

Surviving survival: bushmen, resettlement and advocacy in the Central Kalahari, Botswana

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Covering in excess of 52 000 km², Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) is one of the largest conservation areas in the world. It was established in 1961 with a view to protecting the Kalahari ecosystem whilst simultaneously providing a secure home for the 3000 San (Bushmen) who lived there. This remote place has recently achieved global notoriety following the Botswana Government's efforts to evict its long-standing human inhabitants - the G/wikhoen and G//anakhoen San and their Bakgalagadi neighbours - in the name of "development".¹ After five long years of debate and intrigue the Botswana Government announced in March 2002 that it had finally "convinced" the last remaining inhabitants of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve to bid farewell to the land of their ancestors and move to resettlement centres outside of the reserve's boundaries.

The crisis in the Central Kalahari is a deceptively complex issue that defies simplistic moralising. Indeed, the events that have unfolded subsequent to the Botswana Government's relocation of these communities raise important questions concerning approaches to development and social change, the integrity of indigenism as a doctrinal basis to rights claims and the role of international rights organisations in local struggles. In order to appreciate these complexities it is necessary to place current events in an historical context.

George Silberbauer worked as the Bushman Survey Officer in the Central Kalahari during the 1960s. At that time, the G/wikhoen and G//

anakhoen San that lived there depended almost entirely on hunting and gathering. Unlike much of the rest of the Kalahari the CKGR has no permanent surface water and this constrained human settlement and mobility patterns. During the brief wet seasons G/wi and G//ana congregated at the shallow pans that brimmed with water following spectacular thunderstorms. The long dry seasons were an altogether different story. First the pans would dry up. Then those animals that could not survive on the moisture content of their browse or graze alone trekked northwards in search of permanent water beyond the reserve's boundaries. The relatively large groups of people that congregated at the pans broke up into much smaller kin-based units and dispersed into the bush so that they could exploit available resources as efficiently as possible. In the absence of groundwater they sustained themselves on moisture drawn from melons or tubers and fluids extracted from the carcasses of the animals they hunted.²

When Silberbauer sank a borehole at Xade for his own use in 1961, he inadvertently set the ball of change rolling. The year-round availability of water in Xade enticed many G/wi from their dry season camps thus inverting a seasonal aggregation and dispersal pattern that had persevered as long as anyone could remember. It also gave them a taste for the spoils of modernity. Silberbauer was of course aware of this and went to some lengths to ensure that they could only

access the water at Xade while he was there. Indeed, it was only in the late 1960s, after Silberbauer had left, that San populations in the CKGR began to operate the borehole themselves. Despite his apparent parsimony with water, Silberbauer also realised that without water, the CKGR would no longer remain a haven for the San. Even during the 1960s increasing numbers of CKGR San were drifting to the Ghanzi ranches and Tswana cattle-posts in Kweneng where they entered labour relationships, often exploitative, with Tswana and white farmers. He consequently recommended to the then Bechuanaland Administration that they drill 14 further boreholes throughout the Central Kalahari for use by resident populations - a recommendation that was rejected (Silberbauer 1965).

With easy water Xade's population grew rapidly. By 1980 it was a permanent settlement and two years later the Government built a school and a health centre there. Game avoided the area, veld-foods were over-utilised and the people grew increasingly reliant on state aid. Residents of Xade also realised that with permanent water they could keep livestock. As other water-points were established during the 1980s the residents of the CKGR brought more goats, donkeys, dogs and horses into the reserve. Horses and dogs were particularly prized since they radically increased hunting efficiency and range. The anthropologist Masakazu Osaki (1984:53) reported that during his stay in Xade between September and February in 1982/3, of the 91 large ungulates killed by hunters only one of these was brought down by traditional bow and arrow. Likewise, year-round access to potable water allowed the Xade population to experiment with cultivation. With support from agricultural extension services some managed small harvests of sorghum, maize meal and cow peas. By 1985, it was reported that almost all G/wi planted gardens. In so doing the G/wi and G//ana demonstrated that not only were they unafraid of change, but if appropriately delivered they were willing to embrace it (Valiente-Noailles 1993:76-80). Despite these forays into "modernity" Central Kalahari populations retained a formidable knowledge of their living environment through maintaining a continuous

practical engagement with it.

Between 1965 and 1996 the population in the CKGR fluctuated by as much as 41% between wet and dry seasons. Many who left the CKGR during dry seasons did so to take up work on the Ghanzi cattle ranches or for Tswana households in areas adjacent to the reserve. Some were seduced by the spoils of cattle-post life and remained while others returned to the CKGR for the rainy seasons. The CKGR population dropped from in excess of 3000 during Silberbauer's time to around 1300 in the mid 1980s, most of whom lived at Xade. These population movements also affected the population composition in the reserve. Silberbauer reports no Kgaligadi living permanently in the Reserve during the 1960s. By 1976, however, Kgaligadi comprised more than a third of the total CKGR population (Sheller 1976). A Government fact-finding mission report published in 1985 recommended that a 45 km² area around Xade be declassified, formally recognised as a village and developed as such. The report also recommended that the southern portion of the CKGR (where these populations lived) be reclassified as a "wildlife management area" for use by local communities.

But the Government rejected these recommendations. Game numbers in the Central Kalahari declined rapidly in the 1970s and early 1980s due principally to a savage drought and the severing of key migration routes after game fences were erected in a bid to control the spread of foot and mouth disease. Conservationists like Mark and Delia Owens argued that the San contributed to this decline in game numbers. Additional pressure was brought to bear on the Botswana Government by the European Union which demanded that more land be set aside for conservation. In response, the Botswana Government agreed to curb San hunting rights in the CKGR and increase the number of ranger patrols in the reserve. In addition to this, the Government saw this as an opportunity to "develop" the Central Kalahari populations and integrate them into mainstream Tswana society in accordance with the assimilationist doctrine that underwrote their remote area development programme (See Saugestad 1998). Thus, in 1986,

the Botswana Government embarked on an informal programme aimed at “encouraging” the CKGR population to leave the reserve.

The Government offered a wide range of reasons for this decision, some plausible others less plausible. However, when viewed from a Botswana perspective one can see how, under pressure from the conservation lobby, Government officials found them compelling. In contrast to westerners, for whom Kalahari populations were popularly construed as icons of noble savagery and primitive affluence, most Tswana considered San to be impoverished, under-developed and to represent a way of life incommensurate with Botswana’s rapid march to modernity. This was eloquently revealed when the then deputy president Mogae made an unfortunate, yet revealing verbal reference to San as “stone age creatures” who might “perish” like the dodo if they do not move with the times. During the 1960s and 1970s Botswana’s San population was largely neglected by their Government who had only meagre resources and little capacity to mobilise them effectively. In part this was because the Botswana Government built its national identity in opposition to its apartheid neighbour and dogmatically adhered to an ideological platform that effectively denied ethnic difference. Reflecting the dominant regional academic trends, ethnic difference was considered to be a veneer that obscured real issues of class difference and wealth inequality. As a result, no special consideration was given to Botswana’s San population who found themselves unable to compete with others in the race for land and resources. The net result of this is that the informal structures of San marginalisation, once embodied in the highly paternalist *mafisa* and *kgamelo* systems of patronage, were reinforced in terms of a broader class based idiom.

As Botswana’s national coffers began to swell after the discovery of huge gem diamond deposits, economic growth began to transform a nation once among the seven poorest in the world into the richest *per capita* in Africa. Although it took some time for the wealth to trickle down and for public spending on infrastructure, healthcare and

education to have an effect in Botswana, these are now being felt. Within Botswana’s established élite and growing middle classes, there is a strong sense that a mere 30 years previously their parents and grandparents were a “tribal” people locked into a social economy in which cattle meant everything. It is with this strong sense of themselves as having progressed from a state of primitive penury to modern affluence, and of the San as the group that has benefited least from Botswana’s new found prosperity, that Botswana’s Government has sought to address the San issue as one of poverty and development.

To most Tswana officials San “under-development” and poverty was (and indeed still is) understood to be a contemporary manifestation of their “hunting and gathering culture”, which in turn was seen not only as an obstacle to development, but the subject of development. From this point of view economic transformation is cultural transformation, and presently the desired end of the development process is the re-acculturated, self-sufficient, subsistence farming San. These ambitions allow for little emphasis to be placed on “local knowledge”, which, being “cultural knowledge” is not only ignored, but also devalued since it is perceived to be part of the problem itself. In this sense, San are not simply thought of as “ignorant”, but also to have the “wrong” sort of knowledge. Thus, in this deeply paternalist environment, the low emphasis placed on participatory decision-making, empowerment and capacity building are not seen to contribute to the problem but to constitute an important part of the solution.

Although the residents of the CKGR complained about the restrictions imposed on hunting and the sometimes-harsh enforcement practices adopted by over-zealous wildlife officials, they still maintained their mixed economy of hunting, gathering, cultivation and herding. Household food security was also supplemented through destitute rations, sporadic wage earning, welfare payments and erratic support from the Government’s Remote Area Development Programme. Without abandoning their relocation policy, the Government maintained the Xade waterpoint, clinic and school.

In 1996, however, Government resolved to pursue its relocation policy more aggressively. Following the partial construction of two resettlement areas outside of the reserve's southern and eastern boundaries Government officials set about "persuading" people living in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve to move out. Although the Government maintains that the relocations were entirely voluntary, evidence suggests otherwise. A fact-finding mission conducted by the Botswana Centre for Human Rights, Ditshwanelo, suggests that where phantom carrots did not entice people out of the CKGR, the District Commissioner reportedly threatened them with the stick (Mogwe 1996). Some households reported being offered vastly inflated compensation pledges³, whereas others reported being threatened with arrest or violence. For most, however, it was the Government's insistence that they would terminate all essential services in the CKGR that was the deciding factor. Within a year Xade lay deserted and only a handful of people remained in other villages. While, to be sure, some were in favour of resettlement, few remained positive about it once they had moved to the resettlement areas where an impoverished natural resources base and an almost complete absence of income generating opportunities immediately offset the benefits of improved state services. Indeed, rather than liberating them to drink freely from the cup of Botswana's prosperity, resettlement simply increased the extent to which Kalahari peoples were dependent on Government. Worse still for these communities, the rapid change in circumstances led to a deep sense of collective alienation that was in turn expressed through their boredom, anxiety and despondency. Like San in other settlements in Botswana, many turned to booze to smooth the edges of their daily existence.

In response, a coalition of local NGOs formed a "negotiating team" led by the Central Kalahari peoples' community organisation, First People of the Kalahari. Assisted by a Cape Town based lawyer, they challenged the relocation of people from the reserve. Despite securing a meeting with the outgoing President, Dr Masire, in early 1998,

the negotiating team made little measurable progress. But disgruntled people in the resettlement areas did. They registered their discontent by voting with their feet. With the onset of the rains many returned to the reserve. By the turn of the millennium the CKGR was home to as many as 650 San and Bakgalagadi. In the wake of these developments Government grew more responsive to the negotiating team's concerns. Not long afterwards, they hinted that they had had a change of heart and officials in the Department of Wildlife and National Parks entered discussions with members of the negotiating team concerning the future of the CKGR.

In the new year, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks presented the Government with a new draft management plan for the CKGR drawn up on the basis of their informal dialogue with the negotiating team. This plan, if implemented, would not only allow for the San and Bakgalagadi to stay in the Central Kalahari but also for them to benefit from any possible tourism developments that might occur there. Although not perfect, the plan had considerable promise. At the very least it was a major step in the right direction and would have secured the people of the CKGR a far stronger position from which to negotiate further concessions. It offered a good platform for community development, it allowed people to maintain control over and *de facto* usufructory rights to much of the CKGR and it did not require anyone to suffer the trauma of dislocation. The Government demonstrated their willingness to proceed with this plan when, in March 2000, they published a new set of regulations for game reserves that paved the way for the plan's implementation (Govt Gazette no 28 of 2000). The negotiating team supported the plan in principle and was optimistic that a satisfactory resolution was imminent. A copy of this plan was subsequently leaked to the South African press where it was hailed - somewhat prematurely as it turned out - as a "stunning victory" for the San (Weekly Mail and Guardian 31 August 2001).

But the negotiating team was not the only party actively supporting the cause of those relocated

from the CKGR. Survival International, a London based NGO that campaigns on behalf of “indigenous and tribal peoples” had launched a high profile European campaign aimed at forcing the Botswana Government into granting the San ownership of their ancestral lands. Commanding substantial resources, Survival positioned itself as the dominant voice in the international media on the issue. While there is some doubt as to the effectiveness of Survival’s letter-writing campaign, there is little denying that they dramatically raised the profile of this issue. Unlike the negotiating team, Survival’s Director-General Stephen Corry was unimpressed by the management plan, despite not being party to the negotiation process nor fully aware of the plan’s contents at the time. He opposed it because it did not grant the Bushmen exclusive ownership of the Central Kalahari in accordance with the International Labour Organisation’s 1989 convention concerning the rights of indigenous people⁴, a convention so inappropriate to post-colonial Africa that no African country has seriously considered ratifying it (Suzman 2001). Apparently unaware that granting Bushmen full ownership of the Central Kalahari would establish a precedent that would lead to the collapse of Botswana’s communal land tenure system Corry concluded that negotiations were a flawed strategy and branded the plan a “slap in the face” (Weekly Mail and Guardian 6 September 2001)

Survival persevered with their vigorous campaign. They organised vigils for the San in European capitals, picketed the Botswana High Commission in London, protested at the UN Racism Conference and posted advertisements in the international media. Deeply worried that Survival’s belligerent posturing might undo all the progress already made through negotiations and force Government to close ranks on the issue, the Botswana Centre for Human Rights, the representative of the Negotiating Team, publicly distanced itself from Survival’s Campaign.

But this did not appease the Botswana Government who, much to the distress of the Negotiating Team, ceased negotiations and dumped the innovative management plan in favour of one that excluded local populations almost

entirely. In a thinly veiled reference to Survival’s campaign Government sources reportedly suggested that this was done “to show that a sovereign and democratic Government would not be pushed about by ill-informed do-gooders ignorant of the realities of contemporary African life”. As much as it is impossible to verify this allegation, it is certainly plausible in the context of Tswana political culture.

Survival’s campaign was clearly not intended to create a platform for negotiation between Government and discontented San. Rather it was aimed at fuelling the righteous indignation of Survival International’s membership in Europe and America, a constituency that displays little incredulity when told of evil-doings on the “dark continent”. Their campaign material was typically melodramatic, ran roughshod over dissenting opinions and displayed Survival’s naiveté about the main constraints involved. Invoking theories of cultural purity now largely discarded in Europe by all save the far right (Kuper in press), they claimed that the relocation programme would destroy the Bushman culture. The fact that the Central Kalahari was a site of profound social and cultural change over the past 40 years evidently escaped their notice. They also claimed the Government’s actions were “a racist crime against humanity”, a “final solution” and an exercise in “ethnic cleansing”. In a region where the dust clouds kicked up by the colonial enterprise are years away from settling, European interventions in domestic affairs tend to be viewed with suspicion. When these interventions are seen to be based on a morally solipsistic Eurocentric worldview and grounded in hysterical half-truths, they are viewed as unwanted interference. Such sentiments are felt particularly acutely in post-colonies attempting to assert an indigenous – for want of a better word - national identity forged on an indigenous ethical code. Most Botswana pride themselves on their country’s record of good governance and stability and many had expressed sympathy for those relocated from the CKGR. But this sympathy was diminished by what was seen by most as an unfounded attack by a malevolent foreign force on their national integrity (see

Mphinyane 2001). Survival's implied parallels to the situation in Rwanda or the Balkans through using terms like "ethnic cleansing" led many to suspect that Survival had a hidden agenda by means of which they intended to damage the reputation of one of Africa's best governed states. At the same time Government officials began to conflate the agenda of the Kalahari peoples with what they considered to be Survival's agitation. As a result Government invective concerning leaders of the Kalahari peoples like Roy Sesana became increasingly bitter. It was against this background that the Botswana Government chose to persevere with its resettlement agenda.

Survival International's adherence to the International Labour Organisation's Convention on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO 169) of 1989 as the moral foundation to their campaign raises some other difficult questions. Referring to ILO 169 Survival frequently charged that the Botswana Government's actions in the Central Kalahari were "illegal" in terms of international law. While the Botswana Government's actions in the Central Kalahari contravene the terms of this convention they are not illegal since ILO 169 is only binding in those 19 states that have ratified it. Despite almost universal membership of the ILO no African country has yet given serious consideration to adopting this convention and for good reason. It is wholly inappropriate to the peculiarities of the post-colonial African situation where memories of apartheid ensure that there is staunch opposition to the granting of special rights to any group solely or even primarily on the basis of their ethnicity or ancestry. The indigenous, as Sidsel Saugestad (1998) reminds us, is a very "inconvenient" category in southern Africa.

ILO 169 is also proving to be increasingly unpopular among social and political analysts for its theoretical poverty, its uncomfortable fit with universal human rights doctrines and its inability to cope with the kinds of practical problems experienced by peoples like southern Africa's San population (Suzman 2001c & 2001a). Indigenousness *per se* can claim no greater

legitimacy as a basis for special rights than blue-blood, white skin or red hair. As Ingold (2000:137) notes, "how can some persons claim to be more indigenous than others?" Equally problematic, indigenous rights narratives affirm inherited substance as the principal determinant of status with respect to place, thereby rendering other measures like wealth distribution, equality of opportunity and need to be of only secondary importance. To this extent, the indigenous rights narrative appeals to the same cultural logic as that invoked by the far-right in Europe when bleating their opposition to immigration or minority rights issues (Kuper in press). Indeed, the viability of indigenousness as a platform for special rights in international law hinges on its one-eyed application only in situations where the descendants of indigenous peoples are from marginalised minorities. To this extent, successful indigenous rights claims appeal not to the indigenousness of the target constituency for their legitimacy but to the political and economic status of that constituency vis-à-vis others. To muddy the water further, asserting indigenousness on the basis of inherited substance is in most instances an impossible task. In southern Africa, for example, there are few people who cannot lay claim to being of partial Khoisan ancestry somewhere along the line.

Unfazed by their critics, yet still confounded by the intractability of the Botswana Government, Survival then trained their guns on Botswana's diamond industry. They thought a shot across their bows might gain them the leverage necessary to force Government to back down. Diamonds are, after all, the lifeblood of the Botswana economy. Survival pointed to the presence of a De Beers prospect and exploration concession in the CKGR as the "real reason" behind the relocation. Surprisingly, they did this in full knowledge of the fact that De Beers had no plans to mine the prospect and that legislation concerning sub-surface minerals and prospecting licensing has no legal bearing whatsoever on the land rights of people in the Central Kalahari. Indeed, were De Beers to mine their prospect at Gope, they would only require

use of an area no larger than 25 km² a tiny snip of the vast Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Survival International's apparent revelations of prospecting concessions in the CKGR were not nearly as dramatic as they made out. Most of mineral rich southern Africa has been carved up into prospecting and mining concessions for much of this century. Prospecting licences were first granted in the CKGR area in 1961 and prospectors were based at Gope in the CKGR from the mid 1970s onwards! But Survival International clearly felt that the ends justified the means. At least the hidden hand of a mining giant makes for more seductive copy.

Survival's bungling intervention notwithstanding, the Botswana Government's choices and actions remain at the root of the problem. While they have good cause to assert their autonomy in the face of an international media blitz co-ordinated by a foreign NGO, doing so at the expense of the desires of the CKGR population whilst simultaneously jeopardising the reputation of the diamond industry on which Botswana's prosperity hangs is hardly cause for praise. It appears that the Government of Botswana has not taken on board the implications of the ongoing crisis. Their treatment of Kalahari San populations remains paternalist, inappropriate and ultimately disempowering to the extent that it reinforces the very structures of inequality that the development process is intended to collapse. Botswana's attempts to integrate Bushmen into mainstream Tswana society through a rigidly unilinear development strategy and to treat them the same as any other Botswana has ironically had the opposite effect. Moreover they are guilty of denying the CKGR populations the same respect that they are rightly demanding from Survival International.

I suspect that the Botswana Government has missed a great opportunity here. Had they resolved the CKGR situation they would not only have contributed greatly to rectifying their otherwise poor record in dealing with San, but they would also have made a far stronger case for rejecting the unwanted intrusion of foreigners in domestic affairs. Likewise they could have also shown how the needs of communities like the San could be reasonably

addressed without cementing a concept as problematic as indigenism rights in international law.

With all other avenues seemingly exhausted CKGR residents took their grievances to the High Court but their case was dismissed on a technicality in April 2002. In the meantime, while their lawyers rework their application to the High Court as many as a hundred San have trickled back into the Central Kalahari in defiance of Government. Despite the lack of water they have resolved to remain on the land that they claim by birthright. Others less keen on returning to the "bush" remain in the resettlement areas and wait to see whether the Government will honour its recent commitment to a European Community delegation to reopen dialogue with the Negotiating Team. The loss of the Central Kalahari is not a tragedy because it spells the end of a culture. Kalahari cultures have proved to be both dynamic and robust in the face of external pressure. It is a tragedy because the Central Kalahari was a marginalised people's single most important asset. Remaining in the reserve would have greatly facilitated their development and empowerment through letting them negotiate this transitional period at their own pace, under their own steam and without the additional trauma of dislocation.

Despite its media profile, the Central Kalahari issue is by no means the only problem encountered by southern Africa's 100 000 strong San population. Indeed, excessive media interest in the Central Kalahari debacle has also arguably allowed other pressing concerns to escape careful scrutiny. A five volume European Community commissioned report on the San⁵ published last year shows that life for around 80% of the region's San is very tough indeed. As the first study of its kind, the report shows San to comprise a largely landless, highly dependent and impoverished regional underclass considerably worse off than any other language groups in the region. It also shows that Governments throughout southern Africa have been remiss in their dealings with them and that rights abuses are widespread. Nostalgia for their hunting and gathering past notwithstanding, these reports

show that more than anything that the San need better access to land; state services and development if they are to break out of the crippling cycle of poverty and dependency in which they are trapped. The reports do not call for special status to be afforded to San as indigenes, but rather for states to pay special attention to the San as an impoverished and marginalised minority. To do this, Governments must engineer policies specifically geared towards addressing the problems encountered

by these populations and likewise ensure their effective implementation within a meaningful empowerment framework. Rights Organisations involved in issues like the CKGR must also be less ideologically dogmatic in their approach in order to avoid sounding either morally solipsistic or plain ignorant. They should also be sure to support initiatives on the ground rather than dogmatically adhering to a position that may be desirable in theory but unworkable in practice. The CKGR might well be a good place to start.

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¹ There is no data available on the ethnic make up of the CKGR's population before 1976. In 1976 Sheller reported that the CKGR populations was 47.5% G/wi, 15.3% G//ana and 37.2% Bakgalagadi.

² See Silberbauer 1965 and 1981 for a detailed description of seasonal movements and ecological constraints in the Central Kalahari Desert.

³ The Government of Botswana did compensate most of those who were resettled. Some cases are still outstanding. According to the Botswana Gazette a total of two million Pula (£200 000) was paid out in compensation to those resettled.

⁴ Convention Concerning the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Nation states – Convention no. 169 of 1989 is the only convention concerning indigenous people that is legally binding. To date it has only been ratified in 19 countries.

⁵ See Suzman 2001a, 2001b and Cassidy, Goode, Mazonde and Rivers 2001.
