy of Botswana. She still has her faded gold Zimbabwean driver's license, so heavy and sharp it could crack concrete.

Because I grew up with a tenuous grasp on Ndebele, I have witnessed the death of this language in my generation of the family. In my work, I have used both visual and written/oral language to depict traditional Shona folktales (ngano) for my niece and nephew. I was driven by the fact that they do not speak Shona, the language of their father - my cousin. In the Fall semester, I created a prototype of a quilt with a Shona folk tale in the center. This quilt is an exploration of oral storytelling practiced in Shona culture and is my form of preserving Shona from dying out in that side of my family.

This work will interrogate what it means to be a Motswana, where citizenship is so deeply tied to a unified Tswana identity. I want to challenge the idea that to be a Motswana, you have to speak Setswana and have a homogenized identity.

I hope to investigate the interplay between indigenous languages and the connection to the land, answering the question of what role land use plays in defining and preserving cultural practices. Whilst the San are the most studied people in anthropology, our knowledge of their cultural practices in Botswana is minimal. Using Saidya Hartman's concept of the critical fabulation" (Hartman 11), I will use a combination of animation, pattern design, and woodblock printing to create a fantastical immersive storytelling experience of resilience, spirituality, language translation, and connection with land that culminates in a modern reconstruction of Tswana identity. I want to question what it means to be a Motswana with diverse cultural backgrounds and a shared history of colonial resistance within all of the ethnic groups in our country.

The death of a language is the death of a people, a whole set of practices, history, and traditions. This project reflects the ongoing struggle for representation by marginalized indigenous communities in the world, using the example of the San and Bakgalagadi people in Botswana. As my goals post-graduation involve working with my Ministry of Basic Education, I will not directly criticize my government for fear that it may jeopardize future collaborative opportunities with them. Rather, I am emphasizing the role that land plays in shaping the practices and traditions of other tribes, referencing cases of the San and Bakgalagadi residents living in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) versus the government in their forced displacement from the area. In 2006, the San and Bakgalagadi inhabitants of the CKGR won the case to return to their ancestral land on the reserve. However, in 2022 the family of Pitseng Gaoberekwe were denied the right to bury him in CKGR, opening up old wounds. (Survival International).

It's important to remember that tilling the land is considered taboo in San culture (Barnard, 1992, as cited in Pridmore, 1995) and they subsisted through a combination of hunting and foraging. In this regard, hunting and land are intrinsic to San cultural practice. As outlined in Maria Sapignoli's paper, *Bureaucratizing the Indigenous: The San peoples, Botswana, and the international community*:

Hunting and gathering is the key livelihood strategy and identity positioning of most San. This livelihood strategy was affected substantially by the passage of conservation laws and by the division of the land into farms, parks, and monuments. Game licenses issued after 1961 restricted the numbers and types of wild animals the San could hunt. In 1979, the passage of unified hunting regulations allowed for the establishment of Special Game Licenses (SGLs) which were to be granted to individuals whose livelihoods were dependent largely on the procurement of wild animal products (Hitchcock 1996; Hitchcock, Masilo 1995). In other words, only those San who depended on hunting and foraging for subsistence and income could apply for a license; formal employment would disqualify an applicant from obtaining a license (Hitchcock 1996:55). (Sapignoli 6)

Additionally, a core San belief is that children learn through play and dance, thus the standardized modes of teaching in Tswana schools are in direct opposition to San cultural practices surrounding education. Traditionally, San children are rarely left alone and are always near their parents, learning daily tasks through observation. The separation of San children to hostels (dormitories) far away from their homes is a form of cultural suppression, as they are kept from their families for months at a time. Here, they are punished for struggling to express themselves in both Setswana and English, further alienating themselves from identifying as Batswana.

Project Description

My project consists of three 6ft square textiles arranged along three walls in a room in the Convention Center. The first textile will be the site of the projection of the animation. The second

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will be a hand-stamped canvas depicting abstracted illustrations of the eland, an important animal in San culture. The third piece will be a digitally printed fabric that combines text, images, and traditional leteisi (the official fabric of Botswana) to represent the idealized depiction of Tswana citizenship.

The first textile will be a hand-dyed fabric where the animation will be projected. The animation will consist of drawn dunes and lines that transform into the folds of skin on a person's face and then eventually into traditional San cave paintings. The accompanying audio will be a compilation of San audio recordings from the Endangered Languages Archive (ELARCH), audio interviews provided by Oteng Kolobetso, and traditional instruments, and ambient sound following the same high energy of traditional San healing dance.