

## **The Origins and Early Years of The Botswana Society and *Botswana Notes and Records***

***Pierre Landell-Mills\****

The Botswana Society sprang to life at a well-attended meeting held in the British High Commission Reading Room on 10 June 1969 chaired by the then Vice-President of Botswana, Dr Quett Ketumile Joni Masire. The aims of the Society were to promote interest in and research on social, historical, geographical, scientific and similar cultural matters and to encourage the publication of scholarly articles –all related to Botswana.

This initiative originated in a number of informal discussions that Alec Campbell and I had in the preceding two years. My immediate inspiration was the Tanzania Society and its related periodical, *Tanzania Notes and Records*, with which I had become familiar during a two year stay in Dar es Salaam. For his part, Alec was looking for ways to associate local scholarly work with Botswana's National Museum and Art Gallery, which he had been running for the previous few years. To this end he and John Crawford launched the first volume of *Botswana Notes and Records* (BNR) in 1968, published by the Museum.

As it happened John Crawford was not available to continue his editorial role. Alec asked me to take over this responsibility and Joslin, my wife, agreed to join me in this endeavour as co-editor. Joslin's previous experience as assistant editor for the *Journal of Modern African Studies* published by the famous Cambridge University Press was to be particularly valuable.

Noting that the Museum lacked a membership base, and drawing on my Tanzania experience, I proposed to Alec in early 1969 that we should launch a local learned society to be called the Botswana Society and open membership to anyone who accepted its aims and ethos. He readily accepted this idea and after consulting the Museum Board, he agreed that the Botswana Society should take over the BNR as the main outlet for the scholarly articles, working in association with the Museum. The plan was to hold regular lecture meetings of the Botswana Society and organise seminars and conferences as time and resources permitted. It was agreed that the Society should publish BNR annually, starting with Volume 2 in 1970.

We also sought to involve scholars at the Gaborone campus of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS) but this at first elicited only modest interest, mainly because in those early days university staff were not much engaged in local research and, therefore, had little to offer. The one exception was the historian, Thomas Tlou, who hailed from Zimbabwe and contributed actively. By 1972 the situation had evolved. The University Vice-Chancellor, Dr Vernon-Jackson, had joined the BNR Editorial Board and a university lecturer, David Crowley, had become Honorary Secretary of the Society.

We quickly discovered that there were many people in Botswana deeply interested in local history and culture, such as the ancient rock paintings that were hidden in remote sites. Others were interested in present day matters, such as the wildlife or plants or in such subjects as the economy, geography or water resources. We aimed at being a broad church, covering any matter that involved scholarly study. BNR was the only place in Botswana where such work could be published. Until then all scholarly studies on Botswana were published either in South Africa or in Europe. Thus, the Botswana Society was envisaged as a way to provide a home outlet for local scholars and become a repository of studies related to Botswana undertaken by outside scholars.

Inevitably much of the initial momentum came from the initiatives of expatriates. This was hardly surprising since at the time of independence very few Batswana had benefited from a university education. Yet, from the start a central goal of the Botswana Society was to encourage Batswana to become interested

---

\* Pierre Landell-Mills, Dartmouth, Devon, United Kingdom. Email: [pierremills@aol.com](mailto:pierremills@aol.com). He served as first as Government Economist in the Ministry of Finance (1966-1967) and then as Director of Economic Affairs responsible for development planning (1968-1973).

in Botswana studies and to engage in research into local topics. As Vice President Masire wrote in the Foreword to Volume 2 of BNR: ‘It behoves me.... to make an appeal to all Batswana to join the Botswana Society and help build the Botswana we would wish to have’.

In the first volume of BNR, the Minister of Education, Ben Thema, wrote on the ‘Church and Education in Botswana in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century’. In the same issue John Walker, a US Peace Corps Volunteer working for the Attorney-General as a public prosecutor, wrote on Bamalete contract law, Audrey Renew on Botswana’s edible cucumbers together with beautiful illustrations, Alec Campbell on Ngwaketse Divination, Dr Alfred Merriweather on the Molepolole Mission, Frank Lambrecht, a local doctor, on sleeping sickness in the Okavango and Sandy Grant on pot making in Morwa –altogether an eclectic collection of articles that well illustrates the wide mandate of the Botswana Society.

Joslin and I edited the first four issues of BNR published by the Botswana Society (i.e. Volumes 2, 3, 4 and 5). When Volume 1 had appeared, many people doubted whether there would be sufficient material of a high standard to fill a journal appearing annually. In practice, we found that so many excellent manuscripts were submitted that it was difficult to find space for all those that merited publication. While Volume 2 ran to 131 pages with 21 articles and nine notes, Volumes 3 and 4 each filled over 300 pages. BNR was successful in attracting substantial contributions from such highly reputed scholars as Isaac Schapera, Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics, a social anthropologist renowned for his detailed ethnographic work on the Batswana. Professor Schapera wrote a report on his investigation into land tenure in the Tati District, Balete and Batlokwa Reserves and Baralong Farms undertaken in 1942.

By Volume 6, still only three out of 29 articles and notes were written by Batswana. This number had climbed to six out of 22 in Volume 25 published in 1993. This suggests that the uptake in local scholarly writing was disappointingly slow, though the goal was always to provide an outlet for local research. Notable among the early contributions from Batswana were ‘Notes on the Khurutse’ by Chief Ramokate, an article on ‘The Changing Pattern of Tswana Social and Family Relations’ by Ben Thema, and ‘*The Development of seTswana*’ by Morulaganyi Kgasa.

Throughout the time I was in Botswana –I left in mid-1973 –the Botswana Society thrived with a strong and growing membership and regular well-attended lecture meetings. With President Seretse Khama as Patron and Vice-President Masire as President, the Society effectively had ‘royal’ backing, at least in moral terms if not financial. Twenty-five years later, Masire, who had become President of Botswana, was Patron and his deputy Festus Mogae was President, continuing the tradition of support of the Society from Botswana’s political leadership.

Initially, Richard Mannathoko, a senior civil servant, served as Chairman and Frieda Mathews, wife of Botswana’s first Ambassador to the United States, as Vice-chair. I became Honorary Secretary, taking responsibility for organising the activities of the Society in its first three years. Our anchor at all times was Alec Campbell, an indefatigable supporter, always able to conjure up fascinating lecturers on a wide range of unexpected topics. These lectures often ended up as articles in BNR which indicates the topics covered. Alec served as the Chair of the editorial board and maintained, along with Doreen Nteta after 1973, the link with the National Museum. Initially, this link was little more than symbolic of a shared wish to tie in the National Museum with scholarly research, an objective which proved elusive. Doreen Nteta, in her article entitled ‘Reminiscences’ in BNR Volume 43, describes in some detail how the Botswana Society collaborated with the National Museum after 1973.

The National Museum received only modest support in the early days though more recently it has been in receipt of a regular annual grant. However, a small project for the development of the Museum was included in the National Development Plan (1968-1973). After I left Botswana in 1973, Alec drew the Society into a closer embrace with the Museum, providing for a while some office space. Also, after 1973 Alec took a more active role in promoting the Botswana Society activities linked to the Museum. However,

since the departure of Alec and Doreen a decade ago, to my knowledge its staff have not made significant contribution to the activities of the Botswana Society, nor produced any scholarly studies.

I am told that the Museum is now in a regrettably degraded condition. The reported apparent current lack of government interest in the Museum as a national institution and potential repository of Botswana's cultural heritage is hard to understand. The Museum was the personal legacy of Alec who was a towering personality able to mobilise funds and support through his exceptional enthusiasm and dedication. That there has been no one of similar stature to step into his shoes is sad indeed. However, the Botswana Society paid homage to Alec by dedicating BNR volume 43 to him with Robert Hitchcock as guest editor. The Botswana Society, BNR and the Museum, were conceived as three legs of a stool on which Botswana's cultural heritage could be protected and expanded, with each supporting the other. It is to be hoped that a way will be found to strengthen the weak third leg of the stool –the National Museum.

The finances of the Botswana Society were initially very limited. In the absence of any government grant, the Society depended almost entirely on Ford Foundation grants of US\$1000 in 1970, 1971 and 1972, on the modest income from membership fees, and some income from the sale of advertisements carried in BNR. To boost our income, the Committee decided to offer a life membership subscription for R25, which seemed a lot of money at the time, but which was later regarded as derisory, especially as life members were entitled to a free copy of each issue of BNR. (Until 23 August 1976 when Botswana adopted its own Pula currency the country used the South African Rand). This privilege of life membership was withdrawn in the 1970s for those living abroad. De Beers gave us a small grant –I cannot recall the exact amount –and, hoping for more, Harry Oppenheimer was made an honorary member. To my knowledge, he never participated in any of the Society's events and we were disappointed that he was not personally more generous, given the huge profits De Beers subsequently extracted from its diamond mining operations in Botswana.

There was one way, quite unofficial, that the Society drew support from government resources. The Government Printer, Danny MacKay, generously agreed to print BNR without charge. Being a man of great resourcefulness, he found the funds within his own budget without the Ministry of Finance ever being the wiser.

In his Presidential Address to the annual meeting of the Society in March 1972, Dr Masire reported that the Society was firmly established and was going from strength to strength with 218 members of whom 72 had joined as life members. In addition to the regular lecture meetings, an environmental and conservation section had been established which had run a variety of meetings including field events, such as trips to Content Farm, the Notwane Dam and the heronry nearby. The Society meetings were held at the National Library in Gaborone where one of the speakers had been the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Arnold Smith. The Society also sponsored lectures by Larry Lepionka, an archeologist from Harvard University who described field work he had undertaken at an iron age site at Tautswa. Alex Smith from UBLIS talked on the night sky followed by an observation of the eclipse of the moon. The Society also organised a panel discussion on the development of the water resources of the Okavango and a weekend seminar on the changing patterns of land use in Botswana. There have been an impressive number of seminars and conferences organised by the Society since then.

From the very start, we were keen that the Botswana Society should serve the whole country and not limit its activities to the capital -Gaborone. To this end a branch was soon started in Francistown and by early 1972 had already started to hold lecture meetings, the first being addressed by Vice-Principal Ndwapo of the Francistown Teacher Training College whose subject was teacher training in Botswana. At the second meeting there was an extensive discussion on rural development.

Dr Masire also reported in his 1972 address that BNR had gained an international reputation and was being purchased widely abroad. Indeed, the response to Volume 2 had been so positive that the Society was considering a second printing. He remarked that this had been achieved by editors who were volun-

teers even though it involved a large amount of work usually done elsewhere by full time professionals. Noting that the editors of BNR would soon be leaving Botswana, he called on Batswana to come forward to take on this task. In response, Doreen Nteta, working together with Janet Hermans, took over as co-editor.

Joslin and I left Botswana in mid-1973 having completed the editing of BNR Volume 5 and safely overseen its publication. In that year Baledzi Gaolathe was elected Chairman of the Botswana Society and Kenneth Matambo took over as Secretary. We were particularly pleased that this placed the future of the Society squarely in the hands of Batswana. It is a tribute to their dedication and to that of many others who supported them and to those who came after them that the Society has continued to thrive and that BNR has continued to be published annually ever since, always maintaining a high standard of scholarship. There are few if any other African countries that can boast of such a proud achievement.