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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Alcohol and Basarwa Identity in  
Contemporary Botswana – The Cultural Reality

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Throughout history the San peoples of Southern Africa have experienced a process of marginalisation, in particular the marginalisation of their identity and sense of selfhood. The stereotyping of the San by other social groups as somehow 'different' or 'deviant' has resulted in a popular labelling process which promotes images that range from the exotic and unique, through the romantic, to the juxtaposition of being perceived as 'social bandits' on the one hand and 'harmless people' on the other. While such generalisations mask real differences between the many groups of San living in the region they also signify the importance of contextualising the contemporary search for a San identity and sense of self worth in the specific socio-economic, political and cultural arenas that make up Southern Africa. Within the context of Botswana in the late 1990's the San people's construction of identity and sense of self is increasingly circumscribed by rapidly expanding links and relationships with the larger society. Contemporary Botswana is firmly a capitalist society with a liberal democratic polity which, like other such societies, emphasises the value of the individual, property rights and freedom of choice, particularly with regard to consumerism. From available evidence the main commodity which is consumed, manufactured, sold, bartered and exchanged within and around Basarwa settlements is alcohol in all its varieties, strengths and forms. It is likely, then, that for landless and largely propertyless San people, alcohol consumption and its related socio-economic activities and political relationships will serve as a dominant cultural and emotive resource for scripting a particular type of identity, substantially one of being an 'alcohol abuser' with its concomitant stigma and problematic behaviour for self, family and community.

"The self in a desert becomes more and more like the desert. It has to, to survive. It becomes limitless, with its roots more in the subconscious than the conscious – it gets stripped of non-meaningful habits and becomes more concerned with realities related to survival. But as is its nature, it desperately wants to assimilate and make sense of the information it receives, which in a desert is almost always going to be translated into the language of mysticism", (Davidson, 1980, 192).

Introduction

There can be little doubt that in both the historical and contemporary context there has been an overwhelming tendency to generalise about the Basarwa<sup>2</sup> as a more or less socially uniform group, or what Wilmsen (1996, 185) has described as a harmonisation of identity leading to "an amalgam of peoples categorised as Bushmen". This is, of course, true of other indigenous groups throughout the world, particularly the North American 'Red Indians' and Australian 'Aborigines', and has contributed significantly to the objectification and reification of such groups of people, not to mention the obfuscation of their cultural and behavioural differences. It has also helped to establish an ideology of domination of such groups and has facilitated their social control within increasingly bureaucratic state structures and organisations. In its broadest sense, the "Bushman" construct, specifically, has represented part of the colonial legitimising ideology.

Within Botswana there are significant differences between distinct groups of Basarwa such as the !Kung, !Xo, and the G/wi who we cannot assume will even 'recognise' each other as fellow Basarwa. A Mosarwa student at the University of Botswana, who comes from Mababe, a settlement of so-called 'river Basarwa' (Kxoe) situated on the edge of the Okavango Delta far from the Kalahari scrublands, recently went to Ghanzi on a study visit and was asked by local Nharo-speaking Basarwa, "who are you? how can you be a Bushman, you don't even speak Nharo!" This was a question he had successfully fended off several times over the years and he was able to gain acceptance by describing his upbringing and the living conditions in his home village.

1. Louis Molamu is now located at UNISA, Pretoria, RSA.

2. Given that we are writing primarily about Botswana we use the generic term Basarwa (singular Mosarwa) throughout this paper because it is the Setswana name given to a group of people who are also known by several other names, such as the San and also, in Botswana, *Tengyanatong*, meaning 'the farthest people' or, as it is sometimes translated, those from the deep within the deep (Mogwe, 1992). Interestingly in the context of identity, some Basarwa groups now identify themselves as N'oakwe, 'the first people' (Hitchcock, 1995). Even when we generalise about the Basarwa within the broader regional context, we retain the name for convenience sake.

Doesn't know.

The school and community have one plan.

Its good if people make future, they don't have anything to do.

3. A group of men in Aqpace village wanted to answer the questions together

Very important: learn to do some things by yourself.

Build house, make crafts, traditional songs.

Its important children should learn it also in school.

The schools work together with the village and the community should teach in the school and make learners go to school.

Because they should learn reading and writing so they can do it in the future by themselves. Long ago the old people didn't go to school and didn't learn to read and write. Now they want the children to learn. So they can do some work (like what you are doing now).

They were very happy and they told their children all to go to school. Sometimes they went to watch the teaching and the cooking.

The kids are going to school and they tell their kids to keep learning [at Tsumkwe School]. If they go in the school the children are afraid and don't say anything if the teachers asks them.

To talk everyday by the school. Somebody from the community would go and talk to children if there is a problem.

4. N/haokxa, an old lady in //Auru village (with assistance from other women)

Is a good thing to develop kids for the future then they assist themselves.

Because if children finish with school he assist himself: doing work, buy clothes, food, blankets. Children learn songs, play games, dancing, collect food.

Children come home from school and go and gather food. Children know already about their culture. They need now to learn how to write, and to learn English.

School and village works together.

Because in the future he is going to write on his own and read letters on his own. (Note that in Ju'hoan the pronoun for he and she is the same)

At the beginning they had problems: if they go out to the bush, they take their kids out to the bush. These years they see the children learning so they leave the kids behind, so they learn to read and write.

Last year school committee visited school to see how they work, and parents were there. If you're going to help children you don't get paid. She thinks children are going to have knowledge (like you) in the future.

5. Koba, an old lady in Aqpace village

She thanks me for all the learning children do in school.

She teaches children to work in garden, crafts, singing and dancing.

Yes.

The school should work together with the community. If there are some problems, the community and teacher should come together to talk to children.

Learning knowledge. These children should go to secondary school.

Their children were going to Aasvoeloes Primary School. They took them to come back to live in the village.

Other people when they go to Tsumkwe they take their children. It was good when they had the schools open day with the teacher and the co-ordinator.

They should come together with the children and play and sing and dance, like last year.

Guenther (1976, 130) has noted that a possible unifying factor of a common Basarwa identity "is the concept of *sheta*, a shared life of deprivation and suffering, which gives them a feeling of solidarity".<sup>3</sup>

However, although attempts have been made to prescribe a general identity for the Basarwa by outsiders, these have been very different in nature, ranging from the pure and the decent to the profligate and the deviant, or, as Guenther (1996) points out, in the more specific context of the Nharo of Botswana, from 'Lords of the Desert' to 'Rubbish People'. The former category encapsulates such descriptions by anthropologists of Basarwa as, according to Barnard (1995a: 247), "examples of natural man", as 'harmless people' by Thomas (1959) and what Wilmson (1995, 201) claims is typically represented in the works of ethnographers, film-makers and novelists as "the existential image of Kalahari 'Bushmen' as the Jungian archetype of authentic humanity". The latter includes notions of Basarwa as 'atavistic throwbacks', as deviants ranging from 19th century images of 'social banditry' to more contemporary images of 'poachers' (as their traditional forms of hunting behaviour have become increasingly proscribed and criminalised) and as having degenerated into "a demoralised, drunk and apathetic group" (Wily, 1972).

Another attempt to generalise and classify the Basarwa has been the ongoing 'great San debate' (Hudelson, 1995) between two sets of academic anthropologists, the traditionalists or isolationists who maintain that the Basarwa generally conformed to the ideal type of culturally isolated hunter-gatherers and the revisionists or integrationists who perceive the Basarwa as an underclass having strong historical links with the political economy of the region. While the latter group, in particular Wilmson (1989), are certainly justified in highlighting the need for contextualising the Basarwa within the region's political economy, "neither view is necessarily at all close to a Bushmen's own view of the world .... indeed the thrust and counter-thrust of debate often focuses on minute and trivial details which are of little interest to anyone except the protagonists themselves" (Barnard, 1995a: 244-247). Certainly such an academic equivalent of Nero fiddling while Rome burns does little to help the Basarwa in their current plight.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt, however, there is truth in both of the above approaches as the world seldom mirrors or fits the conceptualisations and categorisations of academics who are often guilty of shaping the very world they purport to be objectively studying. Gordon (1992) correctly points out that changing historical images of 'Bushmen' are more a reflection of variations in the relationship between power and knowledge than actual 'ethnographic realities'.

Indeed, if any generalisation about the Basarwa in Botswana, and indeed the rest of Southern Africa, has any contemporary truth, it is the following made by Barnard (1995b:17). While he acknowledges, as we do throughout this paper, the differences between Basarwa groupings and that "in many ways they are culturally distinct", the expressed commonality of their current social condition is that "they are mostly poor people who live in small communities".<sup>5</sup> This all too evident truth is also recognised by Wilmson (1989), who states that the Basarwa are characterised by poverty and represent an underclass in a more inclusive class structure. In the context of contemporary Botswana, however, the Basarwa represent not only an underclass but an underclass within an underclass, "the poorest of the desperately poor" (Kann *et al.*, 1990), which leads them to be exploited (certainly in the case of the alcohol trade) not only by their hereditary superiors but also by their compatriots in poverty.

One hundred and fifty years ago, as Iliffe (1987:75) points out, "the major western Tswana groups had subjected most San in their vicinity while by the 1880's Tswana frontiersmen were penetrating the remote Kalahari to trade with San and eventually establish suzerainty over them". Subjugation, with its concomitant exploitation, domination and lack of political power, has been the lot of the Basarwa in Botswana ever since that time. While the conditions of virtual slavery that they were subjected to in the nineteenth century, when they could not leave their Tswana master's service and could be 'transferred' from one master to another, has been modified, they still retain their hereditary status at the bottom of the socio-economic, political and cultural hierarchies.

What does this mean, then, for Basarwa living in contemporary Botswana, a country which assiduously promotes itself as 'the model for development in Africa' and as 'the shining star of democracy' on the African continent? At independence in 1966 Botswana was one of the world's ten poorest countries with little significant development, investment or infrastructure. Since that time, largely due to the discovery of large diamond deposits, it has become one of the world's fastest growing economies with, until recently, an annual

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that 'living conditions' will vary from group to group, for example, Thoma (1997) differentiates between Basarwa working on farms and cattle posts; those living on ancestral land with/without hunting rights; those living in communal areas without a source of income/who are self employed; and those living in urban areas.

<sup>4</sup> The June 1995 edition of *Current Anthropology* devoted most of its content to the ongoing debate between an objective and scientific, and therefore 'uninvolved', anthropology on the one hand, and a more militant and action oriented anthropology, which should be ethically grounded, on the other.

<sup>5</sup> While the majority of Basarwa in Botswana probably do live in small settlements of between 250 and 1000 people, the move over the past few decades from living in small bands to such sedentary 'village' conditions constitutes a process of relative urbanisation.

GDP growth of 14.3%, a per capita GNP in 1991 of US\$ 2580 and current international reserves of over 4 billion US Dollars (Government of Botswana, 1993). At the same time, however, Botswana's development has been extremely uneven and inequitable. It has one of the highest degrees of inequality of income distribution among all countries of the world for which figures are available and in 1993/94 forty eight percent of rural households and 36% of urban village households fell beneath the PDL (Poverty Datum Line) (Mazonde, 1996). In such a rich country as Botswana, however, noted for its conspicuous consumption patterns and its ubiquitous Mercedes Benz and BMW cars, the PDL is a somewhat derisory measure of what constitutes 'poverty'. The poorest 10% of rural households, to which the Basarwa undoubtedly belong, had a mean income in cash and kind in 1993/94 of P115 (approx. US\$ 30) per month, hardly enough for one tank of petrol for an average Mercedes car. It is also significant that of all informal sector activities during that period, 38.42% of the total income for unemployed people came from beer brewing and selling.

The continuing structural marginalization of the Basarwa over the years has been well documented and, increasingly, social scientists have focused on extreme poverty and its correlates as the major defining feature of the Basarwa in present day Botswana (Good, 1993; Mogalakwe, 1986; Mogwe, 1992; Scholwane, 1995) and have used terms like the following to characterise their social position: alienation; dependency; deprivation; despair; discrimination; disintegration; dispossession; exploitation; inequity; marginalisation; oppression; political exclusion; powerlessness. Perhaps Good (1994: 2) best encapsulates this continuing process by stating that the situation of the Basarwa in wealthy Botswana "is one of such acute deprivation and exploitation that it almost negates the citizenship that they possess".

It should not be thought, however, that there is no resistance or spirit of 'fighting back' by Basarwa to their current plight in Botswana or, indeed, elsewhere in Southern Africa. Organisations like Kuru Development Trust and First People of the Kalahari (Kgei Kani Kweni) continue to struggle for the basic human rights still not afforded to their people (Saugestad, 1996a) and an organisation like the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) has been developed to co-ordinate on a regional basis the activities of such groups. Indeed, the formation of WIMSA on the basis of Sarwa ethnic consciousness has served as a strategic axis for solidarity. The alleged enforced removal of Basarwa from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) by the Government of Botswana is only the latest issue that such organisations have had to address (Midweek Sun, 23 April, 1997). A recent report by DITSHWANELO, the Botswana Centre for Human Rights, (1997: 26) asked the pertinent question about the right of Government to move whole communities of Basarwa against their will, "whether by 'silent coercion' through the freezing of services and development or direct force".

Before going on to look at the association between such conditions described above and issues surrounding social identity and alcohol use it is important to consider the historical relationships, and indeed seeming affinity, between Basarwa and a range of psychoactive substances, including alcohol.

#### *Psychoactive Substances and the Basarwa*<sup>6</sup>

The influence of a number of psychoactive drugs may have played a much more pivotal role in Bushmen behaviour and belief than is generally acknowledged (Dobkin de Rios, 1986: 297).

There can be little doubt, from the available evidence, that psychoactive drugs have had a significant part to play in the daily lives of Basarwa throughout recorded history. However, whether anthropologists and other researchers have recognised this or not is a debatable issue. Dobkin de Rios (1986) provocatively suggests that in the case of the Basarwa, western researchers may have been 'culturally blind' to the nature and extent of their psychoactive drug use, particularly in relation to their healing and trance dancing activities: "western bias in the scholarly community against psychoactive plants creates an intellectual climate in which evidence for drug use in a society like the Bushmen may lie ignored, disregarded or relegated to an unimportant footnote or comment" (Dobkin de Rios, 1986: 303). This, of course, begs the now unanswerable question of whether many Basarwa were in drug induced altered states of consciousness, or 'stoned' or 'high' to use the western vernacular, when they were being studied by anthropologists who may have had neither the knowledge nor the experience to recognise this state.

In his comprehensive and exemplary study of cannabis in Africa, du Toit (1980) recognises that the smoking of both tobacco and *dagga* (cannabis) by Basarwa 'long preceded the arrival of whites in Southern Africa'. Stow (1905: 52) reports that the Basarwa 'were almost passionately fond of smoking' while Dorman (1925, 122) says that, apart from being inveterate snuff-takers and smokers of tobacco, "the Bushmen are also very much addicted to *dacha* (*leonotis leonurus*) smoking". In this latter case Dorman mistakes *leonotis leonurus*, also known as *Rooi dagga* or *Klip dagga*, which was regularly smoked by the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa and had strong narcotic and intoxicating effects, for *cannabis sativa*. Indeed, it has been recorded that other indigenous plants were also used by the Basarwa as psychoactive agents. Both the leaves and the roots of the

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of argument and debate the following sections make generalisations regarding 'psychoactive substances' and 'Basarwa' which do not reflect the variations in drug experiences related to geographical location, historical circumstances and other structural conditions.

Ganna bush, for example, were dried and powdered and used both for chewing and smoking. Several historical sources, according to du Toit (1980), have recorded the use of Ganna, identified as *salsola aphylla* and *salicornia frutescens*, by the Basarwa. In particular, Stow (1905: 53) claims that 'when mixed with *dacha*, it (Ganna) was very intoxicating', and that 'pieces of a narcotic root were also strung like a necklace and worn round the neck: these were lit at the fire and brought to the nose, so that they snuffed the smoke into the nostrils'.

Most notable of all is the use of tobacco, which seems to have been a favoured drug. Schapera (1930: 101) reports that among the Basarwa 'all grown-up people, and even small children, smoke tobacco when they can get it'. Some fifty years later Shostak (1983: 27) provides a poignant account from a Mosarwa who wanted tobacco from her. 'without tobacco, you wake up and walk around all day with only half your heart and don't know when the sun rises or sets'. Interestingly, Shostak and her fellow researchers used tobacco as a means of payment for Basarwa informants and workers. While they went so far as to give health messages to Basarwa about the dangers of tobacco, which were completely ignored, and were concerned about the ethics of their role of 'anthropologist as drug supplier', they continued to supply tobacco in order to carry out their research, 'our tobacco handouts became more generous, and we no longer refused tobacco to visitors in the village where we are working'. Another anthropologist, Marshall (1976: 9), also reports that 'the !Kung are ardent smokers. In those days, we were ardent smokers too. Not a shadow of guilt crossed our minds when we shared cigarettes and gave handfuls of pipe tobacco in appreciation of the !Kung cooperation'.

It should be noted that even in earlier times tobacco was used, usually through trade, as a means of obtaining the Basarwa's 'cooperation'. A written exhibit from 1929 in the Museum in Mochudi, home of the Bakgadi tribal group, further states that whenever a Mokgadi wanted a Mosarwa to work for them they would light a fire of *dagga*, the smoke from which would attract the Basarwa in from the bush.

From the available evidence, then, it would seem that the Basarwa were, in modern terminology, both polydrug users and multiple-drug users, imbibing and mixing a wide range of psychoactive substances. In particular, Winkelman and Dobkin de Rios (1989: 56) show that plant hallucinogens played 'an important role in aboriginal Bushmen culture and in the development and elaboration of their healing and trance rituals'. These include the following five plants which have marked psychoactive properties as well as nine others with toxic properties which produce so-called hallucinogenic or psychedelic effects: *Albizia anthelmintica*; *Cassia*; *Cissampelos mucronata*; *Loranthus oleaefolius*; and *Plumbago zeylanica*. Chowdhury (1995) also reports at least seven types of plants with 'marked psychoactive alkaloids' that were used in Basarwa healing rituals, including the induction of trance.

However, very few of these substances, or their level of use or type of use, have been recorded in the literature on Basarwa, which is perhaps not very surprising given the level of understandable secrecy surrounding their use'. Almost one hundred years ago Stow (1905: 53) reported that Basarwa added a certain root to their 'primitive mead' made of honey which 'rendered the beverage more intoxicating' but which 'was kept a profound secret, except to a few chosen members of the ruling family'. Katz (1976: 293) has argued that during healing rituals 'drugs are not used on any regular basis to induce !Kia (state of trance)' although 'at least one indigenous drug' was used to help an initiate to induce a state of trance, albeit in an infrequent manner. Katz was not able to identify this drug and does not record the use of any other psychoactive substance during trance dances or healing rituals. Bleek, reported in Hewitt (1986: 291), confirms that during the earlier part of this century initiation dances were used to confer healing power and that 'certain (unspecified) things were also given to them (initiates) to smell which were believed to heighten their sensory awareness, although whether this was done during the initiation dance is not clear'. This lack of information about the use of the several psychoactive substances which she and fellow ethnopharmacologist Winkelman have identified, has led Dobkin de Rios (1986) to suggest that there is a problem surrounding what she terms 'the enigma of drug-induced altered states of consciousness among the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari'.

In other words, it is now highly unlikely that we will ever have definitive knowledge of the nature and extent of the Basarwa's use of the several psychoactive plants found in the Kalahari, which they undoubtedly knew about. Dobkin de Rios (1974) reports the loss of similar drug knowledge by other groups such as Australian Aborigines, the ancient Maya and Siberian Reindeer Herders.

While the use of such psychoactive plants may be enigmatic, however, the Basarwa's use of that other psychoactive substance, alcohol, is not only increasingly knowable but also increasingly problematic. It is interesting to note here that on a general level Room (1980) claims that anthropologists typically play down the seriousness of alcohol abuse in cultures that they study and focus more on alcohol's functions within the

culture. In the case of Botswana only a few writers on the Basarwa have even mentioned the use of alcohol, its functions and associated problems, while others have marginalised it, and yet others have ignored it altogether.

#### The Experience of Alcohol

Nearly one hundred years ago, Stow (1905), as already reported, talks about Basarwa brewing their 'primitive mead' made from honey, while more recently Tanaka (1980: 39) suggests that 'wine' is still made from honey but that this practice was introduced by the Bakgalagadi and is dependent on the availability of water. In 1925, Dorman reported that 'the Masarwas, whether tame or wild, are excessively fond of Kafir beer, and contrive to get drunk whenever they can' (Dorman, 1925: 121). Bleek (1928), writing around the same period, confirms the Basarwa's 'appreciation of liquor' but reports that they did not often have access to a supply of alcohol, neither trading in it nor making it themselves. Dorman corroborates this latter point claiming that 'they seldom brew the beer themselves, but prefer to buy it ready made'. He provides a detailed description of the method of manufacture of this so-called 'kafir beer' by the 'Bechuana or Bakalahari' and says that a root called *qilika* (*anacampseros rhodesica*) was sometimes added which had the effect of making it 'violently intoxicating'. Schapera (1930: 102) claims that very few Basarwa knew how to make any kind of alcohol themselves, although he says that the 'Namib Bushmen' brewed a mead out of honey 'after the manner of their Hottentot neighbours'. However, because of the relative scarcity of alcohol both Bleek and Schapera note that drunkenness was exceptional among the Basarwa even although 'they all appreciate alcohol and native beer when it is given to them'.

What is important here from a contemporary perspective is that Basarwa are still mainly consumers of alcohol, rather than manufacturers or traders. Recent research (Molamu and Macdonald, 1996) suggests that it is predominantly members of other tribal groups living in Basarwa settlements who brew and sell *khadi* and 'outsiders' who control the bottle stores and shebeens and illegally supplied or 'bootlegged' proprietary brand alcohol. In the Kgalagadi district, for example, van der Jagt (1995) claims it is the Bangolaga who manufacture and sell alcohol in Basarwa settlements. In other words, the Basarwa themselves earn little money from the lucrative and thriving alcohol industry located in and around settlements. Indeed, it only increases their level of impoverishment and enmeshes them even deeper in a spiral of dependency.

The only detailed anthropological account of the Basarwa's use of alcohol in post-independence Botswana is provided by Lee (1979) who gives a description of its effects on the Dobe area in the north west of the country. As he correctly points out, it was the availability of one commodity, sugar, that enabled the manufacture of 'the potent home-brewed beer (actually a form of mead) that is the centrepiece of a new culture that has sprung up around the !Kangwa store' (Lee, 1979: 418). It is this 'new !Kung culture based on selling and drinking beer, and listening (and dancing) to hit tunes from Radio Botswana on transistor radios', we would argue, that has become one of the more dominant features of many Basarwa settlements throughout contemporary Botswana. Although, as Lee notes, 'not all the Dobe area !Kung were pleased with the new cultural life', the abuse of alcohol had escalated to such an extent that even by 1973 'the level of drunkenness had increased to alarming levels'. Interestingly, Lee also notes that !Kung women themselves were manufacturing and selling *Khadi*, as 'penny capitalists', and that they did not give drinks on credit. Our research (Molamu and Macdonald, 1996), as already indicated, would suggest that a change has taken place in the 25 years since Lee was writing, and that Basarwa have become increasingly marginalised within settlements as mainly the consumers and non producers of alcohol and are dependent to a large extent on the credit offered to them by shebeen owners and other purveyors of alcohol.

Although generally there is a paucity of information regarding the use and abuse of alcohol, given that the Basarwa have been the subject of considerable study over the past 30 years, Shostak (1983: 216) makes a perceptive comment on the development of alcohol problems.

'Kung men and women who had once provided meat and vegetable foods for their families, and who had conducted their lives with independence and dignity, were now living in a low-status position in relation to people who treated them as inferiors. Given the psychological effects of such a change in circumstances, it is not surprising that drinking the home-brew sold in the villages became an appealing pastime for many of the !Kung.

Certainly it is not surprising that by all accounts there has been an increasing problem with alcohol abuse in Basarwa settlements over the past thirty years, although the reasons are perhaps more complex than those alluded to by Shostak. Indeed, what is happening among the Basarwa only mirrors, in a more extreme form, what is also happening in other impoverished communities in both Botswana and South Africa. Molamu and Manyaneng (1988) have noted the rapid escalation of alcohol consumption in post-independence Botswana and in South Africa there has been a progressive increase in alcohol consumption among adults 'especially in historically disadvantaged black communities and among women generally' (Rocha Silva *et al.* 1996: 3). To compound this general increase in alcohol consumption, research data from the region, along with more impressionistic evidence, suggests that an all-or-nothing pattern is the one most widely representative of African drinking habits. (Macdonald, 1996; Partanen, 1990). What this means in effect is that while there is a

7 This secrecy still exists to the present day, although for different reasons. When our two Basarwa research assistants or 'cultural interpreters' asked thirty Basarwa in the Ghanzi district recently 'Do people in your community use dagga?' most respondents answered 'no', with five people claiming they did not even know what dagga was. The majority of respondents, however, answered a later question which asked them to relate any problems associated with the use of dagga.

relatively large section of the population who abstain from drinking altogether, those who do drink tend to drink to excess, with the resultant problems that this brings. Within the African context generally there seems to be minimal controlled drinking of a social-recreational nature.

As Molamu and Macdonald (1996: 148) have noted in the context of the Kgalagadi and Ghanzi districts of Botswana, "it would appear that it is normative for many of the Basarwa, both male and female, and including young people, to drink literally from dawn to dusk, with an almost constant level of intoxication and regular excessive consumption<sup>8</sup> being to some degree socially acceptable". Given that the above generalisation is based on very limited fieldwork, however, the Basarwa Alcohol Abuse Action Research project is currently trying to substantiate these findings with regard to a much wider range and variety of Basarwa communities.

The Project's 1996 Report (Macdonald, Malila and Molamu, 1997) includes a more systematic approach to gathering data about the consequences of alcohol abuse on the Basarwa. Thirty six community leaders and local extension workers representing eight Basarwa settlements in the Ghanzi district, along with two health and social welfare professionals, were asked, in a workshop setting, to identify the consequences of alcohol abuse on individuals, the family and the community, specifically with regard to economic, social and health-related harm. The lists that were drawn up are reproduced below in verbatim form with minimal editing.

### 1. Harm to the Individual

- Health: Loss of weight; malnourishment; loss of appetite; colour change; hepatitis; liver cirrhosis; stomach ulcers; muscle weakness; increased ageing; dermatitis; dehydration; palpitations; mental disturbance; abnormal sleep pattern; hypersensitivity; more at risk from accidents; more at risk of contracting STD's; 'TB defaulters' (too drunk to remember to take medication).
- Social: Disharmony; lack of cooperation; insulting behaviour; loss of dignity; loss of self-esteem; a nuisance to others; become confrontational; aggression; leads to theft; leads to rape.
- Economic: not able to save money; loss of job; debts; low productivity; loss of interest in livestock; become habitual beggars; tardiness; can't make a 'life plan'.<sup>9</sup>

### 2. Harm to the Family

- Health: No money for food leads to malnutrition, starvation and a lack of health care; poor personal hygiene; poor sanitation because drunks do not pick up their own litter; untidiness which causes sickness; children become depressed and cannot concentrate at school because they are malnourished; conflicts; fight injuries; changes people's behaviour.
- Social: Misuse of family resources; disharmony; indiscipline; become uncooperative; isolation; no family meetings; 'a cursed family'; no role models for kids; lack of parental control; encourages delinquency; deaths as a result of fights; it diminishes people.
- Economic: Debts; shortage of money; neglect of duties and obligations; impoverishment; misuse of family resources; no progress; no money for school fees; do not know how to run the family; no source of income; child abuse; divorce; starvation.

### 3. Harm to the Community

- Health: Poor sanitation because drunks do not pick up their own litter; diseases like TB and STD's become difficult to control; a high under 5 mortality rate due to defaulting parents; loss of community members through premature death; no respect; the environment becomes polluted and filthy.
- Social: Lack of a community spirit; frustration on the part of outreach agencies; poor educational performance; discrimination among the clans; not able to participate in development; discord and a lack of cohesion; poor school results and educational performance; a lack of communication.
- Economic: Increases poverty; theft; unwanted pregnancies; prostitution; a high turnover of people; no money for school fees.

The consequences listed above are, of course, not in any way exclusive to Basarwa communities where alcohol is being abused. Indeed, many of them could almost be described as normative among any impoverished and marginalised group where alcohol abuse is a problem. Certainly other commentators have reported the high

incidence of alcohol-related problems among the Basarwa in Botswana (Mogwe, 1992; Molamu and Mhere, 1988; Tshireletso, 1995), and one report of a survey on the effects of preschool on Basarwa primary school children in the Ghanzi District says that:

"due to the stress of acculturation, many people suffer from despair and confusion, and social problems like alcoholism and poverty leave the majority of the Basarwa destitute ... a high degree of alcoholism is being experienced. Some settlements are more notorious than others e.g. D'kar, Grootlaagte and Bere. This has the effect that the family structures no longer support the child and can actually become a threat to the emotionally developing child" (Kuru Development Trust, 1995).

In settlements such as those mentioned above, it is notable that 50% of the inhabitants are aged under 15 years. Tshireletso (1995), in a study conducted on a Basarwa settlement in the Kweneng district of Botswana, states that such children growing up in a community where adults, 'strongly indulge in alcohol and tobacco' will accept this behaviour as socially acceptable, if not perhaps socially valuable, and are likely to role model themselves on such behaviour. He quotes one school teacher as saying that 'there is also a problem of discipline at times in the school. Children drink and they take tobacco. Even those children in standard 1 take tobacco, so sometimes if they are in need of a dose, usually of ground tobacco deposited inside the lower lip, they become drowsy and cannot concentrate'.

In a broader regional context the negative effects of alcohol and other drug use on the psycho-social development of youth has been noted by Rocha-Silva et al (1996: 5) who maintains "that special attention needs to be given to young people, specifically adolescents from historically disadvantaged groups in South Africa, and black youth in particular".

### Alcohol and Identity

Why the abuse and misuse of alcohol seems to be an increasing problem among the Basarwa is a complex and multi-faceted question in itself. In the South African context Rocha-Silva and her colleagues (1996) have posited a range of social factors associated with heavy alcohol use: support for alcohol use; access and supply; absence of discrimination against use; and exposure to use. A cross-cultural study of 56 culturally distinct 'primitive' societies which considered the reasons for 'the strength of the drinking response' came to the following conclusion that seems all too apposite in the case of the Basarwa: "insobriety varies directly with anxiety as measured indirectly in terms of the anxiety-provoking conditions of subsistence insecurity and acculturation" (Horton, 1943, 294).

Scheper Hughes's work among impoverished sugar-cane cutters in rural Brazil makes a particularly important point which is all too relevant for the Basarwa in Botswana today. She makes the observation that hunger in Brazil has become medicalised through the clinical prescription of tranquillisers and appetite stimulants (rather than food) in order to mask the source of rural suffering and has become, for the rural poor, "a medical-technical solution to their political and economic troubles" (Scheper-Hughes, 1996: 416).

In the case of the Basarwa, it can be claimed that they are self-medicating on alcohol<sup>10</sup> to alleviate their progressive suffering, both as individuals and as a people. They are helped in this process by their compatriots in poverty who manufacture, distribute and sell liquor, and a government whose policies and regulatory practices encourage rather than discourage such a trade. O'Brien (1995: 12), in the context of the European working classes, notes that alcohol consumption has apparently been a necessity for their survival over the years and asks a key question "Are they too drunk to rebel? Or is drunkenness a rebellion?" It is no coincidence that in the course of our research the Basarwa who we met who have been self-acclaimed 'drunks', but have given up, have done so primarily because of religious or political conversion. One consequence of alcohol abuse among the Basarwa is that it continues to be a barrier to politicisation or 'conscientisation', and thus the achievement of a true collective 'San' identity, as well as to the level of sobriety needed to fully participate in the development process. In this context, alcohol consumption can be conceptualised as a "negative identity element".

Given that identity itself is 'socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed' (Berger, 1966), the parameters for the social construction of Basarwa identity have narrowed along with their access to land and the erosion of their culture, particularly their language<sup>11</sup>. Coupled with the fact that 'man tends to 'make his own' the negative image of himself imposed on him by superiors and exploiters" (Erickson, 1959: 31) this

<sup>8</sup> What constitutes 'regular excessive consumption' is, of course, open to interpretation. There is, for example, wide disparity among the definitions of what constitutes 'binge drinking' and cultural differences in drinking patterns make it even more difficult to distinguish between responsible and reckless drinking behaviour (ICAP, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Berger et al (1973) emphasize 'the life plan as a source for identity' and maintain that it is possible to define identity in modern society as a plan. This means, in effect, that all the singular aspects of modern identity can be related to this fact. For example, modern identity is singularly open, differentiated, reflective and individualized. In a transitional society like Botswana, even for a group as marginalised from mainstream society as the Basarwa, these aspects of identity construction are becoming ever more apparent and more important.

<sup>10</sup> A nurse working in Ghanzi alleged that Basarwa teenagers she treated were 'high on something that they had mixed with alcohol'. She suggested that they had been given tranquillisers or other pharmaceutical drugs by an inexperienced or untrained settlement clinic worker.

<sup>11</sup> Another Mosarwa UB student from the Kweneng district says that when he goes to his village, his family discourages him from talking in Sesarwa. Because they now identify themselves as 'Batswana' rather than 'Basarwa', Setswana is the more appropriate language. Setswana, then, becomes the language of development, progress and the future while Sesarwa becomes the language of backwardness and the past.



means that any contemporary search by Basarwa for a positive identity would seem to lie somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

Unquestionably identities are actively constructed out of the material culture presented during the lifelong socialization process and in the social roles that people play<sup>12</sup>. In the case of Botswana this material culture is firmly and increasingly presented within a capitalist, entrepreneurial and democratic polity which emphasises the value of the individual, personal capital accumulation, property rights and freedom of choice – including the choice to drink whatever you like, whenever you like and in the quantities you like – or can afford. In such a context the main commodity which is consumed, manufactured, sold, bartered and exchanged within Basarwa settlements is alcohol in all its varieties, strengths and forms. It is likely, then, that for the impoverished, landless and largely propertyless Basarwa, alcohol consumption, its related economic activities and associated social and political relationships will continue to serve as a dominant cultural and emotive resource for scripting identity.



Figure 1: Brochure on "Alcohol, Qgari, Bojalwa"

The nature of this continuing scripting process, however, can only be revealed in the context of a more phenomenologically based knowledge. What does alcohol mean and represent to those Basarwa who consume it, and how does it affect their sense of both individual and collective identity?<sup>13</sup>

Saugestad (1996b) reports that globally there is an insistence among indigenous people that ethnic status and identity should be self-ascribed, rather than ascribed by powerful others. This definition, by powerful others, of the Basarwa's collective identity has of course further consequences at the individual level:

"Others' definitions of the situation become so dominant as to carry the day. Thus as alienation from others feeds back upon self-perception and reflexivity, individuals become alienated from themselves and their sense of selfhood. Public image may become self-image. Our own sense of humanity is a hostage to the categorising judgements of others" (Jenkins, 1996: 56).

12 Erving Goffman (e.g. 1959) has raised the still unresolved but crucial issue regarding the construction and management of identity: the question of whether or not there is an authentic self or identity behind the various masks which we present to others.

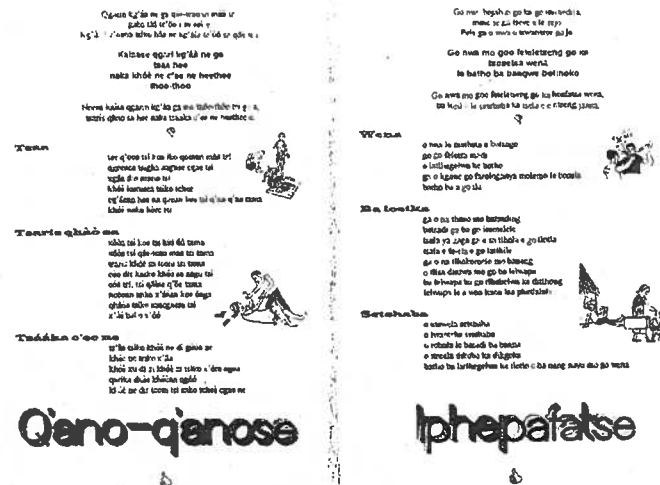
13 Not having this level of knowledge does not preclude working with Basarwa communities to try and help and support them in dealing with the existing level of alcohol abuse and concomitant problems that they already face. One such outcome of a shared action research process is included as appendix 1.

While it is important, then, to acknowledge that alcohol abuse is a serious social problem facing Basarwa individuals and communities in contemporary Botswana, this should not be used to fuel yet another 'symbolic construction of similarity' and label Basarwa collectively in the deviant category of 'drunks', 'alcohol abusers' or 'alcoholics' and as a people who have developed 'a culture of drunkenness'.

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Appendix 1: Alcohol Leaflet for Basarwa Communities in Ghanzi District

(This leaflet was produced as a result of the information gained at the Workshop mentioned on p.12. It is written in English, Setswana and Nharo, and includes illustrations for those people unable to read. It is the preliminary stage of a long term action research project designed to try and help Basarwa communities to reduce the level of harm associated with alcohol abuse).