

Walis NOKAN

Writing the Not-Self

I'll be discussing today's topic through the lens of a story because everyone loves hearing stories, and storytelling is my only forte.

It was the same fifty years, a hundred years ago, and it is still the same now: South African explorer Laurens Van Der Post wrote the novel *The Heart of the Hunter* based on his journey into the Kalahari Desert. One of the chapters described a man named Dabé falling ill, which left me with a strong impression. Dabé was the local guide for the expedition team and a member of the Bushmen Tribe. When the expedition arrived at Tsane, an oasis and rest stop at the heart of the desert, Dabé suddenly became ill. The illness was quite serious and unexpected, even Post didn't know what had caused it.

While in Tsane, Post saw a corporal from the Suto Tribe, accompanied by two of his policemen, performing the lowering of the colonial flag over the station masthead. All three wore spotless uniforms for the ceremony, and carried out the prescribed drill with the precision of guardsmen on a royal parade. Post understood that the show wasn't done for their benefit, because the corporal always raised and lowered the flag at sunrise and sunset with the same punctilious observance of form regardless of anyone witnessing the ceremony.

So what does this have to do with Dabé's sickness? He was laying on the floor, his eyes tightly shut, breathing fast and harshly. As it turned out, his ailment was a physical manifestation of Dabé's fear of the outside world, and the colonial ceremonies he saw at Tsane terrified him. As soon as the expedition got ready to leave Tsane, Dabé was magically cured—in Bushmen philosophy, to live means to travel. If the freedom to travel for hunter-gatherers is taken away from them, it is the same as taking their life. The arrival of the colonial world meant that the Bushmen were no longer free to travel.

The fastidious flag ceremony in Dabé's story awakened the somber history of colonial genocide of an entire tribe.

This was the story I wanted to share with you, a story about the indigenous Bushmen people, a microcosm of indigenous tribes everywhere: forced to adopt the language of the majority and view

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the world through a lens that is not theirs, therefore they are no longer full versions of themselves.

When ethnic majorities started to force minorities to adopt their language and writing, the world became limited to a monochromatic palette. The name of that monochrome is “violence.” Many people forget that the indigenous people are one with Mother Nature, and they forget that they themselves have lost the ability to embrace the Earth. So, when I write using someone else’s language, I am merely demonstrating what it means to embrace. It is not meant to be a form of flattery, unless the dominant culture has learned how to love.

Translated by Lynn X. Wang