

Words That Wound

I lived in an African village for two years. As I search for the words that are faithful to what I experienced, words that capture the poetry of rural Botswana, there is one I won't use. On the printed page, it's an irritant to my eyes, a thorn that pricks at my skin. Spoken, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. The word is "primitive."

Bobonong is a sprawling village nestled between the borders of Zimbabwe and South Africa. It's blessed with the most beautiful sunsets this side of heaven, and has all the characteristics many Canadians would call primitive. The Batswana build their traditional homes as they have for centuries, with round walls moulded from mud and thatch. With few exceptions there is no indoor plumbing or electricity. Villagers fetch water from communal taps. Women with perfect posture balance buckets on their heads in regal processions that wind through a maze of huts. Tired donkeys pull carts along unpaved roads as rough as the washboards used to scrub laundry. Meals are prepared over hot coals that flicker in the night like fireflies.

It could all look so "primitive." But I've learned that there are different ways of seeing. Life in industrialized countries comes with a risk: a severe case of myopia. We gaze at the Bobonongs scattered around the world through lenses framed in rigid assumptions. We see a way of life "less developed" than ours. We see people eating with their hands and smugly wave our forks. We see people walking comfortably in bare feet and tap our leather shoes.

As we look on in judgment of others, we lose sight of ourselves. I don't know how the Batswana would say "appalled", but I do know that's how many would feel if they saw how we treat the elderly amongst us. They don't ship the older ones in their communities to homes for the aged; there aren't any. In Botswana, the word "nuclear" had only one meaning for me: communal families of three generations, tightly bound by the spirit of collective care. Back home, where technology thrived, I knew that nuclear referred not only to families, but to weapons of destruction that could tear them apart. Mothers in Botswana would surely be puzzled and amused to learn that public breastfeeding is still taboo in Canada. They nurse their babies wherever they happen to be — on buses, in shops, in the comfort of a neighbour's yard. And no one bats an eye.

At the end of a long day, teenagers often gather in schoolyards. They meet not to sniff and smoke but to sing and dance. Some keep the rhythm on a goatskin stretched over an oilcan. Others wear traditional rattles around their ankles. A shoeless train of feet rumbles along tracks of dry soil, and clouds of dust mingle with voices sweet and pure. Few of their younger sisters or brothers have the electronic toys sold here in suburban malls. Resourceful village children twist wire and empty beer cans into toy cars with waist-high steering mechanisms that actually work.

The word "primitive" doesn't sit well with me anymore. I need to find one that does justice to the way others live. For the pen is mightier than the sword, and words have the power to wound.

Emil Sher

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