

# **The Psychology of the Oppressed: Issues in the Struggle for Tribal Equality**

Professor Serara Sello-Mogwe

Paper presented at the Meeting of the Marginalised Groups, May 2, 2002, Gaborone Civic Centre)

I have decided to take a little time to address certain issues that I believe are always a part of any struggle for equality. In any such a struggle there are always two groups: the oppressed group and the oppressor group. The oppressor group is always the ruling class which enjoys certain privileges. They take such privileges to be their birthright and will do anything to maintain such privileges. We need only to look round in our region and to recall the liberation wars that were fought to liberate the oppressed groups of such countries from oppression by their colonial masters, who just did not want to see change. The oppressors wanted to maintain their superiority status and their privileges. For all of these they were prepared to go to war, rather than accept change.

Recently we have heard some of the so-called major tribes, not only using unacceptable language, but also promising to go to war if Government did anything they feel threatens their security. What I am trying to say is that change is never acceptable to privileged groups or oppressor groups. Their intention always is to maintain the status quo, for within the status quo are privileges which they enjoy and which they are not willing to share with the oppressed groups. They will go to war if it needs be. It is baffling to try and understand what it is that the tribes who historically have been in the comfort zone want to go to war for and what they will be fighting for? The only answer one can find is the maintenance of the comfort zone.

This evening I want to take some time to talk to you about the psychology of the oppressor groups and its impact on the behaviour of the oppressed groups. I think it is absolutely imperative that at this time of our struggle to

free ourselves and our people we look back and see how the psychology of the oppressor groups has affected our behaviour and our perception of

ourselves/...

ourselves in relation to them. What we have historically believed about us and our given cultures has been determined by them. We have a standing joke among Babirwa which goes – ask Babirwa about any issue and before they answer you, they will pose yet another question – “Kwa Serowe bona ba reng?” If you are able to tell them what the people in Serowe think then their response would be “Le rena re nyaka hoe byalo”. “Bakgalagadi see themselves in the picture given to them by Bakwena and Bangwaketse – Bayei have seen themselves in the picture given to them by Batawana who see them as Makoba etc. In other words, they have seen us as less than themselves in our creation. They have seen us as subjects born to serve them and to live with the insults they taunt us with.

It is absolutely important that we understand how this system has affected us over the years. We were made to understand that our languages and our cultures were ugly! Consequently all our efforts went to mimicking them! To be more like them, speak like them etc at the expense of our own languages. Nobody can explain why this country must speak only one ethnic language. Why all children from different ethnic groups must study in only one ethnic language. There is only one answer to these questions I am posing and that is Setswana is the language of the dominant Tswana groups. When you destroy a man’s language, you destroy him as a human being.

In the ideas I am sharing with you, I have drawn heavily from Paulo Freere, an educator who has written extensively about the behaviours of the oppressor groups and the oppressed groups. His basic premise is that a central problem for all humanity is the historical evolution of a state of

oppression, or the objective exploitation of one person or a group of people by another. The basic propositions of his concepts are particularly

applicable/...

applicable to the oppressed tribes of Botswana. People may not like the use of the term “oppressed” but my position is simply that there is no better word to describe the situation in which we find ourselves. Paulo’s propositions are summarised as follows:

1. The realisation of a full potential is a basic vocation for human individuals and groups.
2. Negation of humanisation occurs by acts of injustice, exploitation and dominance and leads to a yearning for freedom and justice. Such negation is a tacit acknowledgement of the human potential of the dominated groups.
3. The oppressed state creates a distortion of reality of both the oppressed group and the oppressor group, in that the consciousness of the more powerful group and privileged oppressor group is absorbed and taken to represent reality in the world. That is, the powerful group tends to identify the values and structure of the society, the worthwhile goals, and the means of reaching these goals. This distortion leads to dehumanisation for both the oppressor groups and the oppressed group.
4. Only the group that is negated or oppressed can liberate itself and its oppressors, a process that begins with perceiving the state of oppression and becoming committed to action and thoughtful

reflection aimed at becoming more fully human. Liberation will not be initiated or supported by the dominant group.

/5. The barriers...

5. The barriers to liberation or to achieving freedom and justice are primarily rooted in the consciousness of the oppressed. These barriers include the oppressed group's internalised image of the oppressor as "good", "powerful" or "righteous". The oppressors' view and definition of reality is the oppressed group's fear of freedom or the tendency to conform to the prescribed behaviours set forth by the oppressor and become in turn the oppressor; and the inability to take risks in achieving freedom.
6. Because it is in the perceived best interest of the powerful group to maintain its privileges and depend on the continued domination of the less powerful group, the powerful group uses various devices to ensure continued domination. These include limiting the quality and extent of education granted to the oppressed group, keeping the oppressed group divided among themselves, and granting periodic acts of false generosity for the oppressed group. Acts of generosity take the form of token rewards for continued loyalty to the goals of the dominant group, elevating a member of the oppressed group to a high status position or giving verbal commendations in recognition for the labors of the oppressed group. These actions increase and become intensified whenever the dominated group begins to exert effort in the direction of freedom.
7. Actions to achieve liberation usually begin with acts that appear violent to the oppressor group, but are essential to initiate control

by the oppressed group of their own destiny and to claim their right to be liberated. The fight to be free is actually an act of love for the humanity of all people and focuses on changing the unjust social order or system of accountability to all people.

Frequent/...

Frequent reference to these basic propositions is made in the interpretation of data throughout the book and direct quotations are made from the text wherever possible to support the interpretation of various occurrences at various periods of the study.

Botswana society is certainly not one of equal members. It is one of ethnic imbalances, one of superordinates and subordinates. It is one of the oppressor and the oppressed groups. One of privileged groups and non-privileged groups.

If we accept this logic then we can begin to understand why some groups are prepared to go to war to maintain their privileges. We can begin to understand why they stoop so low as to insult the Head of State. That alone is a measure of how far they are willing to go to protect what they consider their birth rights.

The interesting thing is as Paulo Freere points out is that each time you dehumanise another person you actually dehumanise yourself. In trying to strip me of my humanity, you simultaneously strip yourself of your humanity. Paulo also points out that when such a situation arises, it is always the oppressed who must struggle to liberate themselves, and by that act alone they also liberate their oppressors.

What we must understand is that the historic unjust system will never be changed by the privileged tribes. Change must of necessity be brought about by us, the oppressed groups through dialogue in order to restore our own humanity, and in bringing about change we will certainly restore humanity to our oppressors.

Our struggle/...

Our struggle is one for justice. We seek to establish a just society in which all members have equal rights. We will accept nothing less. We do not wish to take away anybody's rights but we simply want the rights enjoyed by the Tswana speaking tribes extended to us. We want equality and nothing else. We must have land rights to the land in which we find ourselves. Our chiefs must be awarded the same status as the eight (8) Tswana chiefs. The time has come for Government to correct the wrong and not to perpetuate it. We are no longer prepared to be second class citizens in the country of our birth. It is time the Government swept the dirt in the house right out and not under the carpet.

In Vision 2016 the Government speaks of a just society. Words alone will not bring about the desired just society but just and decisive action from our Government will bring about a just society.

Let me end my address by pleading for unity among the marginalized tribes. It is true that the degree of marginalisation is slightly different. Some have been more marginalized than others and our oppressors have exploited such slight differences and this has brought about disunity among us. What we need to recognise is that we are all marginalized, that the degree of marginalisation is insignificant. The truth is that we are all hurting and we must stand together to remove the hurt.

We also have responsibility for those of our members who have been so dehumanised by the system that they see themselves in the description

given by their oppressors. Those who have accepted the status quo. We need to help them to understand that change is possible, and that together with them, we must work for change. This is our responsibility, nobody will do it for us. To bring about change is to create a just, happy and united nation.

Consequently/...

Consequently, I propose that we form an umbrella organisation which will have responsibility for a program of action for all our different associations so that we may achieve a coordinated action. For as individual groups we can easily be broken; but as unified groups with a unified action, we will succeed in bringing about the desired change towards a united and proud nation.