

My Life in Botswana, and Observation of the Society from 1971 to 2005

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I obtained a PhD in Statistics from Imperial College, London, in 1963. After working at CERN in Geneva and at Bell Telephone Laboratories in the United States for some years, it gradually became apparent that my wife and my four elderly parents in South Africa were becoming frail and in need of assistance. I applied to the United Nations for any statistical job in Botswana, Lesotho or Swaziland.

By extraordinary coincidence, the newly arrived expert British statistician in Gaborone found that his son was severely allergic to Kalahari dust. He suddenly had to give up the post of Botswana's government statistician and hurriedly returned to England. This created a totally unexpected vacancy in Gaborone. I was extremely lucky to be appointed to this vacancy. I took up the post of Government Statistician at the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in Gaborone in February 1971. It was professionally satisfying for me to live in a country which was making rapid strides in the quest to raise the average standard of living of its people as rapidly as possible. I was also attracted to Botswana by its non-racial and non-tribal policies.

I had to prioritise the tasks that I should do at the CSO. First, I produced a very much improved calculation of Botswana's gross domestic product (GDP). Many areas of production were now included in the calculation of the GDP which had been omitted by my predecessors. This included the economic value of the daily collection of firewood by the female members of rural households; the imputed rental benefit of home owners living in their own dwelling; the correct measurement of the economic value of the weight gained every year by the nation's cattle herd, at a time when there were three times as many cattle as people; the value of milk drunk by cattle herders; the accurate measurement of farmers' own consumption of own production, including maize, millet and sorghum porridge plus madila (air-and-wind dried sour milk similar to yoghurt); the economic benefit to Botswana from the 13 daily freight trains in transit through Botswana en route from Cape Town and Johannesburg to Bulawayo (Zimbabwe); and the establishment of a more complete list of businesses in Botswana so that the value added from their economic activities could be accurately measured.

The real increase in income, combined with approved national accounts technology at the CSO, eventually caused Botswana to be 'promoted' by the United Nations to the level of a middle-income developing country. Dr Gaositwe Chiepe, then Botswana's Minister of External Affairs, had made a well-reasoned speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, in which she pleaded that Botswana should not be penalised for its own success. This was after some cabinet members in Botswana expressed their nervousness that some aid donors might reduce their aid to Botswana.

With the help of a Swedish volunteer, Claes Norrlof, as the deputy survey officer, and with Adolph Hirschfeld as the executive officer, I undertook a large scale survey which established that Botswana had one of the most skewed distributions of income anywhere in the world. The report of the survey was entitled the 'Rural Incomes Distribution Survey. I created Botswana's first ever poverty datum line (PDL), in accordance with World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended daily calorie and protein allowances. Findings revealed that 45% of Botswana's rural households had incomes below the PDL in 1974.

Another study was conducted in 1974 on the difference between the average desired number of children per woman (eight) and the actual number of children (six). This explained why the family planning unit in the Ministry of Health was having such an uphill battle in trying to persuade women

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to have smaller families. When I interviewed an elderly woman in Serowe about her own preferred family size, she started crying. She told me that she had wanted a thirteenth child, but that God had not permitted her, because of her old age, to have this much desired child.

We managed to have the first population census run on professional lines under the direction of a British census expert, Michael Crone. This was much better than the previous census in 1964, which had been run at a much lower level of professionalism. All it wanted to achieve was to draw up constituency boundaries for the pre-independence general election.

However, in 1971 there was a significant under-count of the population in Selebi-Phikwe. Here the local district census officer, who was British, decided, entirely on his own, not to follow the very clear instructions that he had been given by Michael Crone. Instead of asking each household in his area 'Who slept here last night', he asked each village headman in his area how many people lived in each village. This was in spite of the well-known fact that this method of counting is notoriously unreliable and always results in a substantial under-count.

With the help of another British technical expert, Botswana's first ever Model Life Table, that is the probability that any given person of a given age would survive for one year, was constructed. This was used by Botswana's fledgling life assurance industry to set its annual premiums.

Another milestone we registered was the introduction of the first ever computer programmes to analyse statistical surveys. These were written at the CSO by programmers Risto Latvala and Grete Dahl from Finland and Norway respectively.

Statisticians supplied by the Norwegian Aid Agency (NORAD) began the training of Botswana citizens in national accounts technology. This training program lasted many years. The patience of these Norwegian trainers, led by Odd Ystgard, was exemplary. They never complained after several of their successful citizen 'graduates' in national accounts were promoted out of the CSO to non-statistical careers in the civil service. This included both Phopi Nteta and Freddie Modise, government statisticians who came after me, and who became heads of the Department of Taxes (later Botswana Unified Revenue Service). This progression also included two Botswana who became members of parliament (MPs), including one future cabinet minister. This meant that the Norwegian national accounts instructors at the CSO had to start all over again with another group of trainee national accounting statisticians.

The accurate measurement of Botswana's GDP after 1968 enabled government to say that the average standard of living, as measured by 'real' (inflation-adjusted) GDP per head, increased by a factor between 10 and 11 between independence in 1966, and 2005. Admittedly, it was started with a possible under-count in 1968.

In 1974, I took up the post of director of research at the newly created Bank of Botswana (BoB). I constructed the first ever analysis of Botswana's balance of payments (BoP). This showed that the Botswana economy was sufficiently strong that only a very small number of exchange controls would need to be retained on capital account transactions when Botswana issued its own Pula currency in August 1976. This was different from the situation in South Africa where the full set of exchange control regulations continued for many years.

In August 1976, I helped BoB to set up a list of places in Botswana where the previous rand currency could be exchanged for the new pula currency. I persuaded a sceptical Bank of England official that it would be perfectly safe to appoint the co-operative store at Etsha on the west side of the Okavango, to be one such exchange point. In the event, the currency exchange was so popular there, the BoB had to send a second tranche of pula to Etsha to keep up with the demand. I was later informed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that Botswana had broken the world record by managing to exchange 95% of her currency within six weeks.

While I was living in Botswana I observed numerous socio-economic and political developments.

It was a pleasure to see the country's welcoming stance towards the thousands of refugees who poured into the country from troubled neighbouring countries. This characteristic show of sympathy for less fortunate foreigners started with the acceptance of the BaHerero refugees from Namibia in 1904. It continued in the late 1960s with the acceptance of the Hambukushu refugees from south-west Angola, Zimbabweans in the middle 1970s, and the subsequent stream of refugees from South Africa in the 1980s.

My family accommodated two African National Congress (ANC) refugees in our guest cottage – Marius Schoon and his wife Jenny Curtiss. Marius Schoon, a very bright Afrikaner from Stellenbosch had been a Stalinist all his adult life. Around 1959, he was caught in a South African Police intelligence agent-provocateur trap or 'sting'. They suggested to him, that, in order to prove his *bona fides* as a communist, he should set off a bomb at the Johannesburg station. When Marius attempted to do that, he was arrested and sentenced to 12 years in gaol for terrorism. He was also 'banned', which meant *inter alia* that he was not allowed to speak to any other banned person. Marius earned two degrees while in prison, courtesy of the University of South Africa.

His wife, Jenny from Johannesburg, was an effective trade union organiser who led several labour strikes in South Africa. She was also banned as a communist. (There is a memorial plaque to Jenny next to the offices of the Students Representative Council on the campus of the University of Cape Town). How they ever met and courted was never explained to me. They were not even legally entitled to speak to each other. All I know is that they and their young daughter, Katryn, climbed the Botswana border fence and went straight to Maru-a-pula school, where they were confident that they would be looked after, on a temporary basis, by the South African headmaster, Dean Yates, who was also a lay Anglican pastor. Hazel, a teacher at the school, was asked if we could provide a refuge for the three of them in our guest cottage at our home on Phala Crescent, Extension 9. We agreed to offer them a home.

Marius and Jenny were given refugee status by the government of Botswana on the strict condition that he would not engage in any political activity whilst in Botswana. However, as soon as they were settled in, they started to have a stream of visitors for the weekly political meetings they held in the cottage. Hazel and I marvelled that both Marius and Jenny were such devoted Stalinists that they did not see anything wrong with risking the lives of their two children, including their young son, Fritz, who had been born at Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone while they were living with us. When I remonstrated with Marius that he was risking his kids' lives, he replied, 'That's what it means to be a revolutionary'.

By coincidence, I was aware that there was a vacancy at the Molepolole College of Education. I made an appointment to meet Gaositwe Chiepe, who was then the Minister of Education. She gave permission for Marius to be interviewed by the Kweneng Chief Education Officer, and the upshot was that Marius got the job.

After two years Marius received a tip-off from the ANC that the SA Police were onto him, and that they should move further away from the border. Eventually, Botswana became too dangerous for them, so the ANC found Marius a teaching job in Angola, at a village just south of Luanda. Meanwhile, back in Johannesburg, Jenny's mother had inserted a packet of raisins into a parcel which she addressed to their new home in Angola. The South African intelligence agents intercepted the parcel, removed the raisins, inserted a parcel bomb, and resealed the parcel. When Jenny in Angola recognised her mother's handwriting, she opened the parcel. Jenny and Katryn were blown to smithereens. Fritz was the first on the scene where all he could see were bits and pieces of flesh and blood. Marius was out of the room and escaped unharmed.

After 1994, Marius was given a job at the Southern Africa Development Bank, half-way between Johannesburg and Pretoria. Some years later, he died of lung cancer. I was the only person

from Botswana who went to his funeral at the Johannesburg crematorium. I published a short epitaph to Marius in *Mmegi*.

Hazel and I were lucky to escape the serious attentions of the SA intelligence operatives. All they did was break into our house, search all the cupboards and kists for subversive material, and then depart. We heaved a sigh of relief that we had not been banned from entering South Africa, where we were making regular monthly visits in order to look after our ailing parents (the reason why we had come to Botswana in the first place)!

At the time Botswana had a refugee centre in Dukwi near Francistown. After the Quakers in London had sponsored and run a feasibility study, it was agreed by all concerned that there was a need for an additional refugee centre at Mogoditshane, west of Gaborone. Both the Botswana government and the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were ably assisted by the Quakers. With the whole hearted approval of the area's kgosi and the people of Mogoditshane, the Quakers set up a large refugee centre in Mogoditshane. It was called 'Kagisong' (a place of peace). The first manager was Shelagh Willet who had become a citizen of Botswana.

The subsequent award to the Botswana government by the UNHCR of their annual Nansen medal was a fitting tribute to the generosity of the Botswana towards refugees over many years.

At a personal level I managed to solve an intriguing problem. Our second son, Andrew, died. Since we did not believe in a religious burial, this posed a problem because there was no crematorium in Botswana. The Botswana Hindu Association then came to our rescue. They very kindly allowed us to use their own outdoor crematorium in Gaborone, even though we were not ourselves Hindus.

The story of my professional satisfaction as a statistician in Botswana was accompanied by a small number of minor disappointments. The one that most stands out was the plight of the tiny number of Basarwa (Bushmen) in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. The Botswana government's attitude towards the handful of Basarwa (probably, about 4% of them) who continued to lead a semi-nomadic life in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve was patronising at best, and harsh at worst. To this day, it remains a puzzle to me why the government made an exception to their normal caring attitude towards the poorer members of Botswana society, compared to the substantial improvement to many Basarwa villages in western Ngamiland. The small number of the Bushmen remaining in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve were not tolerated by the government because they obstinately clung to their traditional way of living in the Kalahari Desert. This was contrary to the official 'advice' that they should leave the desert and move into the nearby government-sponsored Bushmen settlements so that they could be 'developed'. When an American Methodist missionary, Sue Hesselbring, assisted a group of Bushmen to compose a letter of complaint to the government, she was deported from Botswana.

I was also concerned when an Australian professor of political science at the University of Botswana was expelled from the country for pointing out that a lacuna in Botswana's constitution which allows an outgoing president to effectively hand-pick his successor. All that the Members of Parliament can do is to say that they have no objection to the President's choice. The professor was expelled from Botswana for merely stating this obvious flaw in the Botswana constitution. It was later claimed that he had communicated with Survival International which supported the Bushmen and campaigned against Botswana diamonds.

Along with many other African countries, Botswana has long criminalised homosexual acts. I once witnessed the police using one of their own policemen to trap a homosexual man into a homosexual act so that he could be prosecuted. Similarly, a lesbian woman was blamed for the still-birth of a baby at a house close to where she lived.

Botswana was lucky with regard to official corruption. The minor financial transgressions I observed by politicians who took advantage of their high political positions, were few and far between. This was unlike South Africa in the 1990s, where I estimate that the total bribes paid by British,

French, German and Italian arms exporters to South African importers amounted to about \$300 million. However, in recent times corruption is said to be on the rise in Botswana.

My wife Hazel and I were able to observe the devastating impact of AIDS at first hand. Hazel's library assistant at Maru-a-Pula died of AIDS, as did her teenage daughter. As if that was not bad, the late library assistant's nine months old niece, her 52 year old mother and her 53 year old step father also died of AIDS. It was pleasing to note that Botswana, led by President Festus Mogae, was the first country in Africa to acknowledge the scourge of AIDS and to introduce life-saving anti-retroviral medication at the turn of the twenty first century. Unfortunately, at the same time the ruling ANC leadership in South African was in denial that the problem existed.

In summary, it was a most satisfying experience to live and work in a non-racial, non-tribal democracy which regularly held elections every five years, and where the training of citizen professionals was given high priority. For many years, Botswana held the world record for being the country with the fastest rate of growth in the world.

I became a citizen of Botswana and even represented the country at the yachting competition of the 1984 Olympic Games. On 30 September 1989 (Botswana's Independence day), I was awarded the Presidential Order of Meritorious Service by President Sir Ketumile Masire for my contributions to Botswana's official statistics. Friendships with a wide variety of Botswana citizens were a highly valued bonus.

Hazel and I retired to Wincanton in England so that we could live across the street from our three grandchildren.