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INEQUALITIES AND THE SAN: A SUMMARY

By

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Editors' note: This paper is based on the article "At the Ends of the Ladder: Radical Inequalities in Botswana" published in Journal of Modern African Studies, 31,2,1993, pp.203-230. Interested readers may refer to this paper for a fuller consideration of the points made, and for details of all the references.

In order to understand the present socio-economic position of the San, and to address the question of what might be done to improve this situation, we need to know how they came to be as they are today. In the past their activities were not focused simply upon aboriginal hunting and gathering. For example:

In and after the 8th Century, San across the Kalahari were economically active in the production of salt, ceramics, and metal and ivory ornaments.

Communities were engaged in long-distance trade to the Indian Ocean. Various settlements were established over many centuries. ("San peoples developed and controlled the means of production and trade over large parts of the Kalahari in earlier centuries", Wilmsen and Denbow.)

They were also pastoralists ("the first in Botswana" Wilmsen) controlling in different times and places large herds of bighorned cattle. Evidence for this exists in archaeology (limited); rock paintings (problematic); travellers' accounts; linguistics; and the continuing resurgence of cattle-keeping by various groups over recent decades, against all the odds.

They possessed their own political organizations and leadership, perhaps to around the turn of this century. (Long-distance trade required political organization to operate.)

Their dispossession began slowly and then accelerated, but it seems difficult to underestimate its importance. By c. 1920s, the system of San servitude, say Miers and Crowder, "lay at the very roots of the highly successful Tswana pastoral economy, allowing the masters to build up large herds while freeing them from pastoral (and other) chores and enabling them to engage in politics, herd management, trade, and wage labour."

DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY INEQUALITIES

1. LAND

San were the original inhabitants of the whole region. Some rock paintings have been dated to 26,000 years BP (Lewis-Williams).

Their position concretised in the case of the Ghanzi District. In 1988 the remote area dweller (RAD) population, mostly San, was 10,122 or 42.2% of the District total. By then seven settlements had been created to house San who had previously lived and worked on the expanding freehold farms. With three exceptions, the settlements averaged 20 sq kms in size, located in either CGAs or Wildlife Management Areas (WMAS), and on what was marginal, fragile, infertile land. They had "few or no productive resources" even for subsistence activities (Gulbrandsen et al). In quantitative terms, 42% of the population had access to (but did not possess exclusive rights over) 2,400 sq kms, or 1.7% of the District land.

In the early 1980s, some 19,000 sq kms were zoned for commercial farming in Ghanzi (chiefly freehold), and this land was acquired by roughly 250 individuals and syndicates (from Hitchcock's figures) who together owned land 8-times greater in size than the 10,000 RADs. The demarcation of Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) ranches continued.

2. CATTLE

Cattle-holding by San is not entirely a thing of the past, despite their earlier dispossession, the prohibitions ranchers apply against stock-keeping by their labourers, and the impediment of their mythologised reliance on gathering. In 1976, 85 per cent of the San who laboured on Ghanzi freehold farms had no cattle themselves, but one man had nearly 60, and two others each held 20-30 (Childers). Soon after, when the first residents arrived at West Hanahai settlement, "over half" came "with their own cattle, normally 2-8 head" (findings of Childers et al).

In the early 1990s, on the seven settlements in Ghanzi, a total of some 75 remote people were said to own in all 650 cattle, of which about 470 came from a new Council distribution scheme. The average holdings of this small minority of San was 2-5 cattle each. (Given the inadequate resources of the settlements, and the encroachment on to them by outside cattlemen, the success of this scheme has been doubtful).

Land, cattle, and wealth go together in what is the mainstay of the rural economy, where 75% of the country's population live. The ladder of accumulation increasingly operates to the severe disadvantage of all small rural dwellers. In 1974, about half the rural population held no cattle. Seven years later, those who neither owned nor controlled cattle represented some 58%, and in 1991 the comparable figure was 74% of rural households (White).

Among the stock-holding minority in the countryside, inequalities were also sharp. In 1990, 18,200 cattle farmers, representing 1/3 of all farms with cattle, held on average 6 beasts each, while 35 commercial farms, or 0.06% of all holdings, averaged 4,117 beasts (Agricultural Statistics). Breaking down that latter category even further, the 19 biggest ranchers, Hesselberg said in 1981, owned on average more than 10,000 cattle each.

3. INCOMES

The achievement of high per capita incomes has been one of Botswana's major successes. GDP per head in 1991 was just short of P6,000, and average GNP was some \$2,500. But these pleasing figures can distract attention from serious underlying inequalities. A top public servant, in late 1990, received an annual income of some P 114,000, while the starting yearly

wage of an industrial class worker was P2,900. The position of the many manual workers in sectors uncovered by minimum-wage legislation, notably agriculture and domestic services was, however, far worse. In a survey in the late 1980s, "over 30 per cent of the sample of agricultural workers" received "a cash income of less than P30" per month (Revised National Policy of Incomes). This was below the value of food-allocations to destitutes.

The San appear to fall below even these categories in terms of income received. In 1976, Childers reported that San labourers on Ghanzi freehold farms obtained an average wage of P6.13 monthly. A decade later, Gulbrandsen et al found San workers getting "rarely more than P15.00 - P20.00 per month" in Ghanzi, "if paid at all". Around the same time, Mogalakwe found that labourers in the district worked "from sun rise to sun set, every single day that passes".

The 1990-91 monitoring programme reported on average monthly wages for labour in the settlements studied -- for instance, P70.00 in Thankane, P60.00 in Groot Laagte, P40.00 in Monong in Kgalagadi. However, these earnings were obtained by only a small minority of settlement households -- 14 to 24 per cent in the above three -- and just for brief and irregular periods, between four and eight months in the year. Work on road projects and such developmental activities paid better than the stereotypical San role of 'herdboy'. Gulbrandsen's top figure, of P20.00 per month for a farm labourer in Ghanzi, may not have been exceeded.

National income inequalities in Botswana are unusually high. In 1985-86 the gap between the top 20% and the bottom 20% of income earners was 23.6:1 (World Bank). The position of some domestics and farm workers and, most of all of the San, falls outside this ratio.

4. POLITICAL ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP

Some official agents have sought to dominate embryonic political structures, in the way that outside cattle-owners appropriate the grazing and water resources of settlements. Details of this occurring in West Hanahai around 1979 are provided by Childers et al.

Where indigenous leadership has been able to emerge and become established, the problem has been to obtain official recognition. In Bere, Kagcae, and in West Hanahai, around 1982, government and council officials approached the San "as children...not capable of making and implementing decisions on their own". "A leadership vacuum" existed as a result in most settlements in Ghanzi. Nonetheless, "a strongly expressed need for leadership" existed in the zones, Childers reported.

The stifling of local initiatives was widespread. Gulbrandsen et al reported in 1986 that "most groups" of remote people in the Southern District "have got a community leader". But "in no case" had a headman been formally appointed. The situation was similar in Kweneng, and he and his co-authors concluded that "virtually no RAD community" had representation on district level organizations.

Of the six settlements monitored during 1990-91, gazetted headmen had been appointed in only two. But at Thankane, the recognised leader came from Kanye, while at Kokotsha he

was from Mahopong. The discouragement of independent political organization on the part of the San was significant. It connected directly to the other key issues of land rights, cattle, and the control of community resources. As Gulbrandsen et al. pertinently noted, without recognised leadership the people of the zones have no legal defences against outside intruders.

Literacy, or the lack of it, is relevant to political organization. While the adult illiteracy rate for all Botswana in 1990 was only 26.4%, the position of the San appears to be totally different. A study of four settlements in the Central District, during 1989, found that as many as 86% of respondents had never been to school or had access to adult literacy programmes (Ndozi and Toteng).

That the San and other Remote people constitute almost half of the population of the Ghanzi District is of active political importance. Illiteracy is a grave weakness but it does not guarantee acquiescence. In Groot Laagte, for example, the monitors found during 1990-91 that 72 per cent of respondents held national identity cards, and that 81% had voted in the 1989 national elections.

DEMOCRACY RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AND PROSPECTS OF STUDYING ISSUES RELATED TO THE BASARWA

By

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The Democracy Research Project was established in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Botswana in 1987. The central objective of the Project is to study, monitor and publish aspects of Botswana democracy. The activities involve research on different topics, seminars and workshops to disseminate results, and publication of books and manuscripts on the subject of democracy.

General Findings to-date

Different research conducted by Project members over the years shows that Botswana has succeeded in establishing a wide range of stable institutions at central and local levels. So far these institutions have a potential to promote democracy and protect basic rights of individuals. Our research, however, shows that the public is poorly informed, peripherally involved and less aware of the functions of these institutions and their relevance to their needs.

At another level our findings show that there are still general problems of attitudes, discrimination and deprivation especially in the countryside meted to minority groups and women, which limit these groups' enjoyment of a democratic culture in Botswana.

The Basarwa in particular are slowly losing their traditional hunting territory, rights to hunting and gathering freely and are encouraged to settle in desolate places where neither livestock rearing nor crop production is viable. Poverty among the Basarwa, women, small farmers and low levels of literacy are major constraints to participation of these people in development.

Future Research Focus

Recent research trends in Botswana show that we may be reaching a turning point where the focus of research is shifting from macro issues of policy, development and democracy to more focused research. In the past few years, emphasis has been laid on questions of whose democracy, whose development, etc. These questions have led to efforts to carry out research on the needs of women, children, people with disability, teenage problems and youth.

In the Democracy Research Project, the focus has also shifted from democracy seen from the top which focuses on institutions and structure and little on the process and practice of democracy, to issues of how the civil society perceives democracy and how they practice it. In this context the issues of Basarwa's land rights, group rights, etc will become relevant.

