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SPEAKING FOR THE BUSHMEN

A collection of papers read at the
13th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences,
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On 10 December 1992, on the occasion of World Human Rights Day, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Organisation, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, officially designated the year 1993 as the "Year of the Indigenous People", with the motto "Indigenous People, a New Partnership". The choice in favour of the world's indigenous communities had not been haphazard, the Secretary-General said. Indigenous people, numbering approximately 300 million, often belong to the poorest of the poor, their previous, isolated life-styles having been disrupted by loss of land and inroads on their cultural identities. Their predicament therefore involves a real human rights issue.

In UN parlance, the concern is with "indigenous communities, peoples and nations", defined by the UN Special Rapporteur on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations, Dr José R Martínez Cobo, as:

"those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them".

According to this definition, surviving Bushman communities undoubtedly qualify as the indigenous or longest-term inhabitants of their respective countries. They are now largely restricted to Botswana and Namibia, the remainder living in Angola, Zimbabwe and a temporary refugee camp near Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape region of South Africa. The Schmidtsdrift Bushmen do of course not fall within the UN definition of indigenous people as they do not have a historical link with the place where they now reside, but were taken there by modern transport.

Whereas the sorry plight of the Schmidtsdrift Bushmen is all too obvious, most other Bushmen are hardly better off, cast as they are in the role of a dispossessed rural proletariat. Far in the past lie the days when the hunting-gathering Bushmen were the sole inhabitants of large tracts of eastern, central and southern Africa. Other African ethnic communities would invade their territory, as would Europeans. In their rock paintings the Bushmen would chronicle, in remarkable detail, their encounters with these invaders. To judge from these historical records, the study of which is still far from complete, the initial encounters with individual strangers amused rather than threatened the Bushmen. When, however, strangers started coming in armed bands, claiming land for their herds and crops, paintings of their warfare would be made in the Bushmen's rock shelters. It was an uneven struggle. The small Bushman communities had no adequate defence against these outside forces, and soon fell victim to African-tribal and European-colonial state formations. As it turned out, the imposition of the state had such a devastating effect on Bushman culture that relatively few communities survived to witness the end of European colonialism and the admission of their countries to the United Nations Organisation.

With the UN taking an interest in even the smallest of indigenous communities, it was the international community which eventually would come to the rescue of the Bushmen, and intervene on their behalf *vis-à-vis* the national state. The protection of human rights had always been one of the missions of the UN. However, it was the end of the "Cold War" which would give the UN a firmer hand in this regard, whereas the defeat of "apartheid" in South Africa

enabled the organisation to finally rid itself of the colonial issue and widen its human rights programme.

That the colonial issue is dead, is well illustrated by the proceedings of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. An initial, half-hearted attempt on the part of some UN member states to confine indigenous situations to countries which had European-imported populations, as in the Americas and Australasia, failed, which cleared the way for a consideration of the contents to be given to indigenous rights worldwide. Regarding this, the Working Group favours a "bottom-up" policy which will allow indigenous people to determine for themselves their place in the national society, rather than a "top-down" policy of integration and assimilation. A need for affirmative action reaching beyond mere non-discrimination, is recognised. The focus should be on the recognition of cultural rights, land rights and collective political rights, within the framework, however, of the national state. UN member states are unanimous that a right to secede should not form part of the indigenous rights presently being formulated.

It was against this background that the Organising Committee of the 13th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences was asked to include in the programme a session on "The Heritage and Culture of the San (Bushmen)". In the end, two sessions were necessary. They were held on 4 August 1993, on the premises of the Mexico City School, a short walk away from the world-famous Mexican National Museum of Anthropology. Unfortunately, Professor Phillip Tobias was unable, due to ill-health, to deliver his opening address in person, and enrich discussions with his vast knowledge.

As the Organising Committee of the Congress could not take care of the publication of papers, it was left to the organisers of the various sessions to make their own arrangements. Already before the start of the Congress our arrangements had been firmly in place. The Botswana Society had kindly agreed to publish, in monograph form, the papers to be delivered at the Congress's sessions on the Bushmen. The Society's spontaneous reaction and implicit trust were greatly appreciated and contributed, in no small manner, to the successful outcome of our sessions.

The "Mexico papers" made it clear that the title "The Heritage and Culture of the San (Bushman)" had been too conservative a choice for the sessions, and that a better choice for their subsequent publication would be: "Speaking for the Bushmen". In Mexico City, the speaking for the Bushmen was done on their behalf. The dangers inherent in this are highlighted in John Hudelston's paper; the continuing need for it is apparent from Janet Hermans' paper. Nick Walker and Edwin Wilmsen let archaeology and other historical records speak. Legal anthropology is a relatively new field of study and is represented here in Louis Vorster's and Tony Sanders' contributions. Sanders also touches on the thorny issue of the interpretation of Bushman rock art.

After a century of Bushman studies the time has most certainly come to feed what information has been gathered and what observations have been made into an integrated, annotated and easily accessible databank for use not only by scientists but above all by development officers and the Bushmen themselves. In May 1993, the National Institute of Development Research and Documentation of the University of Botswana announced that it had undertaken this mammoth task, and in September it conducted a highly successful "Workshop on Basarwa Research".

It was at this workshop that I listened to Kamana Phetso explaining the activities of the Kuru Development Trust. His spirited presentation caused me to approach this young man for a short written statement of how he saw his own future and that of his community. This is what he wrote to me:

"I would like to put my vision about my future life and the future of my people.

Before I start about my future I would say something in short about my life up to the stage where I am now, because this information is going to help me to predict my future together with that of my people.

I grew up on a farm of a white farmer where my parents were working and currently my grandparents and some of my relatives are still working. I went to school from primary school up to form five. When I finished my form five I was forced by the situation of my family to look for a job. I have no doubt that everyone knows that Basarwa are poor people and are still far behind when compared to other societies in terms of civilisation. When seeking for a job I came in contact with a certain organisation which is controlled by the Basarwa themselves. At first I could not believe that Basarwa can really do something by themselves. But when I came to work with them I felt that now I am strong enough to speak for them, because at school I felt weak from the discrimination against me. My friends would say: "Aa monna Kamana do you think Mosarwa ke motho mongwe yoo nang le tlhologanyo ya go tsena sekole?" This means: "Do you think a Mosarwa knows the importance of going to school?" That used to frustrate me so that I would feel innocent among civilised people.

But now when I think of those frustrating words my friends used to say to me, I feel that I am having some revenge.

I have decided that my objective of the future is to show other people that Basarwa are also human beings. In the future I want to speak for my people. Basarwa have potential for the future and they need their children like myself who have seen a little bit of light in the current world to stand up for them and show them the correct way.

I predict that in future I will put more effort into getting my people recognised, so that they are also amongst the developed society. I am also confident that in the future my people will get into the mainstream society. From my personal point of view I want it to be known that I struggle for my people.

By Kamana Phetso, October 28, 1993".

Between Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali's laudable statements and young Kamana Phetso's struggle there still stands the national state. But let it be said immediately that the national states most involved in "the Bushman problem", have reacted positively to UN initiatives. The first "Regional Conference on Development Programmes for Africa's San Populations" took place in Namibia, as early as in June 1992; the second was held in Botswana, in October 1993.

May the spirit of the "Year of the Indigenous People" last and, for humanity's sake, redeem the almost forgotten people.

AJGM Sanders

EDITOR'S NOTE ON APPELLATION

The Bushmen do not see themselves as a single, integrated unit, nor do they call themselves by a single name. In the literature, however, they are collectively referred to as Bushmen, San or Basarwa. Whilst respecting the various authors' personal preferences, I used for this publication's title and in my editorial introduction the term "Bushman", as it is still the term most widely used and is not experienced by the people concerned as politically less correct, or should I rather say incorrect, than the other current appellations.

OPENING ADDRESS

- Phillip V Tobias -

Professor of Anatomy and Human Biology
Director, Palaeo-anthropology Research Unit
Chairman, Kalahari Research Committee 1956-1971
University of the Witwatersrand

It is with profound regret that I am unable to participate in the 13th ICAES meeting at Mexico City and, in particular, in the session on the San. The convener, Professor Tony Sanders, has asked me to send this brief introductory address to the session.

In 1936 the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, mounted the first major interdisciplinary research expedition to study the San people. That expedition numbered among its leading members RA Dart (Physical Anthropology), CM Doke (African Languages), ID MacCrone (Applied Psychology) and PR Kirby (one of the first serious ethno-musicologists of Africa). The war years put a stop to field studies but they were resumed in 1951 when a French team led by François Balsan and including myself as physical anthropologist made a traverse of the Kalahari. That expedition started my life-long interest in the San. Only a few years later I set up a Kalahari Research Committee to mount interdisciplinary field studies of the San. Its work lasted from 1956 to 1971 and throughout that time one, two or three expeditions to the San took place every year.

That new burst of interest and newly generated enthusiasm, coupled with the remarkable insights furnished independently and synchronously by the Marshall family, led to a number of scholars coming to southern Africa to study the Kalahari San, such as the team from Harvard University and scholars from Oxford, London, Canada, various parts of the United States, Germany and Japan.

When I first went to the Kalahari to study the San, 42 years ago, there were astonishing myths in the text-books then current. The San were regarded as a dwindling remnant of a few hundred individuals and they were described as stunted and degenerate. Our early researches in the 1950s liquidated a number of those false impressions. For one thing, I was able to put on record in 1956 that there were no fewer than about 55 000 San still alive, predominantly in Botswana, Namibia and Angola. A good proportion of them were no longer leading a hunting and gathering way of life. I was able to claim in 1956 or 1957 that, instead of being a degenerate relic, the San were highly adapted to life in their desert terrain, but it was cultural and social modes which were in the main responsible for their adaptation, rather than biological ones. Nevertheless, our discovery that the San were showing a positive secular trend towards increased average adult stature provided the very first evidence of the operation of secular trends in the African continent. This breakthrough was soon to be overtaken by our demonstration that other African peoples, living a primarily pastoral or agricultural life, had been showing no secular changes in adult stature or even a negative secular trend (a new concept at that time).

The march of researches by colleagues from the New World and the Old World has ruthlessly erased many other misconceptions about the San. One old idea was that there was a once-off change from the hunter-gatherer mode of life to a food-producing subsistence economy. Several investigators, notably Carmel Schrire, have now shown what a hazy boundary there is between

the two subsistence modes and that parties of San crossed back and forth across this supposed line, as conditions became more hostile or more genial.

Forty years ago, in my first ecological study on the San, I predicted that, by the end of the century, hardly any San would still be living their pristine hunting and gathering way of life. Since that time research has shown the truth of this prophesy. We have witnessed San settlement patterns replacing nomadism, the adoption of domestic animals - starting with dogs, sheep and goats, at first supplementing and then taking the place of the old lifeways. The recent tragic hostilities on the border between Namibia and Angola have uprooted some thousands of the remaining Angolan San and catapulted them and many of their brethren from Namibia into a terrifying world of guns, uniforms and human quarry.

The meeting in Mexico City therefore comes at a critical time in the evolution, not only of studies on the San, but of the San themselves.

The devotion of a symposium to the San at this meeting of the International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences is entirely owing to the initiative of Professor Tony Sanders and I wish him and all of you who are participating in this session, fruitful and constructive deliberations. I fervently hope that the results will be of benefit to yourselves, the investigators, but above all will help the survival and welfare of the San themselves.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AMONG THE SAN: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF SAN RESEARCH¹

- John E Hudelson -

INTRODUCTION

"It was the strangest and most beautiful thing they had ever seen and they wondered why the Gods had sent it to them", says the narrator in the popular movie *"The Gods Must Be Crazy"*. He is referring to the empty Coke bottle that had dropped from the sky, the movie's metaphor for modern technology and its effect on the "pretty, dainty, small and graceful" San (Bushmen) of the Kalahari Desert. Later in the movie, the protagonist, X/i finds the bottle to be a curse, and he yells to the Gods: *"Take back your thing, we don't want it ... you must be crazy to send us this thing, take it back!"* Although the film is a fictional comedy, full of stereotypes and clichés, the story of the bottle may serve as an allegory for one recurrent San experience.

From the first University of Witwatersrand expedition to study those "little yellow people" in 1936 to the author's short visits in the field during 1992, more than 130 researchers have invaded the land, lives and minds of the San. In this century, the San have been less isolated from Western academic research than probably any other non-literate ethnic group in the world.

Every inch of their collective skin has been measured and compared, including (but not limited to) the thickness of their subcutaneous fat, the size of their protruding buttocks, the height of their arches, the thickness of their eyelids, the length of the female genital labia, the "angle of the dangle" (as one researcher calls it) of the penis, the angle of their pentagonal skulls, and the curve of their lordotic spines.

The San have given their blood, their saliva and their urine to the advancement of science and the reputations of scientists. The San have taught us their language of crackling sounds, and told us their myths, their stories, their memories and their worries, punctuated only by requests for tobacco and other gifts from our bounty.

Patiently, the hunters have taught clumsy ethnographers to make fires and then to make bows and their arrows - three-stage projectiles, invented centuries before our Titan missile. Women have taught scores of researchers how to build huts, how to find the right roots to dig and how to know whom to joke with. They have spent hours singing to us, dancing for us and trying to cure us. Maybe they thought that they could cure us of our insatiable need to know everything about them, our attempt to "be" them, and even our most incurable pathology, our need to classify them.

¹ Sections of this paper have been abstracted from a book on the social history of San research that is pending publication. Janet Hermans' excellent dissertation inspired me to start this social history of San research, and Robert Hitchcock, who has written a fine, comprehensive history of the San research in Botswana, was extremely helpful. All quotations that appear in this paper without citations are from the author's interviews with the researchers, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. However, the author takes full responsibility for any mistakes or misinterpretations. I have all those people to thank for sharing their experiences, their data and their ideas. But, I am most thankful to Carol Pauli, without whose painstaking editing and eloquent suggestions, this paper would have been quite drab.

