

# Political Development Among the Basarwa of Botswana

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*Our guiding principle in international affairs is that every national group has a right to self-determination: that the essence of democracy is that minorities and ethnic groups comprising a nation should not be subjected to any form of discrimination, and should happily accept the authority of the national government in the knowledge that they form no insignificant part of the national community.*

Sir Seretse Khama

Contacts between state systems and foraging societies have often been characterized by conflict and competition. Most state systems will not allow ethnically distinct groups of foragers the right of economic and political self-determination. Frequently this has led to the whole-sale destruction of the foraging populations.

The Republic of Botswana in southern Africa is one of the few countries in the world, however, where a government policy has begun to evolve which allows hunting and gathering minorities a voice in political decision-making. Within Botswana's borders are some 35,350 Basarwa, also known as San or Bushmen (see Table 1). Many Basarwa groups continue to forage for much of their subsistence. Faced with encroachment on their land and water sources, however, many are finding it increasingly difficult to subsist in traditional ways. As foraging resources decline, they are turning more and more toward economic alternatives such as food production and wage labor in towns. Nevertheless, few Basarwa have sufficient resources to be independent pastoralists, agriculturalists, or wage earners. In addition, as minorities, the Basarwa are often discriminated against not only in employment but also in everyday living situations.

Recently, in an attempt to help the Basarwa reduce their dependency and increase their production and incomes, the Botswana government established a development program. This program initially concentrated on socioeconomic issues such as education, health, agriculture, and rural industries. Recently, however, increasing emphasis has been placed on political developments. Pockets of initiative associated with the beginnings of political awareness are also beginning to be seen among Basarwa groups in some parts of Botswana. More and more are coming to realize that the right to their own land is the key issue in the question of whether or not they will be able to be socially, economically, and politically independent in the future or be assimilated as landless laborers and poverty-stricken hangers-on.

## The Domination of the Basarwa

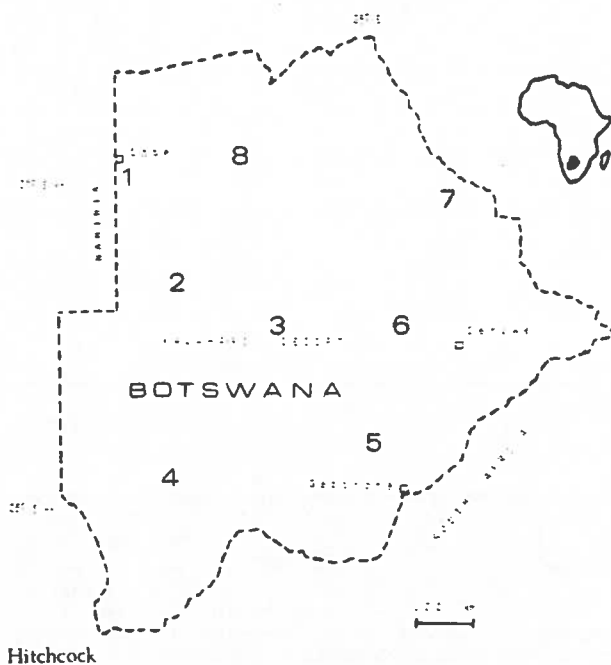
Three thousand years ago southern Africa was populated entirely by San hunter-gatherers. According to Lee (1979:32), there were some 200,000 San in southern Africa. By the eighteenth century the population had dwindled to a few tens of thousands as a result of a combination of disease and conflict. In the eastern part of the region, San had been in contact with Bantu-speaking populations for some 2,000 years. Warfare and assimilation were probably both responsible for the disappearance of independent San communities.

By the 1960s, when Botswana became independent, there were perhaps 45,000 to 55,000 San in southern Africa. The majority of these people were found in the Kalahari Desert region of Botswana and Namibia. Today they make up an ethnically and socially distinct population in Botswana, representing approximately 3.6 of the country's population. In many ways they are regarded as a distinct class and accorded few rights and privileges. Botswana is dedicated to creating a multi-racial state with all people regarded as citizens and having equivalent rights. Discrimination persists, however. It is evident that political development efforts continue to be necessary in Botswana to ensure that its minority groups are able to exercise their full rights as citizens.

As the Tswana states expanded in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, Basarwa and other indigenous populations were incorporated into the states at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. Many were not given civil and political rights. Basarwa and Bakgalagadi groups in Botswana, for example, were not allowed to own property nor were they allowed

Table 1. Population Size and Distribution of Major Basarwa (San, Bushmen) Groups in Botswana

Group Name(s)	Location	Population Size
!Kung (Zu/wasi)	NW Kalahari	2,500
!Xau//ei (Auen)	W & NW Kalahari	1,700
Nharo and other Ghanzi Groups	W Kalahari	7,200
G'wi, G'ana	Central Kalahari	3,300
!Xô	SW Kalahari	2,900
S. Kûa, Tshasi, E. ≠Hûā	SE Kalahari	2,200
N. Kûa	E Kalahari	2,800
Tyua (/Taise, Ganade, Danisan, Shua)	NE Kalahari	5,500
Hiechware, Tuli Block, Motloutse Groups	Eastern Botswana	3,000
River Basarwa (Bugakwe, /Tannekwe, Deti, etc.)	Okavango Delta, Okavango & Botletle Rivers	2,350
Kwengo	Okavango, N Botswana	700
Balala (Ngwaketse Groups)	S Kalahari	1,200
Total		35,350



Republic of Botswana showing the major Basarwa groups that have been studied in the country: (1) Kung, (2) Nharo and other Ghanzi farm groups, (3) Gwi and Gana, (4) Xo, (5) Southern Kua, (6) Northern Kua, (7) Tyua and related Nata River region groups, and (8) Bugakwe and other Okavango Delta (River Basarwa) groups. The shaded area indicates the region studied by the authors.

to speak in council meetings or court. Some reforms were attempted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Tswana chiefs, but many of these reforms were not enforced in remote parts of Botswana. Tswana "masters" continued to have rights over the lives of the Basarwa, and tribute continued to be exacted.

Tswana chiefdoms in southern Africa were relatively complicated. The chief (*kgosi*) oversaw all tribal activities, including the administration of justice, allocation of tribal labor, and parcelling out of land. The relatives of the chief and his adherents were at the uppermost level of the stratified system. The second level of society was made up of commoners who were absorbed into the tribe either voluntarily or through conquest. The third level was made up of people who were members of ethnically distinct populations living outside the tribal capital. Finally, the lowest rung of the several-tiered socioeconomic system was composed of serfs, many of whom were Basarwa and Bakgalagadi, ethnic groups who were held in low esteem by the Tswana majority.

As the Tswana chiefdoms expanded, they incorporated various ethnic minority groups, often allowing them to keep their own leaders and land in a kind of indirect ruling system not unlike that later used by the British. Land was parcelled out among Tswana royalty and commoners who were favored by the leaders; in other instances the people living on a given piece of land were placed in the care of the headmen who received the land. The low status groups were required to provide tribute in the form of meat, skins, and other goods to the Tswana. In addition, they worked as guides for hunting parties and as servants in the camps of hunting parties. In exchange for their

labor Basarwa were given food, tobacco, and sometimes guns and ammunition.

As populations increased and economic changes occurred in southern Africa, particularly after David Livingstone's journey to Lake Ngami across the eastern Kalahari in 1849, Basarwa were incorporated more and more into the livestock production systems of Tswana states. Basarwa males were required to herd sheep goods and cattle; they also dug wells, built fences, and drove cattle to market. Some of these work relationships evolved into patron-client type interactions. Basarwa marriages were arranged by Tswana headmen; whole Basarwa families were passed from one generation to the next; and decisions about where people lived and worked were made by Tswana and other high status groups. Basarwa did not have a voice in court; instead, their Tswana "masters" represented them, and in many cases Basarwa were not even allowed to attend the meetings.

The latter part of the 19th century saw Tswana chiefs attempting to reform the ways in which the Basarwa were treated. It was declared by Khama III of the Bamangwato, the largest of the Tswana tribes, for example, that Basarwa were to be allowed to keep livestock of their own. Later on, he renounced the right of ward headmen to collect tribute. Nevertheless, even today Basarwa have their livestock taken away by Tswana cattle owners. Some have had their children forcibly removed and taken to town where they work as servants in the homes of wealthy Tswana. Beatings of Basarwa for supposed misbehavior still occur. Thus, in spite of efforts to improve the treatment and socioeconomic status of Basarwa, people continue to face problems of lack of rights and mistreatment.

During the Colonial period, the Administration of the British Protectorate attempted to cope with the so-called "Bushman Problem" largely on an *ad hoc* basis. Charges of slavery had been made in the late 19th century, and by the 1920s specific calls were heard for investigations into the treatment of Basarwa. Surveys and investigations were undertaken by District Commissioners, and by specially appointed government personnel. The main outgrowth of these investigations was the declaration that slavery was illegal, and the recommendation that people should be given a fair wage for their labor. Although a few development recommendations were made, these were not enacted. For example, a 1938 agricultural scheme was established in the east-central Kalahari, but by 1940 it had folded and its assets were taken over by other ethnic groups.

By and large, the efforts on the part of the British Protectorate Administration should be seen as race-saving measures. The government was embarrassed about the alleged mistreatment of Basarwa and therefore attempted to legitimize its authority through public proclamations about opposition to slavery and show its concern through investigations. Little real progress was made in improving the status of an ethnic minority which was held in low esteem in the country.

Both the Tswana states and the British Protectorate Administration were interested in the control of foraging minorities. Calls for settlement of "dangerous"



A Tyūa traditional doctor performing a dance accompanied by Tyūa women. Traditional Tyūa doctors are frequently paid to perform dances and curings for other groups. R. Hitchcock

Basarwa were heard frequently, especially in the early- to mid-20th century. Farmers were concerned about stock theft, and Tswana chiefs wanted to have more control over the movement of Basarwa groups. In 1943-44 when a group of Basarwa killed two Royal Air Force pilots from what was then Rhodesia, it was decided by the local Tswana chief and the British Protectorate Administration that Basarwa in the area had to be disarmed, rounded up and resettled on tribal land. Camel patrols were sent into the northern Kalahari, and Basarwa families were forced, at gunpoint, to move to new areas where they were settled in villages. Forced concentration in such small areas brought about numerous hardships, including social conflict, nutritional stress, and widespread dissatisfaction.

The states that existed in Botswana did not recognize Basarwa as a "tribe" nor was hunting and gathering seen as a legitimate form of land use. The result was that when the British Protectorate and the Tswana came to agreements in the late 19th century about land distribution, the Basarwa and other ethnic minorities were ignored. Seventy-one percent of the Botswana's land was tribal, 23% was called Crown Land (now State Land), and the balance (6%) was freehold land, much of that in the hands of European settlers. The major Tswana tribes (Bamangwato, Bakwena, Bakgatla, Batawana) each got land of their own; traditional Basarwa lands, which are found in virtually every part of Botswana, were parcelled out among other tribes. It was not until 1961 that any land was set aside specifically for Basarwa populations — the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, a 52,347 square kilometer area in the center of Botswana where some 5,000 G/wi and G//ana continued to maintain their traditional mobile foraging lifeways. Today, even the areas set aside specifically for Basarwa are threatened with development and changes in land title (Hitchcock 1985).

#### Denial of Land Rights

A major feature of the relationship between Basar-

wa hunter-gatherers and the state in Botswana was the denial of basic land rights and a pattern of dispossession that has accelerated through time. Large blocks of land were given to individuals and companies, many of whom were European. Basarwa residing in those areas were either forced to leave or, if they stayed, were required to provide cheap labor in exchange for residence and subsistence procurement rights.

Since Independence in 1966 the Botswana Government has shown increasing concern for the Basarwa. In 1974 a Remote Area Development Program (originally entitled a Bushmen Development Program) was set up in the Ministry of Local Government and Lands (Wily 1979). Efforts were made to learn the problems and needs of Basarwa and other rural peoples. Development projects ranged from handicraft purchasing to livestock loan schemes to registering wells in the names of Basarwa. A key feature of the program was to provide land for Basarwa populations. Unfortunately, the present amounts of land set aside in settlement schemes, so-called Communal Service Centers, are insufficient to meet the Basarwa's needs. The average range size of a foraging group in the Kalahari Desert is from 500 km<sup>2</sup> to 4,000 km<sup>2</sup>, but the settlements and service centers range in size from 500 km<sup>2</sup> down to 16 km<sup>2</sup>.

In 1975, the Government of Botswana announced a land reform and livestock program known as the Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP). Its purpose was to (1) prevent further range degradation, (2) reduce income disparities between rich and poor, and (3) facilitate the commercialization and growth of the livestock industry. In order to achieve these goals, a process of commercialization or privatization of the tribal land was to be carried out. Leasehold rights over blocks of land were to be granted on a long-term basis in exchange for nominal rental payments.

The Basarwa did not benefit from the land tenure change, however. While the 1975 government White Paper stated that the rural poor's land needs would be met, the only provision made for them was the

establishment of the so-called "Reserved Areas." When the zoning process was completed, it was found that no land whatsoever had been set aside as reserved. Anthropologists and a few government administrators had asked that some land be set aside within commercial areas so people could have access to land for social services and for generating income and subsistence. But as in the case of the government settlement schemes, the land set aside was woefully inadequate. Dispossession has already occurred in several parts of Botswana where ranches were established under TGLP. If this continues, it is possible that as much as a fourth of the entire Basarwa population of the country will lose its land.

The Basarwa have responded to this situation by organizing themselves and calling for recognition of their rights, not as members of a minority, but as full citizens. The government of Botswana has attempted to respond to these requests where possible. Land, where there are competing claims, has been withdrawn from consideration as commercial leasehold ranches. But rather than compensate the Basarwa with alternative land, only extremely small amounts of cash have been offered. Eventually Basarwa could become landless.

#### Encroachment Forces Reluctant Selection of Headmen

The Basarwa are an egalitarian society. They have no formal judicial or political institutions. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus, usually the result of lengthy informal group discussions. Leadership is ephemeral and based on personal qualities that include modesty and non-competitiveness. Social control is achieved by pressure from the group: if a person is stingy, for example, he or she is criticized. If a person commits a crime such as murder, the worst that usually happens is that he or she is ostracized and eventually might be forced to leave the group. Decision-making and social control among Basarwa populations are characterized by law. Social conflict is often averted by talking and sometimes by ritual activities such as dancing which reduces tension.

As Basarwa came more and more into contact with other ethnic groups in Botswana, there was a growing need to have spokespersons handle inter-group interactions. When another group entered a Basarwa group's territory, permission was sought from the informal headman. Permission was rarely, if ever, refused, particularly if the other group had kinship, economic, or friendship ties with the resident group. In intra-group activities, on the other hand, the headman had relatively little say. Social pressure was often brought to bear on those people who tried to control the affairs of others.

As conflicts between groups over access rights to resource areas have increased, so have conflicts within Basarwa groups. Headmen are now often distrusted and accused of working for their own ends and forgetting the good of the group as a whole. In those groups where leadership roles are becoming increasingly institutionalized, dissension is common.

Significant problems arose when the state required Basarwa representatives to attend political meetings, or to sign letters to the district Land Board asking for allocation of grazing, arable, or residential land. Over

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the past few years, through the Remote Area Development Program and the Department of Social and Community Development, the Basarwa government has attempted to set up Village Development Committees and other institutions at the local level. Government officials have also pushed for the appointment of headmen and committee formation. Forced to come to grips with the need to appoint spokespeople to serve as mediators with outside individuals and organizations, some Basarwa groups have responded well by setting up a whole series of committees ranging from Parents-Teachers Associations to Women's Development Committees. In other cases, Basarwa have refused to have anything to do with committee-type institutions, preferring instead to manage their own affairs as a group as was done traditionally.

In coming to grips with the need to elect leaders, the Basarwa have used a variety of strategies. In the Dobe region of the northwestern Kalahari, the person chosen as headman was a retiring, quiet man who was a descendant of the original territory "owner," rather than a more outspoken, articulate, experienced individual. In one region, the Tyua had to choose among a specialized hunter, a traditional doctor, and an outsider who had had extensive experience with the larger society but who was unrelated to any of the local people. The outsider was chosen since there



would be less social pressure on him to respond to relatives' and friends' needs. In another settlement in the Ghanzi District, the leadership consisted of a committee of people rather than a single individual.

#### Basarwa's headmen not recognized by state

A major difficulty with the political development process among ethnic minorities in Botswana is that some of the people chosen as headmen have not been recognized as legitimate by the District Councils. As a result, they have not been registered as official headmen under the Customary Act. In general the Tswana authorities are reluctant and have often refused to recognize Basarwa leaders or even to grant them civic and property rights.

One often hears it said in Botswana that the Basarwa are "politically undeveloped" or that they "lack organization." Adding these prejudices to the distaste many Batswana have for the mobile foraging way of life, which they feel is akin to wild animals, it is not surprising that Basarwa are accorded little in the way of socioeconomic rights. Land is still not granted in many cases to Basarwa, even though theoretically the Basarwa have as many rights as other people when it comes to land allocation. Court cases are still heard where the Tswana "master" does all the talking. Thus, while traditional Tswana political structures have lost the capacity to regulate the social and economic life of the Basarwa, the state has, as yet, been unable to step in and administer the rural areas and its peoples efficiently and fairly. The result is that many Basarwa have been relegated to the background more and more, and decisions are being made which are not necessarily in their best interests.

The Remote Area Development Program and the Community Service Scheme of the government of Botswana have attempted to encourage people to analyze their own problems and to come up with their own institutions and strategies as a means of resolving those problems. But the Basarwa tend to listen and defer to outsiders, whether these people are District Councillors, local Tswana headmen, or even anthropologists. Many are also extremely reluctant to become leaders or members of committees for fear of arousing jealousies and resentments in others.

In the face of these difficulties, the Basarwa are increasingly recognizing the significance of their ethnicity and the need to organize on a large scale. Botswana, however, does not distinguish between ethnic groups. In national censuses, for example, there are not any questions about ethnic identity. Charges of "separate development" have been levelled against the Remote Area Development Program for the attention paid to Basarwa. At the same time, it has been found that it is anything but easy to transfer the various organizational and management characteristics of Europeans and Tswana to Basarwa contexts. Neither the Tswana nor the Basarwa recognize, nor will they pay much heed to, the new structures which are being developed.

The Basarwa need participatory political institutions in which decision-making is done not so much by authority figures as by groups. Introduction of foreign concepts such as headmanship and committees has drawbacks. In the Central Kalahari, where several dif-

ferent committees were composed of the same people, nobody could agree on priorities or even on the subjects to be discussed. One strategy that has been reasonably successful has been the Remote Area Development Program effort to bring Basarwa groups to Land Board meetings and TGLP allocation hearings where they can observe the proceedings and listen to ideas discussed openly, as well as have their own inputs.

Political development is crucial for the future survival of the Basarwa as an ethnic minority in a heterogeneous African state. Yet it is imperative that Basarwa be given the right of self-determination and control over their own lives. At this stage they are still unable to negotiate on an even footing with other interests in the Tswana state system. The key to Basarwa participation in decisions involving their own future is the formation of institutions and establishment of roles which the state recognizes as legitimate. What remains to be seen is whether the Botswana government and District Councils will see these institutions as representative of Basarwa interests. Until this is done, the chances for Basarwa self-determination and economic and political development will remain illusory. □

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