

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# “WHITE SKIN AND AN AFRICAN SOUL”<sup>1</sup>: WHITENESS, EMPLACEMENT AND AUTOCHTHONY IN NGAMILAND, BOTSWANA

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How do White<sup>2</sup> citizens as an ethnic minority in a postcolonial African state forge a sense of national identity and belonging? Does living in a particular locale for generations entitle White citizens to a legitimate claim to autochthony despite the complex histories of colonialism and racism in the region? Drawing on ethnographic research among the White Batswana of Ngamiland,<sup>3</sup> I argue that identity and a sense of belonging for this group are formed largely around a connection to the natural environment.

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<sup>1</sup> From an unpublished poem by Catherine Buckle, a White Zimbabwean woman, lamenting her sense of alienation from her nation.

<sup>2</sup> While the terms White and Black are highly problematic and connote an essentialised notion of race (see Dyer 1997), they are the terms most commonly used by my informants to distinguish between the citizens of Botswana. I specifically avoid using the term European as the White Batswana see themselves very much as African, rendering this geographical identifier inappropriate. The terms Batswana (pl) and Motswana (s) are used to refer to all citizens of Botswana regardless of ethnicity. These terms are used frequently to distinguish White citizens from expatriates and yet I do not simply refer to my informants as Batswana, as despite generations of living in the region, the Whites remain a discrete community, and thus I use the terms White Mo/(Ba)tswana.

<sup>3</sup> My findings are based on one year (August 2006-August 2007) of ethnographic research in Ngamiland, both in Maun, the regional town centre, and on safari in the Okavango Delta. In conjunction with participant observation I have conducted formal and informal interviews with White Batswana; with Batawana, the regions dominant African population (NB: not to be confused with Batswana which refers to all the citizens of Botswana, including the Batawana); with expatriates, who are

An autochthonous relationship is one of indigeneity, of nativeness, connecting blood, self and soil and evoking a notion of being firmly rooted to the place of one's birth.<sup>4</sup> As an ethnic minority implicated in histories of colonialism, racism and the attendant economic and social privileges, the autochthonous nature of the relationship of the White populations to their birth nations in postcolonial southern Africa is often denied. The recent histories of turbulent racial relations in South Africa and Zimbabwe attest to this fissure and the question of national belonging for the White population is a pertinent one. In contrast to their neighbours, however, the political and social dynamics and the relatively peaceful history of Botswana have provided the conditions in which the White Batswana have been able to develop a strong sense of national belonging. Although not the "natives of choice"<sup>5</sup>, the deep sense of emplacement in the nation that is demonstrated by the White Batswana suggests a need to recognise the autochthonous nature of their relationship to Botswana.<sup>6</sup>

I must at this early stage emphasise that my aim in highlighting a White autochthony does not have the intention of making an overtly political comment but is an attempt to gain insight on a discursive level into this ethnic minority's sense of connection and belonging to the nation. For this reason I utilise the concept of autochthony rather than indigeneity, as the latter is mobilized in a highly politicized manner by the first inhabitants of various nations who are, in many cases, disenfranchised minorities. The White Batswana do not identify themselves as "indigenous" *per se* and yet feel strongly about their status as native to Botswana. The concept of autochthony allows an exploration of this ontology without the explicitly political overtones.<sup>7</sup>

As a minority community that constitutes less than one percent of Botswana's population, a sense of belonging for White citizens is not, for most individuals, derived from shared ethnicity or culture. It is my contention that the deep emplacement of the White Batswana is premised on their connection to the natural environment. There are a number of

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primarily from southern and east Africa yet also from the United Kingdom, Europe and elsewhere; and with international tourists.

<sup>4</sup> Ceuppens and Geschiere, "Autochthony: Local or Global?", 386.

<sup>5</sup> See also Read, *Belonging*, and Trigger, "Whales, Whitefellas", 6, on the perception of White people as inauthentic or less desirable "natives" to a nation.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Handler 1990 in Dominy, *Calling the Station Home*, 269.

<sup>7</sup> While autochthony in its English usage remains a relatively neutral, unpoliticised term, the term has become highly politicized in the Francophone countries of Africa and elsewhere in the world (Ceuppens and Geschiere, "Autochthony: Local or Global?", 386).

aspects to this relationship which will each be discussed in the course of this chapter: an economic dependence on the natural environment; an intimate knowledge of the land, flora and fauna; an emotional and spiritual attachment to the environment; a strong conservation ethic; and identification as “bush people”. Finally, I will suggest that this connection to the environment is made possible by a belief in being accepted, for the most part, by the majority Batswana.

### Connection to environment

In Botswana, 17% of the land is designated as national parks and game reserves and a further 22% as wildlife management areas; thus a phenomenal 39% of the land mass is allocated to conservation and the tourism industry.<sup>8</sup> The Okavango Delta in Ngamiland, Botswana’s northwest district, is a unique and relatively pristine ecosystem abundant in game that attracts large numbers of high-paying tourists, resulting in the economy of the region being based around the nature tourism industry. The vast majority of White Batswana in the region work directly in tourism as photographic tour guides, professional hunters, lodge owners and managers or in support roles such as lodge construction, supply provision, maintenance and mechanics. The dominance of tourism in the region’s economy renders it virtually inevitable that the White Batswana work for at least part of their careers in the bush. As one White Motswana who has worked as a photographic tour guide for 14 years describes it, “I was born into it... I’ve also realised that I’ll never be able to get out of guiding. I’ll actually never stop doing it. As Batswana, as bush people, you can’t *not* do it.” This statement reflects the sense of hereditary vocation whereby people grow up with the requisite skills and knowledge and so fall into guiding from a young age. A twenty-five year-old White Motswana man described his upbringing in a fishing lodge. “From a very young age I’ve been taking people out on the river there. So I’ve pretty much done what my Mum did, I grew up in the tourism industry and ja, that’s why I’m not so eager to carry on in it.” While many White Batswana love their work in the tourism industry, in both these statements, a sense of the inevitability of working in the bush is clear and both informants are frustrated by a seeming inability to get out of the industry (the former works part-time as a guide, the latter full-time). As individuals have in some cases entered the industry straight after school, they may not possess the skills or qualifications required to enter other forms of

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<sup>8</sup> Mbaiwa, “Wildlife resource utilisation”, 144.

employment. For other individuals, the pressure to guide safaris derives from a sense of obligation to family, friends, previous employers and repeat clients. Thus despite the ambivalent feelings of the community toward the tourism industry, the relationship of the White Batswana to the natural environment is on one level that of economic dependence.

While many White Batswana are dependent on the natural environment for their livelihoods, their connection to land goes far beyond economics. Michèle Dominy, in investigating the relationship to land of the settler-descendant farmers in high-country New Zealand, argues against the scholarly stereotyping of White culture's connection to land as being primarily materialistic and lacking the "authenticity" that is accorded to non-White groups.<sup>9</sup> For the White Batswana, people speak of work in the tourism industry as being at times frustrating and stressful but something that allows them to live and work in the bush. They do not, for the most part, earn large amounts of money, but rather perceive the industry as a necessary means to allow them to remain living in the region with an outdoor lifestyle. Moreover, many of the White Batswana spend a significant part of their leisure time in the bush fishing, picnicking, camping and enjoying the wildlife.

This repudiation of a solely economic relationship to the environment is also expressed in terms of land. When asked about the difference between the culture of the White Batswana relative to expatriates living in Ngamiland, one White Motswana elucidated it as follows:

I think most of us White Batswana have grown up with a Motswana attitude which is very relaxed and whatever. People who come here as expats are driven. A lot of them come here because they see an opportunity; they come here to make money. I'm applying for a piece of land because I want to live there. Not because I want to sell it as soon as I get a chance. I don't see it as an investment, land... it's home... For me the land is precious.

### Knowledge of environment

This strong connection is made further evident through the White Batswana's intimate knowledge of the environment. The Okavango is the world's largest inland delta, covering an expanse of 10 000 square kilometres. It is composed of an intricate network of lagoons, channels and floodplains dotted with islands and fringed by dense papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) and mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) forests. The White

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<sup>9</sup> Dominy, *Calling the Station Home*, 207-9.

Batswana possess familiarity with huge areas of the delta and navigate it on foot, in boats and vehicles and by air. On a “Trans-Okavango” boat tour, for example, I traversed 460 kilometres of the delta from Sepopa in the Panhandle to Maun, Ngamiland’s capital, with two White Batswana and they negotiated the incredibly complex web of channels without ever referring to a map or global positioning system (GPS) or making a single wrong turn. There is only one route leading to Maun and the way is often counter-intuitive in that a small side channel constitutes the correct path while the main flow of water leads deceptively to a dead end. One expatriate describes the delta environment as dangerous and difficult for those who do not know it well:

You can’t just go into the delta. You’ll get lost, seriously, badly. That’s a fact. There’s too many channels, it’s dangerous. Now I have boated on rivers, coming from the Zambezi. I’ve had a few accidents, and all that sort of [thing]... But these *okes*<sup>10</sup> are just bulleting down ... full speed through these channels. The delta is not just one big open space of water, it is little channels that you go through. You [mess] up, you’re doomed, you’re lost. Goodbye.

Despite his boating experience and knowledge of the neighbouring Zambezi, this expatriate acknowledges that to negotiate the Delta a person requires a highly specialised knowledge of place.

The White Batswana also possess a formidable knowledge of the diverse fauna and flora of the Okavango. They know and can name the majority of plant and animal species and have detailed knowledge of their particular habitats, life spans, anatomy, reproductive practices and, in the case of animals, their behavioural patterns, social practices and diet. From tracks, guides can determine the species of animal, the recency of its presence and the speed at which it was moving. They tend to be extremely knowledgeable on the environmental history of the region, the geology, ecological threats and often astronomy. They constantly discuss and debate the climate, seasons and weather patterns, and tell endless stories about experiences in the bush.

In addition, many White Batswana possess considerable knowledge of the ways in which Botswana’s various cultural groups have traditionally used plants and animals for food, clothing, medicine and other requirements. They possess skills—such as tracking animals and making fire from sticks—that they have learned from the Basarwa<sup>11</sup> and they

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<sup>10</sup> Colloquial expression for “men”.

<sup>11</sup> “Basarwa” is the local name for the first inhabitants of southern Africa, also referred to more broadly as Bushmen or San.

speak with respect of this group's bush knowledge. Shared experience of the bush and exchanging environmental knowledge thus provides a basis of common ground between the various cultural groups in Ngamiland. As the anthropologist Robert Thornton writes of the South African context:

Both White and Black people who call themselves Africans identify with the land, and claim it as their inalienable right. Both appeal to the blood that has been spilt on it, the dead that have been buried in it, the food that can be coaxed from it and, again and again, the beauty of it. The aesthetic beauty of the landscape is thus a political resource.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in Botswana, the natural environment is mobilised as a site of shared identification with the beauty and international fame of the Okavango being a source of national pride for all Batswana. The link between the natural and social environment is made evident further through the fact that while not all White Batswana are fluent in Setswana, the national language, they do tend to have a vast vocabulary when it comes to the Setswana words for flora and fauna, as well as Setswana and Basarwa place names. This is facilitated in part by the requirement for this knowledge in obtaining a safari guide's license where proficiency in Setswana terms is tested. Many Setswana terms for flora and fauna are utilised by the White Batswana in daily speech: for example, the Setswana term *Mochaba* is used more frequently than the English "sycamore fig" (*Ficus sycamorus*).

The White Batswana's knowledge of the environment goes beyond the cognitive to the embodied. Living and working in the Okavango Delta requires considerable corporeal and sensory skills and the White Batswana's expertise becomes patently evident when contrasted with the bodies of tourists. On safari, guides explicitly articulate these differences, telling tourists how to control their bodies while game viewing, exhorting them to be calm and quiet, to whisper, and to keep movement free-flowing and minimal in order to avoid disturbing the wildlife. They encourage people to do more than merely look at the animals but to engage all the senses, persuading clients to be silent and to listen to the sounds of particular bird calls. They encourage tourists to smell certain plants, such as the ubiquitous wild sage (*Pechuel-loeschea leubnitziae*), or to learn to recognise the scent of a herd of Cape buffalo (*Syncerus kaffer*). Tourists are frequently astounded by their guide's skill at spotting animals which they fail to see. One White Mtswana describes the difference in ways of

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<sup>12</sup> Thornton, "The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa", 153-4.

seeing and corporeality between experienced bush people and tourists in the following terms:

As bush people we tend to look further all the time... our eyes are trained for distances. You find that people who come from cities spend all their time looking at computers and a lot of what they are looking for is here, right next to them, instead of searching, looking out. And agility, definitely. Pavements don't have branches lying across them. You don't have to look down all the time when you're walking on a pavement. Whereas here you've got to be listening, looking up and down, trying to walk quietly at the same time... clients are always falling down.

The White Batswana are for the most part very physical, fit people who are passionate about outdoor recreation. I have yet to meet a White Motswana, male or female, who does not ride horses and own a number of dogs. This physical relationship with animals extends beyond the domestic: the White Batswana have vast experience of physical interaction with wild animals, extending from being on foot, to horseback, to interaction with wildlife from vehicles and boats. Everyone has stories of physical attacks by various animals: many have survived elephant, lion, buffalo and hippo charges as well as bites and stings from snakes, scorpions and the many and varied insects. When asked if he had been attacked by a lion ever, a horseback safari guide laconically replied, "This year, more than twice. Well, you ride a hamburger<sup>13</sup> through the Delta, what do you expect?"

There is an extensive scholarship exploring the relationships to land of the indigenous peoples of the world. By contrast there is very little written about how White people connect to land in the places of their birth and upbringing. Among the White Batswana, an autochthonous relationship is seen to be necessary to truly know the natural environment, while expatriates are thought to have different ways of learning about and knowing the bush. The difference is explained by a Motswana guide and photographer in the following way:

You're viewing it from a different point, if you grew up here. You're looking at it, you know, the bush to you is like a story. It's full of all sorts of anecdotes, things you've seen, things you've experienced... But your people who come here to become guides need to classify class, genus, and, you know, put everything into some kind of a structure so they can understand it and they view it very differently like that. So ja, from, you know, our point of view it's the experience factor which plays a big role in it... And what they do is they would be able to tell you the thing's Latin

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<sup>13</sup> A humorous reference to a horse as a desirable meal for a lion.

name, but not how to deal with it when it's trying to eat you; it makes a big difference.

This demonstrates a way of knowing the environment that is not merely cognitive but experiential and embodied and that requires years of living and learning in the bush to attain. When questioned as to how they learnt about the environment a number of people responded simply that they grew up with it. One Motswana explained it as "osmosis". White Batswana thus perceive much of their knowledge to have been acquired not through conscious effort but rather through unconsciously assimilating knowledge through years of simply being there and watching and mimicking members of their community in the bush.

### **Subjective connections to the natural environment**

Dominy describes how an emotional and spiritual connection to land is not usually associated with White culture, and she demonstrates the fallacy of this notion in relation to the high country farmers of New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> Emotional experience is, to an extent, socially constructed and a conspicuous cultural trope of the White Batswana is their constant articulation of their strong emotional connection to the natural environment.<sup>15</sup> They use metaphors of love when verbalising this connection, describing the bush as beautiful and speaking of "falling in love" with particular tracts of land. The White Batswana refer frequently to their environment as "paradise" and speak of it with awe, respect and wonder. Moreover, a number of White Batswana have articulated a sense of spiritual attachment to the land. As one Motswana explained it:

I'm not religious. I think that is my religion. I get my peace from trees and the water and the animals. There's a very strong link, that really that you can't, I crumble, melt if I have to go and live in some other part of the world.

This sentiment was repeated by the majority of my informants where an absence of formal religious belief is accompanied by a strong sense of spirituality derived from the bush. Nature is perceived to provide the

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<sup>14</sup> Dominy, *Calling the Station Home*, 221; see also Griffiths, "Afterword", 299-300.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kitayama and Markus, *Emotion and Culture*; Shweder, "The Cultural Psychology of the Emotions"; Rosaldo, "Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling"; LeVine, "Properties of Culture".



perfect model for living characterised by numerous complex parts constituting a whole and perfect order.

As one informant remarked:

I keep turning back to animals because they explain so much if you look at them for long enough and watch their behaviour. [They explain] things about human nature which we've through our consciousness gone and questioned and made issues of which in some ways are natural and should just be left the way they were... Like discipline is one thing that you find if you keep watching animals you see this very straight forward rule of discipline which if you don't adhere to, you will die and extreme things happen.

This set of beliefs is not unique to the White Batswana. William Cronon describes nature as increasingly being revered in the West as "a secular deity in this post-romantic age," that is looked to "as a stable external source of nonhuman values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity."<sup>16</sup> This is reflected in the above statement where things deemed "natural" are beyond questioning.

The White Batswana turn to the natural environment to put life events into perspective and as a source of healing. The parents of a much-loved four year-old boy who tragically died in a car accident took great consolation from the Thamalakane river throughout their mourning process. They went to the river in the hours after the accident, and close friends in the community came and mourned with them. The father of the child spent hours every day in the weeks following the accident grieving by the river. At the funeral, the former priest and close family friend who presided over the ceremony was instructed to give a "non-Christian" service. He spoke of each individual constituting a particle of water that eventually joins up as part of the great river of life. He said that the deceased young boy was still present in all the animals, trees and living beings around us. This belief was reiterated by a number of community members and was a source of great comfort.

This nature-based religiosity is premised on the here and now with the implication that nature as a complete system is sacred and must be protected. A genuine love of the land and a nature-based spirituality lead to a desire to care for the environment.<sup>17</sup> The White Batswana have a strong commitment to conserving and protecting their environment and this is undertaken by various individuals through clean-up campaigns, education programs, fund raising and lobbying in times of environmental

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<sup>16</sup> Cronon, "Introduction: In search of Nature", 26, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Read, *Belonging*, 222.

crises, awareness-building with local communities and tourists, darting and game capture for research, and veterinary work with wildlife. A number of informants have worked towards conserving the bush for wildlife as opposed to livestock and agriculture and preventing poaching through, among other strategies, creating employment for communities living in wildlife areas. This twenty five year-old Batswana safari guide describes his family's work in a particular village in the north western region of the Okavango:

There used to be a lot of cattle and donkeys out there and I mean it's a pristine part of the delta. And the poaching was unbelievable, really incredible. We got involved, we had a lot to do with the Chief there and we said to him, "Look, you know, we'll bring you guys guests, tourists if you can take them on mekoros and stuff." And we had a little operation going there. The poaching almost stopped completely. They were making a pretty good living, the cows and donkeys eventually disappeared and they were taking a lot of our advice and recommendations like trying to get more qualified, trying to get them to have uniforms with name tags on so the guests could relate to them... So a lot of things we tried to do like that so we literally stopped poaching in that area.

David McDermott Hughes argues that in post-colonial Africa, conservation of the environment gives Whites a *raison d'être* in Africa concomitant with a sense of moral legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> For the White Batswana, too, a sense of belonging is aided by a belief in providing an ongoing contribution to the nation through their conservation values and practices and through their specialised knowledge of the unique and fragile ecosystem of the Okavango Delta. Moreover, the economic gains from the tourism industry, which is the second largest contributor to Botswana's economy after diamonds, encourage the continued conservation of wildlife and the environment.<sup>19</sup> Through their strong involvement in tourism, the White Batswana feel they contribute to the conservation of the environment.

Recent scholarship has advocated a shift in focus to analyse the environment not solely as a physical entity but to recognise the value of place in determining cultural identity and influencing social relationships.<sup>20</sup> Identity for the White Batswana is inextricably linked to place and the natural environment. People believe that living a life in the bush has a significant impact on a person's character, values and beliefs, affecting

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<sup>18</sup> Hughes, "Third nature", 161.

<sup>19</sup> Mbaiwa, "Enclave Tourism", 157.

<sup>20</sup> Jimenez, "On Space as a Capacity", 140; Dominy, *Calling the Station Home*, 2.

how people behave socially and how they think and work through problems. One Motswana in his early thirties describes his perception of his life relative to other cultures. His strong identification as a “bush person” is evident:

I get frustrated that I still live by a very basic, kind of antiquated set of rules in a lot of ways which I battle to deal with when I see people. It's hard to correspond with them on that. But if you live in the bush, your interest level, your interests are in plants, animals, insects, fish, snakes; not music, books, movies, actors, actresses, sport, you know. One of the things that I find is that on that level, when you're guiding, you're in charge so you're telling people about the bush. When you come into town you end up meeting people and you have to talk about stuff that you don't know anything about... It disorientates you when you come back into this kind of first world mindset, what's going on. It's old, you know, [mine] is an old way of looking at things.

Interestingly, there is a self-conscious declaration of this worldview as “antiquated”. At the same time, however, there is a sense portrayed that this “old” ontology is a more authentic version than the perceived shallow interests held by tourists and people in town that are characterised by consumerism.

This strong, if self-conscious, identification and connectedness to the environment is for most of my informants specific to the Okavango region. When asked if they would guide elsewhere in Africa many White Batswana declined, speaking of their love for and attachment to the Okavango. One Motswana in his forties described his connection to the delta saying, “This is my garden. My grandmother is buried here.” This sentiment was also expressed by the informant above who spoke of “crumbling” and “melting” if forced to live elsewhere.

### **Belonging and race relations in Botswana**

Scholars have written of a contemporary “identity crisis” of White populations in southern Africa. Hughes, for example, writes of the “sense of cultural displacement and spatial disorientation” of Whites in Zimbabwe and South Africa.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Botswana's social and political environment and very different colonial history have provided the conditions in which White Batswana are able to develop a strong sense of national belonging and acceptance by the majority population. Thus, while

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<sup>21</sup> Hughes, “Third Nature”, 159; see also Rutherford, “‘Settlers’ and Zimbabwe”, 545.

I have suggested that the emplacement in the natural environment stems in part from the divergent culture and ethnicity of the White Batswana from the majority population, their strong sense of belonging to Botswana would not be tenable if the White Batswana did not feel that their presence was accepted by the majority population despite their differences.<sup>22</sup>

When questioned about whether she felt accepted one White woman in her twenties answered enthusiastically:

As an individual, definitely, I've always felt, I don't know always included, but definitely accepted, and if you make the effort you will be included... Everywhere we go in this country people open their arms to us... I definitely feel welcome... and I feel a part of it... I don't feel disadvantaged, I don't feel bad, I don't feel excluded, I don't feel inferior, I don't feel threatened in any way because I'm White. A lot of White South Africans are almost scared of their Whiteness at the moment. And I think the same for a lot of Rhodesians, they feel quite betrayed and very unsure and quite sort of scared and are not comfortable as to how they fit in to what is their home... My view of myself as a White person living in Africa and the whole integration and race issue is that I am White and I am not apologetic for it. I have quite Anglo customs and ways and I'm not going to pretend that I eat *seswa*<sup>23</sup> every night and that I speak fluent Setswana—although I'm trying to get there—but I'm not going to pretend that I'm one of the homies, you know, and I'm quite comfortable with that.

While recognising the cultural differences between herself and the majority of Batswana this woman felt there was a genuine acceptance of this difference and respect across cultures.

This strong sense of belonging also stems from Botswana's unique history of migration and settlement. The Tswana people, who today constitute 78% of the population, settled in what is now Botswana only in the late eighteenth century. The Batawana (see Footnote 3, above) settled in Ngamiland around 1800 and Europeans began to enter the area just fifty years later.<sup>24</sup> Richard Werbner writes of the recent antagonisms that have arisen with the Bakalanga minority defying their label as immigrants to Botswana through building monuments memorialising their ancient

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<sup>22</sup> By describing the White Batswana's positive sense of belonging, I am not suggesting that all Black Batswana accept the White population as valued citizens. Race relations in Botswana, as in most parts of the world, are complex, and in the context of this paper I do not aim to discuss these complexities but rather to focus on the *perceptions* of the White Batswana of their place in the nation.

<sup>23</sup> A traditional shredded meat dish that forms part of the staple diet of most Tswana people.

<sup>24</sup> Tlou, *A History of Ngamiland*, 28.

Mamba kingdom which predated the Tswana arrival: “What specifically enraged some Tswana was the idea of being labelled settlers or more recent immigrants in their own country, a country named, above all, after them, Botswana—place of the Tswana”.<sup>25</sup> With the exception of the Basarwa minority, who have recently and with limited success been attempting to gain symbolic and practical recognition of their status as first people, the majority of the nation’s population have thus all been relatively recent settlers.<sup>26</sup>

One White Motswana described his view of the history of Botswana and the implications for inter-racial relations and White belonging as follows:

The thing about what’s different here is that Botswana was never a colony, it was a Protectorate, okay... With Seretse Khama<sup>27</sup> that’s what changed everything about this country’s attitude towards White people because he married a White woman and he said from now on we will always be a racially tolerant country—which is so unique among African countries.<sup>28</sup> I think most people here consider themselves part of this country. It’s 40 years old this country. It’s just started. So I think more than from a settler point of view the people are just from here, they’re part of it... And the thing is, essentially, all the tribes in Botswana have come from somewhere so we’re all settlers... No one fought for the land. No one fought to defend it and no one fought to take it over. It was more just a sort of coming together you know.

This history has contributed to the White Batswana feeling a strong sense of possessing a legitimate right to assert emplacement.

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<sup>25</sup> Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana*, 53; also 52, 70.

<sup>26</sup> The treatment of the Basarwa by the government of Botswana has been a major source of international controversy and is the primary blight on Botswana’s human rights record and history of positive inter-racial relationships. See Boko, “Integrating the Basarwa”; Nthomang, “Relentless Colonialism”; Nyati-Ramahobo, “Ethnic identity”; Hays, “Education and the San”; Mazonde, “The San in Botswana”; and Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals*, on the plight of the Basarwa in Botswana and the constant discrimination and inequities they suffer.

<sup>27</sup> Sir Seretse Khama was Botswana’s first president at Independence in 1966 and remains a well-loved national hero. His wife was English and numerous informants have spoken of this inter-racial marriage as having a significant impact on positive relations between Black and White in Botswana.

<sup>28</sup> Since independence in 1966, the government has implemented a policy of “non-racialism”; of civic rather than ethnic citizenship. One example of this is that no data on race/ethnicity is taken in the nation’s census. This was advocated in opposition to neighbouring South Africa’s apartheid politics and is fiercely defended today as an antidote to ethnically based violence in other African nations.

### **“White skin and an African soul”**

Dominy describes the process of “constructing indigeneity” where communities create new cultural forms merging aspects of the country of origin with those of the country of settlement to forge new, unique identities and a sense of belonging over generations of living in a particular locale.<sup>29</sup> The White Batswana see themselves not as settlers but as African and are passionate in their articulation of this. As one informant put it: “I don’t consider myself anything but African. Everything about me, my character, the way I think, the way I work is African. I don’t say I’m a White African, a European; I’m African.” And this identification has a very nationalistic flavour. As another White Motswana put it, “I think everybody shares a very patriotic type of passion of the White Motswana, the people are very patriotic. We love it, eh. Don’t let anybody say we’re from South Africa or anything like that.”

Writing of the Australian context, Trigger highlights the political complexity of the assertion of a White indigeneity and yet suggests that “recognising this risk from a particular political perspective, hardly displaces the significant intellectual questions about who and what ‘belongs’ in relation to the material and symbolic resources of [...] landscapes.”<sup>30</sup> By arguing for recognition of a form of White autochthony based on a connection to environment, I do not intend this to be a competing claim to the belonging of any of the other groups in the region. Nor, I must reiterate, is it a political claim. The White Batswana are not engaged in a “politics of recognition”, as Werbner refers to it, but are simply living their lives with a confident sense of belonging and acceptance as a minority in the nation of their birth. The current reality is that the White Batswana have been living for generations in Ngamiland and virtually every Motswana I have spoken to has adamantly and passionately insisted that they would never consider living elsewhere in the world on a permanent basis. They are proud to be Batswana and, from what I have observed, the majority population for the most part perceives them as having a legitimate place in the nation. This strength of emplacement suggests a need to recognise the autochthonous nature of the relationship of the White citizens to Botswana.

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<sup>29</sup> Dominy, *Calling the Station Home*, 209.

<sup>30</sup> Trigger, “Whales, Whitefellas”, 10.

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