



Last exit from the Kalahari: the slow genocide of the Bushmen/San

Rupert Isaacson

The recent forced removal of 2,000 Bushmen/San people from their homeland in the Kalahari area of central Botswana is not just a brutal act of ethnic cleansing; it also means the end for a hunter-gatherer society whose care and knowledge of their fragile eco-system hold many lessons for the rest of humanity. The Johannesburg summit must attend to the inhumanity on its doorstep.

This year the annual World Environmental Summit on Sustainable Development is to be held in Johannesburg from August 26 to September 4. It would seem to be an appropriate venue. Unlike many other parts of the continent, or indeed the Third World, Southern Africa has long been a leader in environmental innovation. There have been many success stories. Perhaps the best is the CAMPFIRE project, started in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, which – despite many teething problems – pioneered a way for rural Africans to make money from wildlife by leasing out hunting and eco-safari concessions, thus drawing income from, rather than competing with, wildlife and wild habitat. Neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Namibia and Botswana have adopted similar policies. At the coming summit, these

projects will no doubt be held up as models for the rest of the globe to follow.

Contributors to **openDemocracy's** City&Country strand have already drawn attention to the intimate connection between hunting and landscape, an issue currently being brought into sharp focus in the UK by the attempts to ban fox-hunting there. Their arguments remind us of the environmental, aesthetic and human cost that ensues when a traditional hunting culture is swept from the landscape. Rather than add to what Roger Scruton, Donna Landry and Hugh Brody have already said, however, I want to draw attention to a particular case of social and ecological vandalism, happening not half a day's drive from the conference rooms of the World Environmental Summit, and destined no doubt to



be ignored in the torrent of official whitewash. I refer to the forced removal of some 2,000 Bushmen (or more accurately, San) hunter-gatherers from the region's largest protected area, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve of Botswana. The reasons? Well, the reasons are unclear.

Diamonds certainly have something to do with it. Back in the mid 1990s prospectors from Debswana, the diamond mining company owned equally by the Botswana government and De Beers/Anglo American, discovered large kimberlite deposits at Gope, within the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which at over 58,000 hectares is larger than Switzerland. Ever since the prospectors went in, the Botswana government has subjected the local Bushmen to a well-documented intimidation campaign. Despite stiff resistance from the local people and a strong, if intermittent, international outcry, in June 2002 the Bushmen were loaded on to trucks and moved to a 'resettlement camp' outside the reserve which the government calls New Xade and the Bushmen call 'the place of death'.

A history of violence in humanity's cradle

For the Bushmen, this is merely the latest chapter in a slow genocide that has been going on for centuries, but which has recently accelerated to bring them to near extinction. According to anthropologists, ethnologists and paleontologists the Bushmen, or San, have inhabited Southern Africa for at least 40,000 years. There is even a theory among a growing number of geneticists that everyone on the planet shares a common DNA that may be traced back to a !Kung Bushman woman who lived roughly 60,000 years ago somewhere in what is now Botswana – the oldest shared DNA yet found. This in turn has led to speculation

that Southern Africa may even have been the original cradle of mankind, not East Africa as has hitherto been the accepted wisdom.

Be that as it may, nobody else seems to have inhabited the region until Bantu-speaking, black African pastoralists began moving down into the subcontinent from West and Central Africa sometime around the first century AD. The result seems to have been a classic pattern of cultural displacement – aggressive pastoralists encounter peaceful hunter-gatherers (the Bushmen, like many hunter-gatherer societies, have no warrior tradition at all), and clear them from the land as they would the game, killing the men, taking the women as concubines and gradually assimilating the indigenous culture into their own.

As proof of this, ethnologists cite the tonal clicks, which originate in Bushman language, that are currently used among Southern Africa's

Bantu nations, as well as shamanic healing and rain-making traditions still found among both Bushman and Bantu groups. There are also many eyewitness accounts from early white hunter/explorers, such as Selous and Baines, of deliberate genocidal and slave-raiding expeditions being carried out against San/Bushmen by Bantu groups, such as the Ndebele, Zulu and BaTswana, as late as the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The colonial whites did their bit in the genocide too. When the first Dutch settlers annexed the Cape in 1652, they took to hunting Bushmen for sport, and over the following two centuries white Afrikaner settlers pushed north and west, killing Bushmen where they found them. From the early 1900s until the 1930s German settlers practised a similar form of 'ethnic cleansing' (a term actually employed by the Teutonic administrators at the time) in the territory that is now Namibia. By the post 1945 era Bushmen

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only survived in significant numbers in the Kalahari region of central Botswana and eastern Namibia, where the almost complete lack of ground water made both white and black settlement unviable.

A time to resist

All that changed, however, in the 1970s when new technology allowed deeper, more powerful boreholes to be sunk through thousands of feet of igneous rock to gain access to the Kalahari's vast underground aquifers. In Botswana especially, first the British government and then the European Union – in a well-meaning attempt to help the foundering post-colonial country achieve economic independence – funded hundreds of such boreholes as well as the erection of thousands of kilometres of game fences to separate the new livestock areas from the potential diseases carried by wild game populations.

These fences cut straight across aeons-old migration routes. Zebra, wildebeest and other migratory animals which had traditionally wandered in and out of the Kalahari, following the rains, found their way barred and wandered up and down these fences until they died – in their hundreds of thousands. At the time there was a mass outcry from journalists and environmentalists, and a book detailing the tragedy – *Cry of the Kalahari* – became a bestseller in Europe and the US. But the fences stayed up.

For the San/Bushman groups who relied on the game, this was a disaster – exacerbated by the fact that many of them also found themselves hemmed in by the fence lines. Without animals to hunt, they quickly became dependent on the new cattle barons – mostly prominent members of the leading BaTswana clans who assumed control of the country after the British left. The only significant Bushman populations to escape this fate were those living inside the perimeter of the vast Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which was then sacrosanct, having been set aside by the exiting British administration in

1961 as an attempt to 'do something for the Bushmen' before they left.

Meanwhile, in 1972 in neighbouring South Africa, the last group of traditionally living Bushmen left in the whole country, the Xhmani, was kicked out of what is now the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. And in the same decade in Namibia (then called South-West Africa and controlled by South Africa) thousands of Bushmen were also evicted from their ancestral territories to make way for new game reserves – including the present-day Etosha National Park and the Kaudom Game Reserve, two of Southern Africa's premier safari showcases. Only the Ju'/Hoansi Bushmen of the Nyae Nyae area of the far north-east of Namibia survived with any real access to the land and the game.

However, in the early 1990s these Ju'/Hoansi began, amazingly, to reverse the age-old cycle of dispossession and extinction. Through their fledgling organisation – the Nyae Nyae Foundation, started by the American ethnologist and film-maker John Marshall – the Ju'/Hoansi lobbied the newly independent government to declare their region a Game Conservancy, with them appointed as stewards and administrators. After a protracted, uphill battle this was finally achieved in 1998 – setting a precedent for other Bushman groups to follow suit. The most notable victory, in the following year, was in South Africa where the Xhmani Bushmen, after a similarly difficult battle, persuaded their government to award them ownership of some 65,000 hectares of traditional land. The tide, it seemed, was turning.

An uneasy peace

All the more ironic therefore that, just as the Bushmen of Namibia and South Africa were finally being listened to by their hitherto hostile governments, the Bushmen of Botswana found themselves under siege by their own. Until the 1990s Botswana had had an exemplary human rights record. It also had (and still has) the



strongest economy and currency on the continent and a tiny population (1.5 million in an area somewhat larger than France). Shortage of land was not a problem, nor was shortage of money. And when, in 1996, the De Beers diamond prospectors found kimberlite deposits within the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, a company spokesman announced – in London's *Daily Telegraph* – that De Beers had no problem with the Bushmen staying nearby while they mined; it was up to the government to make any decisions about resettlement.

Was this a veiled way of telling the Botswana government what De Beers expected of them? Either way, by 1996 the state had announced its plans to move the people out, citing over-hunting by Bushmen as the main reason, along with vague statements about tourism development and – a further irony – that they could not offer 'development benefits' such as schools and healthcare to the Bushmen as long as they were living inside a game reserve.

A Bushman grass-roots political organisation, First People of the Kalahari (FPK), headed by a charismatic half-Bushman, half-white farmer called (appropriately) John Hardbattle immediately took up the fight. FPK had long been seeking some kind of political platform for Botswana's Bushmen who to this day have no representation in Botswana's parliament or in its House of Chiefs. In an attempt to rectify this and at the same time to fight the coming evictions, John Hardbattle travelled to the UK and the US to alert the international media and garner public support for the Bushman cause.

This was not about over-hunting, asserted Hardbattle; the Bushmen/San, of all people, knew how to manage land and game in a sustainable way. Nor was it about development – for as Hardbattle pointed out, if a mine was going to be built within the reserve,

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along with accommodation, clinics and schools for the workers, then why could similar development not be given to the Bushman inhabitants? Why move them at all? Was it in fact because the government, and De Beers, worried that FPK might demand a share of the diamond revenue?

Hardbattle found some powerful allies on his trip. In Manhattan, the feminist pioneer Gloria Steinem activated human rights agencies such as Cultural Survival International, and persuaded several wealthy socialites and foundations to make large donations to FPK. In London, the indigenous rights organisation Survival International began a protest campaign (and a speech was made in the House of Lords crying shame). Along with this came a raft of newspaper attention on both sides of the Atlantic.

Meanwhile, in Africa, another organisation for Bushman rights, the Working Group For Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), was founded with massive funding from several Scandinavian countries. It hired a human rights lawyer from the same firm that had successfully represented the Xhmani Bushman land claim in South Africa – Chennels Albertyn – and had him file a similar claim on behalf of the Central Kalahari Bushmen in Botswana.

John Hardbattle died suddenly of lymphatic cancer at the end of this brief campaign. But the campaign bore sufficient fruit for the Botswana government to back off and even start making vague conciliatory noises, while De Beers went completely silent. Those Bushmen who had already been moved began drifting back into the reserve to take up their traditional lives once more, and the inhabitants of the other villages within the reserve stated their resolve to resist any further attempts to move them. And so the dust died down, and for a few years an uneasy

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peace reigned over the Kalahari.

Botswana acts, the EU chooses not to see

Fast forward to 2001. With the issue now long gone from the Western media the Botswana government re-announced its plans to move everyone out of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve once more. Several foreign journalists who had been following the story from afar went down to the reserve and found that plans for construction of a new diamond mine at Gope were well under way. Survival International re-launched its London protests, with weekly vigils outside the Botswana High Commission and a letter-writing campaign to the Botswana president, Festus Mogae, and the ministers of land, agriculture and tourism.

The issue raised its head in the British press once more and two books detailing the plight were published – my own *The Healing Land* (Fourth Estate) and Sandy Gall's *Bushmen of the Kalahari – Slaughter of the Innocent* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson). Documentaries were made and aired on British and French television. But none of it made any difference.

By July of this year, after employing a mixed tactic of cutting off the water supply to the reserve's villages, physical intimidation and a mass revocation of hunting licences, local government officials managed to load up the entire Bushman/San population of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve – more than 2,000 people – and dump them at New Xade, just outside the park perimeter. New Xade has no game, no wild foods, no firewood. Everyone there is completely dependent on government handouts. In the months since the eviction took place alcoholism and prostitution have – according to local human rights agencies – become rampant in what the Bushmen/San call 'the place of death'.

In one fell swoop the largest representative population of the world's oldest culture had been eclipsed. As ethnic cleansings go it was quite an achievement.

The story has a sad postscript. Glenys Kinnock, www.openDemocracy.net

a prominent Member of the European Parliament (and wife of a European Commissioner) visited Botswana to see if the EU's development aid to the country's cattle industry should be stopped as a response to the evictions. The visit, according to the Daily Telegraph, which reported on it at length, was a propaganda whitewash. Mrs Kinnock, despite having been lengthily briefed by Survival International in London, confined her experience of New Xade to being shown around by government representatives.

It would seem that she swallowed their official line that the Bushmen had been 'voluntarily' relocated in order to receive development and uplift. With the government people watching, the resettled Bushmen of course said nothing to contradict this. Mrs Kinnock did not meet with FPK or WIMSA representatives although apparently, when she attended a local community meeting, FPK leader Roy Sesarna was physically prevented from taking the microphone. Mrs Kinnock announced, on her return, that she had seen 'nothing untoward' at New Xade and that as far as she was concerned there was no reason why the EU money should be turned off.

Why?

This could well be the end of the line for the Bushmen/San as a viable people, and one is left wondering why it had to end this way. Perhaps then the Botswana government was embarrassed by the presence of hunter-gatherers in its 21st century society. Certainly some of the rhetoric that has come from the higher-ups there suggests this. The best of many quotes is the most recent (darkly absurd) statement made by government minister M. Merafhe in 2001: 'We all aspire to Cadillacs. The San can no longer be allowed to commune with flora and fauna.'

But even if Botswana's government does want the Bushmen/San to be propelled into the 21st century, surely that development could have been offered to them in their ancestral territory. By dispossessing them, Botswana has just



created a brand new underclass, which, while a very modern Third World phenomenon, will not buy their country any more modern integrity in the eyes of the outside world. It does not seem logical.

Perhaps it is simply a case – rather like Mugabe’s land grab in Zimbabwe – of good old male ego flying in the face of reason; something along the lines of, these are our Bushmen, we have been doing what we like to them for generations and who the hell are you to say any different? As Kalahari anthropologists and activists, Richard B. Lee, Megan Biesele and Robert Hitchcock, pointed out in the most recent edition of Cultural Survival Quarterly devoted to the plight of the Bushmen: ‘Not so long ago, BaTswana tribespeople referred to their San servants as “bulls” and “heifers”.’ Given this, it is not surprising that the Botswana government, which is mostly composed of the BaTswana nobility, feels no shame in its barbaric actions.

If the Bushmen truly are the ancestors of us all, then their mass eviction from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve can be seen as

equivalent to kicking one’s grandfather out into the street. Whatever the real reasons behind it all, a grave injustice has been done, and a potential environmental crisis set into motion – for who knows better how to sustainably manage the fragile, arid Kalahari than its original, traditionally-living inhabitants?

Which leaves us with the question we began with – given that this is a local and regional issue, why is the recent forced eviction of the Bushmen from Botswana’s Central Kalahari Game Reserve not even on the agenda of this month’s upcoming Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development?

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