It is early Thursday morning, New Years day, 2009, I am preparing to go home to my parents to perform a traditional ritual to my ancestors. This is a first for me, not only waking up on New years day without a hangover, or even many years ago not sleeping at all, but it was also a first for me to be performing any form of traditional rituals out of my own accord. At the age of 34, I found myself feeling that I had missed out on a lot of my traditional Tswana upbringing, I
had achieved so much in my life and needed to give thanks for all that I had. Why? Ok let me begin from the beginning.

I was born in Phokeng in 1974, during the midst of apartheid in South Africa. Phokeng was part of the then Bophuthatswana homeland regime. It’s approximately 250 kilometres outside of Johannesburg. I was born to two very humble caring people, Jacobeth and Path Motene. My mother, Jacobeth was a domestic worker for a Jewish family who lived in the plush northern suburbs of Johannesburg, Path was a petrol attendant at a nearby BP garage.

My mother had been working for the Friedman’s for many years; 28 or so if I am not mistaken. The Friedman’s were and are incredibly caring people and loved my mother dearly and considered her a part of the family, so much so that when I came to the home I was automatically made the fifth child of the household. Her nickname, Boomba, was given to her by one of the children, a name that she is still called by today.

When my mother announced that she had fallen pregnant with me and would return home to give birth, they were sad to see her go as she had become an integral part of the family, so much so that she was asked to return with the new born baby as soon as possible. This was not an option at the time as there were serious government restrictions on how many black people were allowed to live on residential properties. The plan was for me to stay for a couple of months then return back to Phokeng and be brought up by my maternal grandmother who resided there.

On my arrival, the family took an instant liking to me and took care of me. Whilst my mother worked, I instantly became a member of the family. When the time came for me to return to my homeland, Phokeng, my secondary family was devastated to see me go, not only because they had grown fond of me being around but also because of the different lifestyle I would lead. It was then decided with my
parents consent that I would continue to live in Emmarentia whilst my mother worked in the home and I would be educated in a private school which was on a much higher level than the education system and schooling that I would receive in Phokeng. At that time all black children at school were taught through a system called Bantu education, which was of a lower level. The aim of this was for the government to contain the level of education of Black people, ensuring they would only ever graduate to become servants or workers as opposed to the Private school regime which was based on the belief of equal rights for all. The government schools not only enforced Bantu education but kept the races apart, while the private schools, which were mostly run by nuns, were multi-racial. Another major difference between Government and private schools was that obviously the government schools were subsidised and the private schools were incredibly expensive, thus only allowing privileged individuals to send their children there.

At a tender young age I was enrolled into Mc Auley house convent. It was quite ironic that at home I practised Judaism and at school I was taught Catholicism. How I juggled that well...that’s simply another short story!

From then on my life involved dressing every day in my blue uniform blazer with blue, black, yellow and white stripes, little white ankle socks, carrying a huge heavy duty wooden suitcase and my favourite; a white cloth bowler hat (which by the way if I was seen outside the school grounds without whilst in uniform it was considered a disgrace to the school and one was heavily penalised). I was involved in sports of many kinds but my true love came when my other mother, mommy bought me a pair of tap shoes and enrolled me into dance class at school. I call her mommy as my primary mother was known as Boomba or mama, to avoid confusion. From then on, dance class became my pride and joy, I continued to enter dance competitions for many years,
did all my level of exams up until when I matriculated and completed my gold in tap dance and modern dance. Dancing was my life, so much so that my school work was constantly neglected until I left the convent two years prior to my final year. I left the convent to go to a better qualified school, a college in fact. I was sent to Damelin college as at that time the convent was not doing any justice to my school career and my mother feared that I would not receive a good matric decision. For that I am eternally grateful. At the college I received the attention I needed and went from a barely pass rate to near distinction rate. Still working at getting high grades, I dreamt every day of making it big on Broadway as an extravaganza dancer and performer on stage, well it’s clear that my dreams have not changed.

Whilst growing up, I became more and more part of the Friedman family, not realising it at the time but feeling more intrigued and comfortable with being a Friedman and not so much as a Motene. When I first arrived at the house I lived in the back room with my parents, the Friedmans had decorated my room in what was my favourite colour at the time, yellow. Aargghhh........, now its my worst colour of all. Anyhow for many years I would sleep there and on weekends sleep in the big house and get to watch TV with the family, sit at the dinner table etc. Then it came to the point when I was given my own room as the other children had grown up and were moving out after marriage. I became the fifth Friedman child. From then on my life involved doing things the Friedman way including holidays in Plett, (Plettenbergbay is a coastal town approximately five hours away from Cape Town).

Many wealthy white people during those days had secondary homes where they would go to during holidays especially Christmas time. I had fond memories of me and my daddy, (that’s the Jewish dad) for whom I was the apple of his eye. I could do nothing wrong, he was my everything and it
really broke me when he suddenly died from a drastic heart attack when I was thirteen years old. Anyhow, I remember us packing up the car before a serious holiday either down to Plett or to the bush; those were the only two places I could vacation with them as all the places such as Durban were heavily segregated until much later on in my life. I became accustomed to the Jewish way of life; in fact I think I only knew what Christmas was about due to the fact that I want to catholic school, LOL!!!!

As the years went by I grew closer to my Jewish, white way of life, from my family life to the friends that I had at school. I didn’t really have many black friends as I preferred the white way of life and also due to the fact that I soon grew into this ridiculous brat who refused to learn my native tongue, Tswana. My parents didn’t enforce it upon me and I didn’t really care. The fact that my mother was not adamant about me learning Tswana was her decision as she knew one day that it would come to me. I can now understand a substantial amount of Tswana and can speak the language, but of course with a white accent.

Throughout school I was known as a coconut, black on the outside and white on the inside, now it has evolved to an Oreo, I guess I can never win.

I am also eternally grateful to my mother for allowing me to find that path and not forcing it upon me.

Over the years after matriculating, graduating from University, creating a name for myself in the entertainment industry, buying my own house travelling, living a glamorous fabulous life, I never gave thanks. Although I grew up Jewish, we were never very religious. I practice Yom Kippur, the most holy day on the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement, where we repent for our sins but I have never done anything to give back to where I actually come from.

Over the past couple of years I have grown into myself on a spiritual level and one might even say on an ancestral level. I have always known that I was truly blessed to have always
had love and comfort around me but for a couple of years the
yearning to express my gratitude had been growing stronger.
I grew up not really understanding my Tswana tradition,
but now I love the fact that I am Tswana and can still hold
onto my Jewish heritage, you might call it. I found the need
to create balance between the two worlds, hence my request
for parents to set up all that would be needed to perform the
traditional ritual in Phokeng.

When I returned home in the early hours of New Year’s
Day, I went with my parents to purchase the chickens which
I would have to slaughter the following morning and then
prepare lunch for my elderly relatives. The whole idea was
incredibly exciting and important for me as for once I really
felt that I belonged to my true and traditional roots. I happily
did everything my mother instructed to me, watching how
she looked over me so proudly. I think she was proud that
I had decided to do this for myself, in Tswana, and more
importantly it was a way of her seeing me come home.

The look in my maternal grandmother’s eyes on that
morning was indescribable. (This was a hard woman who
hardly ever cracked a smile except on her 90th birthday the
previous year). The glint I saw in her eyes when she told
me “ka go rata”, “I love you” in Tswana, made me realise that
although we were separated for so many years, although for
so many years I was not proud to be a Motene or a Tswana or
black person for that matter, all those things were gone out
the window. I finally felt that I belonged. Although I would
travel abroad and live overseas for many years I had finally
came home.

Nna ke mo Tswana, I am a Tswana.