

Ian and Gwithie Kirby, *Mokolodi*. Gaborone: Mokolodi Wildlife Foundation, 2024, Hardcover ISBN: 978-99968-85-9, 416 pages.

This engaging autobiography features Ian Kirby, a retired prominent court judge in Botswana, and his wife, Gwithie, with a foreword by President Mokgweetsi Masisi. The book includes captivating photographs and poems and is co-authored, with Ian narrating most of the story. Ian, originally from Rhodesia (colonial Zimbabwe), studied law in South Africa, while Gwithie hails from Britain and grew up in colonial Kenya. Ian was expelled from South Africa for involvement in what the apartheid government perceived as sympathy to the liberation struggle and he also encountered hostility in Rhodesia. He moved to Botswana in 1969, shortly after its independence, to work as a government attorney, while Gwithie served as a secretary for Vice President Quett Masire. They met in Lobatse and married in 1971, during a time when Botswana was among the world's poorest nations, but the discovery of diamonds would soon transform its infrastructure starting in the mid-1970s. Ian shares insights into Gaborone's development and the expatriates in senior government roles at that time.

He credits founding president Sir Seretse Khama, whose nation-building model laid a foundation for a democratic and developmental state. 'It is to his foresight that modern Botswana owes her peace and stability, largely free of strife over land and minerals, and the twin evils of tribalism and racism' (p.65). The Kirbys became acquainted with many influential people, including the first family, and integrated into the Gaborone's tiny high society. They were granted citizenship after Ian had been in the country for just two years. It is not clear whether Ian Kirby is aware of the claim that Ian Khama, who was born in England in 1953, was named after him even though he only became acquainted with the Khamas after coming to Botswana in 1969. The Kirbys' proximity to power appears to have worked in their favour, while citizenship for critics such as historian Sandy Grant and novelist Bessie Head proved difficult; they succeeded only after many years, despite having been in the country earlier than the Kirbys. Ian quit his government job in 1971 and became the first citizen to open a resident firm of attorneys in Gaborone and nationally. He provides details of some cases he handled as both a government and private attorney, including ritual murder.

Ian and Gwithie acquired a farm in Mokolodi near Gaborone, becoming involved in livestock and crop production. They also became entrepreneurs through numerous trading stores across the country and running a cattle post in a remote area. However, severe drought and other challenges forced them to sell their cattle and convert their farm into a game reserve. Due to break-ins and regular shortfalls in the late 1970s, they sold their shops and ventured into other investments, such as property and opening South African franchises locally in partnership with influential figures. The authors detail the process of building their mansion in Mokolodi, including builders and materials sourced as far away as Zimbabwe, as well as gardens. They acquired land on the Limpopo River in Tuli Block for a holiday home they call Little Mokolodi.

The Kirbys have also been quite patriotic; one example is their donation of a hilltop plot on their farm to the Botswana Defence Force for use as a radar station against military raids by the South African military, which had become common in Gaborone in the 1980s. This included the murder of South African student activist Abram Tiro with a parcel bomb at St. Joseph's College near Mokolodi farm; however, this event occurred in 1974, not the 1980s, as the Kirbys write.

Ian writes that 'Then one evening Gwithie and I discussed our life, and our future.... We decided that a life spent in pursuit of money, and then more money, was an empty and soul-destroying path to follow. Botswana had been good to us, and we could now afford to educate our children and to enjoy a comfortable life. So, I resolved to return to serve the Government' (p.172). He rejoined the government as deputy attorney general in 1990 at a time when white-

collar crime, elite corruption, and mismanagement were taking root in government. Ian had to deal with some highly publicized cases involving high-profile personalities. He was also involved in the famous citizenship case in which attorney Unity Dow dragged the government to court and won, as well as the Marietta Bosch murder case that attracted international attention when she was on death row.

His work also led him to be a member of the important government team in negotiations with De Beers over diamond mining licenses and sales agreements. De Beers has long been accused of short-changing Botswana by not supporting the more lucrative diamond beneficiation (cutting and polishing, among others) in the country and deliberately taking Botswana representatives to India to “witness” the poor conditions under which diamond polishers, including children, worked. This led Ian to conclude that ‘The slums of Mumbai, through which we drove to the airport, were a revelation. We saw mile upon mile of makeshift dwellings of cardboard and plastic, extending right onto the pavements, exposed to the seasonal monsoon rains, and with no roads, power, water supplies or sewers. The poverty was indescribable, and there were beggars, often mutilated children, everywhere. That is when we realised that in Botswana there is no true poverty at all’ (p.183-184). De Beers’ perceived exploitation of Botswana was a topical issue as the government was involved in controversial negotiations with the company in 2023, long after Ian had retired.

The Kirbys’ generously donated a large portion of Mokolodi Farm to the Mokolodi Wildlife Foundation to operate a nature reserve for conservation and education purposes. The project was so successful that it was visited by American Presidents Bill Clinton and George W Bush, as well as Michelle Obama. Their son Puso became instrumental in the operations of Mokolodi Nature Reserve and engaged with villagers in the neighbouring Mmokolodi community. Puso was so close to these ordinary villagers that he invited them to his wedding at his parents’ mansion, otherwise a high-society event.

Ian’s legal expertise led to President Festus Mogae appointing him Attorney General in 2003, where he dealt with significant issues, including a campaign by so-called minorities for constitutional recognition at the same level as their Tswana-speaking compatriots. He also engaged in the highly controversial case involving Professor Kenneth Good, an Australian political science lecturer at the University of Botswana, who challenged his deportation from Botswana by President Mogae. Ian also got involved with the De Beers company, whose local agent, Louis Nchindo, had fallen out with his longtime friend President Mogae. Ian details an aborted assassination plot by Nchindo against him and the provision of 24-hour security by the government, which greatly compromised his private life. Similarly, his son Puso died in a motor accident in 2008, and Ian feels that President Ian Khama’s (Mogae’s successor) response to the situation aggravated their grief at a time when the family felt they were healing.

His final appointment (by President Khama) was as President of the Court of Appeal in 2010, where he was labelled a conservative and executive-minded judge by the labour movement due to his judgments favouring the state, such as in the case involving the dismissal of essential service government employees for their involvement in the 2011 civil service strike. However, he explains that some of his judgments favoured the unions but does not provide examples. He also addresses misinformation regarding his investments, which were explosively portrayed as part of the global scandal known as the ‘Panama Papers’, where WikiLeaks alleged that he was an investor in the tax haven of the British Virgin Islands, where several African despots kept their laundered money. He comments on the fallout between former President Khama and his appointed vice president and successor, Mokgweetsi Masisi, which led to Khama’s international crusade against Masisi and his government, and blames Khama for his actions.

The final chapter of the book is on his final retirement, community service in Mmokolodi village, the impact of Covid-19 on Botswana, and the Kirbys' planned future investment in property. He makes an interesting observation that:

The post-Covid-19 era will represent a new beginning for Botswana. When the smoke of the pandemic finally clears, our comforting foreign exchange reserves will have been depleted, many businesses will have been forced to close, and a large number of people will have lost their jobs. But I like to think that that will present the opportunity, too, of a 'return to the crossroads', in the words of Dan Kwelagobe. Or country began her journey in 1966 from a zero base.... This time, post-Covid, it will be difficult as well, but certainly our 'new start' will have the benefit of a wonderfully developed infrastructure, of a well-educated citizenry, ready to play its full part in our recovery, and of operating mines and industries (p.401).

It is surprising that Kirby omits the critical 2021 Presidential Commission on the Review of the Constitution of Botswana, which critics argued undermined democratic governance and the separation of powers by giving an unelected president massive powers and entrenching a dominant party system through the first-past-the-post electoral method. This was an opportunity to return the country to a crossroads and start afresh. However, President Masisi hijacked the process to preserve the status quo and increase his powers, undermining the people's submissions for radical constitutional reform aimed at empowering other sectors and aligning with later democracies such as South Africa and Kenya, rendering the whole process a fiasco.

One also gets the sense that, in addition to being highly connected in the corridors of power, including the presidency, the Kirbys might have benefitted from 'white privilege', whereby doors or opportunities easily opened for them and challenges were resolved with relative ease -something *Motswana-wa-sekei* (indigenous Motswana) would find very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Otherwise, this is a good, informative, and accessible book, even though it may prove a laborious read for most Batswana owing to lengthy chapters on the acquisition of seaside holiday homes in exotic places namely Madagascar, New England, and Cape Town.

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