

## The village, a magnet in the lives of Batswana: Masunga Village

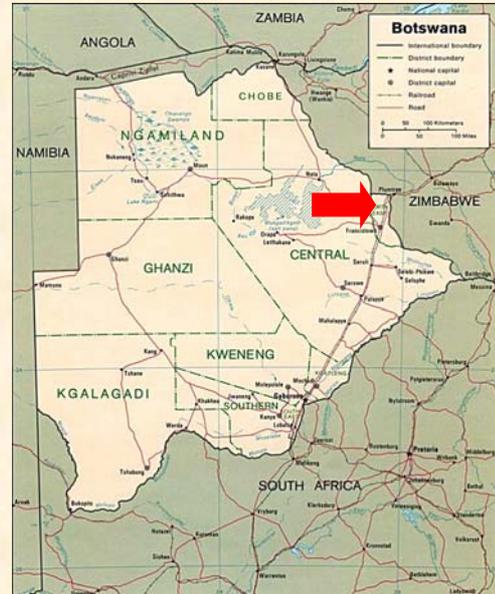
Village life has meant a great deal to the lives of Batswana. Irrespective of level of education, wealth, position held in any job or any other measure, most Batswana cannot get the village sting out of their minds—it's skin deep.

Virtually every Motswana has a village link—the central gathering place for celebrating joyous occasions, national holidays and for comforting each other in times of sorrow. It's also the place that town people turn to for stress relief and the equalizer that brings chief executives and messengers on the same platform. Masunga, in the north east of Botswana, is one such village.

Everything starts with the *kgotla*, the centre of the village and the traditional meeting place for public information, national and local celebrations. This is the place where issues of concern to the residents are discussed. With a profile of predominantly descendants of the Pedi people of Pietersburg in South Africa,

Masunga has a population of about 3,600—relatively small compared with villages such as Molepolole with a population of 54,000. The village is named after Chief Kaochi Masunga who settled with the migrants from Pietersburg in the area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (History of Botswana: Thomas Tlou and Alec Campbell, 1997). It's part of the Ikalanga-speaking people—the largest non-Tswana speaking tribal group (12 percent or so) in Botswana—and is led by Chief Thabo Maruje Masunga III.

The village is bound together by a tribal totem, the hare. A totem is usually an animal that a group is identified by and is considered a sacred thing—not to be touched or killed for any reason. There are strong beliefs that people belonging to the same totem should not marry within their group, but wisdom dictated creation of variations within the same totem. For the Masunga people of Pedi origin, the hare has been split into different nuances. This has consciously or unconsciously opened opportunities for intra-group marriages, totem or no totem.



Like most villages, Masunga has followed a long winding road. It has developed from a settlement of traditional mud and thatch huts to, increasingly, brick



walls, metal and other roofing materials. A significant number of families have a mix of traditional and modern structures on the same compound.



Mr. G.E. Mannathoko's 5 ton truck

Up until the late 1970s, the village had one primary school and a small retail store, five ton Bedford truck and a Landrover, for use to cross rivers and streams in case of rain floods. These were the icons of the then “modern” Masunga. There was one borehole and most inhabitants fetched water from streams around

the village and cooked on open fires from wood collected from the surrounding areas. Open fire cooking is slowly but surely being supplemented or replaced by cooking on gas and electricity stove.



Early morning winters are filled with sweet smoke, signalling that the sun has risen and the day's chores wait to be taken care of, breakfast or no breakfast. The day is greeted by straw brooms hitting the ground to sweep away the remnants of the previous night and in readiness for the lighting of a fire for cooking or for mere symbolism. Even households with modern kitchen set-ups hang onto the tradition of lighting a fire, for family and neighbourhood gatherings.



The wake up call comes with the crowing of cocks just before sunrise, leg stretching and yawning of dogs and the mingling of chicken families looking for something to eat. Voices of passers-by and children running to school mingle with the sounds from cattle, goats and sheep greeting the rising sun and pleading to be released to go out and graze. The village

wakes to life with the rising of the sun.



Julia with mother and aunts

Before the sun gets too hot for walking around in summer, neighbourhoods make sure that they have passed one or two households to check on how the night has been spent or to receive a cup of tea from those who can afford it. News about a death spread quicker than bushfire, through exchanges of voices over compound fences or outright drop-ins.

Masunga has gone through leaps and bounds. A *Mmegi* [www.mmegi.bw](http://www.mmegi.bw) article of May 5, 2008, describes the dramatic evolution of Masunga “from a Cinderella to NED [North East District] Capital” and provides an insight into policy decisions that have benefited the development of villages. According to the article, a decision to relocate the district headquarters from Francistown, Botswana’s second largest town, to Masunga, dramatically changed it from an overwhelmingly rural and subsistence farming village to today’s modern village. With the establishment of council offices in Masunga in the early 1990s came developments that have had commercial and

industrial spin-off and employment opportunities for its residents and surrounding villages.

Masunga prides itself of having, in addition to hosting council offices, a day-care centre; primary school (Masunga Primary School, established in 1908); junior secondary school (Maruje Community Junior Secondary School); senior secondary school (Masunga Senior Secondary School); an extensive tarred road network with street names; electricity and water reticulation systems; a bank branch; a competitive retail shopping outlet; and many other indicators of cosmopolitan village. Some homes have satellite television receptions. Mobile phones are in extensive usage, even within relatively poor households. There is an increasing use of computers, supported by an Internet Café in the village centre.



Masunga also benefited from a government decision to establish a modern sport stadium that has most of the facilities for the development of competitive sports. There are views that this may be a white elephant in relation to the size of the village, even including the peripheral populations. The village is happy to have the asset.



What makes a village life? People are viewed to be closer in their daily relations in a village as compared with metropolitan living in urban areas such as Gaborone (the capital of Botswana) or Francistown (the town nearest to Masunga).



A typical village celebration has no invitation required. Everyone who can make it to a celebration or ceremony is welcome. The wealthier a family, the more people will attend an occasion—be it a wedding or a funeral. The family has to estimate the number of guests and live up to everyone's expectations.



A village is the melting pot for the young and the old, the rich and the poor and the place where stressed-out urban dwellers return to cool off. Traditional hierarchy centres on the *kgotla* led by a chief, and there are generally unwritten rules as to what is custom. Children play together and adults help each other with various chores. Village life is a magnet, irrespective of the position one holds in the Botswana society and, for those who have family and friendship links with Masunga, the sting is a perpetual itch.



Pictures: Per Järtby and Julia Majaha-Jartby

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