

Alverson, Marianne. *Under African Sun* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987. 233 pp.

First hand recollections of experiences in exotic, far away countries have always made popular reading. Par for this genre authors tend to romanticize and use flowery, "travel section" descriptions. At times, their efforts are Hollywood-esque -- historical perspective and a sense of reality being so distorted, the final product lacks any veracity. When recounting their efforts in developing countries, western "experts" often point accusatory fingers at governments or people, implicitly or explicitly stating they are a bit 'backward', warp their accounts in excessive patronage.

Often, there is little effort to understand the culture or people of these lands. Author and reader are satisfied with the hype and sensation provided by mere cursory examinations. *Under African Sun* by Marianne Alverson, potentially an exceptional work, in the end falls prey to some of these pitfalls.

Alverson and her two young sons, Keith and Brian, accompanied husband/father Hoyt to Botswana in 1972 as he embarked on two years of anthropological field work. Almost immediately after their arrival, Hoyt buried himself in his research, completely hiding, we find out late in the book, behind a facade of familiarity and ease with his position in Setswana culture and isolating himself almost entirely from his family. Marianne and the two boys were left to cope with the challenges and frustrations of assimilating life in a rural Setswana household (lolwapa) under the aging patriarch, Rre Segathle.

Under African Sun is not a scholarly work. It is a composite piece skillfully constructed by Alverson from a journal she kept during her stay in Botswana. Alverson, unlike many of the expatriates she encountered who viewed the Batswana as novelties and their way of life as "primitive," was able to make observations of Setswana culture from a more personal, participatory perspective. It is apparent from the outset of the book that "acculturating" herself was a primary objective for Alverson, and as a means of gaining

access to the culture, she worked hard to learn and become familiar with Setswana language. It was her attempts to learn Setswana and to go beyond her own cultural boundaries that enabled the author to be accepted by the Batswana.

Throughout the book, Alverson maintains a fair degree of objectivity stating early on that "clearly in my ignorance of [Setswana] culture I cannot judge [the Batswana] at all." (page 36) From this standpoint, she details her growing involvement in the daily routine of the lolwpa. At one point, her participation in repairing the floors of the houses with a mud and dung mixture is contrasted with letters she received from friends at home exclaiming how reviling it all sounded.

Vignettes provide the reader with snapshot glimpses of the Batswana, and Alverson focusses primarily on the interactions between herself and her children and the men, women, and children they lived with in Rre Segathle's compound. In this manner the reader gains some sense of the intricacies of Setswana culture.

Alverson discusses, for example, why Rre Segathle is so adamant she not share her extra food with the young boy who works for him because if he is too full, "he only plays." (page 34) The women in the compound attempt to explain their views towards *bogadi*, or bride price, a tradition with which Alverson is clearly uncomfortable. Alverson writes, "Some people say that *bogadi* is bad because a woman is traded for cattle: it looks like she is bought for cattle." This analysis was dismissed by Alverson's hostesses with the quip "Those people are *makgoa* (page 97) (a plural form used to refer specifically to Europeans, but also to anyone who does not speak Setswana or practice Setswana customs) highlighting one difference in orientation towards gender and marriage between the two cultures.

Much of what the author learned about Setswana culture resulted from her own *faux pas*. For example, by trying to be polite in the western sense, Alverson learned that in Botswana, one should not ask guests if they would like a refill of their food and drink. Such questioning is considered rude; indicates a "lack of true generosity and friendship." (page 52) Rather, within your means, you should serve your visitors refreshments until they indicate they are satisfied.

A singular strength of Alverson's work is that she includes vocabulary and a number of idioms, which

effectively encapsulate elements of Setswana culture. "Children of a person will share the head of a fly" (page 43) beautifully represents the notion of sharing whatever little one has; a notion which is a noticeable aspect of life in Botswana.

When describing expatriates, Alverson tells of a number of American embassy officials and their gruff and arrogant manner in dealing with Batswana; whites in general, who live completely separated from the Batswana, except in contact with housemaids or fifty year old garden "boys", and a few "experts" who earn huge salaries, but accomplish nothing due to the utter misplanning of the projects they were hired to implement. Her recollections of these people are an indictment of many expatriates who find their livelihoods in developing countries.

Throughout the book one is instilled with the sense of small town ambiance that characterizes Botswana even today, having a population of just over one million. In the rural areas and in the few urban centers one still finds time to stop and chat with the people they meet. Alverson underscores how this Setswana custom has often been mis-interpreted by European supervisors who, in their ignorance of Setswana culture, complained about the amount of time wasted in the mornings as people greet and chat with their neighbors and co-workers, and accused the Batswana of simply being lazy.

Alverson also raises some issues relevant to many societies in the developing world, resulting from the clash between old and new. She tells of the college educated agriculture extension officers, for example, who no longer want to work in the fields but prefer to sit inside so as not to dirty their hands. The intrusion of western influences was summed up by young Motswana girl the author talked to who insisted that America "is the best place" because of the Supremes, Coca-Cola, and Fanta. (page 178)

There are some mistakes in Alverson's work. The rinderpest epidemic she refers to on page 114 is not the same as hoof and mouth disease as she implies. The use of the term "counsellor" in her description of Setswana traditional courts (page 105) is misleading. Although today there is a "prosecutor" of sorts, this is a recent development. Traditionally, the chief, or headman presided over the tribal meetings, and everyone present allowed to speak to the issue

being discussed. There was no "counsellor" as one would understand it in the western legal sense. Her statement that the Bushmen depended on the "hunt to stay alive" (page 117) belies the fact that up to 80 percent of their diet has consisted of wild plants and roots. Finally, it is a mistake to state that even in winter time the "tree[s] [are] never left bare." (page 123) Every winter, especially in drought years, the trees and much of the countryside itself becomes completely barren and quite desolate looking.

Alverson's book also raises some issues which, unfortunately, she does not discuss but which are nevertheless are disturbing for anyone seriously involved in development work. For example, Alverson herself started a "bush" school near where she was living for the children who could not attend regular primary school; a worthy, forthright act to be sure. Yet, she never mentions, and may not really grasp, the long range implications of starting such a project which she knew full well she would eventually abandon, and which would collapse upon her departure. Likewise, her using her influence as a white expatriate to get a neighbor boy into primary school is troubling. Together, these incidents reinforced a status conveyed on whites during the colonial era.

The book ends with a postscript, a letter from a Canadian who had known the Alversons in 1972 and had returned to live in Botswana presumably around 1983-84. One line in particular is disturbing and was remiss on Alverson's part not to have at least questioned it. John Hunter, the Canadian wrote,

"As you may or may not know, Gaborone [the capital] has a new, very fancy airport (*which it doesn't need*)." [my emphasis].

To state that Botswana, a land-locked country desperately dependent on the Republic of South Africa, does not need a modern airport is ludicrous. Can we infer that Mr. Hunter assumes Botswana can develop its own economy and yet remain dependent on South Africa? Or perhaps a new, improved "donkey cart" is more in line with what Mr. Hunter feels the Botswana need? His qualifier is exactly the type of neo-colonial patronage western experts continue to propagate, and it would have been more constructive if

Alverson had commented on this attitude or left Hunter's letter out altogether.

In summary, Alverson is to be congratulated on her efforts to learn about the people, language and customs of Botswana. *Under African Sun*, despite a few factual errors, does a fair job in giving the reader insight into one of Africa's many diverse cultures. It would have been more constructive if it had included some discussion and critique, not simply descriptions of the people she met. Nonetheless, readers, especially those heading off to work in a different culture, would do well to think about the issues Alverson raises.

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de Beer, Cedric. *The South African Disease: Apartheid Health and Health Services*. Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 1984. 86pp.

"The understanding of the distribution of ill health and medical services is essentially political. This is a truth which is simple and obvious. Yet it is not understood. The whole truth, which is a complex combination of scientific fact and social analysis, is lost. Our understanding of health has become de-politicised." (p. 65) Given that health and health services are directly related to the socio-economic structure of a society, Cedric de Beer, in his book *The South African Disease: Apartheid Health and Health Services*, examines the truth of ill health in South Africa as a direct reflection of the dominant socio-political reality of apartheid. De Beer holds that it is not enough to regard a sick individual as a set of physical symptoms. One must go beyond medical analysis and understand the social and physical environment in which those suffering from ill health live and how this environment has developed historically. To demonstrate the validity of a social analysis of health and health services, De Beer examines the socio-political roots of tuberculosis (TB), the National Health Services Commission of 1942-44, the health and health care of black urban workers and recent