On Loneliness

"Wuchi wuch el hayit," complained my mother in the Jewish Iraqi dialect that was her native language. "My face is facing the wall," in literal translation. Or: I find myself interacting with no one but the wall. My mother was going through the empty nest phase as all five of her children had flown the coop. As the youngest daughter, my mother would give me her undivided attention during my infrequent visits. She would share little stories about her everyday life: what she saw in the market that day, what her neighbors were up to, and sometimes memories of her life in Iraq as a young woman before immigrating to Israel. Although I would listen, I was often impatient. I knew my mother directed her stories toward me because she had no one else to talk to. Her two sisters lived in different cities, and she did not have a positive relationship with her neighbors.

Meanwhile, my father would return home exhausted from his taxing work in construction and was not one to engage in extensive dialogue. My mother gazed intensely at my face, attempting to discern if I was paying attention. Although I sensed that she was feeling lonely and cut off from others, as a young college student in my early twenties, I couldn't completely understand her grievances about how isolated she felt.

The term "bodutu," which means loneliness in Setswana, deeply resonated with me as I thought about my mother's isolation. Bodutu is not just about being alone but a profound feeling of disconnection from a community and a powerful sense of emptiness. It's the absence of someone who can reflect your social self. Before I even set foot in Botswana, I gained an understanding of *bodutu* during my time in Boston. A young Tswana woman tutoring me in Setswana, a language I was eager to learn in anticipation of my year-long field research project in her homeland, confided in me that she was dissatisfied with her stay in Boston. Amidst a crowd of people who failed to understand her, she felt isolated and homesick. *"Ke bona bodutu*" - I see loneliness, she related, perhaps assuming that my forthcoming stay in her homeland made me more likely to grasp her feelings.

While in a small village in Botswana in the early 80s, I learned solitude was not a highly regarded state of being. Whenever I dedicated too much time to writing inside my hut, I would hear numerous voices calling out to me, inquiring if I was experiencing any discomfort. Being alone in the mud house was not acceptable. If sick people stayed indoors, they were visited by all and often walked to the open yard wrapped in a blanket to associate with well-wishers. I noticed that senior women who lacked family support (I only knew of two women who were without close family members living with them in the 80s) were provided with a child to sleep alongside them as a way to combat loneliness. Lonely people were in danger of being preyed upon by evil spirits of the dead. Domestic daily chores were always carried out in the company of other women. In the early 80s, we collected wood for the evening fire or went to the nearby stream to fetch water in groups, never alone.

Earlier today, I visited MmaZambia's yard, which was clean and spacious with four structures. One of the structures was an old thatched mud hut currently being used for storage. MmaZambia led us to a two-bedroom cement brick structure with a corrugated iron roof. Inside, we sat comfortably on sofas around a large TV screen surrounded by consumer items. The room was full of colorful decorations, such as an assortment of glasses in the open kitchen furniture, pictures on the walls, wooden decorations, and baskets on the floor.

MmaZambia is a tall woman with a mischievous smile that I remembered from my earlier visits. However, she has lost her last front teeth and was walking with a cane due to her age of 83. She informed us that she had three sons and a daughter. Unfortunately, all three of her sons had passed away at a young age due to sickness. There was no mention of the "sickness," which we all knew to be AIDS. Her only living daughter now lives in Gaborone and rarely visits. "*Ke bona budutu*," she says, without her usual smile. "I see loneliness, and it kills me. O a mpolaya."

In the 90s, things had changed from the way they used to be for MmaZambia. During one of my brief visits in 1997, I went to see my dear friend MaZambia. I remember her as a lively woman full of joy and laughter. During my first stay in her village, I visited her whenever I felt lonely or needed some cheering up. Someone was always sitting under the tree at her homestead, keeping her company. When I saw her in 1997, the tree was still there, but I noticed that MaZambia stayed indoors. She now lived alone in a newly refurbished two-bedroom house made of concrete blocks, which had running water and electricity, something unfamiliar to everyone in the village. MaZambia was happy to see me. She spoke about her bodutu but added that she was fortunate because her great-granddaughter, an eight-year-old girl who attends standard two, lives with her. "At least I can ask her to go to the tap to bring a bucket of water or fetch things for me," she says. "I feed the child and wash her clothes, and her mother (MmaZambia’s granddaughter) is pleased with how I care for her. She had wanted to leave her younger two-year-old son with me, too, but I said NO. I cannot chase a little boy who is not toilet trained at my age. I told my granddaughter I would take him in when he was five years old if I was still alive. While watching the TV, MmaZambia turned on the only Botswana channel broadcasting official news. I was amazed that the speeches in the State parliament were all in English, except for the anchor person who spoke Setswana. MmaZambia knew the names of the members of parliament, but she did not seem interested in politics. When I asked if she had heard about President Trump, she giggled, watched for five minutes, and then fell asleep.

But this was not the case by the 90s when I came for brief visits. I particularly remember the visit I paid in 1997 to my dear old friend MaZambia. I remember her as a vibrant woman full of laughter and joy. MaZambia had a beautiful yard with a large, shaded tree. Whenever I felt lonely or needed to cheer up, I visited her. There was always company under the tree at MaZambia’s homestead. The tree was still there in 1997, but MaZambia was staying indoors. She was living alone in a newly refurbished two-bedroom house made of concrete blocks, which had running water and electricity, not yet familiar to all in the village. MaZambia was glad to see me.

"You have aged too, Peni," she taunted me.

“I hear you have two male children. Are they taking care of you?” she asked.

Her daughter, she said proudly, who works and lives in town, takes care of all her needs. Looking around the room, she observed: "I lack nothing.”

Let me make you a cup of tea, Peni," she offered, getting up from her sofa and complaining about her stiff bones.

 She went about fetching a kettle and placed it on the gas stove.

“But, you know, my friend," she told me, "this tea does not taste as good as the tea we used to make on the open fire."

"In the olden days, when you were living with us," she confided in me, "we would sit in the shade of a tree and see people passing by, and they would join us for a cup of tea, and we would walk together to collect firewood or fetch water. Remember that, Peni?”

After a long pause, she looked at me and shared: “The younger people don't do this any longer. They watch TV."

 She took a deep breath and said the phrase I had first heard from my Tswana student friend in Boston: "ke bona bodutu."

As I walked through the streets of New York in the fall of 2022, I couldn't help but notice the abundance of people walking alone. Vivian Gornick's book, “The Odd Woman and the City," came to mind. She talks about how walking the crowded streets helped her feel less lonely. Similarly, in a recent publication by Israeli author Orly Castel-Bloom, she depicts the vibrant personalities of lonely people she encounters in the dog park adjacent to her Tel Aviv residence. Castel-Bloom portrays their existential loneliness in subtle, heart-wrenching ways.

As I thought about these experiences in Botswana, Manhattan, and Tel Aviv, I wondered how anguish and human apprehension differed in these places.

My acquaintances from New York advised me not to make eye contact with homeless individuals. However, I couldn't resist looking into the eyes of the many destitute men and women I came across on Manhattan's street corners. As winter approached, I was terrified by their existence - wrapped in plastic and sleeping on cardboard. On my second day in New York, I had a profound encounter while strolling through Washington Square Park. I noticed a young woman who seemed to exude a sense of fear, like a deer who senses danger nearby. The young woman stood in deep distress amidst the bustling morning crowd. Despite her attractive appearance, she appeared disheveled and seemed to be struggling with feelings of fear and isolation. I felt deeply empathetic towards her, but I wasn't sure how to approach her. Although she seemed frightened, she didn't ask for any help, and unfortunately, none of the others around us on that gray morning in the park seemed to notice or offer any assistance. Her fair skin, youthful features, and striking beauty only heightened her vulnerability, stirring a deep sense of unease within me. I could easily find myself in her position.

The Tswana bodutu concept helped me better understand the American experience of loneliness. I often wondered how L, who was only four years old when I lived with her family in Botswana during the 1980s and had been living in the United States for over two years by the time I spent in Manhattan, perceived the American experience of isolation and solitude from her new perspective. I visited my little sister at her residence in Connecticut, where she lived with other undocumented Tswana caregivers who looked after the elderly. I rented an Airbnb unit near L's apartment, as I didn't want to intrude on her since she shared her apartment with three other Tswana women, and her sister and ten-year-old son had recently come to stay with her, making it quite crowded.

I took a train to Waterborough, a few hours north of New York City. I arrived in the early afternoon and planned to wait for L to join me once she finished work. I was looking for a place to kill time, and the taxi driver suggested The Mall. In the pouring rain, I wandered around the gloomy Mall and its underwhelming and uninviting stores that offered cheap apparel and electronic gadgets. I grabbed a sandwich at a fast-food burger joint, which was less than appetizing, and trudged through the poorly lit, dreary complex for nearly four hours, watching the drizzling rain outside. As time passed, my mood sank lower and lower, and I felt lost.

I took another taxi to the address of L's place. The place was a run-down street with a lonely feel on that grey, rainy afternoon. My taxi driver, an African immigrant, summed it up when he announced: "there is nothing for you here."

As soon as I stepped into the crowded apartment, I was enveloped in its bustling atmosphere, which reminded me of the human warmth and lively community I had experienced in Tswana villages. The two-bedroom apartment was full of familiar sounds of laughter and chatter. We enjoyed cooking, sharing stories about our experiences in the United States, and sharing laughter. The TV was playing Tswana dance music loudly on YouTube. I was reluctant to leave for my rented Airbnb accommodations when night fell. They were surprised that I rented an Airbnb, so I suggested they all see the place. Together, we made our way up a steep hill and climbed three flights of stairs to a well-kept two-bedroom apartment. One by one, we chatted and made comments in Setswana while exploring the space. We remarked on its generous size for just one person. They teased me about what I was going to do with two bedrooms. I offered to make tea for my guests, but they politely declined. I felt sad about being left alone in this cold and isolated space. L's college-educated nephew, a young man in his thirties, kindly suggested I come home with

them. The word "home" echoed in the room. Despite feeling exhausted from the long train ride and the day's events, I was grateful for the invitation and happy to join them in their cozy but overcrowded space.

While walking back, we were approached by a homeless man dressed in tattered dark clothes, shivering in the cold. L's opened her driver seat window and offered the man a few coins.

“Eee," she said in Setswana. “These people here, I don’t know why they don’t have a family to take them home.”

Back in the apartment, I joined L's nephew for a smoke on the cold porch. In the tiny space, away from the noisy indoor interactions, we spoke about his brief life experience in America. "The worst thing about America," he observed, is that people are isolated. They live in total bodutu,” he offered, ensuring I was familiar with this Tswana term. "The old man I take care of tells me we Africans just came down from the trees; what a racist. But I am the one who pity him. No children, no family. He is dying alone. This kind of life is bad. Bad."

After midnight, while the happy get-together was in full swing, I fell asleep on the sofa amid the laughter and the joyous conversation swirling around me. I thought about my mother and her pain of late-life loneliness. They told me that as a child, I fell asleep in the loudest room, refusing to go alone to my bedroom.