

Developing Basarwa research and research for
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AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH TOWARDS YEAR 2000

By

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Friends and colleagues, in welcoming you, and thanking you for participating in this workshop, I would like to outline what I see as the two main objectives: to create a space for research, and to fill that space with relevant research initiatives.

By creating a space I mean to justify, legitimise, and gain popular acceptance of the need for research on and with the Bushmen/San/Basarwa/N/oakwe people of Southern Africa, as a distinct ethnic and indigenous group of people. And we must fill that space with basic and applied research that brings out the nature of the relationship between these people and the encompassing society of which they are a part.

1. TO CREATE A SPACE

To start by stating these needs may not seem important in the present company, where I am speaking to the converted. All of us here are assembled by the very virtue of having done, planning to be involved in, or being users of research on the Basarwa.

But we are also aware that the political climate in Botswana has not always embraced research on the Bushmen. Let us therefore stop a moment and ask why.

First of all, when Botswana became independent in 1966, it declared itself a non-racial, not a multi-racial state. I believe this distinction to be significant. At that time, and in this part of the world, it was a very progressive and forward-looking policy to entrench in the constitution that there should be no discrimination on the basis of "race, colour, creed, ethnic origin or social standing". Development policies were clearly intended and designed to reach all citizens of Botswana.

However, over the years it has been a gradual recognition by the Government of Botswana and the general public that not all sections of the population have been equally able to participate in and benefit from the development that is taking place in the country. One section which seemed clearly to lose out was initially defined as the dispossessed Bushmen of Ghanzi District, later redefined as the Remote Area Dwellers of Botswana. To reach this most disadvantaged section of the population, the Remote Area Development Programme was set up as a socio-economic welfare programme.

This programme has seen some considerable achievements, but there are also shortcomings that are now being recognised. A new policy document is being prepared, which the Deputy Permanent Secretary, Charles Ntwaagae from the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing will speak about tomorrow.

It is my understanding that some of the problems that this programme has encountered, and some of the reasons why it has been a difficult programme to implement, lie in the conceptual ambiguity of the definition of the target group. In a restricted sense the target group is defined by socio-economic criteria as people that are lacking with respect to certain services, infrastructure, education, land, water, livestock and so on. But it is also an empirical fact that the greater part of the target group, (an estimated 70-80 %) are Basarwa. These people are not only **lacking** in certain respects. They have also **got something** to offer. They have a very flexible and adaptive kinship structure and social organisation. They have a remarkable tradition of high morals, tolerance, non-violence, and gender equality, they have unsurpassed knowledge when it comes to the ecological adaptation and sustainable use of the environment, and the list could go on.

Development has shown that this culture is particularly vulnerable in competition with the expanding majority culture in Botswana. It is to the great credit of the Government of Botswana that this problem is now being recognised, and not only as a welfare problem, but as a problem derived from cultural differences that require specific measures in order to achieve equal opportunities for all.

Let me quote a few paragraphs from a planning document prepared for the Regional San Conference that will take place in October:

The notion of a continuing dialogue between and about minorities should be seen as crucial to equitable development of the region as a whole. Uppermost in the minds of democratic Southern African countries must be the question of democratic and equitable land distribution and resource allocation, based on long term habitation and land use patterns in conjunction with local people's rights to speak for themselves.

In the context of "nation building", most African countries face the dilemma of implementing affirmative action on behalf of specific groups, which could be misconstrued as detracting from a policy of "equal opportunity/ equal development" in the nation as a whole.

By virtue of their past tradition and relationship to the land, San peoples of Southern Africa have, perhaps more than other groups, been adversely affected by twentieth century development. Clearly they will have to adapt their traditional way of life to change. Isolation of these peoples as minorities is not a pragmatic solution. However, it is clear that the San are not coping well with the transition into the twentieth century. It would be less than what is expected of civilised people to ignore their plight. Many San have expressed the desire to incorporate positive aspects of development into their lives, whilst retaining what is valued in their older traditions.(MLGL&H Working document 1993:9)

With policy statements like this on the current agenda, it can again be said that there is no further need to argue for legitimising research on the Bushmen/San/Basarwa/N/oakwe.

We should keep in mind, however, that a policy is a document stating plans and promises. For a policy along these lines to be implemented in Botswana down to the grass-root level, a lot of work will need to be done to gain popular acceptance. For this, our support is needed. Government representatives very justly complain that some people, especially expatriates like myself, are very quick to complain about policies that do not work well for the Basarwa. There is little or no recognition for the good things that may have been achieved. So let me state clearly that recent policy statements, and actions taken, by MLGL&H represent a very positive and promising development. In the Ministry's need to 'sell' this policy to the public, the research community should offer its assistance.

I believe a policy based on 'affirmative action' to be as appropriate as we move towards the 21st century, as a policy stressing non-discrimination and non-differentiation was appropriate in 1966.

2. TO FILL THE SPACE

When we argue for a recognition of the special position and the special problems of the Basarwa, we are balancing on a very thin edge between a purely negative concept, that of apartheid, and a very constructive concept, that of affirmative action. And any argument for targeting specifically the Basarwa, as an ethnic group, is likely to encounter accusation of fostering divisiveness, tribalism and so on.

Let us return to the research field, and for a moment draw a parallel to gender studies. Last week the National Institute of Development Research and Documentation hosted a seminar on gender research, and launched the gender research programme of the Institute. Here are some of the arguments for focusing specifically on the gender dimension.

Point one: Gender research recognises the significance of the culturally-defined categories of **women and men**. The difference between men and women originates in certain well known biological facts. However, the social codification of these facts in terms of culturally-defined gender roles, go, as we all know, far beyond that which could even remotely be justified by biological criteria. Gender roles are cultural constructs.

Point two: Pointing out this fact, and doing research that documents the difference in roles that women and men occupy in a society, does not mean that one wants to be divisive, or wants separate development for men and women. Quite the opposite. It has been acknowledged that **we must address and describe these differences precisely in order to achieve equality**. Only by describing, as truly and accurately as possible, inequalities as they appear in family life, and in the workplace, can adequate measures be developed in order to change the situation.

I believe this approach to be valid not only for women, but also for many other disadvantaged groups. To return to the case of the Basarwa, an argument that is often encountered is that they may well be in need of some special attention, but that it is unfair to single out one particular minority group in Botswana, and advocate special development programmes and support, as long as other groups are equally disadvantaged.

This is a very valid point. But as researchers, we must ask if this is really the case. This is **an empirical question, that can and should be addressed through research.** It is only by a factual description and analysis of the Basarwa, as a distinct group that we can assess their relative problems and needs and compare their situation with other minority groups, and, even more importantly, with the national averages.

I will not try to preempt the answers that will come out of such research. But there are clear indications that most other minority groups are managing much better in socio-economic terms, and are in a much better position to make use of the opportunities that regular government development programmes have to offer, than is generally the case with the Basarwa.

An example: Basarwa with a background in one of the Khoesan languages have more difficulties in learning Setswana, than people speaking other minority languages, that are part of the Bantu language family. There are fundamental differences between Khoesan languages and Setswana, while people speaking Bantu languages other than Setswana do not, to the same extent, seem to encounter problems of communication, because there are linguistic similarities, and an abundance of cognate words.

There are some fundamental differences here which have a bearing on people's life-chances and their possibilities for socio-economic advancement. Research can explain such fundamental differences in life-chances by showing how differences in culture create socio-economic differences and accompanying problems of poverty and marginalisation. On such factual basis can then special programmes - call them affirmative action or any other name - be justified as a means to achieve the ultimate political objective of securing common and equal access to development.

A full session is set aside on tomorrow's programme inviting contributions to outline a Basarwa research programme. In this introductory note, let me just mention two points that we may return to in later discussions.

Point one: In spite of the common assertion (that is only partially true) that an enormous amount of research has been done on the Basarwa, we do not really have a good **overall picture** of the present situation of the Basarwa. The dominant tradition of the anthropological case study/community study approach has brought valuable insights, and should be continued. But **in addition** we need to aggregate data into more comprehensive pictures, and to develop indicators that make comparison possible between groups, and between specific groups and the national situation.

This lack of aggregate data is worsened by the total lack of statistics that can give us a breakdown in terms of ethnicity. The reason given for this state of affairs is again based in an ideology suggesting that racial differences should not be described. But the present practice deprives us of an important instrument for planning and monitoring as well as basic research: namely to assess the socio-economic position of any given group compared to other groups, and to the national standard. If we can put forward this argument well enough, we may just be in time to provide an input to the next Population Census, year 2001.

A second point, related to the previous one: The most important challenge for the future is not primarily research on the Bushmen/San/Basarwa/N/oakhwe, but research on the **relationship** between this group of people and the nation state. It is the attitudes, the perceptions and the decisions made by the majority of this country that will ultimately decide the future of the minority. A programme for research on and with the Basarwa must keep in mind this encompassing framework, and include it.

3. REGIONAL UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

Finally, I would like to say a few words on the role of the University of Botswana. It is my hope that it will play a leading role in the process ahead of us. And I am not saying this in a spirit of competition, but in a spirit of stressing the special responsibility of this university. After all, the greater part of the Bushmen of this world are also citizens of Botswana. This fact should be seen as a justification, as well as an opportunity, for this University to develop an agenda promoting research on and with the Basarwa, and for teaching to incorporate the research findings. Such a commitment should not necessarily be limited only to the Basarwa, but be part of a broadly-defined concern with minority cultures and languages.

To help us on the way towards this future goal, we have invited some visitors, with the dual objective of drawing on their research experience and to establish a research network.

I would first like to welcome our visitors from **Namibia**. This country shares many of Botswana problems, such as a research tradition dominated by expatriates and a need for local capacity-building. Moreover, the whole university sector is new, even compared to Botswana. On the other hand, there is an institution like the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia, which already has an impressive research record based on cooperation with the Ju/'hoan people.

South Africa has a number of distinguished First World universities, and a considerable research record. There are new and very promising prospects for research cooperation with a New South Africa. We have invited researchers with backgrounds in linguistics, social science and law because at the present point in time these are the fields that most readily match research activities and interests among University of Botswana staff. Hopefully, other important subjects such as education, environmental studies and public health will be taken up on future occasions.

Last but not least, let me specially welcome two Naro participants. It is a first step towards a future situation which should ensure proper links for consultation with the people that are the object of this whole workshop. Their participation gives meaning to the expression that stands for the theme as well as the major aim of the workshop: **research on and with the Basarwa**.