Abstract
In February 2006, Botswana Television (BTV) screened a commissioned television drama series entitled Thokolosi. This drama series, which deals with witchcraft, is set in a Botswana village called Bobonong. The contents of the drama series in relation to the village attracted criticisms from the public, which culminated in a heated controversy. While a section of the Batswana audience cherished the pioneering indigenous effort of the filmmakers, a cross-section, particularly indigenes of Bobonong and their sympathizers, frowned at the production, denouncing it as stereotypical, parochial, and ethnically biased. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the ‘censorship’ debate in a positive mode, by attempting to enlighten the viewing public on how to deal with works of art and to sensitize artistic producers to expectations from the consuming audience.

Keywords: audience; Bobonong; Thokolosi; television drama; producer; controversy.

Introduction
The storm of controversy that has bedeviled the theatrical experience of Thokolosi has compelled a reflection upon Hamlet’s soliloquy in Shakespeare’s Hamlet:

To be, or not to be; that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And, by opposing, end them (Act 3 Scene 1).

The screening of Thokolosi beginning in late February 2006 on Botswana Television (BTV) has raised a dune of Kalahari dust. The 1.2 million Pula 13-episode locally commissioned television drama series has been received with mixed feelings by the Batswana community, the sole beneficiary of the programme. While a section of the Batswana viewers saw the drama production as a work of art, a cross-section saw it as ‘offensive’ and ‘prejudicial.’ It is this cross-section in opposition that took arms against the television drama in a bid to take it off the
screen. The crux of the matter is that Thokolosi drama series deals with witchcraft and occultism and has as its setting a village named Bobonong, which happens to be the name of a real village in Bobirwa. The thematic implication of the drama vis-à-vis its setting is that the village of Bobonong is ‘a site of evil and witchcraft,’ hence the rage against the drama series by the patriotic front of Bobonong, denouncing it as ‘stereotypical.’

In most of the local newspapers and magazines and in several radio phone-in programmes and television presentations, many denounced the drama series and castigated its producer, Norman Moloi. Kenneth Dipholo, for example, expressed his distaste for the programme as ‘an extension of tribal prejudices and a deliberate persecution of a minority group’ (2006: 8). Lucas, an academic in the Department of Social Work, University of Botswana, was also unhappy with this series:

The choice of Bobonong as the story setting, one is inclined to contend, has been informed by a prevailing stereotype that characterises the village as stronghold of magic and witchcraft. For many years, the village has been stigmatised as home to Bo-Matholwane, some imaginary mythical creation that supposedly runs all sorts of errands for Babirwa. With patience, tolerance and humour, the people of Babirwa have been able to ward off this stigma. Purveyors of this blasphemous superstitious belief were defeated and Thokolosi might as well serve as the tonic for resuscitating and reinforcing the stereotypes and myths that have diminished and demeaned Babirwa as a people and a culture for many years ... The social worker in me believes that Thokolosi and its depiction of Bobonong as a site of evil and witchcraft can have serious emotional and psychological implications for children coming from that part of the world particularly when faced with torrential taunts and persistent remarks about the absurdity of their village to which they ascribe a lot of importance. . . . Thokolosi is one such dangerous piece of art. It places profiteering above the protection of human dignity. The drama series must be condemned by all for its extreme recklessness and transgression of literary ethics (2006:2).

The Member of Parliament representing Babirwa, Shaw Kgathi took the matter to Parliament and confronted the Minister of Communication, Science and Technology, Pelononi Venson, for allowing her Ministry to air a drama programme ‘whose offensive and prejudicial effect so meaningfully outweighs its dramatic merit or artistic worth...’ (see Letshwiti, 2006:6). He further urged the Minister to ‘consider withdrawing the airing of this programme which has not only put the village of Bobonong in disrepute, but has proven to be so injurious and offensive to the sentiments of the residents of Bobonong’ (Letshwiti, 6).

Controversies concerning artistic creations, particularly drama, are no strangers to the literary world:

Unfortunately, controversy and the humanities seem to walk hand-in-hand. Controversy exists between artists and audiences, between those who enjoy analysis of the arts and those who think it is a waste of time, and between the right of the
artist to unlimited freedom and those who believe ‘dangerous’ art should be suppressed. Connected to these controversies is the conflict of opinion over whether popularity equals excellence (Janaro, ‘Controversy’).

Corneille’s *The Cid* sparked an intellectual controversy that prompted Scudery (1974: 211-217) to accuse the play of pursuing ‘an erratic course.’ Of course, the author put up a venomous attack in the name of defence and the ensuing row rocked the French Academy. Archilochus’ poetry was barred from Sparta because of its indecency and the savagery of the writer’s ‘obscenis maledictus’ against Lycambes and the family. In his first attempt at playwriting, Ben Jonson was imprisoned by the Privy Council for his role in the authorship of *The Isle of Dogs*, a play full of ‘very seditious and slanderous matter’ (Gassner and Quinn, 1969: 741). In the age of modernism, Ibsen and Shaw have been attacked on several occasions. The shafts of criticism thrown at *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* induced Shaw to state:

No author who has ever known the exultation of sending the press into an hysterical tumult of protest, of moral panic, of involuntary and frantic confession of sin, of a horror of conscience in which the power of distinguishing between the work of art on the stage and the real life of the spectator is confused and overwhelmed, will ever care for the stereotyped compliments which every successful farce or melodrama elicits from the newspapers (1960:31).

The recently developed video film industry in Nigeria, ‘Nollywood’, has faced acrid criticism from fiery critics. Many of the writers and producers have been accused of following the ‘bandwagon slant’ – stereotyped characters, occultism, witchcraft, cuckoldry, blood, debauchery, and violence. This censorship debate on the corrupting influence and misrepresentation of some of these dramas has prompted one of its script writers, Ebereonwu, to register his disenchantment with both the audience and the press (Akubuiro, 2006: 1).

The aim of this paper is not to wallow in the censorship debate and its attendant political overtones; it is not to instruct a freedom-loving artist on how not to write a play, or to taunt the Babirwa audience for ‘over-reacting’ on issues pertaining to *Thokolosi* series. Rather, the paper intends to add an intellectual dimension to the debate and discuss issues relating to drama and society and the role of the audience and producers as corporate parts of the theatre experience.

**The Audience as a Creative Force**

According to the Web Wikipedia Encyclopedia, an audience is ‘a group of people who participate in an experience or encounter a work of art, literature, theatre, music . . . Audience members participate in different ways in different kinds of art, with some kinds inviting overt audience participation and others allowing only modest clapping, criticism and reception’ (Wikipedia, ‘Audience’). A theatre experience is a joint event, as it combines many arts, mainly the playwright’s, director’s, actor’s and the audience’s. The audience completes the
aesthetic transaction process in that ‘the director’s ultimate responsibility is to touch and move audiences in a play’ (Hodge, 2000:61). A work of art only comes into existence in the act of interpreting it, making the audience simultaneously its creator.

Since any work of art has to exist within a cultural context, it might be argued that in any given society, people (the audience as a crowd) share a very similarly constructed sense of social reality. The Greco-Roman audience was different from the Medieval; so was the Elizabethan different from the Restoration. In the same light, the African audience is in some aspects different from the European audience. The assumption here is that ‘sharing cultural membership allows people to understand their world in part by depending upon their common cultural interpretations’ (Pelias, 1992:145). However, each individual audience member comes to watch a play with his/her own personal formation which is a total build up of his/her entire life experiences, knowledge and expectations. It is these experiences that ‘will predispose us [audience] to certain interpretations of character, certain attitudes towards moral and political issues and certain emotional responses to events’ (Nelmes, 2001:109). Thus, there will always be as many responses to a story as there are audience members.

The members of the audience too have to understand the conventions of theatre and be willing to play along, that is, they must come to the theatre with a willing suspension of disbelief. They have to enter the imaginative world imaginatively. Upon entering these fantasies of the theatre world, the audience members become directly involved and are drawn in, ‘they share membership in the aesthetic world’ (Pelias, 1992:107). The viewers should succumb and be ‘willing to be deceived by stories [that] are little worlds created for artistic purposes, worlds that resemble [but are distinct from] the actual world in which we live - virtual worlds’ (Cameron and Gillespie, 2000: 11). Theatre, therefore, should be understood by all audience members as an artificial medium and a vicarious experience.

From the Thokolosi controversy, it is evident that Batswana as an audience are vibrant, responsive, sensitive, and heterogeneous, but seem to have a limitation in understanding how aspects of the theatre operate. Such limitations are not exclusive to the Batswana community, as every society in the world, from the ancient to the modern, grapples with its own limitations. It is perhaps this limitation that accounts for responses such as, ‘What are we trying to tell the world about Batswana?’1 ‘What do we learn from witchcraft?’2 ‘Thokolosi does not build our nation, if anything it is tearing it apart. What kind of art is it?’3 A section of the audience seems to have difficulty in making a distinction between image and reality. Hence, the person who plays the leading female role in Thokolosi – Dineo Mophakedi – who once saw herself as an emerging ‘star’ is shunned by some people who now see her as a witch. This, however, is not an uncommon experience,

1 Feedback that P. Mmila got from Mmabontle Lebotse during an oral interview, March 2006.
2 Feedback that Mmila got from Kebaetse Kerekang during an oral interview, March 2006.
3 A reaction from Mmabontle Lebotse during an informal discussion with Ms Mmila, March 2006.
particularly in some African societies. A good example is a Chadian film on HIV/AIDS (*Bye Bye Africa*) in which ‘an actress playing an HIV victim was shunned by her friends and family because they were convinced that she had really contracted the disease’ (Haroun, ‘Chadian’). Similarly a South African actress, Pamela Nomvete, who played the villain (*Ntsiki*) in a local television soap opera, *Generations*, is said to have been once assaulted by one viewer at a grocery store because of her assertive role in the soapy. One of the writers of this paper (Ebewo) suffered a similar fate, when in 1987 he played the role of a corrupt ‘Police Inspector’ (Nigerian Televisions, Sokoto, Zone F Drama Production - *I Would Rather Die*) who connived with criminals to kill innocent citizens. Ebewo suffered persecution in market places from some uninformed northern Nigerians who were not able to differentiate between reality and the stage.

The heterogeneous character of the Batswana audience accounts for the various debates surrounding the controversy. This is not uncommon among Batswana audiences. In 2005, the University of Botswana Travelling Theatre performed Dario Fo and Franca Rama’s *The Same Old Story* at the Maitisong theatre, and this supposedly harmless feminist play attracted negative responses from a section of the audience and the press (see ‘Sun Arts Review’ in *The Midweek Sun*, February 2, 2005). Some people strongly believe that *Thokolosi* indeed addresses a very common and living aspect of the Setswana culture, witchcraft, and therefore find nothing wrong with that. For instance, someone called in on RB2’s *Morning Glory* programme and asked, ‘Are we saying that witchcraft is not part of our culture?’ Another individual quipped: ‘Must a society only celebrate the good aspects of its culture?’

These various responses emphasize the fact that each spectator interprets a play according to his/her social formation: prior experiences and expectations. This in turn reveals the force fields at work within the Botswana society. Historically, the Babirwa have been associated with the *Matholwane* concept. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the drama series producer seems to be locked in this social formation; hence this ‘myth/stereotype’ manifests itself in his work of art. This is perhaps where most of this outrage stems from. This could therefore be viewed as a provocative work of art. Controversy against the drama series started after very few episodes were shown, and it looks like the audience reacted too early, as the gist of the drama was yet to unfold. Dipholo (2006: 8), who pours his outrage on the drama series, nevertheless states that at a press preview of the drama series, the director of the play stated in no uncertain terms that Bobonong was deliberately chosen because of its historical association with witchcraft and the need to dispel the unfortunate stereotype. Unfortunately, the audience did not give *Thokolosi* the chance to fulfill or mar its mission.

**The Dramatist as a Creative Artist**

The dramatist, including the playwright (stage, film, radio or television) is a creative artist. His/her creations deal with works of creative imagination, inventions or what many call fiction. The artist is the humanities’ engineer; the
ordering of the experience presented in the work of art is his/her domain. Critics and artists have battled in vain to define satisfactorily the frontiers of arts. There has not been a consensus, and there may never be any consensus in this regard, especially in today's fast-moving world of inconstancy. Though there may be no consensus per se concerning the meaning of arts, one distinguishing factor is that all art works evoke a certain kind of response – ‘aesthetic response’ - from the audience. Artists are of different breed; some write for the sake of it (l'art pour l'art), some create to please, some create to make the audience ponder over a situation, while others create to titillate. Whatever the situation, an artist does not create in a vacuum because he/she does not live in a vacuum. The artist is a product of his/her environment and, to some extent, the environment influences his/her creative propensity. The specific genre of Thokolosi is not stated by the producer. Surely, it is not science fiction, detective, escape, romance, or film noir. Many have labeled it ‘horror’ in consonance with its thematic preoccupation. The issue before us is not to discuss the dramatic structure, style, spectacle, special effects and images, voice-over shots, or narrative substance. The immediate concern of the audience is the content and socio-cultural comments made in the drama series in connection with the village of Bobonong.

The artist has the liberty to create using any form that appeals to his/her creative sensibility. Artists all over the world have experimented with various forms and used different settings in their works, but a section of the Batswana audience has opposed the use of Bobonong as a setting for Thokolosi because of the negative impression this allegedly creates in the minds of the local people.

Has a producer the right to use any setting for his/her production? An artist may have the right or seek for one, but the right to use a setting for a work of art, particularly a realistic setting in a drama production that is screened on a national television must be exercised with caution. An artist is a sensitive person, who, although he/she has the freedom to create, must take the audience into consideration. This is a truism in the history of the theatre, from the classical to the avant garde, and more so in the African context. Some producers of artistic works using other media may bluff their audience, but in the theatrical enterprise, the audience is a sine qua non and cannot be displaced. The response of the audience may make or destroy a show, because the audience is the theatre consumer. Without positive reaction from the audience, all the effort put into a production is lost. Demand determines supply, and we supply to satisfy the demand hence, Samuel Johnson once wrote: ‘The drama's law the patrons give, / And we who live to please, must please to live.’ Active response is at the root of the power that makes drama a special experience. As an isolated individual, response to Thokolosi would be personal, but as a group (audience) it has taken a different turn because responses are affected by stimuli received from others around the scene (mob psychology). Even though the producer of Thokolosi must have had a genuine reason for using Bobonong as the setting for his story, yet Blade Runner (1982) is a film about life in Los Angeles, USA, but the name of the city is never mentioned in the film. Soyinka’s A Play of Giants, which forcefully sets out to castigate the monstrosity of corrupt leaders like Macias Nguema, Jean-Baptiste Bokassa,
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Mobutu and Idi Amin, makes an artistic effort to hide the identities of the real-life personalities who have served as models for the play.

We believe that a dramatic work, like many artistic works should involve abstraction, not reality, though it represents it. Though not directly connected with controversy, Brecht is of the opinion that drama should ‘alienate’ both the players and the audience, for it is in this way that realism is atrophied. Camouflaging to circumvent censorship is sometimes encouraged in creative writing. Speaking specifically of satirical writing, Garnet discusses an Austrian writer, Karl Kraus, who once said: ‘Satire which the censor understands deserves to be banned’ (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Edition, 272). Talent and sensitivity are needed in creativity. Motlhabane has quoted the MP for Babirwa Area as saying, ‘We believe that there has been an omission when following the protocol on fictitious material and feel that pseudonyms should have been used instead of real names of places’ (2006: 3).

While it is almost impossible for an artist to please his audience members equally without being pretentious and dishonest, the artist ought to consider certain characteristics of his audience, that is, he/she has to study the character of his audience along with its cultural background, religion, level of artistic knowledge as well as knowledge of the subject. This information would help the artist tailor his/her work accordingly. It is very important for the artist to be sensitive to his audience without patronising it. This means that the artist should not be afraid to challenge his audience, demand some truth from it and critique it, provided he/she ‘sugar-coats his criticism with ingenious and irreverent wit’ (Shaw, 1960: blurb).

The argument that much should not be made of the setting for the drama series because it is a work of fiction may not clear the hue and any surrounding controversy, because linking artistic works with fiction may be deceptive since many actually contain facts. Though fiction is a creation that is made up, fact and fiction are old acquaintances (Scholes, *et al.*, 1991: 121). For one, both of them are Latin-derivative words. Fact is derived from the Latin word, *facere*, meaning ‘to make or do’; fiction is from the word *fingere*, which means ‘to make or shape.’

We can see this rather strange relation between fact and fiction more clearly if we consider one place where the two come together: the place we call history. The word ‘history’ itself hides a double meaning. It comes from a Greek word that originally meant inquiry or investigation. But it soon acquires the two meanings that interest us here: on the one hand, history can mean ‘things that have happened’; on the other, it can refer to ‘a recorded version of things that are supposed to have happened.’ That is, history can mean both the events of the past and the story of these events: fact – or fiction. The very word ‘story’ lurks in the word ‘history,’ and is derived from it. What begins as investigation must end as story. Fact, in order to survive, must become fiction. Seen in this way, fiction is not the opposite of fact, but its complement (Scholes, *et al.*, 1991: 122).

If the producer of the series intentionally used the name of the village, Bobonong, he must have done so for a purpose. Theatre’s age-old function is to act...
as a mirror, reflecting ugly spots upon the onlooker. Modern committed writers and producers may write with intent to correct a pose; they assure their communities that they are good-natured people who create out of a sense of public duty. Many write to stigmatize crime or evil and to offer society positive advice. With *Thokolosi*, we are ignorant of the producer's aim, except for the statement he uttered during the press preview of the drama series that his intention is to dispel the stereotype association of the village of Bobonong with witchcraft. But the audience did not give the drama a chance to unfold itself. It must also be remembered that the witch in the drama starts her journey from Gaborone with her briefcase containing the evil spell and thereafter proceeds to Bobonong. In this respect, therefore, Bobonong being used as the setting is merely a victim of circumstance.

Much more than anything else, the medium used for screening the drama series poses yet another problem. The media has dominated our contemporary lives and the way we define our sense of reality and the world around us. The liberal view argues that the media holds up a mirror to, and thereby reflects in a fairly accurate manner, a wider social reality (Strinati, 1995: 224). The media plays a vital role in constructing our sense of social reality, and our sense of being a part of that reality (Curran, *et al*., 1982). People find it difficult to differentiate arts from reality because they see the media as portraying reality. In today's world, our politics, economy, culture, the things we buy and the food we eat, are all influenced by the media. There are many who are not able to differentiate between acting on television or film and happenings in real life situations. This situation may unwittingly account for why the ethnic group supposedly portrayed in the drama series becomes agitated.

**Conclusion**

From the controversy and ongoing debate about *Thokolosi*, it would be myopic for critics to see the Batswana audience as an atomistic community. On the contrary, this is a vibrant, responsive, non-patronizing, sensitive, and evolutionary audience. If this attitude is groomed with modesty and properly harnessed, it will in future yield fruits for the artists. Based on our argument in this paper, there is need though to inform and equip both the artist and the audience to be competent in playing their participatory theatrical roles. In our fast-growing global village, and in line with Botswana government's 'Vision 2016,' the audience is urged to be tolerant and to cultivate artistic taste and be responsive to artistic innovations. The first step towards this is for the audience to become engaged with the production, because engagement is an important ingredient for the aesthetic transaction to take place. When people watch a play, they should try by all means not to be emotional; they should block out their personal biases and hold their judgment in suspension. This might help them draw meaningful lessons from the whole encounter with the theatre. This process yields an audience member 'who has genuine spiritual needs and who really wishes, through confrontation with the performance, to analyze himself . . . toward a search for the truth about himself' (Hatlen, 1992: 384).
Furthermore, the Botswana audience is encouraged to be flexible in analyzing dramatic situations, be innovative and intellectually accommodating so that local artists are not handicapped or become pretentious and dishonest artists who ‘live to please’ only. In Nigeria, for instance, movie makers have uninhibited freedom to explore any subject without much interference from the audience. Opa William Production’s series, Nite of a Thousand Laughs picks communities from across the country, calls them by name and throws darts of criticism at them. Most of the presentations are stereotypical depictions of the communities, yet no community so far has complained. Same can be said of the popular television drama series, The Masquerade that picks on the mannerisms of ethnic groups within the country, exposing them for their crudities.

The artist/producer, especially in a sensitive community like Botswana, needs to be cautious and sensitive to the environment within which he/she works. While striving to be innovative, the artist must also study the culture and values of his/her audience and learn to respect them. The ‘artistic license’ should be displayed with care and should not allow local artists to produce anything they like disregarding the public interests; otherwise this may end up distorting intended messages that are supposed to be carried by their works. If it is assumed that the Batswana audience is not very exposed to a variety of theatrical conventions, then the creators of artistic works should move slowly down the artistic lane so that the audience can keep pace. In fact, Dipholo, in his wisdom has offered some advice when he states: ‘Orange Botswana must feel the taste films (sic) before the production of horror (hardcore) movies in order to build culture appreciation and reasonable understanding of the intricacies of television and film production for the majority of Batswana’ (p. 8). Also, a good artist who puts his/her trade above uncritical praise must learn to tolerate and live with criticism. It should not create room for bitterness. Criticism oftentimes contributes to the growth of the artist. George Jean Nathan once committed the following to print: ‘Art and the artist are/ever youthful lovers;/ criticism is their chaperon’ (Quoted in Tynan, 1950: 21).

Finally, care should be taken not to allow politics to stand on the way of creativity. Many Batswana believe that some of the reactions against Thokolosi are not divorced from politics. Sigg Sour, a columnist in The Botswana Gazette has expressed his opinion against ‘politricks’ interfering with arts (2006: 20). Kekwaletswe shares Sour’s sentiments when he agrees that in the Thokolosi controversy, ‘art and politics found common plateau’ (2006: 7). Angry as Rogers Molefhi, a Mmirwa is, he nevertheless ‘criticizes politicians for making political capital out of the issue’ (Kekwaletswe, 2006: 7). In an article entitled, ‘There is Nothing Wrong with Thokolosi Except Politics,’ Motlogelwa empties his disapproval on those who use Thokolosi controversy to climb their political ladder. Although portions of the drama series have been edited to placate the aggrieved (Gaotlhobogwe, 2006: 1-6), we may also need to add that contrary to what people feel might be the negative impact of Thokolosi, the drama series may indeed bring glory to the village of Bobonong. For one, so far the drama series controversy has brought attention to the village. Believing that associating art work with real-life locations is at the core of creative work, Kekwaletswe draws our attention to the
movie *Troy*, set in a Turkish town, which has attracted interest to the place, leading to multitudes of tourists visiting it. Lagos, Johannesburg, and Paris are some of the cities idealized in creative works. Serowe was made popular by Bessie Head’s books, just as Andrew Sesinyi has done for Kgomokasitwa in his novel, *Love on the Rocks* (2006). Support for our local artists is a form of empowerment and promotion of self-reliance. Activities which may deter private sponsors from patronizing and investing in the arts must be seriously reconsidered.

**Works Cited**


