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THE 'DIRTY' SOCIAL SCIENTIST:  
WHOSE ADVOCATE, THE DEVIL'S OR THE PEOPLE'S?

pp. 173-189

Problems of doing anthropology at 'home': the case of Botswana social  
scientists doing research on their cultural other, the Basarwa

Sethunya T. Mphinyane

Introduction

Ideas of this paper sparked from a leaflet in the coffee room entitled *Survival: For the Tribal Peoples*. I flipped through it and discovered that one of the tribal people they were working with were from my own country Botswana, namely the Basarwa or 'Bushmen'. They were battling with the government to stop the then on-going effort to move them out of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) to New Xade. The issue being very contentious, within Botswana, I became curious as to what they see to be the problem and how they set about to tackle it. I had not hitherto been aware of their campaign, and I must admit my first instinct even before I read more about what they were doing was to fear that their narrative would be one-sided (on the concept of 'narrative', see Rapport 2000).

Reading through the Internet, about what *Survival* (Survival International) says about the resettlement the tribal people in my own country, I was amazed at how successfully they had been able to depict both the Government of Botswana and its people as senseless villains, hardcore racists who wanted no good for the first Peoples of the Kalahari, who wanted to remain in the CKGR. Notwithstanding Botswana's reputation of being an exemplar of democracy (Good 1994) *Survival* has used allegation by some Basarwa of threats by government to use arms to kill them if they do not agree to the resettlement. I felt that *Survival* was counting on the rampant abuse of human rights in Africa, to sell such allegations to people unfamiliar with the politics of Botswana as true. I felt masses of people were conned into pressuring governments on things they only knew carefully narrated half-

truths about, without a full appreciation of some of the complexities around that issue from other view points, especially the government of Botswana.

Initially, I had intended to write on this problem, of the danger of international and non-governmental organizations crafting a way of speaking about a problem, just a single way of looking at it. It was my disappointment at the biasness of the Government's official response that shifted my attention to rethinking my initial 'dislike' of the Survival campaign strategy. Is the dislike justified? What about the way in which I construct my identity influences my way of seeing? What is it about my social positioning viz. the Basarwa that makes me think that the best thing to happen to them is to live more like the other tribes? What makes Survival International and other Indigenous or First peoples organizations to see it otherwise? Survival blames the racism apparently prevalent among the peoples of Botswana against Basarwa. I wondered, what is a Botswana person's way of seeing? Is it racist? If so why? What if Survival, looking as an outsider would, sees things differently from my involved self. My paper then changed from being about how Western cultural groups were misguiding their audiences to how there is a need for theorising that helps me to best understand my positioning, the need to write more about distances from the point of view of the non-west.

I had the pleasure of meeting a representative of Survival International at the conference when I presented this paper, and I had a chance to exchange views with her. I have been most appreciative of her reception of the issues I raise in this paper which concern their campaign strategy. We both agree about the need for Survival International to sell itself much more to the peoples of Botswana, who although have been labelled racist toward Basarwa, many are unaware of the campaign. This would strengthen the debate and make it less of 'foreign' intrusion in 'local' issues.

In this paper I shall discuss the problem of being a Tswana-speaking citizen from three angles pulling a researcher whom is at the same time a citizen and a scholar in sometimes opposing ways: Coming from imbalanced historical relations with the Basarwa and the problems it presents; Identifying oneself as a citizen of a sovereign Botswana and the cross cutting ties of nationalism and 'external interference'; and the problems surrounding taking

an active role like that of Survival within a group with which I occupy a space of domination real or imagined.

### Historical relations of Basarwa and the dominant Tswana groups

The construction of Basarwa as not equal to the Tswana-speaking groups is less a product of the constitution of Botswana than it is a product of a much longer pre-colonial history between the two. Basarwa have been in contact with Bantu-speaking agropastoral populations for over 2000 years. However, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries because of pressure on land and the expansion of empires within the whole of Southern Africa the Basarwa were pushed more and more into the margins. They were allowed very little freedom of community voice; they could not secure land, could not transfer their allegiance to another person, and could not marry Tswana females. They were excluded from the political life of the Tswana, had no voice in court, they were sometimes murdered, and their children carried off into captivity without any consent. In effect the Tswana have stripped the Basarwa of all political rights, except as per the prerogative of the family head who possessed them. (Hitchcock and Holm 1985)

According to Hitchcock and Holm, The Basarwa occupy the lowest possible position in status among all tribal people in Botswana. For many Tswana-speaking the idea of intermarriage with them is almost inconceivable and even some Tswana political leaders still use the derogatory word *masarwa* to call them, which is equivalent to *kaffir* or *nigger*. The intellectuals are no better. Even the most progressive ones believe that the Basarwa ought to be given an opportunity to become a part of Tswana towns where they can take advantage of the market and an increasing array of government services. According to Hitchcock and Holm argue that most Tswana-speaking groups are still hesitant to speak when Basarwa are abused in public. Tswana society has not reached a point where it is considered acceptable even in educated company to condemn public expression of prejudice towards the Basarwa. This is not the case with other tribal minorities such as the Kalanga and the

Bayei. Even the most radical journalists they assert fail to recognize the unique discrimination of Basarwa.

On the several encounters I have personally experienced, more often than not each time a *Mosarwa* (sing. for *Basarwa*) encounters a Tswana-speaking person, the latter is referred to as *mong' wame*, literally my owner, *lekgoa*, literally the white man, denoting the superior being, and *mokweni*, meaning the superior Tswana-speaking tribe. The terms of referring to each other between them and us are not ambiguous about the nature of the relationship, not withstanding that the reality is much more complex. There may not be a direct relationship of domination between the particular Tswana-speaking person and the Basarwa.

The little literature that does exist on the relations of the Tswana today and the Basarwa, (Barnard 1997, Hughes, 1997, Saugestad, 1997, Hitchcock and Holm 1993) has tended to focus more on the bureaucrats, and even then on their official capacities, not on their local outside government relations. The assumption seems to be that once the government has a progressive attitude the prejudices will be cured. Hitchcock and Holm (1985) explain this silence as a fear among outside consultants of invoking angry reactions from government officials and undermine the chances of project proposals, hence they shy away from providing the depth of the humiliation that the Basarwa suffer, the pervasiveness of its effect and how it is reflected in the self perceptions of the Basarwa.

#### The Survival International narrative

*In general, Botswanans have a racist attitude towards 'Bushmen'.*

Survival International, *Urgent Action Bulletin*, December 1999.

For over thirty years Survival International has been involved in what it defines as championing tribal peoples' rights in imaginative ways. Through writing letters to relevant Governments, companies, banks, lobbying, media, United Nations, educating the public, raising funds, discerning information, demonstrations, bringing in tribal representatives to face governments,

companies and banks, challenging legal systems, they have been able to change the lives of Tribal peoples across the world. See the Survival website: <http://www.survival.org.uk/about4htm>.

In Botswana (Survival International *Urgent Action Bulletin*, June 1997, March 1998, December 1999), Survival has attempted to stop efforts by the Government of Botswana to forcibly expel Bushmen and Bakgalagadi from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. (CKGR) which was created in 1961 as a safe haven for them and to support their way of life. They have appealed to their international audience to write to the Government of Botswana to make demands on it to recognize the land rights of the Bushmen, to allow them to hunt freely and to help those that would like to return to the Reserve. According to their narrative, these are the facts:

The non-Bushmen people of Botswana have a racist attitude towards the Basarwa, seeing them as needing to be rescued from their miserable life among animals. Survival is arguing that the Khwe's intimate knowledge of the natural resources puts them in a better position than most to manage the plants and animals, given the chance. Apart from that, the land is their ancestral land where their souls and spirits are.

*Gugama (the creator) created creatures to be eaten.... We dance when we have a good hunt, when it rains and when we feel happy.*

<http://www.survival.org.uk/index2htm>

*We will die for the land Gugama gave us. We want to stay together in the land of our grandparents because we were given this land by God.'*

<http://www.survival.org.uk/index2htm>

The Government has refused to recognize any 'Bushman' ownership rights in the reserve, and has done anything from bribery in the form of promises to schooling, health care, employment, small plots of land, livestock and cash to intimidation. Those that have been successfully forced to move out into the resettlement camp in New Xade suffer ridicule, physical and sexual abuse in the schools because of the 'bushman' background. The few cash handouts received from government has been largely spent in local bars

because of this unwanted change of livelihood. It is impossible for them to continue with their traditional activities of hunting and gathering, they are limited to only three antelope per man, and if caught hunting any extra are beaten, imprisoned and tortured. Life is bad, the land is barren, the camps are overcrowded, they are bored depressed, and this results in alcoholism and violence. Survival then is helping them to effectively resist.

New developments are now being blocked, and telling people who wish to stay to move out because other people have accepted the move. The Government threatens periodically to stop the monthly supply of water delivery on which most of the Bushmen now depend. The people were also forcibly trucked straight to the settlement camp where they and the remains of their dwellings were dumped. (*Urgent Action Bulletin*, December 1999) Statements from the people themselves are used to substantiate the 'force' alleged. So people moved everyday.

*If we didn't move the army would come in and kill us and would stop the water. So people moved everyday. We are afraid, but we are still here and we won't go. The government still visits us to say it will send in the army to kill us and stop the water.*

#### The Government of Botswana Narrative

The Government narrative has been drawn from several responses mostly made in response to the international community between 1996 and 1998. The then President Masire, in Carnegie, Washington, June 13 1996 and the rest were acquired through the Ministry of Local Government Lands and Housing (MLGLH).

According to one of the papers simply entitled 'Basarwa: The Facts,' this is the *truth* of the matter. The British Colonial Government via High Commissioner's notice No.3 on 24 February 1961 to protect wildlife resources and to reserve land for the traditional hunter gathers created the CKGR. At the time it was wrongly assumed that the residents of the CKGR were strictly nomadic hunter-gatherers and that they would always remain so. It has

however become evident overtime that many of the residents have adopted other economic activities such as pastoral farming and significant land use conflicts have emerged.

As the document says, the Government has been seeking a resolution of the CKGR issue since 1985. The position of the Government is that the Basarwa should enjoy equal treatment like all Batswana as per the constitution. Following the recommendations of a Fact Finding Mission, after 1986 no new Government social infrastructure was set up in the reserve, but by 1991, efforts to persuade the residents to voluntary move out had made no significant progress. The Ghanzi District Council which has jurisdiction over the reserve passed a resolution that residents be regrouped at Xade, the most populated part of the reserve and that the area itself be de-gazetted from the reserve into tribal land. The population of the CKGR is estimated at around a thousand, more than half of whom are settled in Xade, and the rest scattered around the reserve. Botswana's land tenure one might like to note, is categorized into state land, communal land, national parks, and game reserves. Each category is designated for specific types of land use within a broad range of competing needs for land. The government feels that it is obligatory for the present society to conserve land for future generations. It is for this reason among others that the government wants to encourage the residents of the CKGR to move out, to conserve it as a game reserve.

In 1993 another working group was appointed in 1993 and its recommendations echoed the same 1985 sentiments, that no farther social or economic infrastructure be put in place. The Government is determined to carry out these recommendations and continue to put up incentives to persuade the Basarwa to resettle outside the reserve and help with transport and other facilities for those that want to move out. The Government's response has been that the Government of Botswana treats all its citizens as equal, and that ethnic identity is never used as criteria for deciding on development. (Saugestad 1997)

**Fitting oneself within the citizenship, historical relations and anthropologist matrix**

*Historical relations of domination: Tswana anthropologists: Whose advocates, the 'Devil's' or Basarwa's?*

What follows is my interpretation of what is wrong about the way in which Survival is handling the issue. My worry is, what it is about how I construct Basarwa as per where I am located, makes this particular analysis be more appealing to me? One of the ways in which we construct our being Tswana is that we are not Basarwa. We do this by keeping cultural markers between *them and us*. Boundary maintenance is very critical to ethnic identity, especially by ethnic groups that see themselves as superior to another. This according to Barth (1998) is first to define status categories and second to justify acceptance that different standards ought to exist between the two groups. Basarwa or being a Mosarwa is a stigmatized ethnic identity viz. being a Tswana.

Survival builds its case by presenting a picture of Basarwa as naturally capable of sustaining their ecosystem and down playing the very pertinent concerns about the wrong assumption that Basarwa would always remain hunter-gatherer societies, that the Government is raising. Although through its intervention, the Government of Botswana has been forced to be much more accountable and careful about how it handles this land issue, Survival is having to appeal to, create and sustain through pictures that portray the naturalness and innocence about Basarwa that in itself can be very disempowering. Basarwa are depicted as helpless victims, and therefore the spirit in which they are being empowered or helped is a very patronising one, not very different from the paternalistic bureaucratic system (Dyck 2000) of the Government.

Within anthropology (Douglas 1997) the debate as to whether Basarwa are helpless victims or a colonial myth (Gordon 1992) has created a major divide between what has come to be known as the Lee's school of thought whose opponents see as patronising and the Wilmsen school which seeks to oppose 'ethnic identities as always ascribed, attributed to and damagingly

inflicted upon people.' (Douglas 1997:50) The debate itself places the more directly imbued anthropologist like myself in an even much more complex and volatile position, where I can easily lose credibility among the Basarwa depending on how they position themselves within it. The other problem that the Survival narrative and most of the indigenous peoples campaigns allows us to think about is the way of projecting tribal peoples unwilting superior knowledge of the environment. As a political tool it is very powerful, but it can be a rather irresponsible stance for an intellectual who seeks to politically support the indigenous peoples courses, yet whose scholarly research may have pointed otherwise. Yet again it may just well be that I am prejudiced and more inclined towards seeing Basarwa not as any more knowledgeable than my Tswana rather than anthropologist self.

Survival has put it in no uncertain terms that it views the attitude of the people of Botswana towards Basarwa as racist. The Survival narrative is important in two ways, firstly because it places before us a challenge to look into our prejudices, are we racist it suggests? If so what can we do? If not, why would we be understood to be so? and most importantly the challenges our ability to play a role of advocacy within those we define as inferior to ourselves. This is not withstanding the point raised by Escobar (1991) that anthropological involvement in development is inherently compromising because it reproduces and benefits from the power relations within the development discourse anyway in the first place. (Gardner and Lewis 1996.)

Survival has a clear agenda, to mobilize support and resources to ameliorate what it defines as tribal peoples. Because of our perception that it is a foreign group *messing up* with the nation building of a country we identify with citizens, insiders as opposed to 'them,' we have not supported its causes, but it places a challenge before us as insiders: *What are we doing about the disadvantaged position of these tribal peoples in our country?* This question raises critical advocacy problems of whether we can ever be freed of our identity as dominators and be accepted as hard and dry academics or advocates. In what ways is the power relation likely to mute the voices and discourses of Basarwa? It is crucial, as Braidotti (1992) and much of Feminist critique has tried to emphasize to the critical thinker to unveil and criticise the modalities of power and domination implicit in all theoretical discourse, including her

own. Cheater argues that it is rare for academics to be conscious of the processes by which we are incorporated into the historical facticity of those we study.

Braidotti argument is that the first and foremost of locations in reality is one's own embodiment. The starting point for the epistemological side of the politics of location is rethinking the body. She urges social scientist to ask critical questions such as: What are the structural relations between me and my object of study? How are they constructed, by me and by them? Where am I subjectively located? How far can I go into the subject, and which conclusions are inescapable from my positioning versus theirs. One's relationship to thinking is the prototype of a different relationship to alterity altogether. If we lose sight of this ethical, relational foundation of thinking, that is to say the bond that certain discourses create among us, we are in danger of purely strategic or instrumental kinds of thought. (Ibid.)

As she aptly points out the subject, i.e. the citizen anthropologist and indeed the Basarwa must be thought of as a complex and multiple identity. It is neither simply a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological. There is no stable internally coherent way of being on either side; it is ever so shifting, contextual and situational. Not the only pre-colonial history but also the post-colonial official or constitutional person defined as Tswana-speaking is faced with the problem of the nationalist identity, citizenship and its contemporary manifestations further complicate their positioning, and therefore ability to speak on behalf of, or about Basarwa. It is therefore important to explore the ways in which the history between 'us' and 'them' places us in relation with them. How far are we inextricably trapped in this history, what are our limits therefore or in what ways can we manage history in the present.

Although there has been a lot of attention given to the problems of working 'away' from 'home' and being at 'home' from the point of view of the Western scholar, there is an appalling silence on the distances that exist between the non western 'self' and its own 'other,' or issues around being at 'home' for them. The 1985 Association of Social Anthropology (Jackson, 1985) at Leeds was centred on this very issue. However much of it is of the West

speaking to itself. Social sciences especially anthropology has long worked on the area of the self in relation with the 'other' from many angles of being self and being other. Okely suggests that anthropologists working at home need to realize that they have to work just as hard to familiarize themselves with 'home' (Okely 1985) as the western scholar. More recently Ferguson and Gupta (1997) have pushed for a shift away from imagined cultural distances to political distances. However there is still very little written on this subject from a non-western's perspective.

Worse still, there is hardly any literature on how a scholars whose social relations with the 'other' are imbued within prejudices that are universally recognized as terms of abuse and condemnation, socially unacceptable. The silence gives little room for scholars to be reflexive about their situations. We run the risk of imagining such imbalances do not exist. Terms like 'racism' have become so repulsed that racists feel compelled to deny they are as such. (Dubow 1995) It is unthinkable today to conceive that anyone in their right mind can openly express their racist tendencies. There is universal acknowledgement that racism is still rife, and anthropology and other social sciences have written widely on it, but there has been a tendency to talk about it as though it exist elsewhere and not within any sensible scholar. Through the use of politically correct language, a poverty of theorising on this problem around being defined as prejudiced. This is not to argue that people have been less reflexive of their class position and how it might influence their way of seeing, but more attention has been given to what Peirano has called 'nearby Otherness'. The way of looking at racism, that is operating is one that sees it as a conscious attitude in the mind rather than a socially embedded imagery that may have very little to do with the particular attitude of the individual.

### *Citizenship*

The Government presents its *facts* as factual because as Mohanty (1991) has argued, the idea of abstracting particular places, people, and events into generalized categories, laws and policies is fundamental to any kind of ruling.

These categories are not an innocent presentation of facts, it is directly political and ideological (Ibid.). There is already new evidence that the *facts* as had previously been stated were just another narrative, a chosen way of telling the story of the CKGR land issue. In a recent Botswana local newspaper, it is now coming out that the 'equal access to national resources' narrative that has put the Government in the favour of its citizens against outsiders needs soon to be altered. In a ongoing debacle between Hotel and Tourism Association Of Botswana (HATAB), and Debswana, the Debeers Diamond Company Botswana chapter, it is coming out what the real land use conflict for the Government of Botswana is, to chose between the most profitable land use for the CKGR would be once the Basarwa are out; diamond mining or tourism.

HATAB has been sitting on the fence all the while the government was relocating Basarwa in the name of tourism, but now that they face competition from other profitable land use alternatives, they are trying to re-question government's former justifications of the resettlement on alleged land use conflicts because elsewhere in the country other communities are living within the wildlife reserves under a community based wildlife management policy. Although their re-kindling of the historical occupation of the CKGR for selfish interests, the Government narrative is getting more and more exposed as contextually and shiftingly *factual*. Survival has long warned of the real agenda behind the resettlement but each of the Ministers responsible at the time since the issue began in 1985 has denied the mining interests possibility. However the government is most likely going to create another set of *facts* to suit its new position. In the end its not so much the greater truth of the government narrative as its calling on our sense of belonging with the country that makes us to defend it against 'outsiders.'

The government has carefully crafted its own narrative to seduce the nation into believing that all it is seeking to do is to provide to every Motswana equally, as per the constitution. Saugestad (1997) has challenged the denial by Government of Botswana to recognize the Basarwa as fitting the definition of indigenous peoples, and therefore not simply as an economically deprived group. The appeal to equity by government has masked its real intentions, but more than that it has been very instrumental in immobilising

the majority of even progressive citizens from looking beyond these seemingly noble intentions. The government narrative has been very instrumental in creating the thinking that Basarwa are as just one among a number of economically disadvantaged groups, and that they will change for the better once they become more educated, change their diet, build modern houses, take part in modern professions and accept authority of headmen and chiefs. (Hitchcock and Holm 1993)

The outstanding democratic governance record of Botswana, the constitution, her good human rights record, her sound economy are used carefully by government to ridicule any claims that Basarwa may be suffering any forms of discrimination viz. other tribal groups. The government narrative uses the equality to all enshrined in the to hide some of the contradictions and inconsistencies in dealing with land use conflicts that Survival is exposing. When I occupy the space of the self simply as scholar, outside my own relationship with the Government of Botswana, it is easier to make such an analysis.

However, when I occupy another sense of selfhood, i.e., a citizen of Botswana against the 'other' foreign governments and organizations and especially, those that may question our integrity as a collective, I create an *other* with which to define myself against, in this case, the 'West'. In the case where Survival attacks that which I identify with as part of myself, there is an unreasoning impulse to defending one's identity. Even members of the Botswana opposition parties are likely to stand on the defence of their country when it comes under *foreign* attack. Just recently at a Botswana Student Union meeting held in London for all Botswana student studying in the U.K. and Northern Ireland, there was a complaint raised about a BBC expose for Survival on television some time around Christmas which showed pictured of the Basarwa. The anger was not on whether there was anything false about the documentary but on the picture about Botswana that was being projected. Most Batswana, as Hitchcock and Holm (1993) have pointed out, view international cultural groups as misguided troublemakers who degrade Tswana society by preventing the modernization of one of its backward groups, even worse seeking special tribal privileges for a tribal group. As a result the cultural rights groups from North America and Europe receive

almost no support within Botswana even within those groups that are concerned with social justice issues.

A.P. Cheater's article, 'The anthropologist as citizen, the different self?' is one of those few that address the anthropologist at home in terms of the non-western anthropologist. Her argument is that especially in the Third World it has been very difficult for academics to separate the anthropological profession from citizenship, and I must add nationalism. The academics may be political participants, but far more significant is their intellectual skill, which often carries exaggerated scarcity value. Through their power as teachers and writers they are able to construct social reality in a particular conceptual image for their students and readers. It is especially for this reason that we need to be very reflexive (Knowles 2000: 56) about our positioning and constantly ask ourselves why we might be prone to some ways of seeing. Independent ideas, she argues are much more dangerous than physical violence. The intellectuals often share citizenship with their own politicians, even while their construction of reality may be distinct. Given that we are citizens of this country, and that we may have to defend statements about it especially when the alleged prejudices have to do with a minority group of our country which we cannot historically deny their dispossession we are charged with a great responsibility to be careful that we are not simply being prejudiced because we do not want to face the truth. Even if we were to admit that we are indeed imbued within racist discourses, we need to be able to find a matrix that enables us to work within such a facticity and yet not let it disable us, paralyse us such that we do nothing about it.

### Conclusion

There is basically need for two things, to pay much more scholarly attention towards doing anthropology at home from a non Western angle of being at home and more importantly for bravery to admit that we exist within sometimes prejudiced social relations with our object of study as researchers, and that beyond seeing these social relations such as nationalism and racism simply as interesting cultural phenomena of only analytical importance to us

as social scientist as Eriksen (1995: 261) seems to suggest, we need to place ourselves within them permanent members of such relations.

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