

“Made in Botswana” Handicrafts Improve Lifestyles

— Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer Works
in Minority Settlements —



Ms. Shiraiwa and local residents attending an exhibition to sell their goods (Photo: Ayumi Shiraiwa)

African elephants, lions and other wild animals still roam free in undeveloped areas of the South African nation of Botswana. Those same areas are also home to the San people (also referred to as “Bushmen” by White settlers), the indigenous population that traditionally makes their living by hunting and gathering. However, development in Botswana has progressed, and San people, who used to move around in pursuit of wild animals, now live in permanent settlements because of the central government policy.

Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer Ayumi Shiraiwa was sent to an area in which many settled San people lived. While she was in high school, Ms Shiraiwa was involved in volunteer activities within Japan and was also involved in making accessories and silverwork. She wanted to volunteer in Africa and was sent to Botswana to work on community development.

In October 2010, Ms. Shiraiwa reported to her post in Letlhakane, a village in the middle of the Central District sub-district of Boteti about 600 kilometers removed from the capital of Gaborone. To learn the lay of the land and its people, she worked with social workers to distribute rations in the San settlements that dot the area.

Ms. Shiraiwa saw the way that San people lived in these villages. She saw that many of those who had lost their traditional livelihood of hunting were not able to find jobs and that, though daily necessities and cash were provided through government measures to protect indigenous peoples, they knew nothing of welfare systems and were reduced to poverty. She saw the condition of the settled San people and wondered what she, a Rural Community Development Officer, could do to help. “One day, San women brought baskets they had weaved with them to the office,” she said. “I also noticed a surprising number of people weaving baskets as I walked through the village. I realized that this was a traditional craft for them, so I posted flyers to begin searching for people interested



San women making baskets in the traditional way (Photo: Ayumi Shiraiwa)

in making things.”

Ms. Shiraiwa thought that manufacturing could improve people's lives and regularly brought baskets the women made with her to Gaborone to sell. Women who had sold their baskets to the small number of people who came to the village and dictated what prices they would pay for them began giving their baskets to Ms. Shiraiwa to sell. She also offered the women excellent advice on product manufacturing, suggesting that they make smaller baskets for travelers to take with them and telling them that European and Japanese tourists would only buy high quality goods. The boundlessly cheerful San women responded eagerly to Ms. Shiraiwa's earnest efforts.

Ms. Shiraiwa began working to build a craft shop in Letlhakane so that anyone who wanted to sell her crafts would have a space to do so. She believed that people could sell crafts from each of the 18 villages in the Boteti Sub-District at such a shop. Most daily necessities had been imported to Botswana from neighboring countries, and souvenirs for tourists were no exception. The actions of Ms. Shiraiwa and the basket makers developed a brand of crafts that proudly proclaimed, “Made in Botswana.” The Botswana Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism recognized their efforts and pledged its support.

The San people gradually became aware that selling things they made themselves could generate cash income, and their perspective changed. They began to make requests on their own – they asked for rides into the bush to collect materials for basket making, for classes on doll making and to introduce friends to Ms. Shiraiwa in hopes that she would help them sell their goods. Soon, Ms. Shiraiwa's office became crowded with people asking her to sell their merchandise. She knew that they would need some space if they were to open a shop. She wrote a business plan and asked corporations for support. Fortunately, she found people who would cooperate, and they decided to help open a large shop. The shop is currently being prepared for a grand opening.

“Unfortunately, my two-year term came to an end and I had to return to Japan, but I am still making suggestions to JICA and UN Volunteers programme so that this project will continue,” Ms. Shiraiwa said. “I am not able to help on site, but this project belongs to the San women and the people of Botswana. It means nothing if they cannot continue it without me there. I hope that these women take the lead and continue this project.”