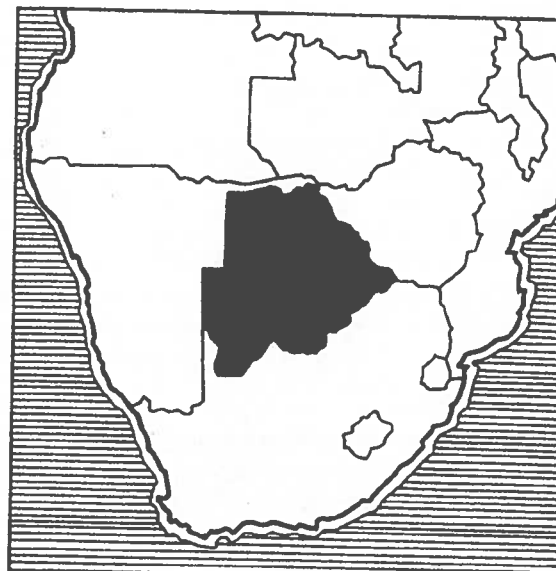


# Botswana: The Inconvenient Indigenous Peoples

By Sidsel Saugestad



In the Parliament of Botswana, the Minister of Local Government, Lands & Housing was recently asked what programmes and activities his ministry has planned for the UN International Year of the Indigenous Peoples. His answer was as follows:

*The Government has not planned any programmes or activities in commemoration of the international year of the indigenous peoples, which 1993 is in terms of a United Nations resolution.*

*This is because, as far as we are concerned, all Batswana are indigenous to the country, except those who may have acquired citizenship by registration. In addition, Government's development programmes and assistance schemes do not draw any distinction among the country's citizens (Daily News 05.03.93).*

This answer is puzzling. Of Botswana's population of 1,325,000, an estimated 45,000 belong to a group of peoples that over time have been called Bushmen, San or Basarwa. More recently some have begun referring to themselves as N/oakhwe ('the red people'), to differentiate themselves from 'the black people', the Bantu majority. There can be little doubt that the N/oakhwe constitute an 'indigenous' population in Botswana, following the concept used by the UN, the ILO and other such organizations.

## Being Indigenous

Archaeological finds date the presence of the N/oakhwe in the region back to the first traces of human settlement. They have tra-

ditionally based their subsistence economy on foraging (hunting and gathering), which is well adapted to the arid environment of the Kalahari. This they have combined with other activities as opportunities arose: e.g. trade, animal husbandry, agriculture and fishing in the rivers of the North-East. They are distinguished linguistically and speak dialect variations of seven or eight different languages within the Khoisan language group, all of which are marked by a number of phonetically complex click sounds. As contacts developed with the incoming Bantu cattle-herding tribes, they tended to be integrated at the bottom of the emerging social hierarchy, in a serf-like position. In their economic relations with cattle farmers they are mostly unpaid or underpaid (Data and Murray 1989).

None of the properties mentioned above are unequivocal in defining the Bushmen/San/Basarwa/N/oakhwe as a distinct ethnic group, and as an indigenous people (1). First of all these criteria are ambiguous: in Botswana in the 1990s the San practice a wide range of different economic adaptations. A growing number are bilingual and in some areas the use of a Khoisan language is declining. Coexistence over the centuries has certainly blurred any genetic distinction. Moreover, while the N/oakhwe are seen from the outside as one group with some common properties, from the inside they consider themselves a number of distinct peoples. The groups are mainly identified by territoriality, and/or speech communities. This accounts for rich variations in culture, but is also a constraint

to any effort to mobilise on a common ('pan-bushman') platform.

However, both the concepts of ethnicity and of indigenous peoples are relational terms. They are not based on any objective and fixed set of criteria, but on the social fact of one group having something in common that makes them different in relation to neighbouring groups. No one familiar with Botswana will be in any doubt at all that the distinction between Bantu and Basarwa (the official term) is a sociological reality which structures the interaction between the two groups, and makes their life chances different. It is also clear that according to the most commonly used criteria for defining a group as indigenous, namely pre-existence (first known inhabitants of an area), and non-dominance (do not control the national government), the Basarwa are an indigenous people (or peoples).

Whichever other criteria one might use to define the N/oakhwe, it seems that they are one of the poorest people in the country. And while there has been an overall positive economic development in Botswana since independence (1966), the socio-economic situation of the Basarwa is gradually deteriorating.

## Government Policy: Non-Discrimination

How, then, can we understand the statement made by the Minister of Local Government, Lands & Housing (MLGL&H), to Parliament? First of all, we must assume that the Minister is not uninformed, either about the current meaning of the term 'indigenous' as it is being used within the

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UN-structure, or of the historical and social realities of Botswana. If we assume that the Minister is not denying the facts, the statements made in Parliament appear more as a declaration of how the government would like things to be than about how they really are. In other words the Minister presented a political manifesto.

There are several aspects of official Botswana policy that in themselves are most laudable, but which make it difficult to address the N/oakhwe as a special group with special needs.

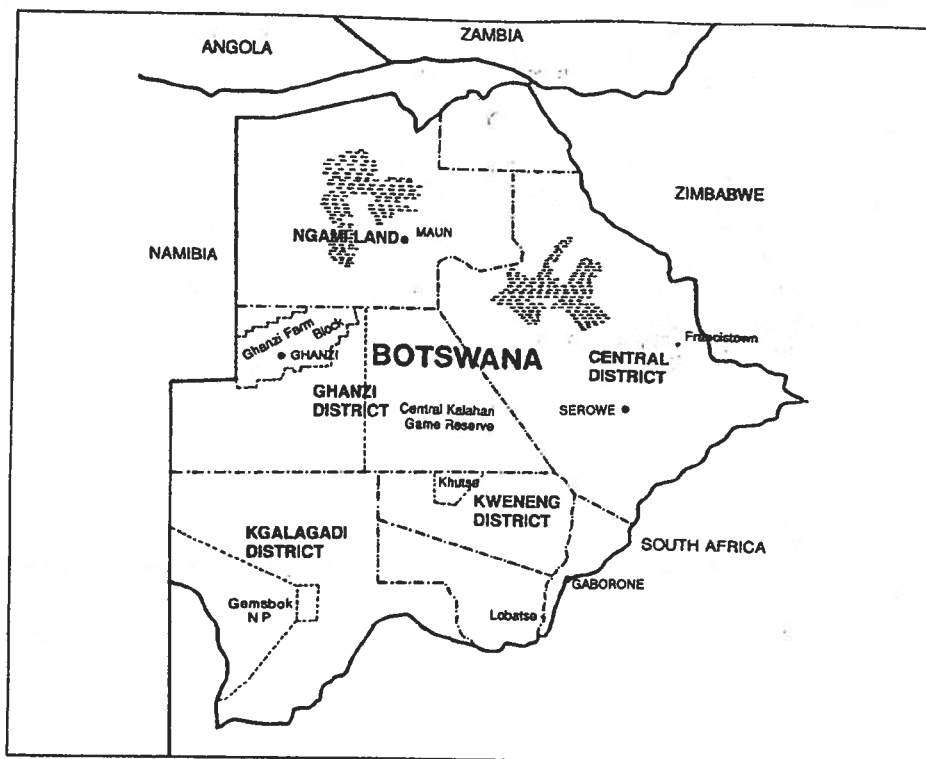
— When Botswana was established as an independent state in 1966 it was declared a non-racial, not a multi-racial, state. The distinction is significant. For a nation just free from colonial rule, and neighbour to the apartheid state of South Africa, this was a radical and forward-looking policy. The Constitution of Botswana guarantees and protects the rights and freedoms of all Botswana irrespective of race, colour, creed, ethnic origin or social standing.

— Moreover, Botswana has a good record in Human Rights, and there can be little doubt that there is no official discrimination in Botswana. There are no laws, or directives, that, as the Minister put it »draw any distinction among the country's citizens« (leaving aside, for now, the gender issue).

— Thirdly, Botswana has a democratic, multiparty system, that works. There are no formal restrictions on persons getting together and nominating candidates for the representative assemblies at district and national levels. Elections are held regularly every 5 years, and the next election is scheduled for 1994.

— Lastly, there is in Botswana, as in other countries of Africa, a fear of tribalism. It is always difficult to know if a recognition of tribal differences (for instance allowing different languages to be used as a teaching medium in schools) would represent any real danger to a functioning democracy. But the government invariably stresses its efforts to achieve a unified state, and encourages the people to forego tribal differences.

Each of these factors constitutes a justification for not singling out any ethnic or indigenous group for special treatment. Taken together, they explain the rationality behind the development programme that most directly addresses the problems of the Basarwa of Botswana: the Remote



#### Area Development Programme (RADP).

#### Government Action

The Remote Area Development Programme started up as a 'Bushman Development Programme' in 1974. The point of departure was the problematic situation in Ghanzi. While most land in Botswana is tribal land, the fertile land along the Ghanzi ridge had been allocated (from late last century) to individual owners as freehold tenure. As a result, an estimated 4-5000 people, mostly Bushmen (Naro), were left with no rights to use or live on the land, as they were squatters that might be removed at the owners' will. According to Liz Wily, the first Bushman Development Officer, »Hunting and gathering no longer being viable on the over-grazed and fenced area, the majority of San increasingly turned to begging, piecemeal and stock theft for survival; they were demoralized, drunk and apathetic« (Wily 1972:292).

At the outset, a programme to assist the Bushmen in Ghanzi was seen as politically acceptable because the situation was somewhat special: 1) the freehold leases had been granted by the former Colonial Government, 2) the farms were owned for the most part by Boers, 3) the farms were run on a commercial basis which differed from the traditional cattle keeping practised by

Tswana tribesmen more generally, and 4) there was land available elsewhere in the District. Therefore alternative areas for resettlement could be provided (Wily 1972).

However, it soon became evident that the socio-economic problems of the Ghanzi Farms labourers/squatters, although perhaps most visible in Ghanzi, were in no way restricted to this particular District. And while recognising the need to address similar problems nationwide, it was no longer seen as politically expedient to define the target group as 'Bushman'.

A re-definition occurred in 1978 when the programme became known as the Remote Area Development Programme, and the target group was described following a number of socio-economic criteria:

All people living outside village settlements who

- tend to live in small scattered communities and are sometimes mobile, covering large areas;
- tend to reside far from basic services and facilities;
- tend to fall... outside the scope of other national development programmes;
- tend to be poor, lack adequate cash income or have the lowest wages;
- tend to rely heavily on hunting and gathering as a source of livelihood;
- tend to lack livestock;

- tend to have no, or inadequate, access to land and difficulties in getting land allocated to them;
- tend to have no, or inadequate, access to water and have few or no water rights;
- tend to be marginalized ecologically since the resource base upon which they depend is deteriorating;
- tend to be culturally and linguistically distinct, with another language than Setswana as their mother tongue;
- tend to have low level of literacy and little access to formal education;
- tend to have egalitarian political structures;
- tend to be a 'silent' sector politically, with no appointed leaders of their own and no representation in political bodies, including Land Boards (Economic Promotion Fund, guidelines 1989:6-7).

This list reads in part like a catalogue of social problems, and the RAD programme developed very much as a social welfare programme. The main objective of the programme has been to »facilitate the integration of the mainstream of the society and to develop rural settlements to a level that is comparable with that of other rural villages in the country« (Draft Policy, MLGL&H).

Initially, the activities of the programme focused on providing physical infrastructure: first and foremost, boreholes, small schools, and health posts. In many areas it has proved difficult to secure potable water, and other construction activities have been put on hold. But by and large, there has been significant progress as far as provision of basic services is concerned, although many people have not yet been reached.

Other components of the programme focused on the development of income-generating activities, and the promotion of leadership and adequate political representation for the people living in remote areas. An Economic Promotion Fund was set up as a component of the programme, with the purpose of promoting productive activities and the development of skills. For a number of reasons these objectives have been more difficult to achieve. Kann et al. in a comprehensive review of the RAD programme in 1990, conclude:

*In its sixteen years existence, the RAD programme... has already achieved much, and the services and opportunities now*

*available to many RADs are far better than they were when RADP started in 1974. Much of the achievement has been in particular in the provision of physical infrastructure, e.g. schools, health posts, and water supplies, and in recent years the big strides made in these areas have been funded by NORAD through the RADP.*

*However, although there have also been some achievements in less tangible aspects of development, e.g. economic development and employment, the provision of land rights, and education and training beyond a few years at primary school, these achievements in such critically important areas are far less than can be observed in infrastructure development.*

*Much has been achieved – but even more remains to be done...*

*The five main issues faced by the RADs themselves, and therefore by RADP are POVERTY, INSECURITY, INADEQUATE EDUCATION AND TRAINING, WEAK INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERSHIP, and NEGATIVE PUBLIC ATTITUDES. (Kann et al. 1990:ix).*

Very much the same concerns that were expressed in this report have been given by the MLGL&H as reasons for initiating a policy review of the programme in 1992:

- the ineffectiveness of education so far, in terms of employment and economic opportunities,
- complaints about unrepresentative leaders, who are said to be drawn from outside their communities,
- concern about land rights and competition with other land users,
- concern for exploitation as cheap labour, mostly as herders in farms and cattle posts,
- concern about negative attitudes towards Basarwa, who are depicted as backward, non-developed and generally uncouth,
- concern about inadequacy of consultations to determine the aspirations of the remote area dwellers (from a Briefing-note).

### Basarwa or RADs

As the quotes above show, there is a fair amount of consensus in defining the types of problems that the RAD programme is trying to address. A national policy review seminar discussed these issues in Ghanzi in September 1992, and the MLGL&H is

presently preparing a revised policy paper, that will be presented to Parliament.

However, even if the problem-description is realistic, there is a basic ambiguity in the programme. The ambiguity does not lie in the description of symptoms, but in the analysis of the underlying causes of the present problems. The ambiguity is expressed also in the profusion as well as the confusion of terms that is being used to refer to the target group.

If the target group is described as Remote Area Dwellers (RADs), the problem is seen as matter of relative deprivation. The RADs are lacking certain services, but the more of these services that are provided, the better they will be integrated into 'mainstream' Botswana society.

On the other hand, if the target group is described as Basarwa (or Bushman, San, N/oakhwe) this is a description which calls for recognition of the special attributes shared by this group. It implies that in order to achieve the objective of equality in life chances and living standards, the measures of the development programme should be differentiated. This does not mean that the Basarwa should be given special privileges, but that the development programme should compensate for their special (and amply documented) problems. Moreover, successful integration is always dependent on respect and a process of mutual adjustment.

The distinction is not merely academic, it is empirical. A recent socio-economic survey describes the difference between Basarwa (in this case Balala) and 'other' RADs (Bakgalagadi) in this way:

*It is anticipated that within 10 to 15 years, RAD Bakgalagadi will disappear naturally and this time period could be drastically and easily shortened by Government assistance.*

*One of the major reasons for this is that these Bakgalagadi are despised by the rich only because they are poor, not because of their ethnic background; they are seen as part of the community.*

*On the other hand, Balala are despised both because of their poverty and because of their ethnic background, and will find it much harder to be integrated in the general community. (Campbell 1989:14).*

Much of the difficulty in establishing a constructive debate in Botswana today on the issue of RAD or Basarwa development may be explained by this ambiguity in the

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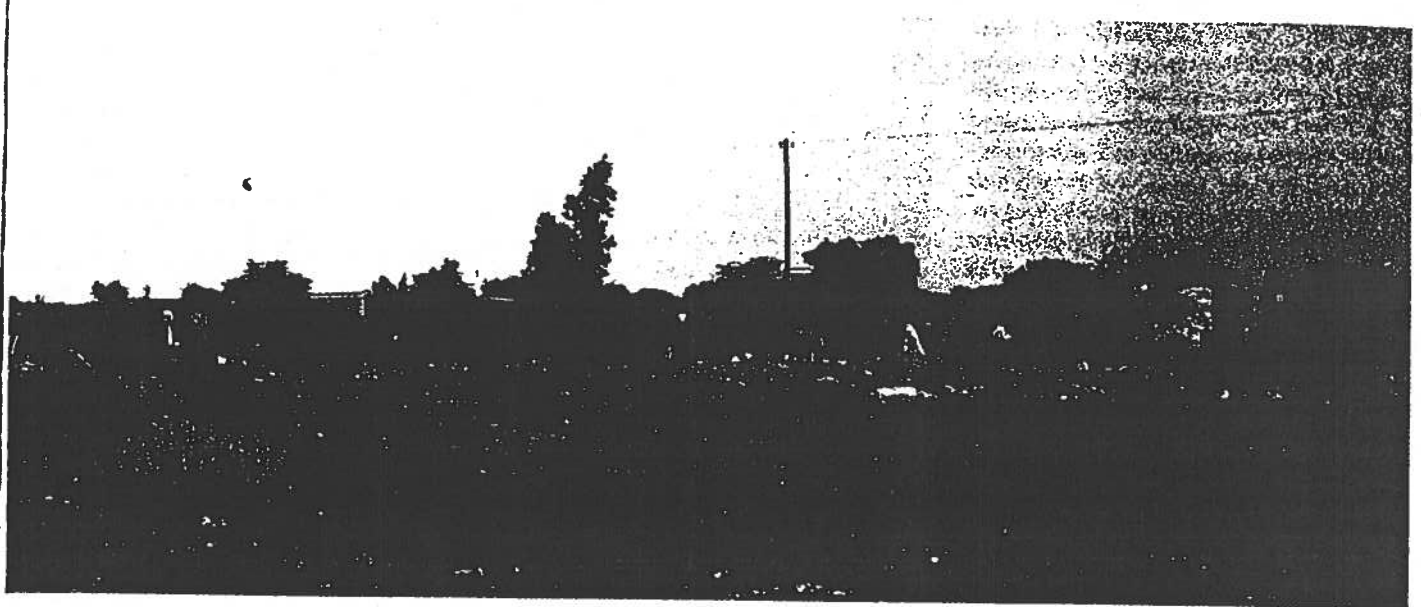
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*Bushman settlement in Ghanzi District, Botswana. Photo: Jens Dahl.*

terms used. For instance at the Ghanzi seminar, which addressed the RAD policy review, the debate oscillated all the time between statements made by, and on behalf of, N/oakhwe as a special category of people; and statements by politicians and government officials who insisted that they were talking about a regular economic development programme addressing all poor people in rural Botswana.

The ambiguity may be difficult to notice (and to acknowledge) because of the considerable empirical overlap between the two categories. Most, but not all, Basarwa are also RADs. But not all RADs are Basarwa. There is no denying that there are members of other ethnic groups that are equally in need of the kind of support that the RAD programme is designed to provide. Schematically, the situation looks something like this:

Remote	Basarwa
Area	San
Dwellers	N/oakhwe



### Speaking up at Gaborone Sun

About one year before the Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing stated that all Batswana are indigenous, a very different comment was made on the position of the San/N/oakhwe in Botswana. The venue was a large workshop convened by the Botswana Society and the MLGL&H in April 1992, addressing the issues of »Sustainable Rural Development«. Komtsha Komtsha, respected elder

and elected chairperson of the Kuru Development Trust, looked down at the chequered carpet of the Gaborone Sun conference room and likened it to his ancestors' land in Ghanzi, now partitioned up in the same way with fences separating people from their resources and restricting wild-life.

Little of what he said was news to people familiar with the situation; but never had it been stated in Naro at a major national gathering. The venue, the imagery he used, and the interpretation into fluent English by another Naro, John Hardbattle, added impact to the words.

Komtsha's basic imagery was of a people overtaken by powerful neighbours, marginalised by the economic development, and left without name. On this last point he said:

*By which name should the Basarwa be known?*

*Nobody has asked us what our name is and how we should be called.*

*All other tribes know who they are, and have a name that they are known by.*

In his statements addressing the problem of terminology, he stressed that this was not a mere question of words. To paraphrase in more ordinary English: How can the government deal with us if they do not have a proper name for us? The terms they use, like RADs and Ba Tengnyanateng (Setswana for Remote Area Dwellers: literally, those who live deep inside the deep) are felt to be insulting. If they do not re-

spect us enough to recognise the names that we use ourselves, how can they be 'our' government?

Basically, Komtsha describes the problem in terms of social relations between different kinds of people: »God made the white man, the black man and the red man. Now they want us to change colour, like a chameleon. I am as Batswana as anybody else.«

The term he suggested for the San/Basarwa: 'N/oakhwe' meaning red people, would serve precisely the purpose of a good ethnic label: it singles out a group of people, not by any objective criteria (it is irrelevant to ask if they have red skin) but by contrast, in this case to the »black people«, the Bantu tribes. And he asked for the difference to be recognised: »With all respect, let me live in my environment and enjoy the wealth around me« (all quotes from field notes, See also Nteta and Hermans, eds. 1992).

Komtsha outlined three main types of problems: 1) that his people were closed in by fences and unable to use their ancestors' land, 2) that drinking was becoming a big problem; he wanted the government to restrict the selling of traditional beer, and 3) that »the daughters of our people« were getting pregnant by Batswana men (often due to drinking) and that these men failed to pay compensation or support for their children.

Roy Sesana, G/annakhwe from Molapo in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, added to the picture:



*You say that we are all the same. But there are some people of a stock called »wildlife«. These people make life uncomfortable for us because we have always hunted Eland (large African antelope), and cannot live without Eland for food. Now the animals drink the water (i.e. from boreholes provided by the Department of Wildlife, meant for the animals only) but we are deprived of the right to draw water. I do not want to learn that I should go to another place just to get water.*

*We want to be called by our name. The name of »Motswana« (i.e. citizen of Botswana, but it also means member of the Tswana tribe) makes it impossible for us to receive whatever assistance is available, because it comes to a Motswana even if it may be meant for a Basarwa. We want to be called by our name »N/oakhwe«.*

### The Dialogue that Failed

As a response to the statements made at the Sustainable Rural Development Workshop, the then Permanent Secretary in MLGL&H, Ms. Pelenomi Venson, invited John Hardbattle to bring some representatives of the Basarwa for consultations with the MLGL&H. Such a meeting seemed to be a most appropriate follow-up to the statements made; moreover, consultation is a valued element in the Botswana democratic tradition.

In addition to Hardbattle (Naro), the delegation included Komtsha (Naro), Roy Sesana (G/annakhwe) Saikuta (G/wikhwe), Tsao (Ju/'hoan), Gomme Kgao (Ju/'hoan) and Aron Johannis (Naro).

According to the newspapers, the meeting turned out to be a confrontation, more than a consultation. The delegation was met by top level politicians (Assistant Ministers, a Member of Parliament and Councillors) and was asked why they had not followed laid down procedures and approached their elected representatives (Daily News 21.05.92). The Botswana Guardian described the meeting as »deadlocked« (22.05.93).

The meeting was interesting in many respects, but here we will consider only one particular aspect: when the delegation tried to describe what they saw as the most basic problems, common to all N/oakhwe in Botswana, this was construed as implying the most negative aspect of tribalism, namely the threat of secession. According to the newspapers:



*Bushmen from Botswana. Photo: Jens Dahl.*

*The delegation, among other issues, requested that they be allowed to secede from Botswana and form their own state as they alleged the present council does not represent their interest (Daily News 21.05.92).*

*Basarwa demand self-rule (Mmegi 22.05.92).*

*What they want is the establishment of Basarwaland and their own council (Botswana Guardian 22.05.92).*

And some weeks later:

*The Ghanzi District Council meeting reacted angrily to reports that some Basarwa communities wanted self-rule, saying this could have been instigated by some people who are not Basarwa. The reaction came after the District Commissioner...briefed the council about the eight-man Basarwa delegation from Ghanzi and North West districts who recently met with the two Assistant Ministers of Local Government, Lands and Housing (Daily News 15.06.92).*

Is this what was actually stated at the meet-

ing? It is quite likely that one or two of the delegates might have expressed their wish to control their own territories and to have some land that they could call their own. After all, a large number of place names in Botswana describe the land as »belonging to« such-and-such a tribe. But no one has ever been known, before or after this meeting, to seriously advocate anything remotely resembling secession. Nevertheless, it was more than a month before a small paragraph appeared (Mokaedi 04.07.93) stating that »The delegation, however, underlined that they had been misquoted in the press and that they had never demanded secession from Botswana«.

Was this »exchange« in the press again a mere squabble over words? A simple communication analysis shows the meta-message as it appeared in the newspapers to be clear enough: what the Basarwa delegation was asking for is unreasonable. By implication it was saying: we do not need to take their demands seriously.

Maybe one should not be too surprised by the strong reactions expressed at this meeting. If we look at other democratic states with structurally very similar minority situations (e.g. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden) there is no instance where the government has readily accepted and recognised claims put forward for recognition on ethnic grounds. However, once reasonably representative indigenous organizations have been established, and leaders have come into a position where they are able to negotiate with their governments, it has been found that far from being a threat to national unity and political stability, such indigenous organisations contribute to the democratic process, and actually make policy formulation and implementation easier (Saugestad 1992). Devolution of power does not mean loss of sovereignty, but that more problems are taken up at a level where they also can be solved.

### What now?

As this article shows, there are some good arguments for avoiding the term 'indigenous peoples' and to refrain from advocating 'compensatory' or 'affirmative' action. Not only the government, but many independent social scientists argue that the San are so obviously disadvantaged according to conventional socio-economic criteria, that the focus should be on improving their lot within regular government programmes (e.g. Williamson 1969). As the legal basis for equality is there, it is the implementation of the laws and regulations that must be improved upon.

The exchanges quoted above also show the extreme sensitivity of the government to any mention of the problems of the San being of a 'special' kind. This in itself might be a good reason for leaving the inconvenient concept of indigenous groups aside and concentrate on a simple class analysis, a social welfare programme and general human rights issues.

On the other hand, one should keep in mind that the concept of 'indigenous people', as it has emerged in international discourse, was actually coined to address the very type of problems that Botswana is facing, and to contribute to their solution.

By choosing to ignore the concept, the Government of Botswana is depriving itself of some arguments that are broadly accepted internationally and that the gov-

ernment might use to explain and to justify policy measures that would go to the core of the problems as described in this article. The basic purpose of the concept of 'indigenous peoples' as is most clearly stated in ILO Convention No 169, Concerning Indigenous and Tribal peoples in Independent Countries is, after all, to legitimise policies and programmes that at the same time can be effective and politically acceptable.

If we look across the border to Namibia, we find that this country has less problems in recognising the San as indigenous peoples. The Land Rights Conference in 1991 singled out the San as a specially disadvantaged group and President Sam Nujoma expressed his special concern and support at the opening of the 1992 Regional conference on Development Programmes for Africa's San Populations.

What if we look at the problem from the point of view of the N/oakhwe? Can they improve their situation by arguing their case as a 'simple' case of economic deprivation, as part of the emerging proletariat of Botswana? So far, 'integration' for the N/oakhwe has meant integration into the bottom of a stratified Botswana society. Compared to the 'major' Tswana tribes and other Bantu tribes, it is their lack of assets, be they land, cattle, traditional chiefs or other valued Setswana traits, that have been the most visible. What is valued in their own culture, in terms of competence, qualifications and cultural values, do not count as assets in the present scheme for integration. Not surprisingly, a common N/oakhwe reaction has been withdrawal. To the greatest extent possible, N/oakhwe tend to keep to themselves and try to avoid confrontations with their neighbours. Under the circumstances, this is a perfectly rational reaction, but unfortunately one which over time has left them continually on the losing end in the competition for territories.

As things stand, one may well ask if it is in their interest to accept the government's claim that there is nothing special about their situation. So far the government policy, well intended as it may be, has not really brought much benefit to the N/oakhwe. And so far the potential for development that lies in mobilising on the basis of common interests and common values, in other words looking for and building on the strength of N/oakhwe culture, has not been tried out.

If they were to come together as the first peoples of the Kalahari, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the connotation of 'indigenous peoples'. It would be a pity if this was seen as a threat to national unity. It could just as easily be seen as adding to the cultural diversity and enhancing the cultural heritage of Botswana.

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1. The reader will note that in this paper I am making a point to the effect that using the right terms is very important, but I have some difficulties in deciding which terms to use myself. Generally I use *Basarwa* whenever I refer to official Botswana policy or public statements, I use *N/oakhwe* when I refer to statements and actions by those calling themselves *N/oakhwe*, and I use *San* when I refer to more general anthropological observations.
- Hopefully, over the next few years, one term may emerge that is acceptable and used by all parties. □