

Botswana Bushmen – historical tragedy or crime against humanity?

Stephen Corry, Survival International

The eviction of Bushmen from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve is the biggest news story in Botswana's history: thousands of press reports have appeared in dozens of countries. The nation's self-appointed role as 'shining light of democracy', is being upstaged by the unfortunately more accurate, 'destroyer of Bushmen'.

The government's reaction has been to attack the organisation that the Bushmen asked to raise the issue internationally, Survival International. We have been threatened, accused of terrorism, told we want to keep the people under-developed, and so on. We are apparently too 'white' to voice our opinion. We have been piously informed that we have made matters worse; and that we are wrong about diamonds being the root cause.

All these are devices to stop the campaign; and they display a deep misunderstanding about the conviction that underpins human rights work. People all over the world once campaigned against apartheid. They too were told that they did not understand the 'African context' and should keep their noses out; they too worked on undeterred.

In a world full of abuse, what makes this so important is that it goes to the heart of two key – and unresolved – questions for 21st century Africa: who is indigenous, and what is 'development'?

Botswana's elite pretends that all residents of the country are indigenous. This is obvious nonsense: history is not so easily twisted. The Tswana tribes, which now rule, first settled there some centuries ago, later European colonists migrated north from the Cape. Both encountered dozens of small tribes now called 'Bushman', 'San', or 'Basarwa'. (All these names have derogatory connotations, 'Bushman' perhaps the least so.) They killed or enslaved many, considering them to be at a lower level of evolution than the Tswana or whites, a sentiment still discernible in Botswana today.

Whilst Africans have rightly berated Europeans for the genocide they wreaked on the natives of the Americas or Australia, most have remained largely silent on the

equally brutal genocide suffered by these Bushman tribes at the hands of both white and black. Now Africa has a choice: are the survivors to be finally recognised as indigenous peoples, with all the protection that international law demands, or are they still to be racially discriminated against? The Botswana government is adamant that history will be repeated, and that the last independent Bushman tribes of Botswana *will* be forcibly assimilated, and so destroyed as peoples.

In the colonial and post-colonial era, ‘development’ was something the authorities imposed on natives deemed too backward to choose their own way of life. Sometimes this was well meaning but it invariably had the effect, if not the intention, of creating a menial, servant sector to support the dominant – largely European – classes. The natives had to pick up enough English (or Dutch etc.) to communicate with their masters, and learn how best to serve.

Only now has this begun to change. Influenced by the post-colonial nations, the United Nations and Commonwealth have redefined what ‘development’ really means: empowering people to choose their own path, in an active, free and meaningful way; not forcing them to give up fundamental rights and freedoms in having ‘development’ imposed on them ‘for their own good’. This is justice, and it works. The people themselves, not the experts, *always* have a better analysis of what they really need.

Development has itself developed because the old colonial model lead to the opposite of its stated goals: it created powerlessness, an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, and at least as many social and physical problems as it claimed to solve. Botswana’s elite will not accept this fact: of course, the model *did* work for them! They are the minority rich in a ‘wealthy’ country where the gap between rich and poor is larger than ever.

But it was not always so: the Bushmen of the central Kalahari remember the country’s first president with affection. Sir Seretse Khama told them the land was theirs forever. But that changed radically with the discovery of diamonds in the reserve the early 1980s. From then on, the government repeatedly said it would move the Bushmen. When its ‘persuasion’ fell on deaf ears, it finally resorted to force in 1997, and again in 2002, when virtually everyone was trucked out to dismal eviction sites.

There are two possible development models for the Bushmen today: the Botswana government’s and the Bushmen’s own. In the first, the Bushmen are forced into the camps. There is absolutely nothing to do there, so they resort to drink. Begging is

rife and prostitution growing. When they hunt, they are arrested; they have become entirely dependant on government handouts. Their children attend school, but are ridiculed for speaking their language, and often beaten. They quickly give up. Eventually, they drift off to the slums to beg or look for menial work. They will never have any land they can return to.

In the Bushman model, those who wish to, still live on their ancestral land, remaining close to their ancestors' graves which are so important to them. There is always food, largely from hunting and gathering, as well as from the goats they have had for decades. They do not need or want cows – the desert will not support them – in any case, as they put it, 'the antelope *are* our cows'. They are in no sense backward. They have their own schools and health posts, with their own teachers and health workers. Those who wish to, freely leave the reserve to try their luck in the towns. Some fail, and return home where they know they can always find food and a welcome. A handful might succeed, but probably still return home on retirement anyway, just as Botswana's rich return to their farms when *they* retire. In any case, the choice is theirs.

Which model is best for 21st century Africa?

If the Bushmen lose both their rights as indigenous peoples and their ancestral land, they will be prevented from developing in a way of their own choosing, one which actually benefits them. Botswana will have taken a giant step backward. Only international pressure – particularly from within Africa – can stop this.