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Missing persons, stolen bodies and issues of patrimony: the El Negro story

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Botswana is a signatory to UN Conventions which protect cultural heritage and prevent illicit trade of the patrimony of other states. The final return of El Negro highlighted the uneven relations between developed nations who have custody of important heritage collections from the African continent. El Negro, however, was not an artifact but was a human being displayed in a museum. His return and reburial in Botswana, and the reaction of Botswana and Africans in general, involved critical issues of African identity, ethnic minorities, and usually unspoken perceptions about death, burial and ritual in Botswana. The return of El Negro occurred against a background of their events in Botswana, including the disappearance of people, ritual murder accusations and capital punishment sentences on two men from the Basarwa (Bushman) minority. These have all been reported in the media and have generated public debate in issues of death, identity and globalisation. This paper suggests that the El Negro case can be fitted into broader discourse about ethnic minorities, globalisation and scientific practice in the 21st century.

On the 4th October 2000 the body of a man known as El Negro was flown into Sir Seretse Khama airport, Gaborone. He arrived in a small plane accompanied by the Spanish ambassador based at Windhoek and an official of the Spanish museums from Madrid. At the airport were crowds of people who had travelled to witness the arrival of this person who was to be buried the following day at Tsholofelo Park in the city of Gaborone. The body arrived amidst controversy over the decision by Botswana to accept burying a person whose identity was unclear save for his being called 'El Negro'—the Black Man. The decision to bury the body in a Gaborone park was made by a joint committee comprising the Ministry of External Affairs (coordinating the event), the Ministry of Home Affairs represented by its Department of Culture and the Botswana National Museum, the Office of the President and the Ministry of Finance. This decision stirred controversy which will be detailed below.

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The body belonged to a man who was born at the beginning of the 19th century who had died and been buried somewhere around 1830 in a village believed to have been located somewhere between the Vaal and Orange rivers. The body had been stolen from its grave, possibly the night of its burial, by two young French adventurers Jules and Edouard Verreaux. The duo had taken it to France via Cape Town where they displayed it after taxidermic work normally done with wild animals. The body had, since 1916, been displayed in the Darder Museum in the northern Spanish town of Banyoles.

The man was called El Negro both in press coverage and reburial proceedings. The temporary monument erected at his grave bears the name El Negro but refers to him as an unknown African. Sometime in the past he must have had a family name, a totem and a clan. All of these are lost and his funeral in a park was the final symbolic act of restoring an identity to him after 170 years of wandering.

The body arrived at the airport shortly after midday and was taken immediately to the city hall where it was to lie overnight for public viewing. The first startling revelation was when the body was unloaded from the aircraft by a small guard of the Botswana Defence Force. It was contained in a rectangular wooden carton of approximately 1.5 by 1.5 metres square. The BDF draped a flag in national colours over the box and carried it off to a hearse. Immediately questions were asked amongst members of the public who had come to

the airport to see the body arrive. Why did the body not come in a coffin? Why such an ordinary box? It suggested that the remains were not the full body displayed in the museum.

The doors to the city hall opened shortly after four in the afternoon for the public to view the body. To the horror of the crowds what they saw was not what they had expected to see, only a bare skull with hollow sockets behind a small glass window. The flesh, hair and other bodily features had been stripped away. There was widespread dismay which continued to be expressed for days on radio talk-shows. What had happened to the body? How could people be sure that the skull belonged to El Negro? There were no immediate answers to this question.

Later it emerged, in a statement through the Botswana National Museum, that Spanish museum professionals in preparing of the body for repatriation had taken the liberty of scraping the stuccoed flesh off the bones. Material objects with which El Negro had spent more than 100 years on display (headdress, loincloth, shoes, spear, shield, glass eyes, internal metal frame and grass stuffing) had been removed altogether. The implication was that Spanish officials had removed all these because because the Botswana government had merely applied for the 'remains' (*masalela*) of El Negro. Material culture was to remain Spanish property.

Public dismay was further fuelled by the disappointment of Dr Arcelin, the man who had spent eight years fighting a lone battle to see the body returned to Africa. Having travelled all the way from Spain to Botswana for the repatriation, he was shocked to see just a skull in a box. There was no way, he said, that we could be sure the skull belonged to the person he had fought so hard to see returned to Africa. Callers to Radio Botswana's RB 2 station speculated whether Spanish people had no burial rites and whether they always treated their dead with such disrespect.

The burial ceremony, held on the morning of October 5th, 2000, was a sombre affair with large crowds. Women wore scarves over their heads and shoulders, and men wore jackets as they would for a normal funeral. The service was conducted by clergymen who performed Christian burial rites. The Minister of Foreign Affairs presided as the senior maternal uncle and chief mourner, speaking on behalf of the original family. El Negro's adoptive family was represented by the Spanish ambassador (resident in Namibia) who had accompanied the body in the plane.

In his address, the Spanish ambassador argued that the Spanish government could not be held responsible for the original tragedy of El Negro's departure from Africa, since the people who took his body were not Spanish. He suggested that the Spanish had done more than enough by bringing the body back home. His words incensed the audience and the next speaker in particular, a diplomat from Senegal representing the Organisation of African Unity. It was not a questioning of apportioning blame to one nation or another in Europe, but the collective wrongs of many. What should be atoned for was the inhuman act of trading in human beings, whether alive or dead—the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Botswana's offer to rebury El Negro was an act of goodwill, given the uncertainty as to where the person originally came from. The reburial was a symbolic act of goodwill by and towards Black people everywhere, and as such it was crass for Spain to argue they had only displayed the body and had not stolen it originally from Africa.

The controversy started in 1991, when the attention of the world was drawn to the display of a Black male human body in a museum in the Catalan town of Banyoles by Dr Arcelin, an immigrant medical doctor of Haitian origin. He argued that with the Olympic Games due next year in nearby Barcelona, it was degrading for a human being, particularly a Black person, to be displayed in a public place. Arcelin began a lone battle to have the body taken off display and returned to its home for reburial. His calls were resisted by many people in Spain, epitomised by a public protest against the return to Africa of El Negro in Banyoles (Parsons 2000). The mascot-like treatment of the person in question showed clearly that in

the minds of the people he was not a person deserving of burial rites like other people, but was seen as property owned by the people of Banyoles. Mayor Joan Solana accused Dr Arcelin of capitalising on the El Negro matter for political gain. The mayor is alleged to have declared that 'we have mummies and skulls and even human skins in the museum. What is the difference between these things and a stuffed African?' El Negro belonged to the people of Banyoles as part of the bequest of Francesc Darder after whom the museum was named.

Interestingly, when the controversy broke in Spain, the museum changed the identity of the person from El Negro/El Negro to Il Bosquimano. The museum claimed he was not, after all, a person of Black origin but was a Bushman from the Kalahari. This argument, which entails the contortion of arguing that Tswana/Betjouana' people are not Blacks but Bushman, has been clung to by the curator of the Darder museum (Parsons 2000:5). Despite the accumulating body of evidence compiled by the University of Botswana academic Neil Parsons and the Spanish journalist Miquel Molina pointing at the origins of the person.

By early 2000 dissenting voices opposing the repatriation of El Negro used the claim that he was a 'Bushman' to try and resist international pressure to have the body returned to Africa. The claim that the person was a Bushman capitalised on the real and/or supposed ill-treatment of Basarwa/San/Bushman by the government of Botswana. Some local Spanish officials used this line of argument to get support for the idea that Botswana was an unsuitable host for reburial of El Negro. But it was too late. The Minister of Culture in the national government of Spain said that his country was duty-bound to return the body for reburial in accordance with UNESCO conventions and UNESCO's request that museums should not display exhibits which were offensive to people. The Spanish foreign affairs ministry liaised with its Botswana counterpart to arrange for the repatriation. But it was at this point too that, we can now see in retrospect, the handling of the matter was indelibly marred.

The decision to treat the repatriation of El Negro as a matter between foreign affairs bureaucracies served to remove from the exercise some of the cultural sensitivity with which it ought to have been infused. On the Spanish side we can only speculate on the reason: it could have been the negative attitudes of national museum officials. On the Botswana side, the matter was seen to a degree as politically 'sensitive' in that the longer it took, the more likely it was to raise national controversy and local competition over where and how the body was to be buried. The government wanted to get the whole process finalised and 'buried' both literally and figuratively as soon as possible.

The Botswana government did not anticipate that its decision to bury the body in a public park would raise public outcry. Tsholofelo Park was chosen because of its central location in the capital city. It was a neutral place where foreigners as well as Batswana could gain access, given that fact that El Negro was a Pan-African citizen. But many people felt that the body should have been buried in a cemetery. Many felt that, given the 170 years of waiting for a proper reburial, it would have been best to wait a little more and trace his proper kin. So that he could be buried properly amongst his true people. People would complain that Botswana was doing to El Negro what Spain had done—making him an object of public display. His grave became a national monument, but it is worth noting here that while the National Monuments and Relics Act covered El Negro in terms of his antiquity up to the time of burial, it is doubtful if he is covered by the Act now as a recently reburied person.

Reburial proceedings using Christian rites were questioned by people who felt that this took away from the return of a precolonial son of Africa. Traditional doctors (*dingaka*) were not invited to officiate at the ceremony. The re-internment of the body of El Negro was thus incomplete. In fact, many believed that this would cause calamities such as poor rainfall. While people accepted that Botswana's decision to accept the body for reburial was

honourable, the necessary rites and rituals of burying a person who had gone missing were not observed. Examples were given of cleansing ceremonies for soldiers who died in a foreign land or hunters who perished in the bush. The reburial of El Negro thus brought back to people's attention issues of traditional belief and humane respect that had been neglected or forgotten by most people in modern times.

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The reburial of El Negro also highlighted other issues that combine contemporary relevance with traditional significance, hitherto hardly debated in the public domain in Botswana. I refer to the question of capital punishment, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the persistent or revived public fear of ritual murder. I will not focus on the details of cases but will touch on how public opinion on such sensitive or sensational issues brings to the fore perceptions of identity and status in Botswana society that also relate to the El Negro issue.

The questions of capital punishment and ethnic minority rights arose early in 2000 when two men, who had already been sentenced to death for murder, were granted stay of execution and a retrial was ordered. *Ditshwanelo*, the Botswana Centre for Human Rights had argued strongly that the two had been insufficiently represented linguistically and culturally since they were Basarwa/Bushmen. A report by Ditshwanelo alleged torture and human rights abuse of Basarwa by police and prison officials and other government officials.

The significance of this was not lost on commentators on the El Negro reburial later in the year. A University of Botswana academic, Kenosi Lekoko, questioned Africans' moral right to pontificate over the El Negro issue given the current abuse of human rights in their continent. Botswana in general, other than Basarwa among them, had yet to admit their 'collective wrong' in maltreatment of Basarwa and in their general neglect of poverty in Botswana. (*Editorial note*: for a related argument, see the paper by Ken Good in this issue.)

Public outrage and expressions of grief over revived ritual murder have hit the headlines in Botswana two or three times in the past fifteen years or so. The first time in the mid-1980s proved to be a false alarm when a young girl thought to have been abducted in the Bontleng township area of Gaborone was discovered alive and well in another part of the city. The, in 1995, violent riots erupted in secondary schools and then in the streets of Gaborone over the case of a young schoolgirl found murdered, with body parts missing, at Mochudi. Police failure to solve the crime was popularly attributed to obstruction by powerful guilty parties. After the riots British detectives from Scotland Yard were invited in to investigate. Their report, however, was never published, and rumours of foul play therefore continued unabated.

About the same time as El Negro was buried in 2000, the remains of the body of a young man, were found in a shallow grave at Tlokweng near Gaborone. His disappearance a decade before had been investigated but never accounted for. Forensic tests indicated that his body had been mutilated. In January 2001, the body of a young man was found in a house in Mochudi, with organs missing. At the end of the same month a young girl's body was found in Mochudi, bringing the number of ritual murder cases in that rural town to three.

The practice of ritual murder appears to be very old, but its prevalence in Southern Africa appears to be new. Oral traditions tell how mostly pre-pubescent youths were ritually sacrificed by traditional doctors in times of adversity—to invoke the intervention of the gods (*badimo*, ancestors) to in times of calamity such as severe drought. But this practice was not explicitly sanctioned by any law, and appears to have been practised only in great secrecy during precolonial times. However, the practice is rumoured to have become endemic since the 1980s. (The last major incidence in Botswana having been in the Boteti area of Central District after World War II.) Young people have disappeared and their mutilated bodies have been later discovered with organs missing. The choice of organs

of generation and power such as genitals, heart, tongue and brain appear to link these murders to rituals associated with the empowerment and enrichment of significant individuals. No longer just aspirant chiefs, as in the famous *dirretto* ritual murders of Lesotho during the 1940s, but businessmen or politicians of any party.

Why young victims? The body parts of young people (extracted even while they live) are reckoned to have strong medicinal properties for the making of empowerment and enrichment medicines. These victims are usually from obscure poor families. Hence popular identification with them combined with popular resentment of the newly rich and powerful. The public urges government to investigate the disappearance of people and incidences of witchcraft in the country. But the modern laws of Botswana do not recognise the existence of witchcraft, hence it cannot ever be satisfactorily investigated. Traditional custom by contrast recognises evil medical practice as criminal sorcery (*boloi*).

Parsons has pointed out that the actions of the Verreaux brothers in digging up the body of the young El Negro from his grave, in about 1830, would definitely have been seen as *boloi*. That the two went on to use the body for self-enrichment and amusement serves as macabre confirmation. The evil legacy was passed on through Darder to the Darder Museum. The remarks of an anthropologist who visited the museum in 1992 adds to this picture of it as a place of evil dealing with bizarre human remains. He noted:

On a wall high above the cases in the room where the African is displayed there are two human pelts, stretched out parchment-flat, with the same peg-holes you see on animal hides in Africa. On each there is a circular hole where the genitals have been removed. The faces have been cut vertically down the centre, the two profiles turned on each side...two headed monsters, dreadful for their ragged mouths and gaping eye holes. The Bushman in his high glass case seems a little less awful. Crinkly hair on the flattened scalps indicates that these two specimens are also African. Why I wonder have they passed without comment? (Parsons 2000:14, citing Robertson 1993:2-3).

The obsessive need to display human bodies in public places, as exemplars of the variety of human races, should have died with the death of pseudo-science in the mid-20th century (Parsons 2000: 6-8). But the El Negro story clearly demonstrates that the old science is far from dead in popular imagination. The belief still lingers that African bodies are legitimate objects of museum collection and display.

Ordinary Botswana question the claim to superior culture of those who commit and perpetuate sorcery in the name of Science, and who condemn as inferior people of different identities, races and class. Public anger and ongoing debate around the case of El Negro has brought to the fore the extent to which museums, mainly located in the West, condone these practices. The El Negro affair has made Botswana question more critically official negligence over the disappearances of young people, and the lack of follow-up by law enforcement agencies.

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