Theatre development in Botswana

Thulaganyo Mogobe¹

Abstract

It is an accepted reality that theatre as an art-form plays an important role in national development. Firstly, theatre as a cultural institution reflects people's cultural norms and ethos, and can assist in nation-building as well as in the transmission of culture to the next generations. Secondly, theatre as a medium can be used to reach out to communities on various issues of national concern. And thirdly, theatre as an industry can create employment and contribute to development. Whilst these 'functional' aspects of theatre are acknowledged by all, there seems to be a general assumption that theatre can achieve all these onerous objectives without a deliberate plan or strategy to develop it as an art-form, resource it sufficiently and harness available theatre talent. This paper interrogates this scenario within the context of Botswana's national development plans, policy documents and historical practice. The paper examines initiatives by the public sector, private sector and the arts/theatre community towards the development of theatre in Botswana within the context of the development agenda of the country.

Key terms: Botswana theatre, arts, implementation strategy, economic diversification, facilities development, Government policy and practice

¹ Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Botswana. e-mail: mogobett@mopipi.ub.bw

Introduction

Over the last 48 years of independence, Botswana has made significant strides in both human and infrastructure development. A large amount of money has been consistently allocated to critical sectors like education, health, agriculture, and transport. Successive development plans have placed an emphasis on diversifying the economy away from diamonds in order to lessen the risks associated with over-reliance on a single commodity, particularly one that is so vulnerable to global economic turbulences. Manufacturing has been touted as a good alternative and/or complement; however, because of the small population size that makes a very small domestic market (National Population Census, 2011) coupled with the fact that Botswana is land-locked, thereby making it expensive to export finished goods as well as to import raw materials for the manufacturing industry, this option has not taken off the ground in any meaningful way.

Given this scenario, it has become regular practice for the Government of Botswana to come up with policies and initiatives whose primary focus is to diversify the economy away from mining. Studies have been carried out to investigate the economic potential of various sectors and industries within the country and, in some instances, specific interventions have been made to promote and develop such sectors. An example of such a study is the investigation commissioned by the Government of Botswana and the World Bank to look into the economic potential of the ICT sector in Botswana, and to recommend steps that could be taken to facilitate the uptake of that sector (World Bank –Botswana Government, 2014). In the tourism sector, the results of similar investigations have informed the Government's current programme of diversifying tourism products, and not to depend only on the flora and fauna. The promotion and development of these sectors and other industries advance the agenda for economic diversification by the Government. A corollary objective is to create jobs and opportunities for citizens, particularly young people, in order for them to become economically active, especially in the creative sector.

The arts and creative industries in the developed world are big revenue earners. In the developing world, interest in the economic viability of this sector is growing. Observations about the significance of the growing creative industries have been made by politicians and government officials in Botswana. The extent to which this is said with full commitment is subject to confirmation, given the reality that has played out over the past decades.

Theatre in Africa, just like in other parts of the world, is a popular medium and art-form. It is enjoyed equally in urban and rural areas. However, its developmental path has not been uniform across the continent. Looking at Southern Africa in particular, the rate and level of theatre development has been greatly influenced by the socio-political and economic situation found in the different countries of the region (Matusse 1999).

In Southern Africa, the level of development of theatre, especially in terms of facilities and infrastructure, can be attributed to the colonial history of each country. In countries where the colonizers had entrenched themselves, there are significant infrastructural developments which are still functional to date. For example, in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa, there are a number of theatre facilities which were left by colonial administrations. Thus, there is a relatively vibrant amateur and professional theatre in these countries. In contrast, in Botswana, Lesotho and Malawi there are no visible theatre related infrastructure developments, perhaps because the colonial powers had no political or economic motivation to establish permanent settlements in these places.

This article discusses the need for investing in the arts and theatre for human and economic development. It begins by interrogating the development of theatre in Botswana, and tries to

establish the reasons behind any such developments or lack thereof. This interrogation is within the context of a country that has enjoyed unparalleled political stability in Africa, and one of the fastest and sustained economic growths since the 1970s when the first diamond mine was opened in Orapa. The discussion will focus on policy, infrastructural development, funding and training. These are the four areas that are critical in the development of the arts and culture sector in the country.

Policy framework

Botswana has a national policy on culture that was adopted in 2001. This policy came about after many years of advocacy and lobbying by those working within the culture and education sector. When it finally came out, there was a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism that at last the culture sector in Botswana would be included in development planning and resource allocation. Theoretically, the policy has the right orientation. For instance, its rationale is to facilitate the provision of facilities and services to Batswana for cultural self-expression as well as for earning a living (*National Policy on Culture*, 2001). In addition, one of the objectives of the policy is to 'create an enabling environment for cultural preservation and participation by all ... in the form of infrastructure, programmes and services' (ibid., p.8).

While the policy position outlined above sounds good and relevant, the real challenge lies in the [lack of] strategies for implementation. What is found listed as 'strategies' on the policy document cannot pass the test of a 'strategy' because they lack specificity. For example, strategies for the development of crafts, literary, visual and performing arts are stated as to 'facilitate... promote ... encourage ...' (ibid., p. 27) without spelling out how the facilitation or promotion or encouragement will be done. Thus, it is very difficult to assess the chances of such a strategy succeeding. Therefore, the policy can be interpreted as just a wish list as its drafters have not determined the appropriate way of realizing its objectives. This situation can be contrasted with what happens in other countries. For example, in South Africa the policy document does not only say what the objectives are, but goes further to outline the institutional frameworks for implementing the policy, as well as the funding models, infrastructural needs, and the role of the public and the private sectors in the implementation of the policy (*White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage*, 1996). In contrast, the Botswana Policy statements express dreams and wishes that are not backed up by a strategic plan of implementation.

Then there are the national development plans. The successive national development plans up to the current NDP 10, indicate that there is nothing allocated to the arts and theatre in the form of infrastructure, programmes or funding except for a cultural village and a state theatre, all of which have been carried-over from NDP 8. A development plan should be a vehicle through which policy is implemented, yet nothing related to theatre development is reflected in any of the national development plans. From the brief write-up on the culture sector in the *National Development Plan* 10 (NDP 10), one of the observations made is that:

Botswana's cultural and heritage resources have the potential to diversify the economy with spill-over effects to other sectors. There is, therefore, a need to harness the potential value of cultural industries and heritage resources. This can be achieved by establishing and consolidating new markets for cultural products and services, enhancing arts and culture practitioner's skills and strengthening communication networks. (*NDP 10*, p. 344).

Besides stating the obvious, this statement demonstrates that the arts are not accorded due seriousness in the strategic planning process, especially in resource allocation. In contrast, the same NDP document favours sport, another department within the same ministry. As part of the strategies for sport development, it states that Government will come up with 'community recreation programmes, introduce adaptive sport and improve and construct purpose-built sport facilities to support professional sport development and [to attract] regional and international sporting events' (ibid., 351-352). In this the case of sports, there are specifics in terms of what is going to be implemented, whether it is programmes or facilities. Unfortunately, the arts and related cultural programmes are not similarly provided for.

If a five-year national development plan does not indicate any tangible developments to be undertaken by the Government, this suggests that the development of the particular sector is not important. The NDP is a plan of action based on what has been determined to be essential for the economic and social development of the country by sector. The fact that the arts and culture sector is not provided for in the national development plans suggests that they are not considered to be essential to national development. This also implies that the public statements by authorities that the arts are getting Government support pay lip service to the sector.

This seemingly half-hearted commitment to theatre development is puzzling because it is not as if the potential of theatre---not just as a source of income but as a medium for community development—is not recognised by authorities in Botswana. Around 1974, adult educators used the medium of theatre to address a prevalent problem of the period in most rural communities of Botswana through the Laedza Batanani popular theatre campaigns (Kidd and Byram, 1982). The importance and efficacy of theatre as a medium was demonstrated sufficiently through that project. It would have made sense for the Government then to invest in the development of that medium for continued use by communities, and to harness it as a potential employment creation initiative. That did not happen. It took the advent of HIV/AIDS in Botswana in the 1980s for Botswana to once again call on theatre practitioners to help curb the spread of HIV. The magnitude of the task required theatre artists to creatively deliver the various HIV/AIDS messages to the nation. In the 1980s and 1990s theatre was vibrant as artists were being asked to create productions for national campaigns on health and related issues. However, support from the government was still lacking. The establishment of the University of Botswana Travelling Theatre (UBTT) in 1983, which travelled around the country performing plays and conducting theatre workshops created overwhelming excitement which could have been used as a spring board for further development, leading to theatre's inclusion in the national budget. There was yet another initiative which gained momentum at the time. The Botswana English Teachers Association (BETA) drama competitions spread country-wide and the focus shifted from using drama as a means of improving English proficiency, to that of promoting drama as an art form in its own right and deserving of recognition in the school system. But there was hardly any investment the country made on theatre. There were no facilities developed, no artists trained, no programmes initiated, and no markets explored and secured. It is logical to conclude that a golden opportunity for anchoring theatre within the mainstream of the economy was missed.

In 1996, Botswana participated at the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Theatre festival in Maputo, Mozambique. The process of selecting those who would participate and represent Botswana in Maputo unearthed a lot of raw talent that needed to be nurtured and developed. Indeed, the three groups that ultimately represented Botswana in Maputo, namely *Bopaganang* from Lobatse, *Reetsanang* from Gaborone and *Ghetto Artists* from Francistown, showed great potential as theatre groups and as individual members of those groups. The young

dramatists needed to be nurtured and encouraged to take theatre seriously. Instead, they went and performed as well as those groups from better-resourced countries with clear policies and workable strategies for theatre development. On their return, there was nothing for them to go to and the majority of them pursued other careers and interests. The lack of support for these artists shows that perhaps in the view of the government, the arts in general, and theatre in particular, is mere entertainment, a way of passing time and not a serious industry that can create jobs and contribute to the economy. It is thus not considered as deserving clearly thought out strategies, taking into account the twin demands of capital investment and skills development.

The country's apparent lack of support for the arts and culture sector has other implications at the regional level. As a member of the SADC and hosting the Secretariat, Botswana has signed up to a number of policy positions intended to develop and promote the arts and culture sector. Member countries have committed themselves to the development of the arts and culture sector in order to achieve regional development programmes as well as the ideals of regional integration (SADC *Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport*, 2001). With the situation being as described in this article, there is no way that Botswana could play her part in the realization of the regional objectives and aspirations if the Government's current attitude to the sector persists.

If one compares the situation in Botswana and the one in South Africa, the differences in approach to the arts, and consequently the outcomes, are clear. Whereas the goals of the Botswana's culture policy focuses on 're-awakening, stimulating and strengthening ...' (*National Policy on Culture*, pp.7-8), the South African one indicates that the purpose of the policy is to 'set out government policy for establishing the optimum funding arrangements and institutional frameworks for the creation, promotion and protection of South African arts, culture....' (*White Paper on Arts and Culture*, p.3)

This is instructive because from this, one is able to appreciate what is understood to be the purpose of the policy from the point of view of the two governments. For South Africa, funding and the structures or institutions through which such funding and other programmes would be delivered to the artists, is deemed to be one of the critical goals of the policy. For Botswana, nowhere does the policy specifically state that it is the obligation of Government to provide funding for the arts. Neither is it committed to setting up necessary institutions for the management of such funding or any other programmes. But the need to set up such institutions is known to the policy makers and has been recommended to the Government. In 2001, the Botswana National Cultural Council, an advisory body that was established by the Government of Botswana to advise on matters of culture and development, adopted a resolution which it passed on to the Government, calling for the establishment of an arts council which would implement the provisions of the policy. Then, in 2008, the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture organized the 'National Arts Council Consultative Workshop' whose theme was 'Towards the Creation of a National Arts Council for Botswana'. It was opened by the then Minister Gladys Kokorwe who stated the Government's intention to establish an arts council for the good of the sector. Some of the guests who made significant presentations, and whose presence convinced many people that finally the Government was committed to the initiative, were the former Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Council of South Africa, the late Doreen Nteta and M'kariko Amagulu, the Council Administrator for the National Arts Council of Namibia. The consensus at the end of the workshop was that an arts council should be established as a matter of urgency. To date this institution is yet to be established and, from all indications, this is no longer a priority for the Ministry and the Government. It is not surprising that projects and programmes for the arts sector are constantly relegated to the peripheries of the planning agenda. It seems that issues related to the arts and culture sector are not a priority in planning and resource allocation.

Funding and facilities development

There is a need to have in place a credible mechanism to be used in determining funding levels for the arts and culture sector. Similar mechanisms exist and are applied in other sectors. The problem in the case of arts and culture is that the Government has never had any planned realistic projects and programmes except the cultural village and theatre building. In the current policy, one can identify a number of projects and programmes, but they are implied rather than stated. It requires a committed policy implementer to pick them up and submit them for budgetary consideration. This situation makes the task of asking for and subsequent allocation of funds to the sector very difficult. It requires dedicated people, or institutions such as an arts council to carry out this task.

The kind of skepticism suggested above seems to be supported by statistics supplied by the Ministry itself, in terms of funds allocated to or spent on theatre programmes. The figures below are for arts and culture projects over a period of 10 years.

Financial year	Total funded projects (P 000)	Fundedtheatreprojects(P 000)	% of theatre projects to total projects funded
01/02	144	11	7.6
02/03	175	0	0
03/04	553	85	15.3
04/05	603	40	6.6
05/06	599	110	18.4
No figures p	provided for 2006/07	7	
07/08	1 854	140	7.6
08/09	1461	201	13.8
09/10	613	0	0
10/11	3 505	20	0.6

Table 1: Expenditure on arts and theatre projects

From the figures above, we are able to see the amount of money that has been spent on arts and culture projects over a ten year period between 2001 and 2011 and the proportion of that which went to theatre. The amounts are miniscule and cannot help in the development of theatre arts in Botswana. Also, there is no discernible pattern of expenditure; that is, whether there is a progressive escalation of resources put into theatre, a stagnant amount or a progressive draw back. To compound matters, the oscillation in the amounts is not accounted for in any reasonable way, and the only likely explanation could be that either fewer applications for funding were made or fewer were approved. This suggests that there is an absence of clear result-oriented strategies for the development of theatre in the country.

What is desirable and appropriate is that the Government has to make concrete what it has committed itself to through its policies. Botswana has many good policies on various sectors of

Source: Department of Arts and Culture, Summary of Projects Funded 2001-2011

the economy, but the main challenge has always been implementation (Kaboyakgosi and Marata 2013). As a result of this inability to implement policies, funding is occasionally made available for projects that have not been budgeted for, and whose long term sustainability has not been established. A few years ago, the Government pumped about P31million into the making of the No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency movie. In a bid to ward off public criticism for giving so much public money to a single project undertaken by foreign companies and employing mainly foreign nationals, the government pointed out that the film was going to market Botswana internationally and that because it was set in Botswana, it would serve as a foundation for the development of the film industry in the country. Had there been foresight and a deliberate plan to develop the theatre and the film industry in Botswana, such an emergency investment would not have been necessary because the country would have developed the required skills and competencies among its citizens, who would in turn have participated in the project. Such an investment would also have meant that adequate infrastructure was developed to promote the film industry. This single expenditure in the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency project surpassed what was spent on theatre over a twenty year period, making it the most expensive single project, but one that did not benefit local artists in any meaningful way (Rapoo 2010).

Similarly, in 2008, a presidential directive was made to hold performing and visual arts competitions nationally with the winners getting prize money. This initiative has understandably breathed some life into the arts and culture sector. While this is a welcome development, it is not an implementation of any Government policy with pre-established objectives. While the President might have had good intentions, the project was ill-informed because no proper assessment of its viability and capacity to deliver long term desirable outcomes corresponding to the Government's policy was ever done. As such, it is difficult to determine the long term benefit of this initiative. What is certain, however, is that the initiative has so far not trained any artists for sustainable economic development. Neither has it delivered any operational facilities for artists. It seems that often the Government engages in some initiatives that have instant impact without necessarily being sustainable in the long term. According to the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture the objectives of the President's Day programmes are to

Keep youth meaningfully engaged; keep youth away from alcohol abuse and other addictive substances; provide leisure to youth; address poverty and curb idleness of youth; combat HIV/AIDS pandemic; promote artistic talent both at local and national levels and also to empower local artists as well as provide a source of livelihood for them. (Department of Arts and Culture, 'Constituency Art Competitions', 2013).

It is evident from these objectives that the promotion and development of the arts as viable economic activities is not the main goal of the constituency arts competitions because of other competing social objectives listed above. It seems then that the arts are used to achieve these other social goals. Additionally, while the objectives of the completion are noble, the prize money amounting to P25 000 (US\$ 2,500) is not enough to make a living. The competition objectives then suggest that the arts are used to strategically achieve other social goals and the competition is not held because of any imperative to develop and promote them. The money that is spent on organizing the competitions as well as the prizes awarded could be used to achieve long term benefits such as the training of artists, and providing basic theatre and other facilities for sustainable development.

It is regrettable that after nearly 50 years of independence, and after so many years of the diamond boom years, no single public infrastructure for the arts has been built. The country is now going through a belt-tightening phase, and it is likely that in the current harsh economic conditions the arts sector will suffer even further. Artists need proper facilities to create and develop. It has been observed by theatre scholars that "artists, especially in the performing arts, need infrastructure to perfect their craft and make their art" (Baylis 2006: 2).

In the 2013/14 budget presentation for his ministry, the Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture indicated that his ministry continues to provide financial assistance to arts and cultural organizations across the country (Kgathi 2013). He proposed a recurrent budget of about seventy four million Pula out of which about fifty five million would go to the Constituency competitions and President's day competitions, leaving only nineteen million for everything else. Interestingly, for the development budget, nothing was proposed for arts and culture while about fifty three million Pula was proposed for sport as development budget. This disparity in resource allocation for sport and arts and culture is consistent with the information in the NDP 10 referred to earlier. Any genuine commitment to the development of the arts would be demonstrated by a commitment of resources for recurrent and capital development budgets.

The provision of appropriate facilities within which artists can work and develop would enable them to become productive players in the economy of the country. This is the case in countries where the arts are given recognition. In a report commissioned to review cultural facilities in Sidney (Sweet Reason 2011), the authors emphasize that while the arts are a product of the creative aspects of a human being and could potentially be manifested anywhere, it is necessary to make available, to artists, good quality facilities in which to create as well as share in the artistic experience That is what artists in Botswana require in order for them to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of their communities and make a living out of their creative works. This is not to suggest that the provision of such facilities alone will automatically result in the development of theatre. Wole Soyinka observed that 'Theatre ... is never a lump of wood and mortar which architects splash on the landscape' (Soyinka 1981: 457-461). He explains what he means by citing an incident at the Kampala National Theatre (Uganda) where, on hearing that the theatre had been built, people rushed to it with excitement hoping to go through a great theatre experience. Instead they were met with disappointment. He says, 'we discovered that there was no theatre, there was nothing beyond a precious, attractive building in the town centre' (ibid.). A comparable situation was described by Ian Steadman when discussing the challenges of theatre in the Western Cape, where, due to the legacy of apartheid, there were good theatre auditoriums but no patrons or audiences. He states that in such circumstances, public funds spent on the provision of such facilities had actually been thrown down the drain (Steadman 1990). What is required in Botswana is a holistic approach to the provision of funding and facilities. Capital development should be matched by appropriate programmes that can be delivered through such facilities. And all these have to be informed by a needs analysis.

Training and skills development

In Botswana skills development and academic training in the fields of the arts generally and theatre in particular have lagged behind. Between 1966 and 2010, there was no institution that offered any

kind of skills training in theatre. Some might argue, quite correctly, that the country was still concentrating efforts on those fields of study regarded as crucial to the development and sustainability of the country's economy. While that could be true, it is also important to note that for economic development to be sustainable it has to be culturally-sensitive and be adapted to the cultural norms and ethos of the people. Theatre is one such aspect of culture which should have been the obvious choice in ensuring that this imperative is taken on board. Government officials regularly make reference to a statement supposedly made by Botswana's first president in 1970 to the effect that a country that does not situate its development path on its cultural ethos and traditions is tantamount to groping in the dark. The expression attributed to President Sir Seretse Khama says "a nation without a culture is a lost nation. A nation without a culture is like a people without a soul" although in reality he said that 'a nation without a past is a lost nation and a people without a past is a people without a soul" (Parsons 2006: 668-682). While this has become a fashionable cliché, nothing concrete to bear testimony to that conviction is evident. To date, it is difficult to establish if any deliberate policy that provides for the training of people in the area of theatre exists and, if so, has it been implemented. In 1997, at a Botswana Society for the Arts seminar, a representative of the then Department of Culture and Youth, Gomolemo Motswaledi, in his presentation indicated that the department wanted to provide for and facilitate the training of artists such as managers, choreographers, stage light and sound engineers, producers and directors within formal and vocational institutions (Motswaledi 1997). Eighteen years later, not much has been done in that regard. Perhaps the observation made by Motswaledi in the same presentation that "we do realize that in most cases the way the Government works so disjointedly towards a common goal has not only brought tremendous failure to the good programmes that are aimed at developing the arts, but has also done very little to assist the people [for whom] the programmes are intended" (ibid) explains the non-implementation of the few existent policy provisions for the arts and theatre.

In the 1990s when the Government intensified support for those seeking to enter the tertiary education system, disciplines were categorized according to their perceived relative economic importance. Those enrolling for science, engineering, mathematics and business programmes were awarded 100 percent grants for their studies while those doing the humanities and social sciences were given 50% grant and 50% loan. For those going for visual and performing arts and other creative programmes, however, they were offered 100% loans. What this meant was that these areas were regarded as the least important to economic development, and were not deemed to have the potential of creating jobs as well as contributing meaningfully to economic diversification. In other words, this suggests that the students were given loans as a 'favour', hence the requirement that they repay all the money upon completing their studies. This worked as a disincentive for those wishing to enrol in these programmes.

Worldwide, universities are not centres of academic learning only; they are also cultural centres. They provide space and resources for staff, students and the general public to share in various cultural expressions, including theatre. While the Government can be faulted for lack of foresight and strategic planning with respect to the development of theatre in the country, the University of Botswana is partly to blame. It is only in 2010/2011 that the University introduced a programme in theatre. But even the introduction of that programme is for the moment without the requisite facilities needed to deliver quality programmes. For a full four years, students enrolled in this programme used one small and poorly equipped room as a teaching facility for practical courses, rehearsals and as a performance arena. For a university that boasts some of the best infrastructure, facilities and staff, and whose vision is to be 'a leading centre of academic

excellence in Africa and the world', theatre facilities at the university are woefully inadequate. A whole cohort of about 30 students has completed the programme without being trained in a proper, well equipped facility that would have prepared them for professional theatre practice. It is, therefore, very disconcerting that even academic institutions which should know better about the provision of requisite facilities and equipment in any discipline, are complicit in the non-prioritization of facilities for theatre arts. It is without doubt that such a situation adversely affects the quality and rigour of the programmes so offered.

Conclusion

From the discussion explored in this article, it is obvious that an acknowledgement of the importance of the arts and culture sector in human and economic development has been made, but there has not been a commensurate commitment of material resources to the sector. While the arts can be viewed as good for the human soul through their aesthetic appeal, and can be a viable industry with favourable economic prospects, it is necessary for a good foundation in the form of facilities, training and funding to be laid. The situation calls for a paradigm shift. The arts, culture and entertainment industry's development can no longer be left to chance. In some countries, this sector contributes significant amounts of revenue and constitutes sizable proportions of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In Botswana, we cannot continue to talk about economic diversification without doing what is needed to bring it about.

For the paradigm shift to happen, it is important for the arts and culture sector to be vocal, and for that to happen and be effective, there ought to be some organizational structure that can meaningfully articulate the aspirations of the sector. This structure would have to lobby and convince both the public and private sector of the important role that theatre, arts and culture play in society, not just from an aesthetic and emotional point of view, but economically as well. The Government and the private sector have to be shown that it is time to invest in this sector if Botswana is to achieve economic diversity and the competitiveness that the country aspires to achieve. Theatre in Botswana is grossly under-developed and under-resourced, yet it has great potential which can only be realized if both the Government and the private sector can make a significant investment into it.

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