

The only good Bushman...¹

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This article considers the glaring contrast between the furore over the repatriation of the unknown El Negro with the continuing neglect and subordination of some 100,000 of his San and other Remote descendents. Botswana's Foreign Minister shows respect for El Negro, but Botswana's treatment of the San today is the worst in the region.

The long exhibition in Spain of El Negro, the remains of an unknown man taken from southern Africa in the 19th century, came to an end in 2000. The display of a dead human being in a museum at Banyoles near Barcelona was ended, after considerable international furore in the early 1990s, and subsequent delays by Spanish museum and local authorities. El Negro arrived in Botswana on 4 October 2000 amidst considerable ceremony. The Organisation of African Unity was said to have asked Botswana to accept the body on behalf of Africa. El Negro was met at the airport in Gaborone by a military guard of honour, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lt.-Gen. Mompoti Merafhe, said: 'We accept him as citizen of this country'. He added that the country was 'angered by the way he was displayed [in Spain] like a stuffed antelope.'²

El Negro laid in state overnight—only the second person to be accorded this honour in Botswana. Although the city possessed two actual cemeteries, he was interred next day in a park at Broadhurst, not far from the centre of town. The burial arrangements, according to Leslie Nthoi of the University of Botswana, did not accord with traditional Tswana practice.³ No San representatives were present. A large sign commemorating El Negro was placed above the grave.

Although they acquired citizenship at independence in 1966, few living San are treated as normal or full citizens of Botswana. The lineaments of the discrimination meted out to them run deep, and they are without the resources for active citizenship. San, or in local parlance *Basarwa*, are in Eric Wolf's terminology 'a people without history',⁴ whose culture, identity, and self-hood, not to say labour, land, and cattle, were appropriated by Tswana overlords.⁵ They lack a self-given name, and are without knowledge even of their numbers, since the government declines to collect census data on an ethnic basis.

Where every Batswana has an attested right to land from local authorities, San in general are without secure land rights. Cash income is a prerequisite for effective political participation, but if San have any at all it was, in findings for the early 1990s, considerably below P100 (or then about \$30) a month, for a household, of perhaps five to seven, for only part of a year.⁶ When they are employed, it is typically as farm labourers, or as short-term recipients of food-for-work relief programmes. Botswana's successful pastoral economy was built in large part on their serfdom,⁷ and a conditioning to obey lingered on among San in the western sandveld of Central District, according to experienced observers, into the 1990s. Serfs (or *malata*) were not allowed to own property, and had no political status. Facets of this system, Campbell and Main wrote in 1991, still prevailed.⁸

They are also the special objects of repeated, coerced re-location. This takes place without adequate compensation, usually in the interests, variously, of cattle production, wildlife preservation, bureaucratic convenience, and minerals exploitation. Re-location commonly occurs in oppressive colonial or semi-colonial situations—Scotland's Highland Clearances, when 'sheep ate men', colonial Australia, French Algeria, apartheid South Africa. It is emblematic of a people's near total absence of human rights. As cattle production intensified in the western sandveld, for instance, any San, or other closely

related Remote Area Dwellers (RADs), in the official terminology, '[could] be told to move by anyone who ha[d] been awarded [rights to land] by the Land Board', noted Campbell and Main.⁹

Resettlement of unwanted San has been occurring again in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) since 1997. Botswana chose to set aside two-fifths of its land area as parks and reserves devoted to wildlife and tourism activities, supposedly the second-largest allocation of this type in the world. The CKGR is the country's largest reserve, and covering more than 52,000 square kilometres, it is the second largest in Africa. Created under British administration in 1961, the original function was emphatically twofold: in the words of the Proclamation, 'to protect wildlife resources and reserve sufficient land for traditional use by hunter-gatherer communities in the Central Kalahari.' The CKGR was reserved for those whose 'primary subsistence was derived from wild-plants and animals'. Further regulations in 1963 declared that 'no person other than a Bushman indigenous to the [CKGR] shall enter the said Reserve without...a permit in writing from the District Commissioner, Ghanzi.' The population of San and other Remote Area people in the CKGR was then around 4,000, whose ancestors had possibly lived there for some 2,000 years.¹⁰

The latest re-locations have been accompanied by considerable prevarication over both the fact and the reasons for the removals, and by highly authoritarian methods of implementation. The Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing, Patrick Balopi, said in parliament in December 1995, that essential services for Basarwa would only be provided outside the CKGR because building schools and clinics inside '[would] not be compatible with maintaining the pristine environment of the game reserve.'¹¹ Another minister, George Kgoroba, added shortly after that tourism could become Botswana's number one income earner if, he emphasised, wildlife was conserved and game reserves made more attractive to tourists.¹² Neither made any mention of the diamond-prospecting that had been undertaken by De Beers and Falconbridge at Gope, in the south eastern part of the CKGR, since the early 1980s, and the impact that this might have on the Reserve's 'pristine environment' and tourism potential.

Official attitudes soon rigidified. When Balopi met CKGR residents in February 1996 he told them: 'I have not come to address any other question with you except that you must move'. A Ghanzi District Council representative clarified government thinking shortly after: 'The government will bring development to those who move outside the Reserve...Those who would like to be given development (sic) would migrate, and those who do not want to get it...would remain.'¹³ The views of the then Vice President, Festus Mogae, in July 1996, were chillingly dismissive. San, he said in an interview with a leading London newspaper, were 'stone-age creatures', and what he termed 'human dodos', who faced inevitable extinction if they refused to accommodate themselves to the government's developmental plans.¹⁴

Ditshwanelo, the Botswana human rights centre, reported that 'those who are moving [out of the CKGR] are doing so because of government policy...they are not doing it freely.'¹⁵ Outsa Mokone, an able local journalist, summed-up the situation when he noted 'relentless pressure' upon San residents in the Reserve: 'sometimes it is a display of force by government officials, more often a word whispered to residents to scare them.'¹⁶

By mid-June 1997, Xade, one of the largest settlements inside the Reserve, was empty of its residents. They had been moved to New Xade, sixty kilometres away, where there were few trees, no potable water, and no permanent buildings. Winter was setting in. Samora Gaborone is a Botswana academic closely involved in the future of the CKGR. He stated in May 1998 that the government had speeded up its resettlement campaign following the sudden death of John Hardbattle, co-founder of the First People of the Kalahari based in Ghanzi, and an effective spokesperson. The First People had written letters to Minister Balopi and to his successor at Local Government and Lands, Margaret Nasha. These were

neither acknowledged nor responded to, he said. Gaborone believed that the responsible Ministry 'did not want to enter into negotiations with Basarwa.'¹⁷

Official estimates indicated that 1,200 people had been moved from Xade to New Xade through 1997-1998, while another 3,100 people had been re-located near Kaudwane in the south at the same time. Denying the government's claims that they had moved voluntarily, with adequate arrangements made for their reception, about 400 to 600 San moved back, carrying their belongings on their backs, inside the Reserve, in 1999. When they persisted in their efforts to remain in what they considered to be home, the Ghanzi District Council, in April 2001, threatened them with the cessation of water services.¹⁸

In July 2000, the Minister of Mining, Boometswe Mokgothu, admitted for the first time, that a prospective diamond mine at Gope in the CKGR was under active, advanced consideration. Another minister and a senior public servant had both specifically denied this possibility in 1997.¹⁹ It could cover over 40 square kilometres, and have an expected lifespan of 18 years.²⁰ Here was a threat to the environment of the Reserve, and possibly to its tourism potential, far greater than some 4,000 San had ever represented.²¹ On the assessment of the Department of Wildlife and Natural Resources, the Gope mine would be 'so large and permanent that there would be no realistic chance of rehabilitating the area for a very long time.'²²

The dissimulation continued. Mokgothu insisted that a permanent mining site would not be established at Gope, and he reportedly said, in April 2001, that 'we have no reason for chasing Basarwa away for diamonds.'²³

Reality on the ground seemed different. Persistent efforts to evict the remaining San, accompanied by occasional raids and beatings, have been reported by Andrea Hardbattle, newly returned to her birthplace in Ghanzi. 'The situation of the Bushmen is the worst it has ever been', she said in an interview in May 2001. The underlying reason for the removals from the CKGR was, she felt, the old racism: 'Today Bushmen are still seen as inferior'.²⁴

There were wider dimensions to both El Negro and the diamonds in the CKGR. The coerced resettlements from the Reserve threatened to place Botswana's gems in the obnoxious category of 'conflict diamonds'. Brutal civil war was not occurring as it was in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Angola, but some 4,000 San were being evicted from ancestral lands. Organisations existed, such as Survival International and Amnesty, which saw this connection, and could promote an international boycott of Botswana's diamonds in consequence. President Mogae seemed aware of this likelihood when he toured Europe in 2001, insisting that Botswana's diamonds were 'clean', and he repeated this message in the United States.²⁵ Mining at Gope was also in potential conflict with organised tourism interests in the Reserve, as HATAB seemed aware.²⁶

It is in this context that the ceremony accorded to El Negro occurred.²⁷ Details therein were acquired and disseminated, and the wider aspects largely ignored. Honour to one dead Bushman was indeed outstanding. Botswana has the largest San population in the region—the next largest was Namibia, with South Africa a low third—but it arguably treated its San inhabitants worse than its two neighbours.²⁸ The El Negro which actually arrived in Gaborone, moreover, was not the body on long display in Banyoles. What arrived was simply a skull in a box labelled museum exhibit, not human remains.²⁹

The exhibit is in a grave in a park, and is apparently expected to attract the visitors to El Negro who would not be appropriate in a cemetery. The new exhibition might serve to distract international attention from the resettlements in the CKGR, and the situation of the 100,000 or so other San in the country. For some, however, it could have a contrary effect—one Unknown Bushman, like an Unknown Soldier, highlighting the plight of all of the rest.

Notes and References

1. My thanks to Zac Graham and his letter 'Only One Good Bushman', *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 13 October 2000.
2. As quoted in *The Star* (Johannesburg), 5 October 2000, with a photograph of the honour guard at the airport.
3. Oral presentation by Leslie Nthoi, 'Was El Negro re-buried properly? Tswana burial beliefs and customs', Workshop on the Repatriation of El Negro, History Department, University of Botswana, 24 May 2001.
4. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1982.
5. Edwin N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled With Flies: a Political Economy of the Kalahari*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1989.
6. A generous estimate extrapolated from Alec Campbell, Michael Main and Associates, *Western Sandveld Remote Area Dwellers Report*, Gaborone, April 1991, and Economic Consultancies, et.al., *A Monitoring Programme for the Settlements at Thankane, Kokotsha, Inalegolo, Monong, Ngwathe and Groot Laagte*, Gaborone, 31 May 1991. Campbell and Main found that San average wages were about P25 a month plus rations, *ibid*, p.45.
7. The system of Basarwa servitude 'lay at the very roots' of the successful Tswana pastoral economy, Suzanne Meiers and Michael Crowder, 'The Politics of Slavery in Bechuanaland...', in Meiers and Crowder (eds), *The End of Slavery in Africa*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988, p.177.
8. *Op.cit.*, pp. 14-15, 58 and 65.
9. 'All RADs' there were threatened with removals, *ibid*, pp.56-57.
10. Emily Pedder, 'Report on the Central Kalahari Game Reserve', mimeo, n.d., p.19, and Kenneth Good, *The Liberal Model and Africa: Elites Against Democracy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming, c.2001
11. Quoted in *The Botswana Gazette* (Gaborone), 20 December 1995.
12. *Botswana Daily News* (Gaborone), 15 February 1996.
13. Quoted in Pedder, *op.cit.*, p.23.
14. Cited by Suzanne Daley, 'No Room in Desert for 'Human Dodos'', *The Guardian* (London), 16 July 1996.
15. Ditshwanelo, *When Will This Moving Stop?, Report on a Fact-finding Mission to the [CKGR]*, Gaborone: Ditshwanelo Botswana Centre for Human Rights 10-14 April 1996, p.13.
16. M. Mokone, 'Basarwa Lose Removal Battle', *The Botswana Gazette*, 29 October 1997.
17. Samora Gaborone presented a statement which he had addressed to the then Vice-President designate, Lt.-Genl. Ian Khama, to a meeting of the University of Botswana's Basarwa Research Committee. He was an adviser to CKGR residents and to the First People of the Kalahari.
18. Council secretary, Kgotla Morakanyane, said the decision was taken after 'necessary consultation with the ministry.' Alpheons Moroke, *The Botswana Guardian* (Gaborone), 20 April 2001. Margaret Nasha, the responsible minister, appeared to disagree subsequently with the Council's decision, but added: 'In so far as we are concerned the issue has long been settled. Basarwa have moved to New Xade and Kaudwane.' Letshwiti Tutwane, in *Mmegi* (Gaborone), 20 April 2001.
19. E. Molale, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Local Government, wrote in a Johannesburg paper, that '[Basarwa] have not been and will never be dispossessed of any land'; that after '15 years' of 'consulting and negotiating', some Basarwa had agreed to move 'of their own free will'; and specifically affirmed that 'there are no mines coming up in the CKGR.' Letters to the Editor, *The Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 7 September 1997. Rather similarly, Minister Kgoroba was said to have told Xade residents earlier that the search for minerals in the reserve had proved fruitless. Samora Gaborone, 'Resettling of the [CKGR] Basarwa: Who Gains or Loses in a State Sponsored Dispossession', Dept of Adult Education, University of Botswana, March 1997, p.12.
20. Article by Spencer Mogapi, *The Botswana Gazette*, 5 July 2000, and Alpheous Moroke, 'Do You Trust This Government?', *The Midweek Sun* (Gaborone), 12 July 2000.
21. Modise Mothoagae, the director of the Hotel and Tourism Association Botswana (HATAB), was reported as finding Minister Mokgothu's revelation shocking, particularly as regards the time that it took for the government to come into the open: 'It brings in a question of compensation. [Basarwa] must be compensated accordingly.' Cited by Moroke, *ibid*.

22. *Central Kalahari and Khutse Game Reserves. Second Draft Management Plan*, Gaborone, 7 May 1999, pp.29 & 34.
23. Cited by Tutwane, *Mmegi*, 20 April 2001.
24. Cited by Christina Lamb, in the *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 20 April 2001.
25. 'We wanted them to be aware that we are apprehensive, lest our gem diamonds be harmed when we don't have any conflict', he reported on return to Gaborone, Enole Ditsheko, 'Mogae Pleads Botswana's Case in US', *Mmegi*, 6 July 2001.
26. Their concerns were heightened as tourism earnings especially in the north of the country fell, under the influence of lawlessness and violence in neighbouring Zimbabwe. Rebaone Odirile, 'HATAB in Bid to Save Botswana Tourism', *The Botswana Guardian*, 13 July 2001.
27. An enthusiastic and celebratory role in the process was played by the History Department at the University of Botswana, which accepted that the issue was as officially defined, the reprehensible display of human remains in Spain and the 'repatriation' of them to Botswana.
28. Considered in Good, *op.cit.*
29. As clearly shown in a photograph in *The Star*, 5 October 2000.