

# SOCIAL ASPECTS OF AMERICAN PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERISM IN BOTSWANA 1966-1997

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## *Abstract*

*This research aims to investigate and evaluate the work and reasons behind past and contemporary American Peace Corps (APC) volunteerism in Botswana and the social impact this had on Botswana's developmental roadmap. The study focused on the APC volunteers, being the largest group of volunteers to have served in Botswana and have since stayed the longest. Approximately 2 058 APC volunteers have served in Botswana over a period of 31 years. Available data indicates that the APC volunteers' advent into Botswana society and their sincere interest and participation in daily community life endeared them to Botswana, leaving behind a legacy of deep friendship and contentment. The volunteers' free-spirited mentality is credited for influencing local dress styles, music and dance as well as perceptions of black and white relationships in rural Botswana communities. The author asserts that APC volunteerism was able to impact positively on the lives of Botswana, as the volunteers' work existed within the vortex milieu of already existing forms of volunteerism such as Botswana's own motshelo, letsema and ipelegeng – schemes that made it easier for the volunteer to mobilize rural communities for development.*

**Keywords:** American Peace Corps; volunteerism; international; development; Botswana; independence; assistance; friendship; culture.

**Slutelwoorde:** Amerikaanse Vredesmag; vrywilligersdiens; internasionaal; ontwikkeling; Botswana; onafhanklikheid; hulp; vriendskap; kultuur.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the role of the American Peace Corps (APC) volunteers in Botswana in the late 1960s. It analyses the relationship between Peace Corps and other international volunteers in the country, their social impact on the lives of Botswana as well as on the Botswana Government's official bureaucracy. The study was based primarily on responses from oral interviews, as well as the use of relevant archival and secondary source material. The first phase of the Peace Corps volunteerism in Botswana ended in 1997. It was due to the fact that the Peace Corps Agency felt Botswana was one of those countries that could do relatively well without the Peace Corps volunteers and so given the limits to Peace Corps funding. It was felt other countries needed the volunteers more than Botswana.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Peggy McClure, Country Director American Peace Corps Botswana, Gaborone, interview by Monkge, 9 March 2009.

Approximately 2 058 Peace Corps volunteers served in Botswana over a period of 31 years.<sup>3</sup> The question that this article seeks to answer is to what extent that American Peace Corps volunteerism contributed to Botswana's social development from 1966 to 1997. The author argues that there was a dualism of interconnected causes for American Peace Corps volunteerism in Botswana, and in Africa, particularly in the 1960s. This dualism was between determinism versus voluntarism. The aim of this study is to help us understand the American Government's action within its geo-political setting during the Cold War period and why the Government sent thousands of American Peace Corps volunteers to serve two to three year periods in Botswana and other African countries. It argues that during the Cold War the United States of America was determined to combat the suffocating spread of communism by providing volunteer assistance to emerging African states.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, African states at their independence (Botswana included) were determined to rid themselves of poverty by using skilled foreign manpower where it was needed. American participation in African affairs was accelerated by the ending of colonialism and the emergence of African states as independent actors on the world stage. While American Peace Corps volunteerism impacted on all aspects of Botswana life, including the economy and the development of Botswana political consciousness, the author discusses only the social impact of that volunteerism. The voices of traditional Tswana chiefs were included to project how people in rural areas perceived the volunteers, as most of them served in Botswana's rural areas where their services were mostly needed. The relationship between Peace Corps volunteers and other foreign volunteers merely serve to highlight how differences of ideology may have impacted on their assistance in Botswana's development.

The article further asserts that American Peace Corps volunteerism, though geo-politically deterministic, was not a new social phenomenon in Botswana's developmental roadmap, as other international volunteers, such as the Danish, Norwegians, British, Canadians and local forms of carrying out voluntary projects for development, are still remembered in Botswana's history. It is worth noting that Botswana has a long history and tradition of carrying out volunteer projects that have always been consistent with the ideals of building a united nation. The American Peace Corps philosophy, that is the idea of providing young people with an opportunity "to do something for their country", corresponds to pre-colonial Bechuanaland's voluntary community development projects such as *letsema* (communal ploughing of fields by age regiments) and *letsholo* (regimental hunting for the community as well as its defense from dangerous animals). A *letsholo*

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3 Renee Gilbey (ed.), *Remembering thirty-one years of the Peace Corps in Botswana* (Peace Corps: Botswana, 1997), p. 8.

4 Joan M Nelson, *Aid, influence and foreign policy* (New York, 1968), p. 3.

could also be called for constructing bridges, new roads and dams. During these projects young people were organised into age regiments, similar to a brigade, and worked together for the improvement of their communities.<sup>5</sup> This system of self reliance was to be one of the founding principles of Botswana's democracy. The same principles and philosophy of providing young people with an opportunity to do something for their country are resonant with post independence Botswana's programs such as the defunct Tirelo Sechaba, 4B,YAA (Youth Against Aids) and many others which support the pillars of Botswana's National Vision 2016. Other African countries also boast of similar schemes, such as the Kenyan National Youth Service, the Ghana National Service Scheme and the Ethiopia National Study Service Scheme. Abroad, Canada has Katimavik and the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO).

## 2. AMERICAN PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH BOTSWANA GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL BUREAUCRACY

The American Peace Corps (APC) volunteers have served Botswana's development in different posts as lawyers, engineers, business advisors, auditors, game wardens, land surveyors, etc. This section proceeds to investigate the volunteers' relationship with the Botswana Government official bureaucracy, and how this may have affected their efforts in developing Botswana. In 1966, when the first APC volunteers began work in Botswana, Botswana cultural, political and institutional values had not completed the shift from a heritage of autocratic chieftainship and paternalistic colonialism. Status, unthinking obedience, resistance to change and concepts antithetical to many Americans were realities to many Botswana new to independence and with a population largely uneducated. Many APC volunteers were to be confronted with values they did not share, such as bureaucracy. And for the volunteers to function properly, there was a need for considerable adjustment to concepts of authority and efficiency. Coupled with this was a great shortage of working equipment. However, the American Peace Corps volunteers were accepting the *status quo*. The 1966 Deputy Country Director of Peace Corps Botswana, Reuben Johnson, remembered a primary school teachers' workshop where APC volunteers made hand puppets and felt boards, even abacuses using rolled grass for the strings.<sup>6</sup>

Though a given volunteer might be available to perform crucial service to the Botswana Government, he or she was constrained by limited finances, a critical shortage of housing and transport, which placed a substantial limit on the

5 QN Parsons, "Report on the Botswana Brigades 1965-1983" (National Institute of Development Research and Documentation, Gaborone, October 1983), p. 11.

6 Gilbey (ed.), p. 10.

government's ability to absorb volunteers. The development terrain in Botswana demanded APC volunteers with maturity in terms of manner and personal objectives.<sup>7</sup> However, despite this demand for mature volunteers, some volunteers serving in Government still complained of lack of administrative and technical support, which, as clarified, was made worse by the shortage of manpower and equipment in Government departments.

Urban-based APC volunteers spoke highly of the down-to-earth attitudes of Botswana Government officials. Phyllis Bravinder, wife of the late Keith Bravinder, Peace Corps Botswana Country Director from 1968 to 1970, spoke of government officials as ordinary people with whom one could easily interact at the Notwane Club, a local sports club. "They were just real people who cared about Botswana. They weren't caught on being government officials."<sup>8</sup>

Oliver Taylor, Peace Corps Botswana Country Director from 1975 to 1978, described the Botswana Government as rational, benign in its objectives, people conscientious, self-sufficient and incredibly kind.<sup>9</sup> Other volunteers spoke appraisingly of how Vice-President, Dr QKJ Masire, used to volunteer to teach mathematics at Capital Continuation Classes, while Mr BC Thema, Minister of Health, Education and Labour, also volunteered there. To summarize, a Botswana who lived around that time, Lekoma Mothibatsela, was quoted as saying: "The people in government who were steering the country's development were as approachable as your neighbor. One could run into Seretse Khama, the much loved President of Botswana, in the downtown mall."<sup>10</sup>

Echelons of government officials trusted the APC volunteers' abilities to perform. An example was an incident in 1968 when the Minister of Local Government and Lands, EMK Kgabo, addressing APC volunteers, assigned to District Councils as advisors, said he was confident that the future of local government in the country was largely dependent on the ability to provide each local authority with a nucleus of trained and qualified staff. He said council secretaries would have the opportunity to work side by side with highly qualified people (APC) who would, by on-the-job training and by example, help them to discharge their duties methodically and confidently. He asked the Peace Corps volunteers to attempt to pass onto their (Botswana) counterparts a sense of method, organization and efficiency in completing various tasks and responsibilities attached to the post.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Botswana National Archives and Record Services, BNB 3128 (Hereafter only referred to as BNB 3128 or the proper reference number), Peace Corps Volunteers in Botswana, The Country Plan 1970-1974, p. 14.

8 Gilbey (ed.), p. 11.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11 *Botswana Daily News*, 4 September 1968.

Ironically Minister Kgabo's call meant that the better the APC volunteer performed in his or her job, the sooner he or she would be out of a job, leaving behind a Motswana with whom the volunteer has worked and interacted, so that an expatriate would not be needed for the job – or leaving behind ideas that would not immediately need implementation upon his or her departure.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years the APC volunteers have endeared themselves to Botswana Government officials. In 1997 Sir QKJ Masire described them as a constant and welcome asset in their schools, villages and towns.<sup>13</sup> Recently, at a Peace Corps farewell organised by the US Embassy, Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, Dr Kolaatamo Malefho, spoke about the volunteers in glowing terms. He mentioned how in the previous six years the country made gains in the fight against HIV/AIDS. He said the transmission of HIV from HIV positive mothers had declined from 40% to less than five per cent. Dr Malefho told the APC volunteers: "Your return as Peace Corps has been notable in your invaluable assistance to help us achieve these gains through community mobilization."<sup>14</sup>

### 3. RELATIONS WITH OTHER VOLUNTEERS IN BOTSWANA

As early as 1971 Sir Seretse Khama, then President of Botswana, called for a coordinating body for voluntary organisations, concerned with social welfare, to provide an effective channel of communication between government and the voluntary services. Khama emphasised that the precise shape of such a central body needed to be considered by government and the voluntary agencies themselves.<sup>15</sup> It appears Khama's appeal was never heeded, as voluntary agencies serving in Botswana are still loosely organised and meet irregularly with each other to share programs and interests so as to avoid a duplication of efforts.

Despite this lack of communication between the agencies, international volunteers poured into Botswana since independence, driven by different motives, which in no way diminished the commitment they showed to the agencies they volunteered for. Poverty has a certain attractiveness to it. In some cases these international volunteers successfully worked together to help develop Botswana, while in most cases they carried projects on their own, only mobilising the local host communities. An example of international volunteers' collaboration in achieving a common goal was when the APC volunteers, assisted by the International Voluntary Service (IVS) and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO-British), held successful Visual Aids courses for primary school teachers at Kasane,

12 BNB 3127 (BNRS), Botswana and Peace Corps 1970-1974, January 1971, p. 6.

13 Gilbey (ed.), p. 8.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Botswana Daily News*, 9 August 1971.

Maun, Ghanzi, Tsabong and Tshane from 16-20 April 1968.<sup>16</sup> Other examples of collaboration for development were when, in the late 1960s, famous Swaneng Hill Work-camps sometimes managed to pull together IVS, APC, South African students and other African student volunteers for a common cause.<sup>17</sup>

The burst of international cooperation by the volunteers seemed to have had a positive impact on the development of Botswana. In other places, like the Thaba-Tseka district in Lesotho, it failed dismally, leading James Ferguson to lament that the concentration of development assistance in Lesotho, as throughout the Third World, seemed to be an operation of an identical development institution. There were also a common discourse and the same way of defining problems, a common stock of expertise, which failed with the same astonishing regularity as they did in Lesotho.<sup>18</sup>

In Botswana the above was not true, though it is true that currents of jealousies flowed amongst the international volunteers themselves, which in a small way might have prejudiced their performance, acknowledging the fact that it is human to be jealous of others or have an uneasy relationship with those working with a different purpose or coming from a different orientation. For example, one VSO volunteer, Neil Parsons, described the APC he interacted with at a work camp in 1969 at Serowe as “hippish”, though he was impressed by their educational background and working skills. Still yet, an IVS volunteer, David Inger, while he appreciated how the APC volunteers had assisted him at Kweneng Rural Development Association (KRDA) and Botswana Technology Centre (BTC), referred to them sarcastically: “With the American Peace Corps volunteers you ordered them like a can of beans, you were not given a choice to make an informed choice on recruitment, as you are never provided with a *curriculum vitae*.”<sup>19</sup> Sheila Bagnall, Deputy Principal of Swaneng Hill Secondary School in 1968, also admired the professionalism of the APC volunteers at her school, in contrast to what she termed “British amateurism”, but she too [though not a volunteer herself] found something negative to say about them. Bagnall felt they were too fantastically full of self-confidence. They just knew it all.<sup>20</sup>

APC volunteers regarded their program as superior to others. As Caplan put it: it places its volunteers in more remote areas of countries; areas in which other relief or aid agencies were either unwilling or unable to place their expatriate workers. Peace Corps volunteers therefore tended to learn more deeply about what makes a country “tick”. “We gain first-handed, daily experience with cultural traditions and

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16 *Ibid.*, 29 April 1968.

17 S Grant (ed.), *Sheila Bagnall's letters from Botswana 1966-1974* (Odi, 2001), p. 64.

18 James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine; development, depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 8.

19 Inger, e-mail message to Moatametsi Monkge, 7 March 2009.

20 Grant (ed.), p. 109.

expectations, and we are at least in a better position to learn about the needs and challenges facing a country's less-privileged people."<sup>21</sup>

Peggy McClure, former Peace Corps Botswana Country Director, from 2006 to 2011, thought that the development of *V2 Volunteerism Action Guide; multiplying the power of service*, would make the APC program more unique, as it taught their volunteers on the field, how to encourage locals to be more involved in volunteerism.<sup>22</sup> While international volunteers presented a united front to the host communities they served, their personal differences did not escape unnoticed. An ex-student of Swaneng Hill Secondary school, where most volunteers served, observed that you could tell from the way they related with each other, that some looked down on others, but as for the students they treated them equally.<sup>23</sup>

Not only did they treat their students well, but were described in most interviews as having been friendly and resourceful, capable of mobilizing rural communities to carry out their projects. One informant ascribed this to the fact that when the Peace Corps arrived, "the spirit of self-reliance was already ingrained in us [Batswana], that was why it was easy for the Peace Corps volunteer to mobilize people for any project it had in mind. Regiments had set the example of volunteerism."<sup>24</sup>

Julius Amin, writing about the Peace Corps in Guinea, observed that the Peace Corps community development emphasized that the best way to improve conditions of life in Africa was to devise a program that the people themselves would carry forward by their own efforts, after participating with others in its initiation.<sup>25</sup>

Thus it was in this close interaction, aimed at doing something together, that the APC volunteer managed to excel and make his mark on Botswana's developmental roadmap. The APC volunteer, in mobilizing rural community participation, capitalized on its existing, embedded spirit of self-reliance to achieve his or her objectives.

#### 4. THE SOCIAL IMPACT ON BATSWANA

At independence Botswana experienced an acute shortage of skilled manpower, which was worsened by the fact that many capable people were outside the country for further studies. During this time of need of skilled manpower, Botswana Government prevailed on the American Government to supply it with APC volunteers with special skills to fill posts, while Batswana studied abroad and in

21 Caplan, e-mail message to Monkge, 12 March 2009.

22 McClure, interview by Monkge, 9 March 2009.

23 Motswagothata Tau, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009 (MA, University of Botswana).

24 Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009. See Gilbey (ed.), p. 12.

25 Julius A Amin, "United States Peace Corps Volunteers in Guinea: a case study of US-African relations during the cold war", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 16, July 1998, pp. 197-226.

the region (some Batswana were studying at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland at Roma Campus, (UBLS)). The American volunteers were also to advise Batswana in their posts and make them more effective.

Most of the oral data collected showed that during the 31 years that the APC volunteers served in Botswana, they endeared themselves to Batswana, leaving behind a legacy of deep friendship and contentment. When commenting about the arrival of the APC volunteers, Edna Malomo, a Motswana secretary for the APC office in the early 1970s, observed: “It was a time when it was unusual for whites and blacks to be friends, but the Americans wanted to be our friends.”<sup>26</sup> Malomo’s comments sets a distinction between the earlier whites who interacted with the Batswana, namely the British colonial officials, white settlers and traders as compared to the APC volunteers.

Brian Mokopagosi, a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Botswana, who was taught by the APC volunteers in the 1970s observed that, “the American teachers were more approachable. They coached sports and participated in other extracurricular activities.”<sup>27</sup> Among the APC volunteers themselves, Arthur Caplan, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer who served in Botswana in 1986-1989, talked about how he was received by the Batswana with curiosity. “Being a *lekgoa* [a white] I couldn’t help but spark their [Batswana’s] wonderment about the different behaviors that I displayed. Once people I continued interacting with on daily basis realized that I was sincere in my efforts to learn Setswana and learn about the prevailing way of life in Botswana, I felt accepted by them.”<sup>28</sup>

The social interaction of many Peace Corps volunteers was quickly noted and appreciated by their host families when they took up Setswana names. In appreciation of the Peace Corps volunteers’ attitude and to acknowledge and appreciate this sign of friendship, Batswana volunteers sometimes named the newly born members of their families after the Peace Corps volunteer whom they loved and have accepted as a family member. The Peace Corps volunteer had an adventurous mentality, wanted to experiment with the world around him, he interacted with Batswana and even ate traditional Tswana *bogobe-phane*<sup>29</sup> dishes and even the delicious *seswaa*.<sup>30</sup> The volunteer wanted and tried to even master the

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26 Gilbey (ed.), p. 11.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Caplan, e-mail message to Monkge, 12 March 2009.

29 *Bogobe* is a traditional Tswana sorghum porridge. *Phane* is an edible worm found in the *mophane* tree. It is roasted and used as relish for *bogobe*.

30 Gladys Motene, interview by Monkge, 5 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana). The *seswaa*, *bogobe-phane* dishes have now been made popular in Botswana by the Annual Letlhafula Festivals, where traditional dishes and music are showcased, and visitors given an opportunity to buy and taste them. *Seswaa* is pounded boiled cow meat, a delicacy usually used as relish for *bogobe*.

anecdotes and grammatical structure of the Setswana language. In the Botswana setting, the APC volunteer perceived himself or herself to be far away from the western notions of table manners, of using fork and knife. The volunteer found it easier to wash their hands, like the rest of host family members, and ate with his or her hands. They even licked their fingers without having to worry about the use of napkins. It was this genuine interest in the lifestyle and welfare of their host communities that endeared the APC volunteers to Batswana.

The arrival of the APC volunteer and his or her interest in the lives of Batswana puzzled many. The Batswana were used to the relatively pompous British colonial officer. The colonial officials in the then Bechuanaland Protectorate up to independence were people who were associated with people who would shave in front of the mirror daily and dress up in a suit and tie, mannerisms soon adopted by the emerging local elite. It is even common today to see a Motswana man (Botswana national) dressed heavily in a full suit and neck tie on a hot day. This was more or less the same image that was adopted in settler countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe. However, although Botswana was never a settler colony but a protectorate, the Batswana like the Kenyans and Zimbabweans, related to the British Colonial Officer who conducted himself differently from the new arrival – the APC volunteer. Relating his service experience, Neil Parsons, an ex-Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) participant, recalled how his behaviour at the time also puzzled the people he served at Moeng College. The local people at this college, in the Central District of Botswana, used to stare at him with curiosity when he did not mind riding in the back of a lorry, and would not insist on sitting in the front seat either, as was the norm with white settlers and British Colonial Officials until the 1960s.<sup>31</sup>

According to oral interviews conducted in Serowe, Bangwato people talked at length about their interaction with the APC volunteers, who would indulge in eating cooked *phane* worm as relish for the common Botswana *bogobe* dish. The APC volunteer took this expression of freedom a step further by going around the local communities dressed in tattered Levi's jeans, keeping untidy long hair (sometimes in a pony tail) and a bushy beard, an example which soon spread among Tswana youths as some newly acquired fashion.<sup>32</sup> The APC volunteer of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was obviously displaying a new culture in terms of appearance, dress code and conduct in the different corners of Southern Africa, including Botswana, Lesotho and Malawi. This was because many of the APC volunteers who came to Botswana during that period sympathized with the American Hippie movement, which advocated freedom of oneself from the usage of machines, and emphasised

31 Neil Parsons, interview by Monkge, 19 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

32 Scorbie Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

that many things in life can actually be done using one's own hands and initiatives.<sup>33</sup> The hippie movement advocated freedom from materialism and dependency on manufactured goods.

Felix Mnthali, a Professor of English at the University of Botswana, who worked with APC volunteers in Malawi, argued that these volunteers, who came to Africa in the 1960s, were enthusiastic about their surroundings. According to him, these were youngsters who came from an America that was fairly conservative but was also changing, because they played a leading role in the age of the hippies and the flower children. These youngsters now thought they were in an environment where they did not have to look for flowers, where they could easily join the ordinary people and didn't have to worry how they dressed or behaved.<sup>34</sup> The free and open behaviour of these early Peace Corps volunteers may perhaps further be explained by the fact that some of them were avoiding draft for the Vietnam War and had not volunteered willingly; their radicalism demonstrated that lack of care. Carol Pursell's article, "The rise and fall of the appropriate technology movement in the United States 1965-1985", argued that "joining the US Peace Corps volunteers became popular among young Americans in order to avoid forced conscription into the Vietnam War of 1959-1975".<sup>35</sup> The volunteers' behaviour was witnessed by Leloba Molema (a University of Botswana academic), who befriended some of the volunteers. She recalled: "We [with the American Peace Corps volunteers] used to sit and talk late into the night, drinking Tassenberg wine because it was all we could afford."<sup>36</sup>

It was this expression of freedom by the APC volunteers that alarmed some African community leaders. In Malawi, President Hastings Kamuzu Banda was pressured by his party, the Malawi Congress Party, to do away with the APC volunteers in the late 1960s, as they were perceived not to be exemplary role models for the Malawian youth. As Mnthali commented on the case: "The American Peace Corps volunteers were [at first] well received in Malawi. What they were not told in America was that they were going to a conservative society."<sup>37</sup>

In Botswana's case, the behaviour of the APC volunteers also surprised many Batswana, but not to the extent that the Government banned them from their country. Many Batswana were sceptical whether the new breed of whites would be able to deliver on their duties, while others adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Batswana compared the former British colonial officer with the new APC volunteer.

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33 *Ibid.*

34 Felix Mnthali, interview by Monkge, 29 January 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

35 Carroll Pursell, "The rise of the appropriate technology movement in the United States 1965-1985", <<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=CnnlKRHwzsc&oi=fnd&pg=RAIPA292&dq=truman+point+four+programme&ots=BDTyPFaESD&sg=JiuTnCdDyTmXNM>> accessed 28 August 2009.

36 Leloba Molema, interview by Monkge, 14 August 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

37 *Ibid.*

Their manner of dress also entrenched this scepticism, as most volunteers were teachers, and in the Botswana of the late 1960s, teachers were respected. The society expected them to be well dressed and well groomed, which APC volunteers were often not, but the society also expected teachers to have good manners, which the APC volunteers had.

The disturbing behaviour of those early APC volunteers, whether it may be called freedom of personal expression, did not pass unnoticed at a national political level. Female volunteers were to find out that African sexism posed a personal as well as a philosophical affront. Women were censored for their style of dress, even though male volunteers were free to wear whatever they liked. During a 1972 meeting of the Botswana House of Chiefs, Chief Seepapitso IV of Bangwaketse asked the Acting Minister of State and Minister of Commerce, Industry and Water Affairs, MK Segokgo, to plead with the government to take steps to see to it that volunteers set a good example to the community in behaviour as well as in their mode of dress.<sup>38</sup> Segokgo begged Chief Seepapitso to be tolerant as volunteers serving in Botswana came from different countries where customs and even manner of dress differed.<sup>39</sup> However, bad behaviour in a conservative society was always viewed with alarm. Commenting on the behaviour of the APC volunteers in Malawi in the 1960s, Mnthali lamented: "Perhaps America had been sending immature people, but what were really needed was professional people, such as doctors, engineers, etc."<sup>40</sup>

## 5. LOVE AFFAIRS WITH BATSWANA

It was of great concern for Botswana when APC volunteer males started taking liberties with Botswana ladies.<sup>41</sup> While that behaviour was considered undesirable, the relationships between many of the Botswana women and APC volunteer men were fruitless, although a few did end in marriage or bore children outside of marriage. Where a child was born, most APC volunteers accepted their responsibilities by either getting married or providing shelter for the child he was leaving behind.<sup>42</sup> In cases of birth outside of marriage, it was most often the local girl who refused marriage, even though she was pregnant, not wanting to relocate to a foreign state when the volunteer term of the father of her child came to an end. Jonathan Zimmerman's study on Black Peace Corps volunteers in Africa, observed

38 *Botswana Daily News*, 15 February 1972, p. 4.

39 Even today Chief Seepapitso VI of Bangwaketse is still disturbed by the way researchers from the western world come dressed to his court. He expects women visiting his court to come dressed in skirts or dresses that cover the knees.

40 Mnthali, interview by Monkge, 29 January 2009.

41 Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009; See also Grant (ed.), p. 50.

42 Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009.

that such romances were frequently charged with acrimony and ambivalence, underscoring cultural distance rather than congruence.<sup>43</sup> He realised that female volunteers, especially, bridled at African promiscuity and plural marriage, even when their own relationships were monogamous. They resented the persistent advances of African men who traded on racial fears and biases. White female volunteers risked charges of prejudice if they resisted. Black volunteers, on the other hand, faced accusations of betrayal rather than bigotry from snubbed suitors.<sup>44</sup>

This article emphasizes that while the APC Agency did not dictate its volunteers' social life, it kept an eye on them, concerned that certain behaviours might affect how they were viewed. McClure stated: "I can't stop the Peace Corps volunteer from having a relationship as long as it doesn't conflict with his job, or affect how he or she is perceived as a volunteer. And if they behave in a way which impacts on the reputation of the Peace Corps, I might have to ask them to leave."<sup>45</sup>

If the APC volunteer wanted to get married, he or she had to consult with the APC Country Director first, as it was possible that some marriages might affect how the volunteer was perceived. For example, if a volunteer married a rich man in the village, the marriage might change her social standing in the community to a point where the community might not perceive her as working with them. Thus, in terms of marriage, the important question was: did the marriage change the volunteer's social status in the eyes of the community and could the volunteer afford the marriage financially? Marriages are only socially respected in Botswana after the payment of bride price.

It was the APC Agency's responsibility to counsel its volunteers for them to understand that how they behaved in a dating relationship in the United States of America, might be differently perceived in Botswana.<sup>46</sup> Hoyt S Alverson, an anthropologist, argued that most APC volunteers serving in rural Botswana had suffered a trauma or cultural shock, when their beliefs proved inadequate to interpret the new behaviour they encountered, including in a relationship. What appeared to be normal in the United States became a puzzlement in Botswana.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. A FAMILIAR CULTURE

Sometimes the laidback, carefree behaviour of the Peace Corps volunteers puzzled Botswana. And the volunteers' concern with what appeared to be trivial

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43 Jonathan Zimmerman, "Beyond double consciousness: Black Peace Corps Volunteers in Africa 1961-1971", *The Journal of American History* 82(3), December 1995, pp. 999-1028.

44 *Ibid.*

45 McClure, interview by Monkge, 9 March 2009.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Hoyt S Alverson, "Peace Corps Volunteers in Rural Botswana", *Human Organization* 36(3), Fall 1977, pp. 274-281.

to Motswana (such as keeping time, reciprocation of meals, visits, etc.) and a volunteer's indifference to lengthy village greetings, left many Batswana confused. Whereas whites regarded the act of saying hello an optional courtesy, for a Motswana, not to be greeted was a sign of ill-feeling on the part of the other. Alverson wrote that to many volunteers serving in Botswana, they were to find out that Tswana culture looked familiar but felt alien.<sup>48</sup> For example, to a rural Motswana, the sum of greetings and taking-of-the news during the day was a functional analogy to the reading of the daily paper. This aspect may escape the volunteer's attention, as he or she may see the meaning of standing around "talking", as a sign of a lack of constructive things to do or as laziness or a lack of belief in hard work.<sup>49</sup> To a rural Motswana, however, the conception of time as scarce was unheard of, and if there was no scarcity of time, then there will always be time for work, for greetings and for paying social visits. Gilbey confirms this when she wrote: "Batswana are remembered by Peace Corps volunteers as a people who had a lot of time for people; time for helping neighbours, for socializing, for understanding and for reaching a consensus."<sup>50</sup>

Despite the above glaring differences, many informants remark that Peace Corps volunteers were always ready to interact with Batswana and learn their culture. They paid Batswana visits, but hardly received any in return.<sup>51</sup> This was because as far as whites were concerned, rural Batswana were not forthcoming. For example: they would readily accept an invitation to dinner, but frequently would not come. These misunderstandings closed off another avenue to close social interaction and contact with one another's culture. Gladys Motene summarized this unequal relationship between the APC volunteers and members of their host communities: "They [American Peace Corps volunteers] loved and wanted to interact with the local people. They seemed interested in the Bakhurutshi culture, but we could not ask them about their cultures as we were reserved, and did not ask them about their homes."<sup>52</sup> That was because in Setswana culture it is considered bad manners to question a visitor, but the visitor is left to tell his or her story at their own time. As the Setswana saying goes: "You may know a person's home or experiences only if they tell you."

Looking back at the last 31 years of the APC volunteerism in Botswana (discussed in this study), one can safely conclude that socially it had a positive effect. The APC volunteerism's benefits to Batswana were multi-faceted. Some locals were assisted at a community level, acquiring skills brought by the

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48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 Gilbey (ed.), p. 1. See also Joe Cooley, Steven Harpt, Jenny Ledikwe, e-mail messages to Monkge, 14-15 August 2009.

51 Motene, interview by Monkge, 5 February 2009.

52 *Ibid.*

volunteers. An example was David Stanton's snake-handling skills at Moeng College. His bravery and techniques at handling snakes helped to rid the Moeng College community of this problem, and earned him such a following among the student community that he was soon known as *Rra Noga* (Mr Snake). While his skills in a developed community may not have aroused such interest, or been considered particular uniquely, in a Tswapong community, where reptiles were feared and despised, he was a godsend. His skills of capturing snakes (not killing them) were viewed with awe and respect.<sup>53</sup> He helped demystify the aura surrounding most snakes, but was generally considered crazy to be risking his life. It was, however, appealing to his host community. Even today, the Botswana Defence Force Snake Extraction Unit is considered a useful public service, which is always watched by awe-struck spectators, whenever they stage a show or rescue a snake.

Above all, many volunteers contributed to the development of sports and are still remembered by many people for coaching football and volleyball, and for introducing softball to Botswana. They were also credited for having brought the 1960s Rock and Roll music trends to Botswana, as well as their fashionable dances, such as the "twist".<sup>54</sup>

On a literary front, some of the APC are said to have brought with them a reading culture and broadness of knowledge previously unknown in Botswana communities. During those days the Peace Corps office provided its volunteers with a shelved locker full of paperbacks. They introduced their Batswana contemporaries to human rights activists such as Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>55</sup>

Batswana also benefitted at a personal level as individuals. Lillian Mafela, ex-employee of Peace Corps Botswana, confirmed this assistance by saying: "The American Peace Corps volunteers have definitely contributed to Botswana's development. Personally I benefitted in terms of acquiring research skills, writing and in compilation. I gained those skills and have been building on them over the years. I gained confidence and open-mindedness."<sup>56</sup>

But it was really the intangible things that the volunteers did, such as building friendships, which are still remembered with nostalgia in Botswana communities. Through the experiences of such friendships, the APC volunteers gained more than they did from the work place.<sup>57</sup> And from a governance point of view, McClure stated: "The relationship [with Batswana] has been positive for Americans who

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53 Gilbey (ed.), p. 51.

54 Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009; Parsons, interview by Monkge, 19 February 2009. See also Gilbey (ed.), p. 14.

55 David Inger, e-mail message to Monkge, 7 March 2009. See also Lekhutile, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009.

56 Lillian Mafela, interview by Monkge, 29 January 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

57 Caplan, e-mail message to Monkge, 12 March 2009.

have served here. They are Ambassadors of Botswana, and can talk positively about Botswana, because they can speak about Botswana in ways nobody knows about. Peace Corps strengthens relationships between the United States and Botswana. It is much more difficult to go to war with a country in which you have served and you know it and its people personally.”<sup>58</sup>

However, not everybody appreciated the presence of the APC volunteers. In some circles the friendliness of these volunteers had been viewed more predatory than beneficial. Chief Tlholego Seretse of the Bangwato led the attack: “Volunteerism develops the American volunteer more than the local people, as the volunteer gets experience which he or she may later use for his benefit or to the benefit of his country. The volunteer on the ground is able to observe directly the shortcomings of the host country.”<sup>59</sup> Mnthali added a political dimension to Chief Tlholego’s dissent when he said: “If you give people human resources you are delaying the development of their own human resources. Foreign Aid has created a dependency syndrome for Africa.”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the most compelling question still remains whether APC volunteerism in Botswana and elsewhere helped the countries that received its volunteers or whether its greater service was to America and its sense of national identity and mission?

Chief Tlholego and Mnthali’s voices of dissent were not the only ones, as Chief Obona Masedi of Bakhurutshi also felt that APC volunteerism in Botswana was self-centered, as it benefitted the Americans more than the local communities. He argued that since the APC volunteer did not influence government policy, this meant he or she left the host country more informed of its needs, a fact which he or she may later use to market his or her country’s products in that country where they have served.<sup>61</sup>

Such lack of trust shown by the above respondents with regard to APC volunteerism in Botswana, did not however override the goodwill many Batswana felt for the American APC volunteers who served in Botswana. Chief Goitseka Hetanang, also of the Bakhurutshi, cautioned that in Botswana, politicizing issues, even those that benefits them (such as this APC volunteerism) contributed to the demise of their own cultural volunteerism.<sup>62</sup> The present political attitudes of people have created a culture of paid work, which has done away with local volunteerism.

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58 McClure, interview by Monkge, 9 March 2009.

59 Chief Tlholego Seretse, interview by Monkge, 10 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

60 Mnthali, interview by Monkge, 29 January 2009.

61 Chief Obona Masedi, interview by Monkge, 5 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

62 Chief Goitseka Hetanang, interview by Moatametsi Monkge, 5 February 2009 (MA Project, University of Botswana).

Furthermore, such sceptical sentiments ignore the fundamental drive behind volunteerism – that the volunteers provide benefits to others, and not simply to themselves, their countries or their direct family members and/or relatives. Volunteering involves serving, a key element which offers individuals an opportunity of an equal dignified exchange, allowing common human values to emerge.<sup>63</sup> And by agreeing to serve and contribute to developments in Botswana, APC volunteers met one of their own goals, which was to help interested countries meet their needs for trained personnel.<sup>64</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

In this article much has been said about the social impact of the American Peace Corps (APC) volunteers on Botswana's development roadmap. As young people with lots of energy, they effectively participated in their host communities' daily lives, which resulted in lasting cultural exchanges that are still remembered with nostalgia in Botswana's villages where most of them served. They were able to mobilize communities for rural development, because they found Botswana a conservative society ingrained with the spirit of self-reliance, which for years had used aged regiments to carry out its rural development projects.

Whatever individual blemishes the volunteers may have left on the society, such as impregnating young Botswana and leaving them behind with children, research has shown that they were committed workers who left behind many Botswana friends in places where they had served. That feeling of friendship was felt by a popular former US Ambassador to Botswana (though not a Peace Corp volunteer), Mr Joseph Huggins, when he said: "Every day of my life in Botswana is a memorable experience and it is going to be difficult for me to say goodbye when the President of the United States, George W Bush recalls me. If I go, Botswana will always be in my heart. I have enjoyed every moment and have been part of a big family of this great nation – Botswana."<sup>65</sup>

The volunteers influenced Botswana sports culture by introducing softball to the country, which today is played in almost every secondary school. Their Rock and Roll music led to the mushrooming of popular Levis'-jeans, clad rock bands such as Flintskin, Steeping Razor and Nosey Road, bands which enjoyed popular support in Botswana and in the region. It is equally difficult to find amongst the older elite generation a person who had not positively been touched by the service

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63 Jacqueline Butcher, "A humanistic perspective on the volunteer-recipient relationships: a Mexican study", in Paul Dekker and Loek Halman (ed.), *The values of volunteerism: cross-cultural perspectives* (New York, 2003), pp. 36-52.

64 Gilbey (ed.), p. 14.

65 *Kutlwano Magazine* 46(8), August 2005, p. 32.

of an APC volunteer. APC volunteers came to Botswana as young people, who apart from assisting Botswana in meeting its human resource needs, were moulded by Botswana society, gained experience in their work and confidence as future leaders. This relationship is continued by a returned Peace Corps volunteers' organisation for the nation of Botswana known as Friends of Botswana, which keeps the world in touch with developments in Botswana. Its website members engage in discussing topical issues regarding the country.