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‘Your Obedient Servant or Your Friend’: Forms of Address in Letters Among British Administrators and Batswana Chiefs

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Introduction

In the late 1800s, Bechuanaland, now Botswana, and other less powerful nations neighbouring South Africa were in danger of being annexed to South Africa by the powerful Boers who ruled it then. Bechuanaland asked for protection from the British government, and in 1885 it was declared a British protectorate. However, before British protection, the country was ruled by local chiefs who had a great deal of power over the people, the land, and were responsible for issuing mine prospecting permits. The advent of the British in 1885 called for a redefining and regulation of the powers of the chiefs, a step that naturally bred misunderstandings and strains in the relationship between local Batswana chiefs and British administrators.

Using a corpus of 200 letters written during the protectorate period (1885–1966) by and to the British administrators on one hand and letters written by and to Batswana chiefs on the other hand, this chapter aims to explore the type of relationship that existed between the British administrators and Batswana chiefs during the protectorate days. This relationship is assessed by examining the type of address forms used in the salutations and signatures of the letters. The chapter argues that the two groups sought linguistic means of dealing with the strife between them by use of or failure to use certain address forms. For example, the British administrators used the signature ‘your obedient servant’ when writing to fellow British administrators but rarely when writing to Batswana chiefs, suggesting that a Briton could not be a servant of a Batswana chief. Similarly, the address term ‘friend’

which connotes equality and solidarity is only found in letters from British administrators to Batswana chiefs but is rare in British administrator to British administrator correspondence. In this chapter, the African liberation struggle and the history of colonisation in Africa is investigated from a language point of view and, thus, contributes towards debates on this issue by adding a language dimension.

Analysis of the letters

The letters used in this analysis are authentic and were obtained from the Botswana National Archives in Gaborone between August 2000 and June 2001. The letters are divided into two broad categories. The first category consists of letters written by the British administrators who mostly worked as officials in the British administration as High Commissioners, Deputy High Commissioners, Resident Commissioners, Governors, Magistrates, etc. This category is further divided into two parts: letters written by the British administrators to other British administrators, and letters written by British administrators to Batswana chiefs. The second category consists mainly of letters written by Batswana chiefs. This category, too, has two parts: letters written by Batswana to the British administrators, and those written by Batswana to other Batswana.

Letters by British administrators to other British administrators

Salutations and openings

In this category 43 out of 45 (or 95 percent) of letters from one British administrator to another employ a formal salutation such as: *Dear Sir*, *Sir*, *Your honour*, or the addressee's name or official title. It is only in two cases that elaborate praise or greetings such as 'May it please your excellency' is used in the salutation. This finding suggests that the relationship between the addressee and the reader for one British administrator writing to another is formal and professional, allowing very little intimacy. The following examples illustrate the kind of salutations and opening sentences of letters of this kind.

Excerpt 1

My dear Colonel,

It appears Bathoen became infatuated with a local girl who is no class and she seems to get control of him.

(Signature of letter not legible, To Colonel Sir Carrington, 6 February 1929 S 5/5).

Excerpt 2

Sir,

I have the honour to inform you in reply to yours of 15 inst. with reference to the inquiry as to whether we intend charging a commission on sums of money transferred to the credit of the deputy commissioner in Bechuanaland at Kimberly, that we have much pleasure in making the said transfers at par.

(Letter from imperial secretary, signature not legible, to High Commissioner 25 April 1884 *HC 65/14*).

The letters written by British administrators to other British administrators do not only have formal salutations but they also include direct opening sentences that immediately present the issue that the author wants to discuss. Merkestein (1998) remarks that British letter writing style is more direct because the norms of British English fellowship dictate that expositions must be rational and since reason and emotion are felt to be diametrically opposed, the overt expression of feelings, attitude and emotions must be avoided as much as possible.

Signatures and endings

The signatures of these letters are also simple, formal and formulaic. In the current data the most popular signature is 'your obedient servant' which is employed in 22 out of 45 letters (or 45 percent). This signature seems to convey reverence and respect for the high status of the addressee and is therefore mostly used by a low status person writing to a high status person. It is also formulaic, used by most of the writers and sometimes not even written in full but abbreviated to 'I am your etc'. The rest of the letters, 23 out of 45 (or 51 percent) use other formal signatures such as 'yours sincerely', 'yours truly', or 'with kind regards I remain'. Once again, the formal and formulaic endings and signatures in these letters suggest a formal, professional and faceless type of relationship in which colloquial and intimate language does not have a place. The letters have one function: to convey official business. The following examples illustrate the type of endings and signatures found in the letters of the British administrators to other British administrators.

Excerpt 3

It occurs to me that perhaps some of the sentences in this communication may appear at a distance to be too strongly expressed. My apology, it could be due to my sense of magnitude of the imminence of the question, which alone could have induced me to write at all.

With every expression of respect, I remain.

Your excellency's humble servant,

John Mackenzie

(Letter from John Mackenzie to Sir Henry Berkly, 2 May 1876 *HC 48/1/2*).

Excerpt 4

I asked him if he is satisfied, he said 'no' and then again he said if you are only riding past it is all right, but you must do nothing.

I have the honour to be etc.

J. Vosthurgen

(Letter from J.Vosthurgen to High Commissioner, 19 February 1889

HC 25/42).

Letters by the British administrators to Batswana chiefs

It is through these letters that we obtain an insight into the controversial relationship between the British administrators and Batswana chiefs. It should be noted that during the 1800s and 1900s when these letters were written, white people in South Africa were considered to be superior to black people, so the kind of relationship that existed between British administrators and Batswana chiefs had its roots on the struggles that existed between blacks and whites. Though Bechuanaland did not have a white government in the same way that South Africa and Rhodesia did, it was a British protectorate and the British administered and oversaw the country by means of a small administration based in Mafeking, South Africa. The terms of the protectorate were that the British protect Batswana country from annexation to South Africa but leave the governance of the country to the local chiefs. However, that situation could not be maintained, and the British ended up assuming more power than the chiefs had anticipated (Tlou and Campbell 1984). This obviously caused conflicts and overlaps in the duties and powers of the British administrators and Batswana chiefs, who before the advent of the British administration were the sole rulers of the land and people. The forms of address found in the correspondence between the British administrators and Batswana chiefs serve to shed some light into the kind of relationship that existed between these two groups.

Salutations and openings

The form of address in the letters written by the British administrators to Batswana chiefs is less formal than that found in British administrators writing to other British administrators. The letters mostly employ an informal and intimate address form, 'my friend'. Of the 23 letters written by the British administrators to Batswana chiefs, 18 of them (or 78 percent) employ the salutation 'my friend'. This finding is significant and interesting since it is rare in British administrator to British administrator correspondence. The use of

such an informal and intimate address form suggests that although the British administrators were very formal in their correspondence with other British administrators they did not need to be formal in their correspondence and interaction with Batswana chiefs.

The Oxford Reference English Dictionary (1996: 555) defines 'friend' as a person with whom one enjoys mutual affection and regard. Therefore, the address term, 'My friend' in these letters can be interpreted to be a neutral address form that connotes solidarity, equality, intimacy and informality. The use of this salutation establishes a solidarity and closer relationship between the British and the local chiefs and bridges the gap of subordinate and boss between the two groups. It is only in a few instances that formal salutations such as 'Dear sir' or title of addressee or their name is used in these letters. The following exemplify the kind of salutations and openings found in letters from British administrators to Batswana chiefs.

Excerpt 5

My friend Sechele,

When I visited Molepolole last month an address of welcome was presented to me by you and your people and I told you in reply to certain points therein that I was unable to say anything relative thereto without first consulting Mr. Barry.

(Letter from assistant commissioner to Chief Sechele, 24 February 1912, *S* 42).

Excerpt 6

To the kafir chief Khama,

Friend, I have received your letter about complaints against Khamane and will in answer inform you that I have referred the matter to my native of Lurtenburg, Mr Polfiator.

(Letter from S.G.R. Kruger, State President of South Africa, to Chief Khama, 30 March 1885, *HC* 5/12).

Excerpt 7

Chief,

Herewith I give you notice and forbid you absolutely from trespassing on Transvaal ground as is already done by your people and warn you in the name of the South African Republic not to lay your hands upon the crops sown by your people in the boundary of the South African Republic.

(Letter from Native Commissioner, Mafeking to Chief Ikaning, 7 March 1887, *HC* 12/18).

The opening sentences of these letters are also for the most part direct, immediately stating the issue. It is important to note that though the address form 'my friend' connotes solidarity, equality, and intimacy, these sentiments

are contradicted in some of the letters where the authors use very bald on record, statements which signify their authority and power over the addressee. For example in Excerpts 7 and 8 above, the writers issue a reprimand or a command that clearly indicates their authority and superiority over the chiefs.

It is also interesting to note the use of the word *kafir* in Excerpt 6 above. *The Oxford Reference English Dictionary* (1996: 770) states that the word 'kafir' originates from Arabic meaning infidel, or not a believer. 'Kafir' was a disparaging and derogatory term used to refer to blacks during white supremacy rule in South Africa. In this excerpt the word 'kafir' is used in juxtaposition with a more intimate address term 'friend' to refer to chief Khama. Such address terms as 'kafir' and the issuing of reprimands and orders suggest that the British administrators did not regard Batswana chiefs as their equals despite the use of this form of address. It would, therefore, seem that the term was deliberately adopted by the British administrators to mask the power struggle and gap between them and the local chiefs as well as a cover up for British dominance over its subjects.

Signatures and endings

In the analysis of letters from British administrators to other British administrators it was noted that 48 percent of the letters employed the formulaic signature 'your obedient servant'. However, it is interesting to note that this signature is found in only 3 out of 23 letters written by British administrators to Batswana chiefs. This finding is significant because it suggests that though the ending 'your obedient servant' might seem formulaic or routine between native speakers or British administrators, it is hardly used in letters to the local chiefs. The near absence of 'your obedient servant' in these letters is a comment on how the British administrators perceived their status in relation to the chiefs. It suggests that though 'your obedient servant' was popular in letters during that era it did not apply in a situation of a Briton writing to a local chief because it could suggest that a Briton could be of a lower status or a servant of a local black chief. That of course was not acceptable.

The endings and signatures of letters written by the British to Batswana chiefs are relatively less formal when compared to those found in letters to other British administrators. The most popular signature found in letters from the British to the local chiefs is 'your friend' and the endings of these letters mostly convey greetings and best wishes. Of the 23 letters written by British administrators to Batswana chiefs 20 of them (86 percent) employ the signature 'your friend' and only 14 percent of the letters employ such signatures as 'with best wishes, rain, I remain'. The following excerpts illustrate the kind of signatures and endings found in letters from British administrators to Batswana chiefs.

Excerpt 8

I propose to be at Gaborones on Friday next and request you to be present there to meet me and give me an explanation of why you held the meeting and the reason for making use of the words which you are said to have used. Until we meet I shall not discuss the matter with you.

Let it rain.

Resident Commissioner, Mafeking.

Letter from Resident Commissioner to Chief Sebele 9 June 1899, *HC 115*).

Excerpt 9

With regard to a line between you and Khama, I know no such line yet and I don't see how any line could justly be made without your knowledge and consent.

With hearty greetings remain always your friend.

Letter from S.G.A. Shippard to Chief Lobengula, 29 April 1887, *HC122*).

Letters written by the British administrators to Batswana chiefs can generally be characterised as less formal though faceless. The letters have an informal tone which is achieved by a direct presentation of the subject matter without informal openings such as greetings. The informal tone is achieved through use of intimate salutations and signatures such as 'my friend, let it rain, with greetings'.

Letters by Batswana to British administrators**Salutations and openings**

The majority of letters, 70 out of 130 (or 54 percent) from Batswana to British administrators employ formal salutations such as 'dear sir', 'your excellency', 'your honour', or the addressee's title or name. This is in contrast to letters from the British to Batswana. The high percentage of formal salutations in these letters is probably indicative of the formality with which Batswana chiefs perceived their relationship with the British administrators: formal, distant and professional. The less formal salutation, 'dear friend', is also used in a significant number of letters, 42 out of 130, (or 32 percent). It has already been argued that this address form is a mark of solidarity and equality though it has also been demonstrated that the use of this address term does not connote equality because the British administrators and Batswana chiefs rarely participated as equals in their interaction. For instance, despite the use of the address form 'my friend', the British displayed their authority by use of reprimands and commands and Batswana authors on the other hand used a lot of self-denigration strategies in their letters to the British administrators. This contrast serves to highlight the power disparity in their relationship.

Since the addressee (British administrator) in all these cases is someone who is believed could bring about an adjustment in that disparity, the use of self-deprecating language is designed to invoke compassion and pity. Batswana writers used the strategy of downgrading in order to attract attention and compassion from their readers. In Setswana speech interaction, such expressions as 'I have nothing to say' or 'I have a little question', make the speaker's opinion or idea seem modest, and, therefore, not pressurising or imposing to the listener. At the same time, such expressions appeal to the addressee's compassion and generosity to listen to those with a small voice. Excerpt 10 below exemplifies common Setswana downgrading strategies of downplaying one's opinion and ideas in front of a superior by using such expressions as 'I have nothing to say', or 'I have a little question'. In addition, the use of the plural marker 'our' in the salutation of the same excerpt is an expression of respect for a person of higher status in the writer's dialect.

Excerpt 10

To *our* senior magistrate,

My best greetings Sir, *I have nothing to say sir*, I *only* ask about the health of my relative who is there. *I ask only one little question chief*. I hear that my wife says that when I beat her I had her held down, one person holding her by one foot, another by another foot, and another by her hand. I say I hear her words, but if they are hers they are lies.

(Letter from chief Sekgoma Letsholathebe to Magistrate, 13 November 1905, RC 5/13).

Sometimes the address form 'chief' was used to refer to British administrators such as resident magistrates, magistrates, etc., as exemplified in Excerpt 11 below. This address form is found in four out of 130 letters and its use suggests a much broader meaning than a leader of an ethnic community. It was also used as a term of respect to refer to an individual in a position of authority.

Excerpt 11

Mr Ellenberger,

Greetings *chief*, to you, your wife and your children. I am writing to inform you that on his return from Gaborone, the boy who had taken our letters to you said that he told him it was well with regard to the letter which I had written to you.

(Letter from Kgabo to Ellenberger, 2 May 1901, RC 5/12).

The following excerpts illustrate the kind of salutations and openings found in letters written by Batswana chiefs to the British administrators.

Excerpt 12

Your honour,

I greet you and the Bakwena also greet you. I together with the headmen and all of the Bakwena are very much pleased that his honour found an opportunity and the necessity to visit our town and see us.

(Letter from Sechele paramount chief of the Bakwena to His Honour the Resident Commissioner, 8 September 1911, *S* 42/3).

Excerpt 13

My dear friend,

Sir, I write to greet you, and Mrs Wright. Now I send you these few lines to let you know that you will be so kind enough, please sir, to wait until I tell you when I need the corn.

(Letter from chief Montsioa to W.J. Wright 25 September 1884, *HC* 193).

It is also worth noting that while the letters written by the British mostly opened by going straight into the issue, letters written by Batswana tended to open by a greeting or making a reference to the welfare of the reader before presenting the subject matter. In the best traditions of Setswana hospitality a speaker has to ask about the welfare of the hearer and sometimes that of his family at the beginning of a conversation. An examination of the data shows that of the 130 letters written by Batswana chiefs to the British administrators, 29 of them (or 22 percent) opened with a greeting or inquiry about the health of the recipient or his family thereby employing the Setswana practice of using greetings as conversation openers and as a strategy by which a speaker attempts to please and win the social approval of the listener.

Signatures and endings

Although Batswana chiefs seem to have accepted the superiority of the British as evident in the use of downgraders, and honorific titles such as 'chief', it is interesting to note that only about 15 percent (or 20 letters) of the letters from Batswana chiefs to British administrators were signed 'your obedient servant'. This low percentage among Batswana chiefs is indicative of the fact that although Batswana chiefs acknowledged and accepted the superiority of the British administrators they could not readily accept the position of obedient servant. Batswana writers tended to prefer less formal endings such as 'greetings, your friend, that is all'. Of the 130 letters written to the British, 54 of them (or 41.5 percent) end with a greeting, 34 (26 percent) are signed 'your friend', 13 (10 percent) employ the Setswana conversation ending 'that is all', or the Batswana peace slogan 'pula or rain', thus making the percentage of informal signatures 78 percent. The rest of the letters employ formal signatures such as 'yours sincerely', 'yours faithfully', or 'yours truly'. The follow-

ing examples illustrate the endings and signatures of letters by Batswana chiefs to British administrators.

Excerpt 14

With regard to this matter we can only inform the government, only the government will know what to do, we have no other will but that of the government. *This is all, Greetings chief*, I shall say no more.

I am your friend, Baruti.

(Letter from Baruti Kgosidintsi to J. Ellenberger 17 July 1901, RC 5/12).

Excerpt 15

His people are doing what they wish, they are not waiting for the decision, with regard to my people I have told them not to do nothing as you said. I am waiting for the decision. *With kind greetings* to yourself and to Mrs Surmon and family.

I am etc. Sebele.

(Letter from Sebele chief of Bakwena to Mr Surmon 25 September 1894, RC 5/12).

The letters written by Batswana chiefs to the British administrators suggest a formal and yet friendly and cautious relationship. Batswana writers tend to address the British formally, yet in accordance with their culture they have to greet them and ask about their welfare and that of their families. Letters written by Batswana thus have longer introductions and longer signatures which involve greetings and best wishes. While the British used the signature 'your obedient servant' in letters from subordinate to superior this type of signature was not preferred by the majority of Batswana writers even though they accepted and acknowledged the superiority of the British administrators.

Letters from Batswana to other Batswana

Current holdings contain a few letters between Batswana chiefs because there was not much written communication between them in the early years. The chiefs mostly communicated by word of mouth. The holdings include only 32 letters written by Batswana chiefs to others.

Salutations and beginnings

The majority of letters written by Batswana chiefs to other Batswana have formal types of salutations: 15 letters (or 47 percent) employ such salutations as 'dear sir', 'your honour', 10 of the letters (or 31 percent) employ the title of the addressee or 'chief' is used. These two kinds of formal salutations numbered 25 out of 32 (or 78 percent). However what sets the salutations of the letters from Batswana chiefs to other Batswana apart is the use of kinship

terms and totems as salutations as exemplified in the excerpts 16, 17, and 19 below. The use of kinship terms does not necessarily connote a biological relationship between author and reader. The kinship terms are honorific forms meant to show respect and solidarity with the addressee.

Excerpt 16

Dear chief Keaboka,

huti ke a dumedisa. (*Duiker I greet you*). *Chief* I learn that you have paid us a visit a few days ago in connection with some school trouble we are having. *Chief* we are only sorry that when you were here you did not even see one of the teachers. *Chief* we here feel that we are your ears and eyes.

(Letter from John Malome to chief Keaboka 24 March 1952, *BT Admin* 1/22).

Excerpt 17

Dear father,

When a man is rotten all the things which belong to him smell bad too. I speak these words for the sake of the dispute and color bar and persecution of employers of the workers who are recruited in the South African mines in the republic of South Africa.

(Letter from Khumo Keitumetse to the Office of the President 31 July 1971, *OP* 18/2/1).

Though the majority of the letters have a formal type of salutation a significant number of them open with a greeting. For example, 12 out of 32 (37.5 percent) use greetings as openers in accordance with the Setswana practice. Totems are also used as a way of expressing solidarity. Setswana conversation openers such as 'I have no news', or 'I have nothing to say', which are a modest way of presenting one's opinions or downgrading one's view, are also common in these letters.

Signatures and endings

Most of the letters in this category end with a greeting. Out of 32 letters, 17 (or 53 percent) conclude with a greeting and 4 (or 12.5 percent) employ conversation endings such as 'that is all', or 'pula or rain'. Eleven of the letters (34 percent) employ formal signatures such as 'yours truly' or 'yours sincerely'. The following exemplify the type of signatures found in letters from Batswana to other Batswana chiefs.

Excerpt 18

Mr Lampard told me that he will inform the chief that I should get away from here. He says that even when I meet him I do not take off my hat. This

European comes from Mashonaland. I am well chief. There is no news.
Greetings to the family.
 Yours B.K. Motheo.

(Letter from B.K. Motheo to Bangwato Deputy Chief 25 January 1940, *DCF* 7/2).

Excerpt 19

We found out that the huts had been entered and searched for fictitious evidence for which the girls were to get dresses. *Father*, there is not much to say. I will stop here. The writer is *your child*.

(Unsigned letter to D. Raditladi 4 January 1937, *S* 485/1/1).

Batswana writers mostly used formal signatures and salutations when writing to other Batswana. Letters to the British administrators on the other hand tended to have more informal signatures. This is interesting since we would expect letters to the British administrators to have more formal signatures and salutations. However, this is not surprising since the British writers also employed more informal salutations and signatures when writing to Batswana than when writing to other British administrators. The informality between these two groups is argued to be an expression of solidarity as well as an avoidance strategy for dealing with the power struggle between the British administrators and Batswana chiefs during the protectorate period. Letters written by Batswana are orientated towards the relationship between the reader and the writer and the format, content and style of the letters help establish or maintain that relationship. The letters by Batswana illustrate a freer register in which there is a place for the explicit maintenance of relationships. As Merkestein (1998: 182) points out, the expression of relationships is central to the social reality of Batswana. On the other hand, letters by British administrators are more formal, they have no place for maintenance of relationships but are focused on expressing the message of the writer.

Conclusion

The available evidence tends to suggest that both the British administrators and Batswana chiefs were aware of the inherent power struggle between them. The two groups seemed cautious of this inherent problem, and they both sought linguistic means of dealing with it such as use or failure to use certain address forms when writing to each other. For example, the address form 'my friend' which connotes equality and solidarity is only found in letters written to Batswana chiefs by British administrator and in letters written to British administrators by Batswana chiefs but rarely used by Batswana chiefs or British administrators when writing to fellow British administrators or fellow Batswana. The use of this address term masks the unequal power

relationship and tension that existed between the two camps. The failure to use the signature 'your obedient servant' by British administrators when writing to Batswana chiefs also suggests that the British did not perceive themselves as being subordinate to Batswana chiefs. The superiority of the British administrators is demonstrated in these letters by the issuing of commands and reprimands and the inferiority of Batswana chiefs is demonstrated by use of down graders and repeated use of honorific titles when writing to British administrators.

This chapter argues that language has played a very crucial role in the African liberation struggle and it is worth looking into in order to further support and broaden already existing evidence. While most studies on the history of the African liberation struggle have concentrated on the political issues they have largely ignored the battle of words that has always gone alongside with these. This chapter is thus an attempt to generate interest in scholars in this field to look more closely at how language use can lend more evidence to their historical and political findings.

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