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Dialogical subjectivities for hard times: expanding political and ethical imaginaries of subaltern and elite Batswana women

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Tracing the careers of three Batswana women leaders, two of them trade unionists and one a public servant who became, first, a politician and then an international civil servant, the article explores ideas of ethical leadership in Botswana and argues that leadership is to be understood as essentially dialogical, linked to notions of dignity and responsibility, while activism has created an impetus for the women to expand their cosmopolitan political imaginaries. The article responds to feminist poststructuralist arguments regarding the possibility of gendered agency and ethical subjectivity. While rejecting Michel Foucault’s ‘negative paradigm’ in favour of a more dialogical understanding of subjectivity, it argues that an alternative reading of Foucault’s later work may provide insight into an ethics of the other, beyond the self.

Keywords: African trade unions; cosmopolitans; subjectivity; Botswana; civil society

Introduction: from subject to subjection

E.P. Thompson remarked famously in his opening to the The making of the English working class: ‘The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making’ (Thompson 1963, p. 8). The emergence of class and class consciousness, he stressed, is an active process, ‘which owes as much to agency as to conditioning’ (1963, p. 8). Class was not merely a ‘structure’ but a historical phenomenon, unifying ‘disparate and unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness’. Echoing Thompson, Iliffe argued about dock workers in colonial Tanzania that workers developed class consciousness by the very process of working together and acting together to advance their interests (Iliffe 1975, p. 50).

A key question not pursued in this early literature on labour relations concerns the extent to which a politics of honour and distinction is at stake in trade union activism. The present article traces the historical evolution in Botswana of the notion of seriti, personal and collective honour and dignity, in the wider context of the emergence of what Iliffe recently has called a ‘modern code of honour’ (Iliffe 2005, p. 280). My approach echoes Lonsdale’s (1992) analysis of the historical evolution of the Gikuyu notion of wiathi, self-mastery in labour, and that of the late Foucault’s analysis of the changing meaning of askesis, self-fashioning and self-mastery, from the Greek to the Hellenistic period.

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Unlike these two latter notions, however, *seriti* even in its rural setting was not only a matter of self-mastery, but of recognition by others. *Seriti* is, in other words, an intrinsically dialogical notion, often related to the notion of *botho*, compassion or humanity. Tswana say that ‘Motho ke motho ka batho’, ‘a man [or woman] is a person through people’. My article moves from a broader discussion of current debates on subjectivity and ethics in Foucault’s work to a focus on the ethical subjectivities of three women, two trade unionist and one a politician.

The poststructuralist turn in the social sciences, in social history, anthropology and feminist studies, has questioned Thompson’s humanist conception of the acting subject, whose consciousness is embodied culturally ‘in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms’ (Marks and Rathbone 1982, p. 8), and defined in struggle. In a far-reaching critique of notions of experience, consciousness and agency, Joan Wallach Scott has argued that ‘Thompson’s brilliant history of the English working class, which set out to historicize the category of class, ends up essentialising it’ (Scott 1991, p. 786). In particular, she castigates Thompson for ignoring women in his stress on an allegedly masculinist universal definition of class (Scott 1988, pp. 68–92). In this respect the project of the present article, of exploring the subjective and public ethics of subaltern and elite women public actors in post-independent Botswana, must necessarily contend with feminist responses to the early Foucault’s deconstructive unmasking of the modern individual as the product of socialisation, subjection and insertion into highly coercive, inescapable discursive formations. These construct embodied subjects and subjectivities, allowing at most for a ‘plurality of resistances’ (Foucault 1980, pp. 95–96).

Recent feminist scholarship has, however, questioned the constraints of this ‘negative paradigm’ of the subject, limited to describing subversive strategies or partial resistances to hegemonic normative regimes. Acts which ‘transcend their immediate sphere in order to transform collective behaviour and norms’, Lois McNay suggests, require a ‘more dialogical understanding of the temporal aspects of subject formation’ (2000, p. 4; emphasis in the original). She thus proposes theorising a creative, active subject transformed not merely discursively (i.e. in language) but through embodied action, self-narrativising and a capacity to imagine the social creatively (McNay 2000, p. 4 and passim). A limitation in McNay’s own work, however, is that she bases her critique on Foucault’s first volume of *The history of sexuality*, and thus does not attend to his later theorising of an ethics of the self (Foucault 1987 and 1990).

In her recent monograph on the Islamic pietist movement in Egypt, Sabah Mahmood draws on Volume 2, *The use of pleasure* (Foucault 1987), to theorise the possibility of embodied agency shaping an ethics of the self, fashioned through self-mastery and voluntary self-subjection to a transcendentally authorised, normative aesthetics of female conduct (Mahmood 2001, 2005). Moving beyond Judith Butler’s notion of agency as resistive performativity (Butler 1993), Mahmood draws on Bourdieu’s and in particular Aristotle’s notion of ‘habitus’ as a learned, embodied ethical disposition. She ignores, however, what may be considered Foucault’s *ethical theory of leadership*, first hinted at in Volume 2 and developed more fully in Volume 3 of the *Sexuality* series. This would have allowed her to illuminate further dimensions of the women’s pietist movement she studied, and, in particular, their mastery of knowledge and desire as authorising their assertion of public leadership positions. Foucault’s approach, particularly in the final volume, is critical to an understanding of his theory of ethics, not simply as aesthetic self-fashioning through personal asceticism, but as a theory of alterity and power. A hint of this appears at the end of Volume 2: in the Greek city of the fourth century BC, abstention
and renunciation by older men of physical relations with boys, Foucault argued, stemmed from:

[t]he respect that is owing to the virility of the adolescent and to his future status as a free man. It is no longer simply the problem of a man’s becoming the master of his pleasure; it is a problem of knowing how to make allowance for the other’s freedom in the mastery that one exercises over oneself and in the true love that one bears for him. (Foucault 1987, p. 252, emphasis added)

Individual freedom, albeit restricted to ‘free men’, is defined here in negative terms for the first time in Foucault’s *oeuvre*, as being a conscious abstention from coercive power over an Other. Beyond that, in the Greek city a man’s claim to authority was based both on his status and on his capacity for self-mastery and self-governance, so that ‘ethics implied a close connection between power over oneself and power over others’ (Foucault 1990, p. 84). In this model, which posited ‘a close connection between the superiority one exercised over oneself, the authority one exercised in the context of the household, and the power one exercised in the field of agonistic society’ (Foucault 1990, p. 94, see also 1991, pp. 357–358) the self-mastery of desire legitimises authority in a hierarchical series of nesting social formations – over the self, the household, the city.5

The dissolution of the boundaries of the Greek city during the Hellenic period gave rise, however, to a new kind of ethics – more cosmopolitan and egalitarian. This created, Foucault argues, a ‘crisis of subjectification’ in which ‘heautocratism’ – ‘the principle of superiority over the self as the ethical core’ – needed to be ‘restructured’ and ‘reelaborated’ although it ‘did not disappear’ (Foucault 1990, p. 95). Political space had become much vaster, more discontinuous and less closed, with multiple centres of power (p. 82). The correlation between identity, status, functions, powers and duties was sundered (pp. 85, 93), and the Cynic and Stoic philosophical response was to fashion oneself as a rational, virtuous subject, irrespective of status or external power. For the Stoics, political activism was seen as a free life choice, based on judgement and virtuous reason (p. 87), a matter of rational negotiation within a complex field of relations (pp. 88–89 and passim). An early Cynic, Epictetus, renounced marriage and all private ties because qua philosopher, ‘his family is mankind’, so that ‘responsibility for the universal family is what prevents the Cynic from devoting himself to a particular household’ (p. 158). For the Stoics, by contrast, heterosexual marriage was natural, universal and hence obligatory. Marriage was defined as egalitarian, reciprocal and ethical (p. 163). A wife was the ‘valorised’ other, identical to the self (p. 164).

Several conclusions may be drawn from this genealogical movement in Foucault’s thought: first, he shows that a concept such as *askesis* (ascetic discipline) may change its significance historically while retaining some of its earlier connotations; second, the subject as rational agent and political actor is rescued from the straightjacket of an all-determining discourse; and finally, the notion of ethics moves from being almost entirely monological, focused on the autonomous self, to being dialogical, egalitarian and cosmopolitan.6

**Citizenship, honour and dignity in modern Botswana**

Post-Foucault, we may conceive of subjectivity as the product of subjection and creativity co-existing historically in dialectical tension. In the present article I consider the careers of three women, one a senior civil servant-turned-politician and the other two trade unionists in the Manual Workers Union, a public service union of government employees. I locate their rise to positions of leadership in two epistemic shifts in the history of citizenship
in Botswana. The first relates to the grounding of citizenship in the right to a living wage and, with it, the right to dissent, to legally challenge the developmental state; the second identifies a transformation in the meaning of citizenship arising from the immediate need to save the lives of ordinary citizens, which draws further legitimacy from a global movement re-envisioning health rights as human rights. Both, and especially the latter, have entailed new subjection regimes as well as new entitlements, modes of governance and individual responsibility.

Chronologically, the first shift was associated with the nascence of a collective working-class ethos and identity in Botswana, rooted in a series of historical events which shaped both individual and collective discourse and consciousness of being a worker in what Thompson, as we saw, has called a ‘historical relationship’ – in this case, with the black, African-governed, postcolonial state. The second arose in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Botswana. Both shifts were associated with emergent cosmopolitan as well as local reflexive discourses. Inserted differentially in Botswana’s changing historical and political landscape, the three women portrayed here sought, in different ways, to act and think in terms of wider social universes of discourse, expanding their current understandings of citizenship in the face of state failure to deliver what they came to regard as basic rights.

This process highlights the fact that subjectivities need to be grasped in temporal and creative terms – they are made and remade dialogically through tests and ordeals overcome. I mean ‘dialogical’ here in two senses: first, to refer to women’s political engagement and struggle within the wider social field; and second, as reflecting vernacular notions of honourable ethics as they have come to be incorporated historically into Botswana’s political discourse and ‘modern code of honour’ (Iliffe 2005, p. 280). My notion of dialogical may be referred to Charles Taylor’s argument (1994, p. 27 and passim) that in the shift from feudal notions of honour to notions of citizen dignity, secure hierarchies of ranking and respect have been replaced by the need for recognition, and that winning that recognition might fail (1994, pp. 34–35). So too in modern Botswana. As Botswana has become more egalitarian and democratic, dignity (seriti in Setswana), from being embedded in rural notions of ancestral protection, prestige, gender and seniority, has come to be a fragile achievement for both men and women. If, as McCaskie proposes, the ‘Asante historical subject existed in dialogical consciousness’, embedded in implicit collective ‘background understanding[s]’ (McCaskie 2000, pp. 43–44), it is likely that modern Ghanaians, like modern Batswana, must win recognition in the public arena, and that this attempt may, and often does, fail.

Seen in dialogical terms, then, I aim to show that the activism of the three women described here emerged in response to hard times they encountered, in contention with authoritarian or conservative voices and the perceived predicaments of vulnerable others. In ethical terms their dignity (seriti) is linked by them to a sense of their rights and responsibilities as compassionate citizens (an ethos captured by the Tswana term botho). Notions of dignity, distinction and compassion define the qualities of the rightful leader in Botswana’s modern-day political discourse, as they did for chiefship in the past (Schapera 1956, pp. 137–138). Modern citizenship itself is a discourse that emerges dialogically; it is not frozen in a timeless set of principles, but encapsulates ‘specific, historically inflected, cultural and social assumptions’ as these emerge over time (Werbner and Yuval Davis 1999, p. 2 passim, P. Werbner 1998).

I use embedded personal narratives to illustrate my argument. In doing so, I draw on a long tradition of African scholarship which stresses the centrality of narrative for recording the history of ordinary subjects alongside the ‘morally determined, intellectually
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A common historiographical strategy in Southern African scholarship is that of telling women’s life stories or microhistories, whether in order to recover their voices (Kompe 1985), to exemplify social change, highlight (racial) difference, or connect the global with the local (cf. Marks 2000). Thus, for example, Deborah Gaitskell portrays the individual lives of mission women, white and black, and relations across the racial divide (Gaitskell 2000a, 2000b). The shift in such narrativising by African historians has been, Hay argues, ‘from queens to prostitutes’ – from heroic narratives of prominent individuals to narratives of silent victims (Hays 1988). One problem in such micro-histories, as Shula Marks points out, is to underline both the commonalities and contrastive positioning of the women portrayed (Marks 1988). As C. Wright Mills has argued, the sociological imagination arises from the capacity to recognise that one’s personal troubles are shared by others and determined by wider structural forces, that the personal is also the political. Hence the biographies of particular individuals,

cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of their everyday life are organized … that is why culture and politics are now so intimately related; and that is why there is such need and such demand for the historical imagination. (Wright Mills 1959, p. 87)

The cases portrayed here are exemplary in the sense that they link the emergent recognition of shared predicaments to a widening sense of social responsibility, a move from the private domain to public activism, and the expansion of political imaginaries encompassing increasingly widening discursive horizons. My argument is thus that for the women portrayed here, a sense of social responsibility for a vulnerable other is not simply pre-given. It is discovered through ordeals, which test human capacity to act. This is an argument I have put elsewhere (see P. Werbner 1999a), in my development of the notion of ‘political motherhood’, first outlined by Jennifer Schirmer (1993) in her foundational analysis of women’s resistance movements in San Salvador and Guatemala. Political motherhood, as I have interpreted it, refers to the active move of women from their traditionally defined domains of seriti in familial care and social responsibility – from being a mother and wife – to being actors in the public sphere, often in the face of authoritative male resistance. Such processes lead them to ‘discover’ their role as public actors when they face hard times (Schirmer 1989, 1993, pp. 58–59). Writing about the rise of large-scale women’s protest movements in South Africa, Gisela Geisler writes that in their heyday during the 1950s, they were predominantly ‘motherist’. Hence Lilian Ngoyi, the first president of the Federation of South African Women, a multi-racial organisation, ‘called on women to be at the forefront of the struggle in order to secure a better future for their children’ (Geisler 2004, p. 67). As Tom Lodge too argues: ‘The most powerful sentiment was matriarchal, captured most vividly in the magnificent phrase of Lilian Ngoyi’s: “My womb is shaken when they speak of Bantu Education”’ (Lodge 1983, p. 151). It was only later that more explicit feminist agendas were developed by women.

In theoretical terms this means that the subject, from being the object of subjection, becomes an acting agent over a lifetime. This transformation, it is argued here, occurs in active participation, in the challenge posed by hard times, by the encounter with oppression and discrimination, or the misfortunes of vulnerable others. Particularly in the case of women, activists often begin as wives and mothers in the domestic sphere, only
‘discovering’ their role as public actors when they face hard times. Ultimately, this activism leads them to engage with more universalist knowledge regimes and gendered or human rights discourses. In this article I extend the comparison of the argument on political motherhood further by examining the unfolding ethics of contemporary African women activists. My acquaintance with all three women portrayed here has been long-term, based on many conversations and shared participation. Each of the women was interviewed formally once (in 2001, 2005 and 2006) at some length. The trade unionists are both elected officers, primus inter pares, firsts among equals in the union’s collective action; the politician by contrast is highly placed enough to initiate major policies in her own right.

Generational consciousness: three women

While it may be true that postcolonial African women have moved into the public sphere in confronting hard times, these hard times have differed considerably for elite and subaltern women. Two of the cases discussed here trace the evolving subjectivities of subaltern women workers in Botswana in their involvement in the collective struggle for a decent wage. For an elite woman in Botswana, her subjectivity has evolved as she has felt compelled to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic ravaging her country, and the world. In each of these three cases, the women’s life histories reveal a dialogical movement in which they reach consciousness and self-consciousness of wider global or cosmopolitan discourses, whether of labour or human rights.

One could equally well, of course, talk about Batswana men who faced the same sorts of ordeals, but I believe that a dialogical understanding of women’s subjectivities as leaders is important precisely because the distances they have had to travel from being private mothers to public actors are often much greater, and because their interpretations of global discourses are inflected by their femininity. We see this in the remarkable autobiography of Emma Mashinini, a pioneering black woman trade unionist and activist in apartheid South Africa (Mashinini 1989). If, as Nancy Fraser argues, ‘many of us who had been “women” in some taken-for-granted way have now become “women” in the very different sense of a discursively self-constituted political collectivity’ (Fraser 1992, p. 179), this discursively constructed counter-hegemonic identity has nevertheless come alongside an identification with, and command of, broader discourses of social justice which encompass men as well as women. In this sense, the ‘her-stories’ presented here are not intended to relegate women to a ‘separate sphere’, isolated and apart from men (Scott 1988, pp. 20–21).

The Batswana women who figure in this article were born just before the moment of Botswana’s independence, in 1966. All three thus grew up in a time of scarcity and relative poverty, before Botswana’s diamond wealth created a boom in personal consumption with its associated politics of desire. Although two of the women have relatives in South Africa, all three were, and still are, committed Batswana citizens, dedicated to the country’s project of nation-building, and sharing its ideology of development, as promoted by successive Botswana governments. If they oppose government policies, it is for the sake of just citizenship as they envision it. To the extent that they are also cosmopolitan subjects, they see the wider world as embodying values of justice and human rights which they believe should apply at home. All three have become leaders in their own spheres of action. Their careers, while not perhaps typical, portray the encounter of positioned individuals with their own, black, elected government in changing historical circumstances.
Seen sociologically, the women are thus part of a single ‘generation’ in the sense defined by Mannheim (1997). Mannheim argued that generational consciousness is always positioned temporally and socially. This means that those exposed to the same historical and cultural circumstances have, he proposes, a generational ‘location’. In this sense members of a generation are ‘sited’; they are ‘held together by the fact that they experience historical events from the same, or a similar, vantage point’ (Edmunds and Turner 2000). At the same time, however, people may respond quite differently to the same historical events in terms of their class, status and political attitudes. In other words, their interpretation of these events may differ quite markedly. They may be liberal or conservative, religious or secular. This creates, according to Mannheim, generational ‘units’ or identity cohorts within the broader generational cohort (Mannheim 1997, p. 306–307).

In addition to generation, then, actors may also be positioned by class and status, as the cases below illustrate. I begin my account with the personal life story of a union activist, who rose to be vice chairperson of the Manual Workers Union of Botswana, based on research conducted between 2005 and 2007.

Subaltern subjectivities

The Manual Workers Union of Botswana is the union of so-called ‘industrial class’ workers, employees of government, local government and parastatals in Botswana. They occupy the lowest ranks in government service, working as cleaners, porters, drivers, hospital orderlies, messengers, storekeepers, cooks, agricultural extension workers, pump attendants, night watchmen, gardeners and such like. They are uneducated, relatively speaking, and they work in unskilled or menial jobs for very low pay. Not surprisingly, many of the Union’s members, at least 50% and probably more, are women. If anything, women trade unionists occupy even lower employment positions than their male comrades. They are certainly below other public service women employees such as teachers or nurses. Unlike nurses in South Africa who constituted the nascent black middle class (Marks 1994), they identify with the international workers movement.

Despite the low wages of its members, the Union was remarkable during the time of my study, in 2005, for being the largest in Botswana – at its peak, in 2003, it had some 70,000 paid-up members, and even in 2005, in the face of an extremely painful factional split, it still had some 45,000 paid-up members. For a small country of 1.5 million people, these figures are impressive, especially in a period when union membership in the West is in decline. In Britain, for example, only a quarter of all workers belong to trade unions. This comparison underlines the immense achievement of the Manual Workers Union in recruiting virtually all government industrial class worker employees into the Union. Its success was partly due to the fact that Union dues were low, five pula, about 50 pence ($1) a month (they have since risen), yet the income from this paltry sum had made the Manual Workers Union rich – its officers had invested Union income wisely, in property and shares. Hence, paradoxically, the Union of some of the lowest-paid workers in Botswana was also the wealthiest in the country, and the best organised.

Trade unions in Africa were historically leading civil society actors in the colonial era, mobilising different ethnic and even national groups in demand of basic rights, united in opposition to colonial regimes. This was made evident in early anthropological studies of miners on the Zambian Copperbelt (Epstein 1958), and on the railways in East Africa (Grillo 1973, 1974). Trade unions were at the forefront of the liberation struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Namibia (Moorsom 1977), and, since the 1980s, in Zambia.
In Ghana, railway and other public workers developed an independent, radical consciousness, across ethnic divisions, during the colonial era which persisted after independence (Jeffries 1978).

African nationalism arose on the back of such inter-ethnic alliances, only to be subsumed and suppressed after independence. In his magisterial survey of the ‘labour question’ in French and British Africa outside South Africa, Frederick Cooper (1996) documents the emergence of an emancipatory discourse of self-governance, citizenship and labour rights, and the growing international links of African unions to international labour organisations, during the period following World War II.

In Botswana in the early years after independence, unions, never strong, were actively discouraged and the demand for workers rights construed as unpatriotic, striking at the country’s development effort. It thus took an act of moral courage to challenge the status quo from the lowly position of a manual unskilled worker. Such workers were not the subject of common esteem. Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana, extolled rural work while suppressing the demands of miners and government public manual workers. Thus, in a speech made in 1976 to celebrate 10 years of independence, Khama said that:

> the future of Botswana lies in the rural areas, in the land, where our forefathers eked out a living, where the majority of our people still eke out a living, and where we must make life more attractive not only for ourselves but for many future generations. To do this – to develop our rural sector – we must, first and foremost, appreciate the dignity of labour, and be instilled with a clear social conscience. We must come to grips with our true identity as a traditionally rural people who are being lured to the towns by the largely false promise of a better style of life and a more secure standard of living ... Botswana is a democratic country founded on the ideal of kagisana (harmony) ... rooted in our past – in our culture and traditions. (quoted in Vaughan 2003, p. 134, emphasis added)

Dignity, in Setswana seriti or tlotlo, is here represented as a feature of rural ‘traditional’ labour. Against that, the struggle of manual workers in modern non-agricultural work is for dignity and a fair wage in manual work outside the rural sector. There was a redemptive quality to the self-conception of struggle in the Union, the sense that their ultimate aim was to liberate the poor and oppressed – this, despite the fact that daily activities were marked by nitty-gritty, pragmatic negotiations over wages and rights. Members of the Union never tired of telling me that despite their poverty and lack of education, they could ‘teach’ the other unions and occupational associations in Botswana how to be unionists, how to protest, how to mobilise effectively. This was a source of pride and distinction for them. The redemptive quality of their vision may be linked to their almost universal affiliation to churches, whether established churches like the Congregationalists (UCCSA) or Catholics, local ‘Spiritual’ churches, ‘Zionists’ or Pentecostals. Many of the leaders stressed that they had cut their teeth in church preaching and organisation. Indeed, the ‘dignity of labour’ bears Christian connotations, rooted in Puritan ideas of vocation and calling (Constantin 1979). The ILO headquarters in Geneva has a large mural painting by Maurice Denis entitled ‘The Dignity of Labour’, commissioned in 1931 by the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions, showing Christ in his Nazareth workshop talking to a group of workers, dressed in twentieth-century work clothes, who are easily identifiable as key leaders in the Christian Trade Union movement (WTO Building 2007, p. 12).

Their moral courage in claiming their rights as workers was displayed by the Manual Workers Union in what has come to be mythologised as a glorious history of struggle. The struggle proved that although Union workers may be uneducated, they cannot
be intimidated, above all because they are rights experts. Knowing their rights has made them unflinching, tenacious negotiators who have gained the respect of university-educated, top Batswana civil servants. The achievement is all the more notable in a developing country in which open public protest is rare (Maundeni 2004). Botswana, a multi-party democracy since independence, started off as one of the poorest countries in the world, and for this reason, anti-state protests were defined as a betrayal of the solidarity needed to build a new nation. Against the grain, the Union demanded a fair wage from government. At the time, in 1990, its members were earning as little as 80 pula a month, which amounted in those days to not much more than 30 pounds sterling.

The 1991 strike, which lasted for four or five days, was a remembered heroic fable of worker solidarity. It took a further 10 years, until 2000, to achieve the minimum wage settlement demanded in that strike (by then in many ways the victory was a pyrrhic one), and it involved the Union taking the government to the High Court of Botswana and then to the Court of Appeal. It was during these heady days that Lilian Mamoshe chaired and led the Union in her region before becoming, in 2004, a nationally elected vice-chair of the Union.

Lilian was a messenger in one of the government offices. She was excluded from school at 16 when she became pregnant and was a union leader by the age of 22. By the age of 30 she had been widowed, left to bring up four children.

I first noticed Lilian as an outstanding singer of Union songs, sung in Setswana, the language in which all union affairs and public meetings are conducted. Many of the songs were written in Setswana by a former labour unionist and activist, Klass Motsedisa, later Labour Commissioner, and their words speak of oppression and of the fight for workers’ rights and liberty. There was (for me) an element of déja vu in the songs of bygone eras and dead ideologies, but sung with passion, they re-emerged like a phoenix from the ashes, to bear real meanings in the real world. ‘We work in suffering/Creating Botswana’s wealth/We work, not eating/We die in poverty.’ Or in another stanza: ‘We die of hunger/Without healthcare/Without a home/Or education for our children.’ There is a certain twist in the songs: we, the workers, create the wealth of the new nation yet we live like beggars and strangers in the land of our forefathers. As one song goes: ‘We (only) want our rights/In a land that is ours.’

The only solution to this injustice is to join the Union and fight for liberty. So the singers sing in Setswana, in a translated version of the English song: ‘The Union is our shield – we shall not be moved/We are protected by it – we shall not be moved/Just like a tree that’s planted on the waters, we shall not be moved.’ There is sometimes a local colouring to the songs as when the workers sing: ‘If you see workers (or women) sleeping in the bush/[know that] All they want is their rights.’ Every Union meeting begins with a song and a Christian prayer, followed by more songs. And it ends with a song and a prayer. Prayers are sometimes passionate and highly politicised. The workers stand up, often dressed in red Union T-shirts, and sing, harmonising their voices naturally, as in a church choir. It is indeed a moving moment, a moment of uplifting, of hope, of unity and solidarity. Members are used to this kind of natural harmonising of different voices since almost all, as mentioned, are active members of Christian churches. Union and church are in Botswana deeply symbiotic.

The singing conjures up a consciousness of faraway worlds – of workers’ struggles in Europe at the birth of the industrial revolution, but also elsewhere in Africa, particularly Southern Africa. Here in Botswana, however, there is no doubt that the struggle is very concretely against one’s own government, and not against white privileged
capitalists. It is the workers’ own black government which is oppressive. Workers work for the government and experience on a daily basis this oppression and the hardship caused by their meagre salaries. Lilian told me about their protests: ‘We were called the ones who sweat, “magaposetito”, that was the slogan, we would wipe our brows.’

For Lilian, who was not a great reader, the songs were a bridge to those other worlds of struggle, to a wider consciousness. She told me: ‘When you sing these songs, you feel very happy, that you are very strong and it gives you the bones (i.e. the strength), like medicine. You feel at one with other workers.’ As a woman, she had suffered. She was the victim of arbitrary rules which first removed her from education, then left her without compensation when her partner, who never married her, was killed in a road accident. Even when he was alive, although he professed to loving her deeply, he was, nevertheless, something of a philanderer. She managed her household and brought up her children alone. But she did not see her agency in her womanhood. She told me:

I’m a man. I’ve never gone to those things of the women’s wing. I just act like a man. I chaired the region for many years. Men like performing, standing in front of people. Women, I’ve noticed, like being the secretary, supporters behind the scenes. . . . To me, I’ve never been in these women’s councils pushing men away from us. I don’t like working on one side – from experience, when we women get together we fight. There is a lot of jealousy, yes, even witchcraft – too much. Men like a big base, they want to be respected, honoured (ba batla seriti, ba batla go tlotlwa). Women are not so worried about that. They show off, they just show off. . . . That’s not seriti [lit. powerful dignity], just to shine. Myself, I want to act like a man.

She prided herself on her oratorical skills. When she stood up in front of an audience, she said, she was listened to intently, she held her audience.

At my request, she described the time of the great strike, the moment of remembered heroism.

I started on 122 pula a month. When we went on strike, in 1990 [the strike began in November 1991] I was on 322 [or 276, unclear] pula. Myself as a politician I had once been in a seminar with Mr Marambo who taught me about inflation and the poverty datum line, which was 276 (pula) a month, which means I was being paid at the poverty datum line. That is why I had the strength to teach my colleagues why the salary was so low. I was the vice chair of the region, but in fact acting as chair because the chair was never there. . . . Sometimes I attended the Union General Council. When we came close to striking I started to attend. The decision came after the government went back on their agreement (with the Union)26. Some members didn’t really understand, many had never been to school . . . we just made a simple example, so they could understand. We took three plates, and we put bogobe [traditional porridge], in the first plate just one teaspoon, in the second four teaspoons and in the third a huge quantity. The huge one represented the Ministers and Perm Secs, the medium [plate], the supervisors. (We the workers had just one teaspoon).

Her account highlights the common stress by union leaders that although they are uneducated, they understand their rights. Lilian goes on to stress her own personal struggle against injustice in the workplace.

We had a lot of general meetings. Here, they knew me, first when there was a lady who was our administrator, at the District Office, who was very corrupt and I exposed her. When you are a chair you have to arrange for the meetings, cases and so on.

She described the solidarity and commensality as memorable aspects of the strike:

We went on strike for four days. It was long [for us] because it was our first time to strike. . . . we were at the DC’s office every morning, just to stay down, with our breakfast and scoff tins of lunch and we sat on the ground, on the grass, sleeping, but with exact times: we ate breakfast at 8, lunch at lunch time, all (of us) together. The DC was instructed to fire us from the place, to expel us, (so) then we went outside to the trees, there are some big trees outside
the magistrate’s court … (that is) also where political rallies are held, we went under the trees. We agreed that all of us every morning should come and report there. We took the register. First we prayed, then we sang union songs, me and my secretary, we are both Roman (i.e. Catholics).

Communication and coordination across the whole country was a key challenge, and strikers required ingenuity and cunning to overcome the obstacles put in their way. They were helped by the (Catholic) church:

The DC had left an instruction that we could not use the phone, so there was no communication. In those days there were no cellphones in Botswana. So we went to see the father at the mission to tell him our problem – can we use your fax and your phone? He even came and prayed for us the second day. That was after we’d been expelled. There were so many journalists, and Radio Botswana.

Then we phoned (the organising secretary) to know the news. What the government was deciding. So we could stop the strike. That time Mabustane [a place in the Kalagadi] was under me and then all the way to the Barolong farms and Moshupa. The regions were very big. ‘Where are you?? Roger Roger, under the tree! Go on, Roger’. It was very tough, we tried our level best, we stole the roger roger [i.e. the walkie-talkies] from the government – radio communication [i.e. the people working in that department], they stole it. And when we talked to Mabutsane all the other places could hear us.

All of us were fired, on the third day, the government announced they were firing us. On the fifth day when we went to work we found the letters dated two days previously.

Her vivid memories underline the enormity of the achievement the strike represented for union members. Although the strike itself was brief, it was followed by nine years of litigation and political struggle in Parliament, represented by the opposition parties, and through the press and media: ‘The cases (against government, in the high court) went on and on . . .’

Although she does not see herself as acting like a woman, and indeed has easy relations with male Union comrades, Lilian’s victimisation on this occasion is very much that suffered by assertive women in lowly positions. She told me:

The Union destroyed my future because of the strike. I am unlucky with bosses, every time I meet a tough a boss who refuses to promote me. I’m at the top notch of A2, right on the bottom scale. My bosses refuse to promote me. I would prefer to be a field assistant. They think I’m a bully, that I’m tough.

Lilian does not allow men to dominate her. She demands respect. She expects that her dignity and self-dignity, her seriti, be recognised. She is no longer the young girl expelled from school. But in her position as a manual worker, even as an elected national officer of the Union, she seems repeatedly to be forced into a clash of wills with dominating men. While she was the elected regional chair, she led the Union, she had the power of office. She represented members and settled their disputes with management, with great skill. As she told me, ‘to be the chair of a region is tough’. But it is also rewarding. In her new, somewhat ambiguous status as elected vice-chairperson, she often felt marginalised and continuously struggled to find a role and a voice. Eventually, in November 2006, she was compelled to leave the Union after a confrontation with two of the union leaders, one a former colleague and friend, who had ‘insulted’ her. She began supporting the breakway rival union. But through it all, through all her struggles, she saw herself as first and foremost a unionist, being a unionist was ‘in her blood’ (Union e mo madi a me) as another woman told me (Y.N. 16/7/05, Gaborone), part of a heroic self-narrativising that gave meaning to the daily slog and vision to her life.

Lilian’s greatest ordeal as a worker came about as a result of a familiar conflict the world over: the clash between boss and underling. As a messenger for many years at the
local offices of the Ministry of Commerce,27 she had seen bosses come and go. As a Union leader, she had dealt with many of them in her feisty way. Her latest boss was particularly difficult, and she had a series of encounters with him culminating in a public stand-off which led to an extended series of disciplinary hearings. These exemplified the tenacity a unionist must have in their dealings with government. It also exemplified the vulnerability of manual workers who lose their jobs in a time of high unemployment and government lay-offs.

The case of the offending beret

The incident that sparked the case against Lilian happened during a public meeting of the local branch of the Ministry of Commerce with the Permanent Secretary. Lilian attended the meeting wearing a beret and refused to remove it when asked to do so by the head of the local branch of the Ministry of Commerce (she explained later that she had not groomed her hair). In retaliation, he had her physically removed to the back row. Then followed a series of confrontations and internal disciplinary hearings which ended with the decision to fire her. When I first discussed the case with her, she was cavalier about it, invoking the length of time she had worked at the Ministry of Commerce, which she felt gave her a measure of job security. Gradually, however, it became evident that her boss was determined to get rid of her. She had heard that he was accusing her of bewitching him and had even treated the walls of the office against sorcery. He would not allow her to enter his office.

Despite her reluctance to mobilise the Union officers, and especially the charismatic Organising General Secretary whom she regarded as an all-too-dominant male (though she had great admiration for his negotiating skills), she asked fellow unionists to represent her. In a series of meetings involving the Permanent Secretary and his deputy over a prolonged period, her case was repeatedly heard, and the decision that her firing had been illegal repeatedly reiterated by the Permanent Secretary and his deputy. But her boss dug his heels in and, having been suspended initially with pay, her salary was stopped and she was compelled to manage for several months without any income at all. In effect, she was destitute. She had no savings, no unemployment benefit (which does not exist at present in Botswana), no income from the Union, which does not support unemployed members, and no job. The house she was living in was rented and belonged to her employers, and three of her four children were still attending school and could not be easily shifted.

Just before the last scheduled hearing, her boss had a road accident while driving with two colleagues in a Ministry of Commerce vehicle. He was laid up in hospital seriously injured. Lilian told me over the telephone that the final hearing had been delayed. She also told me that colleagues in the local branch of the Ministry of Commerce had been coming to her with information about the boss – in particular, that he had bought a vehicle without tendering, breaking regulations and hence subject to charges of corruption. She felt sure his days in the Ministry were numbered. His accident, she speculated, had convinced him that her witchcraft powers were huge, but although she heard rumours about this, he had not come out with a public accusation, since witchcraft accusations are against the law in Botswana.

After so many dashed hopes that the case would be settled, Lilian finally rang me up one day to tell me that she was going back to work on Monday28. Her boss had been ordered by the Permanent Secretary to pay her lost wages over several months from his own salary and she had been reinstated. When he asked why she had refused the ‘reasonable request’ (as set out in her job contract) to attend prayer meetings, she showed
him the Constitution of Botswana, she told me, which guarantees freedom of creed and
assembly. During this time she continued to be an elected officer of the Union, critical of
some decisions made by the executive and yet dependent on its representatives to help her
fight her own case.29

I asked Lilian how she was welcomed by the other workers when she finally returned
to work? ‘So well,’ she said, ‘They say I am a hero’ (mogaka, i.e. the bravest, a champion).
Her boss was still in hospital, being treated for severe injuries. One of the other passengers
had injured his back and was also still hospitalised several months after the accident.

It is, perhaps, ironic that a year later, Lilian had made friends with her boss, supported
by the local chief, also a friend or even distant relative. On a recent trip to Botswana, in
2007, I found her position amazingly transformed: her boss had even selected her to
represent the local manual workers in her department at a national meeting to discuss
changes in the structure of public salaries. Yet a year later she had once again clashed with
him, over his treatment of a fellow woman worker, and once again been suspended without
pay. When I last talked to her, in July 2008, she reported that she had joined another union
which was handling her case while her boss had finally been transferred.

Lilian’s case is exemplary rather than unique. Winning such cases for relatively
uneducated manual workers in confrontation with their educated, Westernised bosses, has
been the reason for Union support among its rank and file members, the basis for its
formidable reputation. Suspected attempts by the current government (or the ruling party,
the BDP) to infiltrate and undermine the Union’s strength through factional challenges,
accusations of corruption and splits, have had to contend with the belief of ordinary rank
and file members, based on past experience, that only the Union could protect their
interests and their vulnerable, low-paid jobs.

Subjection and agency

Lilian’s case illuminates the complexity of self-knowledge and personal agency that
manual workers in post-independence Botswana may develop. On the one hand, Lilian
sees herself as an actor and leader, hence a man; on the other hand, she is a vulnerable
victim, suspected and discriminated against, hence a woman. In Botswana subjectivities
are perceived to be affected interactively, with people’s hostilities and animosities
impacting physically on a subject’s sense of self (see Klaits in press). They are also
formed through interaction with a close circle of kin and ancestors (R. Werbner 1989,
Chapters 1 and 3).

Clearly for Lilian the strike was an empowering moment of heightened
consciousness, solidarity and camaraderie, an ordeal successfully overcome. The Union
is the primary source of her identity as an acting subject. Nevertheless, she is also active
in other village committees. Indeed, as a civic-minded villager, she has fostered good
relations with the local chief. In 2007 she was engaged in setting up a local Community
Based Organisation to help HIV/AIDs orphans. She is a long-term supporter and
member of the BNF, the main opposition party. She also dreams of leaving her job and
going to work in England, so she can afford to build a house in her natal village.
Although herself a manual worker, some of her closest relatives are middle-class nurses,
teachers and civil servants.

The active participation of women in the strike and in the union more generally
supports Iris Berger’s observation, against the argument that women workers tend to be
‘incompletely’ proletarianised, that in Southern Africa the predicament of very low wages
for men, and women’s responsibility for basic household livelihood, have created ‘a basis
for solidarity between men and women’ and women’s trade union militancy (Berger 1986, pp. 220–221).

The complexity inherent in African workers’ identities and subjectivities is highlighted in studies that challenge simplistic assumptions about popular worker mobilisation and strikes, or the emergence of a long-term proletarian consciousness. Repeatedly, unions are revealed to be fractionised by internal racial, class and educational divisions, with clerical and skilled workers often suspected of being stooges or sell-outs. In the early colonial period, sustained consciousness was said to be weakened by workers’ double rootedness as circulatory labour migrants. Local and national union interests often diverge (see Cheater 1986, Kapferer 1972), leading to suspicion of official political rhetoric. Workers are also subjected to appeals in the name of broader, national interests, as in Botswana. Recently, anthropologists have challenged the supposed homogeneity of Botswana as a ‘Tswana’ nation, and have highlighted the need to study marginalised social groups and intersections of ethnicity, class and gender.

Despite their multiple affiliations, however, these ambiguities seemed to be absent from the Union officials’ worldview. In their confrontations with government the Union, like Lilian, drew on a rights ethic that presumes that justice should and must prevail, that their rights are fundamentally and intrinsically sacrosanct. These rights are defined internationally, by the ILO convention and by long traditions of labour struggle.

It is worth asking, nevertheless, whether union leaders’ pride in their capacity to win against the full might of the state despite, as they repeatedly stressed to me, their lack of education, echoes postcolonial narratives of subalternity, or whether it merely mirrors more familiar class narratives of conflict? Throughout the Union meetings I attended, including those convened to protest the firing of 461 diamond miners, which included teachers’ and many other unions, the stress was on the fact that the Botswana government did not respect international human rights and labour laws; it had not yet, as it were, come of age, and it thus thought it could oppress workers with impunity. This narrative is one which is no longer bothered about a colonial past, in the sense that it demands full accountability and responsibility from the people’s own African government. Although mention was made by one miners’ union leader of the ‘white’ ownership of De Beers, most speakers universally pointed out that Debswana, De Beers’ daughter company, was in reality owned by the Botswana government and it was thus government that was ultimately responsible for the injustice suffered by the miners. In all these conversations and meetings the pre-independence past seemed totally irrelevant and long forgotten. Colonialism was never mentioned and was never invoked as an excuse for current failings. What was mentioned repeatedly was a new cosmopolitan world of rights, including workers’ rights, which the state should acknowledge and respect (on this, see P. Werbner 2008).

In demanding procedural accountability from government and the right to strike, organise, unionise and negotiate for fair wages, workers are also inserting themselves into a complex bureaucratic and legal regime, which defines the limits of their rights as citizen workers. In this discourse on the dignity of labour prior notions of seriti as self-respect and embodied selfhood, dignity and well-being in the rural context have been incorporated into demand for worker respect and well-being.

**Elite postcolonial subjectivities**

I turn now to my second case, of an elite postcolonial leader in Botswana. Joy Phumaphi is currently vice-president of the World Bank, and had also served a stint as Assistant General Director of the World Health Organisation in Geneva, having been the Minister
of Health who introduced universal, free anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment in Botswana.36 Ms. Phumaphi comes from a very different background from Lilian Mamoshi and her struggles have consequently occurred on a much larger stage.37 She was born into one of the elite families in Botswana, which rose to prominence after independence. Her parents were founder members of the Botswana Democratic Party, which has won all the elections and ruled Botswana since independence. Her mother, a national charity worker, was mayor of the capital city, and her father rose rapidly in the civil service to become the permanent secretary of several ministries before leaving the civil service to be appointed the first ever African member of the International Board of BP and an ambassador. At 18, Joy was already head of the student union. She married a young lawyer, now a high court judge, trained as an accountant and worked as a civil servant.

Nevertheless, as a young child, Joy told me, she experienced both the hardship of poverty and the exclusions of race and minority status, growing up in Francistown, a white settler-dominated provincial town in Botswana. These experiences left an indelible trace and shaped her political outlook, she reflected. Lilian had told me: ‘If you are suffering a lot you have to struggle. I don’t like to see people suffering, being abused because they don’t know their rights.’ This sense of responsibility for the suffering of others, of botho, compassion, is one that motivated Joy’s public activism and which she linked to their rights as citizens and to human rights.

When she became Minister of Health in Botswana the young nation was in the middle of the worst crisis of its short history. The HIV/AIDS pandemic, entrenched after growing almost imperceptibly for 10 years, was claiming more and more lives, with no cure in sight. There was medication on the market, anti-retroviral therapy (ARV), which could keep the disease at bay. A two-tiered health system was in effect in place, which protected the wealthy salariat. Those on private medicare, mainly civil servants and businessmen, were able to access ARV medication, while for the rest of Botswana’s citizens, the disease spelled certain death. Yet most civil society activists, including middle-class academics with whom I spoke to in 1999 and 2000, just shrugged their shoulders in despair. Botswana was too poor to afford the drugs, one feminist activist told me, and anyway, people would not adhere to the complex drug regime involved.

Although in retrospect the move to introduce universal free anti-retrovirals in Botswana may now seem obvious, it can be seen as a turning point in the history of citizenship in the country. At the time, in 1999, it required a combination of strategic planning, courage, conviction and vision to go against the prevailing wisdom in order to overcome the hesitations and paralysis affecting the government, the Ministry of Health and the country as a whole. In the many conversations with Joy it became evident that it was not her training, education, work or even family background as such that made her a quiet revolutionary. It was a long-term conviction, which she expressed several years later in an interview with *The Times of India* in relation to her work at WHO on maternal and child mortality:

> It is a moral, political and social imperative to ensure that people don’t die when you have a fairly easy solution to prevent this. Women give life to save the future and they are entitled to the gift of life. It is a basic human right.

So too in Botswana, once it was clear that medication was available that could prolong adult lives and save the lives of young babies, it was, she believed, a basic human right of all citizens to access the drugs freely. Her conviction can be seen in the context of a growing global movement to recognise access to health and free medication as a basic human right in the late 1990s.38 In South Africa the international drug companies had
in 1999 withdrawn their case against the use of generics, but no African country at the time provided free, universal anti-retrovirals and access to regular testing, counselling and medical care.  

In her struggle to introduce free ARV treatment in Botswana, Joy had to overcome gridlock and scepticism in the Ministry of Health, to persuade the president of Botswana of the reality of the looming economic disaster, to enlist the international drug agencies to become partners in the fight against AIDS in Botswana, to set up new systems of health care where none existed before. In short, it required all her skills of tact, diplomacy, administration, organisation and business management to overcome a myriad of hurdles, to bring NGOs, donor agencies, civil servants and government on board, and beyond that, to appeal to all Batswana citizens to heed the dangers of the disease, even to believe in its existence.

Joy is an extremely modest, soft-spoken woman, but as a politician she was not afraid to heap scorn on the antediluvian views of fellow MPs. This was exemplified in a speech on mental health she made in Parliament on 19 July 2001, following comments by two male MPs that ‘there was nothing wrong in saying that a person is sane or insane’, what ‘benefit’ is there in euphemisms? MP Phumaphi’s response was scathing:

The same benefit that you derive from not being called a bastard or from not being called a kaffir or any other derogatory term is the same benefit that is going to protect your dignity and protect you from discrimination and from being looked upon as a lesser human being than others is the benefit that this particular group is going to derive from the removal of the ['euphemisms'] that the Honourable Member is referring to. (Leslie 2006, p. 119)

The essential lead taken by the then President Mogae in mobilising the nation for the struggle against the disease has meant that the narrative of her own pioneering contribution is often left untold. She is a loyal wife and mother who has brought up four of her own children and has fostered or adopted some sixteen others. But she is clearly a formidable negotiator and administrator, moved by her sense of conviction and responsibility for vulnerable others. Her sense of dignity means being open and accessible to others, never allowing her status to blind her to the misfortunes, to the ‘face’ of the other, of those less fortunate than her. Hers is a liberal, cosmopolitan normative discourse, apparently quite different from that of activists in the Manual Workers Union, one she has evidently recovered for herself, deeply integrated into a coherent worldview. Although she does not use words like exploitation and oppression, she is on the side of the oppressed, the impoverished and the marginalised. They too, she argues, have a right to live as free agents, to make their own decisions about their future, to have a future.

Unlike Lilian who sees herself ambiguously as both man and woman, Joy embraces wholly her identity as a woman, humanist and feminist. She accepts the fact that she operates in a world in which men often dominate, and that this entails being a certain type of leader in this highly politicised environment: one who acts strategically, with tact, a clear vision, and meticulous attention to detail.

Botswana’s achievement in creating a much improved universal health system to deliver medication, and to test and monitor the treatment of HIV and AIDS patients, has undoubtedly liberated citizens from a life of suffering and early death. It has come along with a major educational thrust demanding that citizens change their sexual habits. Yet it needs also to be recognised that this epistemic shift, which has created the grounds for an expanded notion of citizenship, has also created, in Foucauldian terms, a new subjection regime of monitoring and surveillance, backed by scientific knowledge and complex structures of governance.
Cosmopolitan working classes

The question is: do all cosmopolitans have to be members of such an elite? Recent research in Africa has begun to look at the role of contemporary African elites, intellectuals, civil society pioneers and activists (e.g. Yarrow 2008, R. Werbner 2004, 2008, Hodgson 2008). To conclude this article, I want to defend my argument, put elsewhere, that in a cosmopolitanising world of increased mobility and so-called space-time compression, there can be working-class cosmopolitans too who share a global subjectivity. To consider this possibility, I turn now to a portrait not of a migrant worker, as in my previous article on this subject (P. Werbner 1999b), but of a trade union employee who became a worker representative in modern Botswana. During my study in 2000 and 2005, Elsinah Botsalano was Coordinator of the Women’s Wing of the Manual Workers’ Union. In this role she had risen to become the elected representative of the Southern Africa region and elected ‘Titular’ for the English-speaking African Region in an international labour union, Public Service International (PSI).

Elsinah, like Lilian, was of Barolong origin, a tribal group spanning Botswana’s international boundary with South Africa, and half her immediate family lived across the border. She came from a settlement in the Kalahari, and she began her career in the trade union as a typist, in 1982. Later, she organised workshops on women’s issues, and trained as an accounts officer. She was one of a team of four Union employees, who ran the Union on a day-to-day basis.

As the Union’s strength grew, it reaffiliated to the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions, and to Public Service International, an international trade union of public workers with its headquarters in Geneva, despite the heavy costs of membership. PSI represents millions of workers worldwide. It comprises five major regions, Africa and the Middle East being one such region. As Titular, Elsinah travelled regularly to Geneva and Johannesburg for PSI executive meetings, workshops and seminars. She also travelled to Italy for an ILO course, and to Beijing for the UN International Conference on Women, as part of the Botswana delegation. She was part of Union struggles against redundancies and looming privatisation of the public sector.

Elsinah is, I suggest, a working-class cosmopolitan, relatively uneducated and thus deeply conscious of the inequalities in Botswana; part, perhaps, of a tiny labour elite; well-travelled and knowledgeable about the kinds of rights to which low-paid workers, and women in particular, are entitled. She and her fellow trade unionists have made a genuine difference to the alleviation of poverty in the lives of ordinary Batswana women, indeed arguably far more so in economic terms than other initiatives of the women’s movement. In the capital city, Gaborone, her position in the established church, the UCCSA (the United Congregationalist Church of South Africa, formerly the LMS), its committees and women-run burial society, which included many wives of the great and the good in Botswana, seemed to prove her membership in the bourgeois middle class of the capital. Yet she is not really a sophisticated cultural cosmopolite, and although she was part of the Botswana delegation to Beijing, she is often marginalised by the group of highly educated elite women activists, feminists and global travellers who shared that experience with her. Although she is, quite explicitly, a feminist who promotes gender equality within the Union, and despite her international status and role as coordinator of the Union’s women’s wing, as an employee, Elsinah accepts that her role as a labour activist in Botswana is to lend unquestioning and loyal support to the charismatic organising secretary of the Union, a man who during my research in 2005 was regarded by ordinary rank-and-file members – and even by many government
negotiators – as having almost mystical powers to settle disputes, as he travelled up and down the country.45

Elsinah is an example of a new type of cosmopolitan – the procedural cosmopolitan or cosmocrat: a person of competence who knows all the regulations (tsamaiso in Setswana), is familiar with constitutional structures; a skilled negotiator who is meticulous in her observance of rules and procedures. She enunciates the Public Service International ideology which promotes women and youth participation and is imbued with political correctness; for example, when I asked her if she was a Kgalagadi, a lower-status group living in the Kalahari where some members of her family lives, she explained that no, she comes from the relatively high-status Barolong tribe, but added that she would not mind being a Kgalagadi.

How does Elsinah exemplify the cosmopolitan? When she travels, she rarely ventures out beyond the Geneva airport hotel or the PSI offices located near the hotel, mainly for lack of time. Despite the arduous air journey from Botswana of some 20 hours to Geneva, she stays only as long as meetings last, usually a couple of days, moving between her hotel and PSI headquarters (in France, on the border with Switzerland) by public transport. Like most other workers in Botswana, virtually the whole of her per diem allowance is saved up to support her immediate and extended family back home, and she is almost always called back urgently to attend to the day-to-day mundane business of the Union, or to care for the illness of her own children, her ailing mother46 or one of her numerous siblings. Her brief forays abroad, however frequent, mean she never feels at home there; she is not a connoisseur of art, music or foreign cuisines. Nor is she a pioneer, a mover-and-shaker in global affairs, although her election as Titular is a first for Botswana. Instead, she is an actor in an emergent bureaucracy of global governance, and, given her class background, a person who has advanced quite remarkably into global affairs through the esteem of colleagues for her dedication, religious piety and procedural knowledge. She is a person of evident moral integrity and meticulous commitment to fair procedures. She achieved her position as elected Titular for the English-speaking African Region of PSI in the face of competition from far more educated trade unionists, men and women, civil servants in local and central government, and despite Botswana’s insignificance by comparison to larger African countries like neighbouring South Africa, where PSI’s headquarters are housed in Johannesburg. Her achievement is all the more remarkable because in public meetings she is often soft-spoken and diffident, frequently the tireless behind-the-scenes worker lending support to an event rather than being its charismatic leader. As chair, she is practical, down-to-earth and matter-of-fact. If she expresses emotions, this is only when she joins in the singing of trade union songs or leads public prayers.

Like the other women portrayed here, Elsinah is weighed down by family commitments. In addition to her children, husband and living parents, she has at least a dozen living siblings and half-siblings, resident on both sides of the border, who regard her as an elder sister, and expect her to take command at family funerals or in illnesses. She juggles her commitments to them, the Church, and the Union as best she can, always on the run. Her consciousness as a worker (and feminist) has emerged, in work, particularly in the endless round of meetings negotiating workers’ rights, and in repeated legal adversarial action: with the government, in the High Court and the Court of Appeal, and with internal union dissenters and trouble-stirrers who on occasion have questioned her own integrity. As in her family commitments, she is dedicated and loyal – above all to the Union and its leader. Her consciousness has evolved through constant learning, but her instinct is always to play safe, not to rock the boat; instead, to follow the rules and procedures.
Conclusion

Writing about South African labour leaders such as E.S. Sachs of the Transvaal Garment Workers’ Union and Ray Alexander of the Cape Food and Canning Workers’ Union, Iris Berger suggests that ‘any sense of identification with others is not simply a given fact, inherent in people’s material lives, but rather needs to be constructed conceptually, emotionally and historically’ (Berger 1992, p. 11). In South Africa’s long history of repeated mass strikes, protests and marches, the theme of trade union activism as historically leading to a sense of expansive agency and personal empowerment is one repeatedly stressed in the scholarly literature. As Jennifer Fish comments in relation to post-independence South Africa: ‘Domestic workers’ unionisation – while replete with struggles for both recognition and financial viability – continually reflected women’s agency’ (2006, p. 120). Yet as Emma Mashinini notes almost as an aside in her story of her struggle to build a trade union and gain recognition for it in the face of apartheid, despite her national achievements and international recognition; despite the fact that the majority of black workers were women, when it came to electing the National Executive of the newly formed COSATU or its logo, women were absent, so that, as Mashinini concludes, ‘it means that our presence – our efforts, our work, our support – was not even recognised’ (1989, p. 118).

Botswana’s short history is far less conflictual and thus lacks, on the whole, the mass populist element so prominent in the historical activism of its big neighbour. Nor have worker politics been imbricated in race politics as they almost invariably were in apartheid South Africa and other colonial societies. Nevertheless, my article has argued, in Botswana too there are many public actors, among them women, whose subjectivities have been formed in interaction and confrontation with the government and state, in response to local conflicts, injustices and crises.

Schirmer has warned against a Eurocentric tendency to elevate Western feminism as ‘a superior understanding of the ‘truth’ (1993, p. 63) vis-à-vis other forms of women’s activism. Instead, as this article too argues, the need is to reveal the alternative scripts and conjunctions that emerge, in action, in particular contexts, as subaltern women in the global south create political imaginaries that make sense of their citizenship and gendered worlds in specific political or social circumstances. In the face of poststructuralist, post-Butler feminist suspicions of essentialised unities of self, class or gender, the article thus follows Schirmer and McNay in arguing for the need to reclaim concepts such as agency, consciousness and experience, but as sited, embodied, participatory, dialogical and conjunctural.

In his book on postcolonial subjectivities in Africa, Richard Werbner reminds us of the slipperiness of the cluster of terms around the idea of the subject. Nor, he says, ‘can we claim to have resolved the ambiguities by imposing a standard vocabulary,’ given the richness of the literature around these terms’ (R. Werbner 2002, p. 3). Nevertheless, he argues, we can say, broadly, that subjectivities are political, moral and realised existentially, in consciousness (ibid.).

The emergent postcolonial subjectivities I have portrayed here draw on modern discourses: of class oppression, normative cosmopolitanism, labour rights or human rights and contemporary Christian humanist religiosity. But as I proposed at the outset, the easy opposition between overdetermined subjects and free autonomous individuals, cannot be sustained. Instead, the article has highlighted a dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy, emancipation and subjection, by tracing the evolving ethics and postcolonial subjectivities of both subaltern and elite women in Botswana. I have argued that these
subjectivities need to be understood dialogically, as historically inflected in struggle, in
the face of hard times, and that therefore it can be said that there is no subject in and for
itself, ‘no subjectivity prior to intersubjectivity’ (ibid., p. 1). Above all, the women I
described here sought dignity and self-worth through a sense of responsibility for more
vulnerable others.

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14–16 March, 2006. I am grateful to participants in both events for the comments and
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from reviewers in JSAS and CHHS.

Notes

2. McNay argues that Bourdieu’s notion of embodied habitus allows for the capacity to change in
the encounter with the ‘field’, a complex and changing social formation. She also appeals to
Ricoeur’s notion of narrativity and Castoriadis’s notion of the radical social imaginary to spell
out the possibility of agency outside discourse.
3. Butler argues that there is no subject prior to discourse so that: ‘The paradox of subjectivation
is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced,
by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of
agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power,
and not a relation of external opposition to power’ (Butler 1993, p. 15). Foucault in fact sees
resistance as invoking power: ‘if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations’
4. Attention to this dimension of Foucault’s work would have enabled Mahmood to incorporate
aspects of her ethnography left untheorised, in which she describes the emergence among
pietist women of leaders (diyani), experts in the interpretation of Koran and Hadith, who claim
the (hitherto masculine) right to lead the prayers, in some cases even when male imams are
present. These women also lead active lives in proselytising and fund-raising for philanthropic
purposes. One of them even filled the place of a male leader while he was jailed, and later she
herself was jailed. Pious women also claimed far more authority within the family and one told
Mahmood she would divorce her husband if he prevented her from engaging in pious activism.
5. Women and slaves were of course excluded.
6. Foucault appears to fudge the relation of the ethical Self to the Other in an interview in 1984 as
well as the transition he identifies from the Greek to Hellenistic period, arguing merely that
mastery of one’s desires guarantees that a person will rule with moderation and not become a
tyrant. Nor does he ever fully theorise the cosmopolitanism of the Stoics and Cynics (see
in isolation.
7. On the global negotiations surrounding the right to free medication and health see Petchesky
(2003).
8. On the dialogical see also Bakhtin (1984). Bakhtin means by dialogical the fact that personal
worldviews always contain implicitly a consciousness of others’ views in a never fully resolved
argument, which arises in response to moral ordeals and crucibles (see Holquist and Clark
1984). Jeffery Nealton (1998, Chapter 2) compares this to Emmanuel Levinas’s dialogics
which – like the present article – posits the necessity of subjection to alterity along with
responsibility for the other.
based on his belief that only violent revolution would free the self from mimetically reflecting
the colonial master.
10. Anthropological examples include Shostak (1981)
11. Often interviews are combined thematically, as in B. Bozzoli (1991).
12. In San Salvador and throughout much of Latin America, women moved into the public domain to protest against the disappearance of sons, daughters and husbands, kidnapped by the military dictatorships. In Israel, Northern Ireland, Cyprus or the former Yugoslavia, women entered the public sphere to protest against their exclusion from decisions about war and peace, and the terror and injustices that occupation and ethnic violence were causing. In England in the nineteenth century, Christian women initially entered the public sphere as philanthropists, concerned with the plight of the poor and destitute. Without ever being feminists, they became experts on matters of social welfare and fought for major legal reforms. Through their activism they created a much expanded public sphere in which matters of personal welfare were included, and were increasingly debated by political parties and financed by the state. In my own work on political motherhood among diasporic Pakistani women in Manchester (P. Werbner 1999a, 2002, Chapter 10), I traced the way male resistance to their philanthropic fundraising drove charitable women into the public sphere. From defining themselves as privileged do-gooders, the women became self-conscious anti-war activists who demanded the right to have an independent voice in the diasporic public sphere.


14. Recently, the union has amalgamated into a single federation with the Civil Service Union BOPEU. In 2005 the Union’s name, the National Amalgamated Local and Central Government and Parastatal Manual Workers Union, was changed, dropping the ‘Manual’, to allow it to recruit workers from a wider range of occupations, but the name did not stick and during most of my visit in 2007, the Union was exclusively for industrial class workers and was still called the Manual Workers Union for short.


17. See, for example, Peace (1975) on the mutual stereotypes of different classes of African workers and then sense of factory shop-floor unionists that they were the true opposition to oppressive management. Peace (1979) argues that low-paid workers in Nigeria were far more closely embedded in and hence aligned with the peasantry and urban masses than they were with the more highly-paid salariat in Nigeria.

18. Perhaps not coincidentally, Unity Dow challenged the state on the new citizenship law in the High Court on 4 May 1990, in a landmark case for women’s rights in Botswana.

19. The strike is discussed by both Mogalakwe (1997) and Maundeni (2004) who both recognise its significance in the development of civil society. Their instructive account has laid the foundation for future studies. It should be noted in relation to their accounts that although the Union did not win its appeal in the Court of Appeal, the court reprimanded the government for not honouring agreements negotiated between the Union and State representatives, and reinstated all the workers with full rights. Second, that government attempts to lure workers away from the Manual Workers Union into the civil service (which at that time was prohibited from unionising) with the offer of pension rights, failed, with most Union members preferring the five-year gratuity system.

20. A pseudonym.

21. Minutes of meetings were written in English after the event.

22. I interviewed Motsediso in his home in Palapye in 2005. He is a prominent member of the Botswana National Front, an opposition party with, in the past, Marxist tendencies.

23. I speak of my own youthful experience as a member of the youth labour movement in Israel, who had witnessed the passion with which such ideologies were celebrated in the past.


25. Virtually all studies of trade unions mark the passage of time via a union’s historically significant strikes. This seems unavoidable, if repetitive, since these remembered mobilisation events shape members’ consciousness.

26. This was negotiated by the National Joint Industrial Coordinating Committee (NJICC), a negotiating mechanism set up in agreement with the government. The final decision lay with
the Ministry of Finance, who had rejected the agreement that had been reached by the Committee.

27. In fact, she worked in the offices of one of the other ministries.

28. I was in England at the time.

29. In November 2006, however, as mentioned, she was excluded from the Executive Committee, and, after she went to the Press, from the Union. In her view this was because she had been questioning and challenging the lack of transparency in the financial decision-making process and strategies adopted by Union officers (see the Monitor, 20 November 2006, pp. 1–2). She intended to join the rival, breakaway union and to carry her ‘region’ with her into the newly-established union.

30. See, for example, Simons and Simons (1982), McCracken (1988), Cheater (1986, 1988) and, for an overview, R. Werbner (1988).

31. On this in Southern Rhodesia, see, for example, C. van Onselen (1976), who argues that, cumulatively, over time, ideologies of worker resistance came to be established, rooted in the industrial landscape despite a labour repressive system and the failure of individual strikes.

32. On ethnic minorities see, for example, Solway (2002), Durham and Klaits (2002) and Motsafi-Haller (2002); on the marginalisation of the disabled, Livingstone’s exemplary study (2005); on the intersection of gender and class see Griffiths (1997).

33. ILO Conventions 48, 87, 98 and 151 on freedom of association and the right to unionise give unions the right to strike and the civil service to unionise. Although ratified by Botswana in 1997 and 1998, conventions 98 and 151 were only passed in Parliament in an amended labour law in 2004. They were published in mid-2005 after some delay, and were being implemented in 2006, with several major ‘associations’ (such as the Teachers and Civil Servants) unionising. Unions in Botswana may employ full-time administrative staff but, until the change in the law, elected union officials were required to work full-time in the industry that the union represented. This rule severely limited union leaders’ professionalism and effectiveness, and was criticised by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). The law also severely restricted the right to strike. Legal strikes are theoretically possible in Botswana after an exhaustive arbitration process, but in practice none of the country’s strikes has been legal. Sympathy strikes are prohibited. After much delay, the Trade Unions and Employers’ Organisations Act was changed to limit the Minister of Labour and Home Affairs’ powers in labour issues.

34. The government owns 51% of the shares in Debswana.

35. It is beyond this article to discuss seriti here in all its complexity. It differs, however, from the Gikuyu notion of wiathi described by Lonsdale, which refers to moral value attributed by Kikuyu to control over their labour in self-mastery, a precondition for gerontocratic rural sub-clan authority, and secondarily to freedom (Lonsdale 1992, p. 356), a notion which later, in the context of labour migration and struggle for independence, was expanded to include worker strikers’ ‘struggle for self-mastery’ (p. 416) Mau Mau fight for self-mastery and freedom (p. 446) and even the wiathi right to vote (p. 461). Seriti, by contrast, is, like charisma, an embodied notion of the self as inherited ‘shade’, protected by the ancestors, which stresses dialogical features of respect and self-respect, compassion, and generosity, as well as vulnerability to attack by others (see R. Werbner and P. Werbner, forthcoming).

36. In 2007, she was appointed Assistant Director to the World Bank in Washington.

37. For a further portrayal of Joy Phumaphi see R. Werbner (2008).

38. See Petchesky (2003). Although she was involved in the Doha negotiations in 2001, her conviction of the need for universal free ARV preceded these.

39. Botswana was the first country in Africa to implement a nationwide anti-retroviral programme. Four years later, 95% of patients, including those using the private sector, are reported to be receiving treatment, and the programme is often held up as a test case for the rest of the continent. Teenage pregnancies are down by 70% and life expectancy rates are rising. In a study on treatment adherence and drug resistance, researchers at the Botswana-Harvard AIDS Institute found little evidence of treatment fatigue – becoming less vigilant about taking the pills over time – and patients are said to have so far demonstrated better or at least the equivalent adherence of their western counterparts. Universal testing has also been introduced. See a recent presidential press release and http://www.plusnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=39685
40. My husband and I happened to be in Botswana during the early part of this struggle for hearts and minds in 1999 and 2001, and I have subsequently interviewed her about it, though there is much still left to be told.

41. Schapera (1956, p. 139) notes that great chiefs were supposed to be ‘easy of access’.

42. On African intellectuals, nationalism and pan-Africanism see Mkandawire (2005).

43. It subsequently left the BFTU and helped establish a rival federation in 2007.

44. In Botswana, the women’s movement is mainly concerned with rights issues. See Selolwane (1998, 2000), Geisler (2006). Legal rights do, of course, have economic implications. However, as most of the contributors to the special JSAS issue argue, despite highly progressive constitutions and legal reform, implementation is still a challenge across the whole spectrum of family law reforms. Moreover, few of these movements outside trade unions significantly impact on the economic circumstances of poor women. In South Africa, for example, the demand for inclusion of domestic workers in the Law on Unemployment Insurance, likely to have huge benefits for women, was spearheaded by the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers’ Union, who joined a coalition organised by the Commission for Gender Equality as Jennifer Fish (2006, p. 107–128) shows.

45. Lilian, who had once been one of his most loyal supporters and admirers, had lost faith in him.


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