

## **The Origins of The Bessie Head Archive**

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I am grateful to the organizers of this Symposium for inviting me to Botswana and to Tom Holzinger and Scobie Lekhutile of Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe for finding me in Denmark and inquiring about the "Origins of the Bessie Head Archive".

Let us start the morning with two quotations from letters in which our author expresses the universal problem shared by most artists of the world. Both letters are written to the publisher:

"You could certainly oblige me by giving my messenger some money, as at the moment I am in need ..." And the next one which is to the same publisher: "If you could please, in advance and before printing, see your way clear to giving my messenger, my son, an approximate royalty, it would please him..." As you already might have suspected from the archaic wording of these quotations, the begging letters are not from the Bessie Head Archive — they come from another author unknown to most of you. So the messenger is not Howard Head, Bessie Head's son, but Jens Frederik Blicher, who in 1841 had to be messenger for his father — the Danish author St. St. Blicher.

My lecture this morning bears the title "Origins of the Bessie Head Archive" and it will more take the form of an account of what happened than be that of an academic lecture. First, I will ponder on my motives and background for saving Bessie Head's papers and establishing a writer's archive at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe after her sudden and unexpected death on April 17 1986. The Bessie Head Archive seemed for many years as almost established by itself. Who wouldn't rescue her posthumous works and bring them to the nearest museum? Anyone, of course. But someone had to do it, and that someone happened to be I.

There were two factors, which drove me to react and rescue Bessie Head's papers after her death in Serowe. The first factor is to be found in something that happened back in Denmark shortly before I came to Botswana. The second factor is rooted in something terrible which happened in Botswana a year before she passed away.

### **Lesson from Denmark**

The quotations with which I opened my lecture, come from some letters written by St. St. Blicher who lived from 1782-1848, and which I discovered in Denmark before my assignment here in Botswana. To the Danes St. St. Blicher is equivalent to what Robert Burns is to the Scots — and apart from Hans Christian Andersen whom I presume you all know, St. St. Blicher is for many Danes as important as the famous author of fairy tales.

Before I came to Botswana I was a curator at the St. St. Blichermuseum at HERNINGSHOLM and it was in this position I made a discovery of not just the letters mentioned above, but also two war poems and a short story by St. St. Blicher. The manuscripts were kept in a village by a vicar who had inherited them from his great grandfather, the publisher F.C. Olsen. The manuscripts were unpublished and therefore unknown, because F.C. Olsen had rejected them. He was famous for his notorious habit of keeping rejected manuscripts, and for never returning them to their rightful owners.

The Blichermuseum managed to acquire the manuscripts from the vicar in 1981 and as the following year was the year where the whole country was celebrating the

200th anniversary of St. St. Blicher, the Blichermuseum made a sensation when publishing a book with these new and unknown words from the old writer. I learned three things: (a) how a writer's undying fame was kept through the preservation of even the tiniest letters or obscure little manuscripts; (b) that a writer's manuscripts are valuable not only from the researcher's point of perspective but also for a nation's identity; and (c) that it was important to make supreme effort efforts to keep an author's posthumous work together.

### **Discovering Botswana's Archives**

I came to Botswana in 1984 with my husband and two daughters. My job was to build up a district museum in Serowe. Already in 1976 Leapeetswe Khama had taken the initiative in beginning to establish a museum in Serowe by the founding of the Serowe Historical Society. He was the eldest son of Chief Tshekedi Khama and in 1984 he donated his house in Serowe to the museum. The premises consisted of several buildings. The main house, the so-called Red House, was from 1910 and built by Khama the Great, a smaller building of 125 square meters built around 1970, and a servants' quarter. In the Red House were kept a small museum collection consisting of old furniture, uniforms, guns and Khama the Great's walking sticks. In the house I also found what was left over of an archive from Leapeetswe Khama's time as acting Paramount Chief.

I still remember a letter from the ILO in Geneva complaining over the tribal custom of age regiment work. ILO claimed it was out of touch with modern labour regulations and should be regarded as forced labour which was illegal. Bearing in mind the tremendous positive effects the age regiment work has had on Botswana's development — the building of roads and schools just to mention some — I was wondering how international laws could ever be applied to societies with different social values.

When I came to Botswana I got in contact with my colleagues Alec Campbell at the National Museum and Sandy Grant at the Mochudi Museum. They put me in contact with the two historians, Michael Crowder and Neil Parsons. Already at our first meeting they told me that Leapeetswe Khama possessed a historical archive: The Khama the Great Archive. The papers were kept in a rondavel with a thatched roof. It covered the period between 1875 and 1950, which is the period between the time of the introduction of written language in Botswana and the banishment of Tshekedi Khama due to what has been called the Marriage Crisis. Neil Parsons had written his PhD thesis based on studies of the archive and had — as I remember it — organized the papers into brown archive boxes. But what especially made an impact on me was Neil Parsons' account of the danger of fire under which these most important national treasures constantly were.

### **Making a Museum**

A year after my arrival on the October 19 1985, the Serowe Museum was officially opened by the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Englishman Kgabo. The efficient Museum Board under the direction of Chairlady Naledi Khama and Secretary Vyvyan Watson had managed to raise funds to restore the building next to the Red House. It was a 125-square-meter large house from around 1970, built as a garage for the Tshekedi Estates. After this came the hard work of raising funds for the restoration of the Red House which I eventually succeeded in finding at the Norwegian donor agency NORAD.

The beginning of the Khama III Museum was modest. We had one room for temporary exhibitions, a little craft shop, a storeroom for artefacts. And a room,

which I had converted into a fireproof archive with metal shelves. At the opening this room was empty waiting for the Khama Archive. But Leapeetswe Khama had no intention of moving his papers anywhere. I still can recall my futile appeals to him to persuade him to do something. But should I not have influenced him to place the Khama Archive at the National Archive of Botswana, you may ask? I tried because I knew that this was the most proper solution. But he refused to do so for two reasons:

a) what he said — that the archive in Gaborone had once been flooded and papers had been destroyed. So he did not trust the National Archive. I do not know if this is true.

b) what he did not say — that he was not ready to part with the archive and felt that he would lose his influence on how it was used if it was placed in Gaborone.

But every time I met Leapeetswe Khama I sang a song for the removal of the archive from the rondavel to the fireproof archive room at the museum. And he smiled politely — and nothing happened.

### **Overtaken by Events**

Parallel to this course of events Botswana was attacked by South African paramilitary troops on June 14, 1985. A horrible, cruel and humiliating event that became the second factor which influenced me and eventually made me move the Bessie Head papers to the museum after her death.

The attack on Gaborone came as a shock to my little family. A South African ANC friend of ours escaped death by the skin of his teeth but an innocent man was killed in his place. The victim's pregnant wife was left wounded inside his house. However, the neighbours managed to pull her out just before a time bomb exploded and blew up the house. A friend to whom I had talked just a few hours before the attack was killed by a hand grenade thrown into his room.

After the raid I drove our ANC friend to Serowe where we hid him for some time till he could get out of the country. While he was in Serowe, Bessie Head turned 48 and my eldest daughter, Laura, baked her a cake, which we all brought out to her little house. When we arrived, we found that she was alone with no one to celebrate her birthday, so we immediately invited her to our house for an improvised birthday dinner. Consequently we celebrated Bessie Head's 48<sup>th</sup> birthday, which no one knew would be her last. How this evening went on and what happened next you can read about in the booklet "A Grave in the Sand", which right now is being printed by the National Museum. It will be ready for sale next week at the Bessie Head Feast in Serowe. The money from the sale of the booklet goes to the Khama Memorial Museum and therefore to the Bessie Head Archive.

Bessie Head died on the April 17, 1986 at the Serowe Hospital, and the following morning I got the sad news from Hugh Pearce. He and his wife Mmatsetla Pearce had had been at her deathbed the entire day. At first they tried to suggest that she be flown to a better hospital in Harare or Lusaka but it was too late. Mmatsetla was all in tears and deeply worried. She kept saying, "We must do something. If we do not do something, Bessie will die like a dog." Bessie Head's son and only heir, Howard, had left the country leaving no address behind. For that reason there was no one to conduct the ceremonies which according to Tswana tradition were to start immediately after death.

Although almost a year had passed by since the South African raid on Gaborone, I was worried about South African agents and spies. I feared that they would break into her empty house and steal her papers. What would happen if they found something, which might compromise her friends or acquaintances? I also feared that they would burn her house down and thus destroy the possibility of being able to study her life and work, apart from her published books.

Mmatsela decided that she would go to Bessie Head's house and clean and disinfect it. Bessie had died from the highly contagious Hepatitis and everything had to be cleaned before the funeral services. I volunteered to go with her to save Bessie Head's papers. Hugh knew the correct manner in which to handle this sensitive situation. He advised us to go to the District Commissioner, Mr. Bergsman Sentle, and ask him for permission to enter the Head house. Mr. Sentle could also issue me with a legal permission to move Bessie Head's papers to the archive room at the museum. You can read more details about our experiences and the conditions at the house in the booklet "A Grave in the Sand".

### **Saving the Bessie Head Papers**

Here I will ponder on what I moved away and what I did not move. Being a historian and social anthropologist with a museum background, I had never established an archive before. So what did I do? And what did I find? To my surprise I found that Bessie Head seemed to have always copied her letters with carbon paper on her typewriter and kept them. On her bookshelf I found files with her letters organised year by year. Cards and other greeting letters were in her drawers, and so was her collection of personal photographs. Under her bed were boxes with theses dealing with her authorship, sent from all corners of the world from students and professors. This I packed in boxes together with the rest of the papers and manuscripts. I also took her typewriter, chair and maybe the little desk? But I am afraid that I left the little personal notes and small newspaper cuttings that decorated her walls at her writing desk. At least I am not sure to day if I removed them.

Her house consisted of only two rooms, so I took care not to remove too much. I did not want to expose Howard Head to the shocking experience of coming home to an empty place. So I did not move all her books to the museum, but only those with written comments in them or with inscriptions and greetings from the author. I seem to remember that I filled the museum car. But I do not know if this is true. In my head I had the idea that this could be the first step towards an archive preserving her letters, manuscripts, papers and photographs for future studies and research.

But my main concern was the immediate danger of destruction or stealth. I never considered removing any of her personal belongings to the museum. Those of you who knew Bessie Head would remember her Nigerian dresses which would have been wonderful to have today. It might seem odd that a museum curator did not care for keeping any of her personal belongings. But I had only one excuse for moving anything from her house to the museum, and that was to save her papers, not her personal belongings.

When Howard Head returned from South Africa for the funeral he warmly welcomed the idea of establishing a Bessie Head Archive. So, together with the Museum Board, we decided that the museum from that date also should house a writer's archive. I persuaded Howard to receive a proper payment for the papers because I had approval to do so from the Danish Volunteer Service in Gaborone. I cannot recall today the amount.

To this moment I do not know what I saved on that day of April 18, 1986. Only once have I looked through her papers and that was when searching for information to write her obituary. I was so busy with my museum work that I never again went over the material. The only thing I did for the Archive was to apply for money to have the material catalogued. This we received from the Danish donor agency DANIDA. As I recall it, it was on the Museum's last board meeting before my departure in October 1986. We could employ librarian Ruth Forchhammer to start the registration and cataloguing of the Bessie Head Archive.

### **The Khama Papers at last**

So instead of the Khama Archive, the Bessie Head papers were installed on the shelves. There was still plenty of space for the Khama papers, but I began to fear that time was running out. Then, a short time before I should leave and without any notice, a lorry drove up into the museum yard, and behind it drove a fancy car with a driver. Leapeetswe Khama sat on the back seat. "Here you are," he smiled, while his men carried all the brown boxes of the Khama Archive into the museum. Why he had changed his mind he never revealed to me.

You can make the most exceptional discoveries in an archive. When I saw the brown boxes arriving I already knew that somewhere there would be a begging letter from 1920 to King Khama III for money: "for the starving children of Europe". On page 24 in "The Word of Khama" by Neil Parsons, he quotes one single line from this letter which had aroused my curiosity: "It seems so terrible to think of the great sufferings of these poor children when we in Africa have all that we require." I found the letter in a box labelled "Miscellaneous". Inside there was a file with the word WAR in front with several begging letters from Europe. King Khama donated 80 Pounds to the "Starving Austrian Children's Fund". It is striking how the global situation has changed during less than a century — and thus Botswana's history is full of surprising examples.

Let me finish my account by returning to Bessie Head. Bessie Head was very poor in her last years in Serowe, yet she was the most generous person, willing to share her poetic wisdom with the world in her writing, but also in her home face to face. I am grateful that I came to Serowe when Bessie Head was still a part of the life of this beautiful village.

### **Literature**

*Tvillingerne og andre skrifter af Steen Steensen Blicher*. Blichermuseet på Hørningholm 1982.

*The Word of Khama*, by Q.N. Parsons, Lusaka 1972 (out of print).

"When Africa Gave Aid to Europe" by Maria Rytter, *New African*, October 1990.

"A Grave in the Sand" by Maria Rytter and with Gillian Stead Eilersen's "Marking the Grave" (Botswana National Museum 2007) can be purchased from Khama III Memorial Museum, Private Bag 008, Serowe, Botswana.