



Conference on Indigenous
Peoples of Africa (1993, Ture, Denmark)
"... Never Drink from The Same Cup"

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STATEMENT BY THE PERMANENT SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF LANDS, RESETTLEMENT AND REHABILITA- TION (MLRR), NAMIBIA

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Ever since I received the invitation to this Conference I have been trying very much to identify the Indigenous Peoples in Africa and relate them to the state, because after the independence of Namibia from South Africa in 21 March 1990, the indigenous peoples of Namibia formed part of the state.
2. When I look at the international scene the issue is self-explanatory: the Indians and Eskimos are indigenous to North America, the Aborigines to Australia.
3. The Namibian scene is different. Here we see a heterogeneous population, divided into ethnic groupings that were treated differently and discriminated against by the colonial systems which had oppressed them for more than a century.
4. Our young republic is therefore faced with the great challenge of building one nation out of a highly divided people.
5. To tackle this task, the Namibian Government started out with a constitution that guarantees and proclaims the rights and freedoms of all its citizens, irrespective of race, color, creed, ethnic origin or social standing. Furthermore, it has embarked upon a policy of National Reconciliation, whereby old wounds are not to be opened.

Mr Chairman

6. Having said that, we do, however, recognise that there is a peculiar problem confronting some groups of our society, which

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we see as the most disadvantaged and deserving of special attention. The Bushmen are one of these groups.

7. Their traditional nomadic way of life has been disrupted by the private ownership of land which was promoted by the apartheid system and by the demarcation of national game parks for the protection and conservation of our game and vegetation. This prevents them from hunting game for survival as they used to do.
8. In the same light, the introduction of the money economy has also meant that like other Namibian citizens the Bushmen people can no longer live a subsistence life alone. They need cash incomes with which to satisfy their needs. This need for money was exploited by the colonial army during the National Liberation Struggle, which employed some of the Bushmen as trackers to detect the movement of the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (Plan).

The withdrawal of the army of occupation and loss of subsequent sources of wages left the Bushmen destitute, unemployed and marginalized.

Mr Chairman

9. When we search into our past to gauge where we are at present, we are often accused of blaming everything on colonialism. However, in the case of the Bushmen people it is fair to say that this disadvantaged group in Namibia was deprived of its former hunting fields by the latter wave of communities and settlers who entered our country. At the same time, their traditional way of life was destroyed by their introduction to the modern economy which made them more vulnerable.
10. However, the Namibian Government is well aware of the plight of the Bushmen community and has made their development and social advancement a priority within its budgetary limitations.
11. In this connection, the resolution No. 14 of the National Conference on Land Reform of June 1991 recommended that Bushmen as well as disabled people be given special protection of their land rights.

The Government of Namibia believes that the disadvantaged communities of our society must be given the right to talk and they must be listened to. To this effect, my Ministry organized and hosted a Regional Conference on Development Programs for

African Bushmen in June last year. The Bushmen communities all over Namibia were represented and were free to voice their concerns to the Government on topics like: Land Reform and land rights; education; health; sanitation; to mention but a few.

12. Nevertheless, we are faced with the challenge of how to fully integrate the Bushmen in our fast and ever changing society without the loss of their cultural values. Most of us who have undergone cultural transformation know it is almost impossible; but wish it was possible to have a culture that can grow with you. Or is it not possible to pick certain aspects of your culture that you cherish and actually grow with them, whilst taking care not to get locked in a culture that prohibits development.

Mr Chairman

13. We realized that these are issues that deal with social acceptance. We would not like to have a situation where one part of our population is developed only so that it can serve another. Neither do we want to give nourishment to the myth that Bushmen should cling to their old way of hunting and fruit gathering. Or to the suggestion of separate development independent of the larger society in which they are to function as individuals.
14. On the other hand we put emphasis on the issue of individual rights and equal opportunities, with the basic understanding that all Namibians are equal under our constitution. We also strongly believe that the only way that people can exercise their rights fully is by having access to education, because education does facilitate the ability to state one's case, not only in your community but in an international forum like this, and be heard in your own voice and not through a medium that may choose to misrepresent you.

Mr Chairman

15. It is true that the Bushmen have a culture of their own which has sustained them over centuries; but we realize that culture is not something that exists in isolation of the environment. The reality may also be that nomadic life is no longer possible. We are experiencing series of droughts, the population increases and pressure on the land builds up.
16. To this effect, the Government of Namibia had embarked on resettlement schemes for disadvantaged groups namely:

- (a) former exiles
- (b) disabled
- (c) displaced
- (d) Bushmen

So far the Bushmen as a group form the largest part of the Resettlement Schemes.

Mr Chairman

17. The major aim of resettlement is to create homes for landless Namibians, by allocating arable land to them to settle on, use and develop in order to make a living as individuals, families or a group.

However, Resettlement Schemes are not only providing homes for the most disadvantaged but also making them self-sufficient in food production, and helping them attain a certain socio-economic level when they can feel fully integrated into the society.

Similarly, most of the Resettlement Centres have primary schools, clinics and in a few cases where the resettlement is near a hospital, a mobile clinic visits the centre twice a week.

Concerning food production, the Government provided agricultural tools, ploughing services, fertilizers and seeds for a start. Gardening had been introduced in all the schemes to improve the settlers' diet. And the results are that people are producing surplus for cash income. One Bushmen Resettlement Scheme in the east of our country now supplies a local school with fresh vegetables on a weekly basis.

Mr Chairman

I have to personally admit that as a Government we may be preoccupied with the social and economic welfare of our disadvantaged groups but lack the anthropological knowledge of why the Bushmen of our society live a nomadic life.

Do they live a nomadic life in search of food, or do Bushmen just enjoy moving around? Those are the things we need to understand before we confine anyone to a fixed home whose value they may not enjoy.

Before we do this we must be convinced as a Government that the nomadic life is one that any person could possibly choose.

We in Namibia are however convinced that the solution has to

come from the disadvantaged people themselves. And the consultative meetings held with Namibian Bushmen confirm our conviction that the Bushmen are in fact ready to settle down and be integrated into the Namibian society.

Mr Chairman

Allow me to conclude that the time has come in our Namibian society when the Bushmen are not to be regarded as mere objects of aesthetic appreciation and admiration for socio-anthropological research, but as part and parcel of our new and vibrant society, proud and ready to take their place among all rightful people of Namibia, our country, our continent, our humanity. The Namibian Bushmen are ready to work together with all other citizens to shape our country's destiny.

I thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen.

