A dog named Kutsi

The dog took an immediate liking to me. A well-fed, friendly pet, it was quite different from the malnourished village dogs. It came over, wiggling its tail, expecting a caress, and after receiving it, settled calmly at my feet. "We picked it up on the street. It was abandoned," says my host in this rare place I found on Airbnb -- a large tent pitched outside a farmhouse in northern Botswana. I arrived here last night after a treacherous 14-hour-long drive from Central Botswana. The trip took twice as long as expected because my rented car could not speed through the deep potholes on the road the way those four-wheel drive trucks who ran past us did. This trip north came after several weeks of intensive field research in the small village of Mokokwana, where I had carried out a house-to-house census that followed up on the lives of people I had documented during my Ph.D. fieldwork in the early 1980s.

With me in the rented car was my little Motswana sister, Lebbo, a 38-year-old single parent of two. She was four years old when I came to live in her family's compound. On this trip, Lebbo transformed herself into an excellent research assistant. Taking this journey to the known tourist areas in the north, I proposed, will expand our research focus beyond her native village and “study the makgoa (the white people)—why not?”

Neither of us had been to the Okavango River Delta, a nature reserve white tourists flock to. I had often watched tourists speed past my Mokokwana home, making a beeline from the capital, Gaborone, in the south to the game reserves in northern Botswana. I shunned visiting these tourist sites in my earlier excursions to Botswana, considering it a waste of my time. Lebbo was excited. She said that the farthest north she had been is Francistown. Yesterday, we spent a night in Francistown with Lebbo's relatives, enjoying a stop-over rest on our way to Maun, located at the mouth of the Okavango Swamps. I made a three-night Airbnb reservation in what was described as a picturesque farm near the Limpopo River a few miles outside of Maun.

Our Airbnb host is Alistair, a white South African in his early thirties. Alistair was incredibly supportive throughout our hard 14-hour drive, ensuring we got to his place in one piece. When we finally made it to his unmarked abode, it was dark. We crawled into our clean beds in a tent pitched next to a small house and zipped the mosquito net behind us, too exhausted to bother with a shower. Waking up the following day, we discovered an elegant, well-crafted outdoor shower attached to a high branch of a large tree, complete with drainage and running water! When we emerged from this unique shower experience clean and well-rested, we found a note waiting for us on the table of the open porch. It said that our hosts had left for the day and suggested that we help ourselves to a simple breakfast already laid out on the long wooden table. The farmhouse was positioned a few steps away from the river. As we sat on the porch enjoying our morning coffee, taking in the beautiful scene, our host called to inquire about our plans for the day. Would we like to hear about the best safari tour option to take us into the swamps? It was assumed we came all this way to see the big game. What else does one come to Maun, known as a hub for departing safari tours? I politely declined Alistair’s proposed offers of safari trips, telling him I needed to recuperate after the exhausting day of driving. We spent the day on the open porch, appreciating the serenity of the place and watching several boats pass by on the river. The views are beautiful as Alistair ensured that the bushes that grew high around the house were trimmed in front of the porch to allow a sweeping view of the river.

When our hosts returned in the evening, they joined us on the porch for a long, relaxed conversation.

I tell Alistair that I am an Israeli anthropologist and Lebbo is my Motswana sister. This is the first time either of us has visited this northern area of Botswana. Alistair tells me about his life.

"I am a fourth-generation Tswana white man," he declares. "My great-grandfather worked for the British Administration in 1910. My grandfather and my father were crocodile hunters.” I was amused by this exotic crocodile hunting pedigree. I teased him: "The only crocodile hunter I ever heard of is that Australian man who a crocodile eventually ate up…" But it seemed Alistair was not incredibly happy with my humorous association. He observed that the guy I talked about was a clown and that it has nothing similar to his family history. "My father owned this large estate and the tourist lodge next to us. But he lost them both. I bought this eight thousand square meters estate with the original two houses sitting on it only one year ago. Today, it is worth 2.1 million Pula. It is so valuable because it sits next to the river.”

His wife is French, he says. They met when she volunteered on a South African farm across the Botswana border near Lebbo’s home village.

“When we came here,” he relates, “you could not see the house from the outgrowth of bushes. You might have seen a Tswana man who works on the grounds this morning. I asked him to cut the grass and clear the bushes every day. Today, we reached a point where one can have a decent river view. I have been fixing this place since I moved in," he said proudly, "but there still is so much more to do." The energy and urgency of Alistair's narration is palpable. He has plans for this place.

When he learned that I am writing a new book about a range of experiences of life in Botswana, one that expands beyond my earlier ethnographic focus on life in one Tswana village, Alistair was pleased to share more details of his story. He offered to start from the beginning.

"You see, as I told you, I am a White Motswana," he declared, using the proper term in Setswana for a man of Tswana origin. "I was born here, close to where we are sitting. But when I was seven years old, my parents divorced, and my mom took me to South Africa."

“Do you have Tswana citizenship?” I asked.

“Sadly, I don’t,” he stated. “My Mom went to South Africa to give birth to me, so technically, I am South African, not a Tswana citizen. I spent my childhood in South Africa but wanted to return to Botswana, where I always knew I belonged.” Alistair looked at me, wondering if I could relate to his insistence that he belongs, knowing, as much as I do, that the ownership of land by white expatriates is a sensitive issue in contemporary Botswana and that, unlike some African countries like Zimbabwe or Kenya, Botswana was never a white settler place. [[1]](#footnote-1)

“I was studying at Uni Ecology and Range Management,” Alistair explained, "because I knew what I wanted to do with my life once I returned to Botswana, but then I had a bad accident, and I crushed my right foot.”

Alistair was very emotional at this point. He said he did not want to get into this particular accident story in detail. After a pause, he added that he smashed his leg in that accident, which was a sad event for a young and stupid man. He spent months in hospitals and, thus, was forced to quit his studies. "I was depressed for a long time," he told me. “But I am completely healed now. I still have a little limp,” he shared.

He took the first job he could get as a simple laborer on a farm. He then brightened up and announced that all was well because he met the woman who became his wife on that farm. She was a volunteer on the same farm. “She is French," he added. We had a brief glimpse at Alistair’s French wife when she dropped by earlier to greet us and disappeared into the house, leaving it to her husband to socialize with us, the guests. They moved to Botswana soon after they got married. They settled in Maun. "We worked in Maun trying to save some money. Other companies hired me as a tour guide. They paid little, but I came to learn all I wanted about this business. My wife used her French contacts and got employment in an international NGO in town."

It took him several years until he was able to realize his dream and purchase this tract of land along the river. He explained that saving enough money to buy this tract of land involved some sticky legal problems. When I asked him to explain, Alistair was hesitant. He said he hired a good lawyer who advised him there was a way of registering ownership of this land if he secured a co-signature with a Tswana person. Lebbo, who was listening attentively but did not engage in our conversation, told me later, in the privacy of our tent, that she thought the Tswana man cutting the brush was Alistair's fictitious legal partner. "Did you not see that he lives in the other house alone? She insisted on explaining that such large living quarters are rarely given to a simple farm worker. “That man does not want to speak to anyone. He is afraid.”

It was getting late, and we were all exhausted. Alistair apologized for going to bed early because he needed to get organized for his safari trip the following day before the sun was up. He asked if we would like to join the small group he will lead tomorrow into the Okavango Delta and informed us that there were two available places, a rare option on such short notice. His safaris could include up to eight people riding the four-by-four vehicle. His safari promises tourists to be taken deep into the swamps where they are “guaranteed” to encounter large wildlife and provided all the comforts, including food "made by an excellent chef."

I was impressed by all he offered and was interested in joining his safari. However, I was shocked when I learned that such a safari excursion into the swamps costs US $500 per day per person. I knew these safaris were expensive, but Alistair’s price seemed higher than expected. Alistair wasted no time justifying his prices. He stated flatly that his safaris offered the best comprehensive deal and that he could refer me to other safari companies if I wished to take a less complete, more affordable package. He warned that they might be less expensive because they do not go all the way into the swamps. I declined politely, telling him that I needed to rest another day and that I would spend the day visiting sites close to town and might take short walks along the river.

Alistair is very gracious, and he promised to make a list of places I might want to visit in the area and that he will leave a note listing the best tourist attractions I should consider visiting. Before going into the house, he apologized for the noise made by the workers laying a cement floor at the entry to his estate that morning. "I plan to build a three-room construction that will house my camping gear and my office," he beamed with unstoppable energy. "The office is necessary for my growing business, and now it is all spread out in the corner of the house."

He then invited us to see his home. It is a large single room. "This building is the original home my father built from locally dried-out mud bricks supported by wooden Mopane wood posts. These old wooden posts,” Alistair pointed to the exposed walls of the small farmhouse, “were inserted like this into the mud wall by my father and covered with cement afterward. But you see," he directed my attention to cracks in the wall next to the front door, “after so many years, the wood expands in the heat and contracts in the cold, creating these cracks. These cracks in the cement wall cannot be fixed. They will reappear each year. One day, I will demolish this building and build a new one in its place," he concluded.

The following day, we drove to the neighboring lodge, which Alistair said was once his father's property. A colorful sign greeted us with “Welcome to Okavango Camp.” We parked the car and walked towards an open-air elegant bar, where a Tswana man served drinks to about half a dozen guests seated on high stools at this late morning hour. They were all white. Their accent is distinctly South African. They all boast apricot tan and vacation outfits of white cotton shirts, sandals, and sunglasses. I took my seat at the bar, greeting the bartender in Setswana. I noticed that Lebbo hung back, looking apprehensive. I waited for her to join me at the counter facing the Tswana bartender. The Tswana man responded politely in Setswana to my greeting and shifted to English to inquire how he might serve us. I asked about hiring a boat and a tour guide to take us to the Delta. He informed me that the organized safari group had already departed. Still, he could offer us a Mokoro, a dug-out canoe that carried two people navigated with a single oar managed by a man standing at one end of the canoe. The Mokoro can take us only to the reserve gate, he cautioned. If we wish to go beyond that point, we must hire another vehicle to drive us into the Delta. He explains that the longer the trip we book, the better our chances are to see large wild game like elephants or lions. It means you must spend at least one night on the reserve. He informed me that the cost for excursions and overnight accommodation could be between $700 and $1000 per person per day.

From her distant corner, Lebbo listened on. I could see that she cringed at the prices quoted. I was taken aback, too. It was more expensive than what Alistair had suggested. The fee for this one-day excursion is more than Tswana high school graduates might hope to earn in a month. She whispered: "You go, I will wait here." I could feel her deep shock. I was saddened at the rapid transformation of the nature of our relationship, redefined in this *lekgoa* space. It bothered me that the Tswana man never looked at her. He directed all his words at me, ignoring Lebbo. A few minutes later, Lebbo declined her seat on the high bar stool and wandered away. I thanked the man for his helpful information and followed Lebbo, who sat beside a dry swimming pool on a long white wooden chaise.

“Hay, Sis,” I said, “this is crazy. I am not paying this money.”

Lebbo was livid. We had established a deep friendship built over many years of letter-writing and my interknitted visits. During this most recent visit, I became her employer. But I was also a long-time family friend and her classificatory older sister. But in this racially defined tourist setting, our relationship became strained. In the village, she felt comfortable as my knowledgeable and valued interlocutor. In the tourist spaces, she was humiliated. Speaking English, people addressed me directly and ignored her. I felt her pain. I resented the racist overtones of our experience in this alienating environment. I tried to tease her: “Remember Manchusa,” I used her childhood nickname no one uses anymore, “We came to research the Makgoa [the whites]. We study them. We are here to make observations, to record this social reality."

Lebbo clearly understood my idea of ethnographic research. It was evident earlier that morning when I proposed to invite the silent Tswana man cutting the grass with a large iron sickle to join us to eat the Tswana porridge and steamed vegetables we prepared. Lebbo observed that the man might not wish to partake in our meal because "This man, he was looking at us eating together kind of funny. I tell you, Peni, our people are not used to this. To see a Moith a l*ekgoa* like this."

Throughout our trip north, Lebbo taught me that the color bar was alive and powerful in 2016 Botswana and that I should be aware of its strict codes. She offered keen observations of social hierarchies all along. But today, she kept her distance. I took two glasses of lemonade from the bar and joined her near the empty swimming pool. I reminded her that we came to observe how the rich makgoa behaved. I asked her if this was a painful experience and tried to coax her. But Lebbo seemed to have lost her interest in my research. I sensed she had reached her fill, no longer wishing to participate in my game. She kept her eyes on her mobile screen.

I looked at Lebbo and knew we should leave this tourist scene. We needed to buy some groceries for our dinner. Driving into Maun, we searched for a place to have lunch. I recall Alistair recommending a "nice restaurant" in his morning note. You must try it, he wrote. After a brief search, we located the highly recommended place. Not surprisingly, it was a distinctly “white people's” space. Housed in a stand-alone small blue building on the side of the main road, near the busy Government offices district, the restaurant has a 1970s hippie ambiance. Tables were set outside in a shaded, well-kept garden, and there was a small, funky-looking juice bar at one corner boasting a list of "exotic drinks," cocktails of non-alcoholic nature. The menu, written with white chalk on an old-school-style blackboard, announces that the day's special is chili-con-carne with tortillas served with yogurt and cucumber sauce.

What a far cry from the Tswana porridge and braised meat the many restaurants that cater to local people offer. The waiter was a beautiful Tswana woman who spoke American-accented English. She played the familiar waitress role, describing the dishes available today. She announced that only some of the listed items on the menu were offered pleasantly. There are crab cakes, roasted chicken, spaghetti, and fettuccini. She ‘strongly recommended’ that we try their freshly squeezed lime and ginger cocktail. We did. While we waited for our meal, sipping on our fruity cocktail, we looked around. The place was almost empty. At one end of the open garden, a single white man was eating what looked like a pasta dish. A small, energetic boy with blond dreadlocks ran between the tables accompanied by two doting Tswana girls. Lebbo and I exchanged silent looks and seemed to agree that the Tswana owner who waited on us must have had this child with a *lekgoa* white man who might have helped her design and build this place. When we walked out towards our car after our meal, Lebbo told it straight and with some unconcealed anger: "If you, Pnina [a lekgoa], would only sit in a restaurant that I'll open, they [the other white people] will see you and puff puff! They would all come in." Lebbo was smiling a bitter smile, making her sociological observations.

Two days ago, when we stayed with Lebbo's young cousins in Francistown, I made a wrong turn on the road, confused as I often am, with driving on the left of the street, the English way. The Tswana man coming straight at me in the lane I was not supposed to be on just smiled widely and pointed me to the other route. "Batswana are so nice," I beamed. “They are always polite to the makgoa,” said the cousin, who works as a secretary in a large firm in town. "If it were me coming at him on the wrong lane, he would have gotten out of his car and beat me up right there and then." To make her cousin's comment sink in, Lebbo took my arm and moved her index finger up and down my skin. “It is because of your color, Pnina." I was highly uncomfortable with that demonstrative act that positioned me as the ‘white’ woman. Unlike Lebbo and her cousin, I do not think of myself as white but as a person of color’. Indeed, in the 1980s-apartheid South Africa, as I described in one of my early reflexive essays, I was barred from entry to a public swimming pool in Johannesburg reserved for whites. In my native Israel, I am classified and proudly define myself as a non-European, Mizrahi Jew. But Lebbo and her cousin were not aware of the politics of skin shades but with the privileges of being a non-Tswana lekgoa in Botswana.

When we returned to our tent in Alistair’s campground, I was reading a book I picked up in a Gaborone bookstore earlier that week.

“Botswana becomes merely a place to be mined for gold, diamonds, adventure, information, *a place also where whites learn about themselves*," wrote May S. Lederer (2014:81, emphasis added). Sitting there with Kutsi, the dog cuddling at my feet on Alistair's porch, I reflected on my position within this stubbornly unchanged reality of racialized hierarchy. To what extent could I build personal bridges across the color bar that defined me despite my decades-long relationship with Lebbo and her family? To what extent was my academic work helpful in challenging this racial status quo?

I had built a thriving academic career based on my Tswana research. My academic work has produced a dissertation, a book, and many scholarly articles. Despite my best intentions, was I one of those white lekgoa who mined this place, if not for gold or diamonds but certainly for information?

“We named him Kutsi,” Alistair told me when he saw that his dog liked me. “Kutsi means ‘island’ in Setswana, you know. I named him Kutsi because I hope to buy an island on this river one day.”

1. See <https://www.apanews.net/en/news/botswana-ownership-of-land-by-foreigners-divides-opinion> and, more recently <https://thepatriot.co.bw/deny-foreigners-land-ownership-in-botswana-mps> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)