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CHAPTER 7

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: SAN EXPERIENCES

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Introduction

Africa contains 20.2% of the world's land mass and 14.9% of the world's population—some 795 million people live in an area containing some of the world's most impressive scenery, wildlife populations, and rich cultural diversity. It is also a region characterized by civil and military conflict, high debts, environmental degradation, developmental difficulties (including unproductive investment of aid and loans), autocratic governments and corruption, external power conflicts, high population growth, drought and famine, and disease—including AIDS, malaria, gastroenteritis, river blindness, schistosomiasis, and tuberculosis. As a result, per capita income and food production is declining, and the numbers of families slipping into poverty has doubled in a decade. An estimated 6.5 million people are infected with AIDS. Some 40 million Africans have been displaced by military conflict or environmental disaster. More than half of Africa's population live in absolute poverty, and over 100 million are malnourished.¹

This chapter describes the experiences of the San of southern Africa, though their plight is by no means unique. The southern African region includes ten countries with a combined population of nearly 100 million. During 1992, severe drought struck southern Africa, reducing harvests and causing enormous social difficulties. More than a quarter of the region's population is threatened by chronic food insecurity. The number of

families in southern Africa unable to meet their basic needs has doubled over the past decade.²

Some analysts have suggested that the problems are due to misguided development policies which have undercut the self-sufficiency of southern African households. Colonial and post-colonial governments undertook economic development programs which sometimes saw the expropriation of substantial blocks of territory for private use—often by white settlers, foreign companies, and entrepreneurs. Land belonging to local communities was turned into freehold farms, national parks, and wildlife reserves.³ Governmental institutions and private enterprises contributed significantly to the degradation of the resource base, causing impoverishment and social stress among rural communities. There are numerous examples of unsustainable development projects in southern Africa. These projects range from large-scale mining operations to the introduction of new types of agricultural technology, and from the construction of huge dams to the establishment of plantations and ranching schemes. South Africa has pursued a policy of industrialization which has resulted in some of the worst pollution of rural areas seen anywhere in the world.⁴

In Africa, it is the so-called vulnerable groups that are bearing the heaviest burden of recession, poverty, and environmental decline. These groups include not only indigenous peoples but also women and children, rural farmers, refugees, and the urban poor.

For the purposes of this chapter, the term *indigenous peoples* will refer to those groups who are descended from the original inhabitants of a territory or state. Some of these were hunter-gatherers whose life-styles have changed substantially over the centuries. Others are pastoral nomads or small-scale farmers who reside in rural areas. In some cases they have entered the national economy as marginally successful food producers and specialized workers. In other cases, they are relatively poor and have had to become dependent upon the largess of other groups or the states in which they live for their very survival.⁵ Sometimes called natives, aboriginal peoples, tribal peoples, Fourth World peoples, or First Nations, these groups are found in a number of African countries. Few, if any, African countries acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples inside their boundaries. Part of the reason for this position is that they do not wish to grant primacy of one group over another. By admitting that some groups have historical precedence, states might end up bolstering arguments of some tribal or ethnic groups for self-determination. Another reason is that they see virtually all people within their territories—other than Europeans—as indigenous. What is often at issue in Africa, is not victimization on the basis of indigenous or ethnic status per se, but rather the clash and subsequent human environmental consequences of

different kinds of economies—power struggles which are tied to national and international economic development priorities.

The following case describes human environmental rights abuses resulting from national and external efforts to “develop primitive populations”—with specific examples of enforced settlement of hunter-gather groups in Namibia (the San), as well as generalized examples experienced by the San throughout southern Africa. Attention is also given to community-originated efforts to improve social and economic conditions.

Resource Management and Social Justice among the San of Southern Africa

The San (Bushmen, Basarwa) make up the majority of the indigenous peoples of southern Africa. In the past, San territory covered virtually all of southern Africa, but today they are generally confined to remote areas or to the peripheries of villages and towns. Some San are in the equivalent of refugee camps, while others are in settlements that were designed to provide water and social services to rural populations.⁶ While many people consider the San as the archetypal foragers, ethnohistorical and ethnographic evidence suggests that they have been engaged in extensive interaction with other groups and state systems for well over a thousand years. Far from being full-time hunter-gatherers, the vast majority of San pursue mixed economies which include food productions, formal sector employment, and dependence upon other groups, or in some cases, the states in which they live.⁷

The approximately 95,000 San are often described as vulnerable populations because of their poverty and low socioeconomic status. San and other African indigenous populations have been affected by a variety of factors ranging from drought to settlement efforts, and from wildlife laws to military struggles. In the 1970s and 1980s, San in Angola and Namibia were drawn into the military conflict between South Africa and the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO). A number of former foragers and agropastoralists have been resettled as a result of the establishment of game reserves and national parks. Dams, mining projects, roads, and agricultural schemes have also had major impacts on many of these people.⁸ In Botswana, San were affected by drought and changes in land tenure arrangements. In Zimbabwe, the Amasili were removed from national parks such as Hwange. A similar fate was suffered by the Bushmen of northern Namibia.⁹

These situations have exacerbated problems of poverty and landlessness and follow a long history of serious human rights abuses. Genocidal activities resulted in the near extermination of San in what is now South Africa and Lesotho. Ethnocide—the destruction of cultural systems—is prevalent in all of the southern African countries in which they reside.

Possibly the biggest problem facing these people is the expanded pace of development in rural areas of southern Africa. As populations grow and the economies of these countries expand, there is increasing pressure to utilize the range, mineral, and other resources of what used to be the frontier of settlement. Development-related problems include:

1. Boreholes drilled to provide water for livestock and wild animals attract large numbers of animals, leading to overutilization of the resources and eventually to the loss of both livestock and wildlife.
2. Competition with cattle for foraging plants, as well as erosion and desertification resulting from overgrazing.
3. Land use conflicts tied to expansion of grazing and farming areas into territory utilized by hunter-gatherers. Governments, companies and individuals have been granted ranching and/or farming leasehold or freehold rights in areas that supported foraging and part-time food producing populations for generations.
4. In the Kalahari Desert region of Botswana, the expansion of fencing, including veterinary cordon fencing, has cut off game from their traditional grazing and watering areas. The result has been massive die-offs among wildebeest, hartebeest, and other mobile antelope species.
5. Drought and overgrazing have exacerbated the problems of environmental degradation.
6. Hunting laws and conservation programs inhibiting the ability of the San and other rural poor to obtain food and income. In some cases, people were arrested even when they were in possession of a “Special License,” which is supposed to guarantee the hunting rights of subsistence hunters.
7. The setting aside of land for parks and game reserves, with associated restrictions on San movement and resource use in those areas, has further reduced the land where people can forage or produce food. In addition, the number of tourists in the Okavango and Kalahari areas rose during the 1980s, and people had to put up with seemingly endless questions and requests for photographs of “traditional” behavior.

Top-down Efforts to Improve the Socioeconomic Condition of the San: Tsum!Kwe

Governmental and private assistance to the San in southern Africa has taken several forms. The following overview presents an example of the problems resulting from projects designed and implemented by outside agencies, with little or no San participation.

In 1959 and 1960, the South African government established a settle-

ment scheme at Tsum!kwe (in the Nyae Nyae region of northeastern Namibia) in order to provide Ju/Wasi Bushmen with water, social services (e.g., schools and health facilities), administrative offices, and housing. The purpose of this scheme was to turn the nomadic San into settled food producers and wage laborers. The South West African government administration provided food, livestock, plowing services, and occasional jobs for people who resided in this settlement. By 1980, there were approximately 1,000 people at Tsum!Kwe, and the socioeconomic situation was extremely difficult.

Assessments of the Tsum!Kwe settlement by anthropologists and administrators revealed a whole host of problems, including overcrowding, high levels of infant mortality, nutritional stress, shortened life spans of adults, social conflicts, alcoholism, and apathy and discontent on the part of the residents.¹⁰ Sharing of goods and services broke down, and families became more isolated from one another. Many of the people at Tsum!Kwe became dependent upon government handouts for their existence. In some cases, local San joined the South African Defense Force, since this was one of the few means of employment available.¹¹ Social fragmentation was accompanied by environmental degradation. Too many people in too small an area, and their intensified patterns of grazing and foraging, led to increased wind erosion and losses of soil nutrients, as well as decreased availability of wild plant and animal resources for local people.¹² In short, nearly every socioeconomic indicator used to measure quality of life declined when people moved to Tsum!Kwe.

Community-Originated Efforts to Enhance Environmental and Social Conditions

In the early 1980s, the Ju/Wasi in the Tsum!Kwe region began to move back to the bush in an attempt to get away from the fighting and drinking that was so common at Tsum!Kwe. Initially, three groups returned to their traditional territories and set up new communities based on traditional kinship arrangements. These communities had a mixed economy which included foraging, pastoralism, and agriculture and some food obtained either through purchase or in the form of Namibian government allocation. In 1986, the Ju/Wasi formed the first Ju/Wa Farmers Union (now known as the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation), a self-help organization that assists local people with livestock production and other development activities and in which decisions are made by the Ju/Wasi themselves. By late 1991 there were thirty-one such groups, many of them with their own water source, gardens, and small herd of livestock. Foraging makes up part of the subsistence of these Ju/Wasi communities, while some income is derived from rural industries such as the manufacture of handicrafts.¹³

The Ju/Wasi have made efforts to gain greater control over their land and resources through petitions to the government of Namibia and by playing an active role in a national-level conference on land reform held in the country's capital in 1991. The Namibian government gave tacit recognition to their land rights when they stated that they would accept the traditional Ju/Wasi land management system as the basis for land allocations. Subsequently, the Ju/Wasi were able to convince some pastoralists who had moved into their area with their cattle herds to leave peacefully, thus demonstrating their willingness and ability to maintain control over their resources. The Ju/Wa Farmers Union was instrumental in lobbying against the establishment of a nature reserve in eastern Bushmanland (only foragers would have been allowed to remain on the reserve—livestock grazing and small-scale farming would have been prohibited).¹⁴

The new communities do face a number of constraints, including wild animals that destroy their water points and attack their livestock. The Ju/Wasi have petitioned the Namibian government to allow them to protect their water and livestock by killing problem animals, such as lions and elephants, but so far they have not been granted permission. Lack of formal government recognition to resource and land rights also affects Ju/Wasi ability to exploit the natural resources of their traditional territories. For example, they are not allowed to exploit and sell local timber. Efforts are now being made to establish a natural resource management program in Bushmanland. The leadership of the Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative is afraid that the government will set up a new kind of land management unit known as a "conservancy" which will usurp the authority of the Ju/Wasi.¹⁵ They are also concerned that most of the economic benefits will continue to flow to government or to a private safari company which has been operating in the area since 1988. Their efforts to convince the government to permit local people to make decisions about the use of natural resources have so far been unsuccessful.

Conclusion

To summarize, the San, like other marginalized groups in Africa, have experienced human rights abuse—including genocide and ethnocide—from colonial times to the present. Previous efforts to improve the socioeconomic condition of the San included settlement strategies aimed at "developing" these subsistence-oriented peoples. The case of the Tsum!Kwe settlement suggests that top-down efforts designed and implemented by outsiders can have disastrous effects. The Ju/Wasi response of returning to traditional territories and employing mixed economic strategies in communities that emphasize traditional kinship relationships and participatory political structures represents one of many efforts across

Africa where indigenous peoples have attempted to regain control over their resources and society. Some people, including many San, see development as a fundamental right of all people. Self-generated development schemes like the one described above have a greater chance of equitable success. Long-term success, however, hinges on the degree of participation and level of authority granted by the Namibian government to local people in managing and using their natural resources.

Concluding Discussion

All over the tropical and subtropical world, the policy toward hunter-gatherers appears to be much the same. Well-intentioned governments (or those whose intentions toward indigenous peoples are more suspect), radical or conservative, civil or military, colonial or post-colonial – all seem to favor the settlement of hunter-gatherers and are unprepared to recognize hunting and gathering land rights. All too often, sedentarization is forced upon peoples without real efforts given toward discovering their wishes.

The experiences of former foraging populations in various parts of the world raises a major philosophical problem in regard to social evolution. The idea that hunting and gathering is an "earlier stage" in a linear view of evolution, and that hunter-gatherers should be "hurried along" toward agriculture, has erroneously found its way into the attitudes of government planners and the multinational agencies which fund development schemes. An instance of this attitude is to be seen in Mauritania, where 70% of the populations are pastoralist. The few hunter-gatherers there are thus encouraged by the government to become pastoralists "overnight" and join the nation. They receive free cattle handouts and are asked to live in tents and to move about like nomads. The experiment has been a disaster because the hunter-gatherers have not been allowed to adopt new ways at their own pace in the natural course of their exposure to them but rather are hurried into a new way of life without fully understanding or desiring it.

Over the past decade, a dramatic surge has taken place in activities designed to promote human rights for indigenous peoples across the world.¹⁶ In the case of Africa, attention has been concentrated on what broadly can be called socioeconomic and cultural rights, especially the rights of everyone to a standard of living adequate to ensure health and well-being, sufficient food, water, and shelter, and social security.¹⁷ In a context where substantial numbers of people face problems of poverty, political conflict, and environmental degradation, efforts to undertake self-help activities at the community level have become increasingly important. As yet, it is too early to say whether or not the grassroots development and environmental movement in Africa has achieved significant restructuring. There is no question, however, that internally designed and

implemented community-based resource management activities allow local people greater opportunity to survive and thrive than the previous top-down centralized resource management schemes afforded.

The human rights and environment issues facing Africa are the same issues facing much of the world. People will not have an adequate ability to survive and thrive without conflict resolution and peace, without development designed to improve life-styles and well-being for all peoples, without the protection of basic human rights (to life, political and civil liberty, and social/economic/cultural integrity), without a sound and healthy environment, and without the opportunity to participate in decision-making systems.

Notes

1. See Mort Rosenblum and Doug Williamson, *Squandering Eden: Africa at the Edge*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1987; Lloyd Timberlake, *Africa in Crisis: The Causes, the Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy* (London: Earthscan) 1988; David Ewing Duncan, "The Long Goodbye," *The Atlantic* 266(1): 20–24 (1990); Alemneh Dejene, *Environment, Famine and Politics in Ethiopia: A View from the Village* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press) 1990; Bread for the World, *Hunger 1992: Second Annual Report on the State of World Hunger, Ideas That Work* (Washington, DC: Bread for the World Institute on Hunger and Development) 1992; Lester R. Brown and Edward C. Wolf, "Reversing Africa's Decline," in *State of the World 1986*, edited by Lester Brown, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co.) 1986, pp. 177–194; World Bank, *World Development Report 1992: The Challenge of Development* (Washington, DC: Oxford University Press for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) 1992; American Anthropological Association, "Surviving Famine and Providing Food Security in Africa: A Position Statement," (Arlington, VA: AAA) 1992.

2. Bread for the World 1992 op. cit. note 1; World Bank 1992 op. cit. note 1.

3. Robert J. Gordon, "Conserving Bushmen to Extinction in Southern Africa," in *An End to Laughter? Tribal Peoples and Economic Development*, edited by Marcus Colchester (London: Survival International) 1985, pp. 28–42; Robert K. Hitchcock, *Monitoring, Research and Development in the Remote Areas of Botswana* [Gaborone, Botswana: Ministry of Local Government and Lands and Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD)] 1988.

4. Alan R. Durning, *Apartheid's Environmental Toll*, Worldwatch Paper 95 (Washington DC: Worldwatch) 1990.

5. Jason W. Clay, "Organizing to Survive," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 8(4): 2–5 (1984); Robert K. Hitchcock and J. D. Holm, "Bureaucratic Domination of Hunter-Gatherer Societies: The Case of the San in Botswana," *Development and Change* (in press).

6. Hitchcock 1988; John Marshall *The Constitution and Communal Lands in*

Namibia. *Land Rights and Local Governments. Helping 33,000 People Classified as "Bushmen": The Ju/Wa Case* (Windhoek, Namibia: Nyae Nyae Development Foundation) 1989.

7. Edwin N. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1989; M. Bieseles, M. Guenther, R. Hitchcock, R. Lee, and J. MacGregor, "Hunters, Clients, and Squatters: The Contemporary Socioeconomic Status of Botswana Basarwa," *African Study Monographs* 9(3): 109-151 (1989); Hitchcock and Holm (in press) op. cit. note 5.

8. Robert K. Hitchcock, "Wildlife Conservation and Development Among Rural Populations in Southern Africa," *International Third World Studies Journal* 2(1): 225-232 (1990); Bieseles et al. 1989 op. cit. note 7; Robert J. Gordon, *The Bushman Myth: The Making of Namibian Underclass*, (Boulder, CO: Westview) 1992.

9. Gordon 1992 op. cit. note 8.

10. John Marshall and Claire Ritchie, *Where are the Ju/Wasi of Nyae Nyae? Changes in a Bushman Society: 1958-1981*, Communications No. 9, Center for African Area Studies, University of Cape Town (Cape Town: University of Cape Town) 1984; Gordon 1992 op. cit. note 8, pp. 175-181.

11. Marshall and Ritchie 1984 op. cit. note 10; Gordon 1992 op. cit. note 8, pp. 183-192.

12. Rodney L. Brandenburgh, "An Assessment of Pastoral Impacts on Basarwa Subsistence: An Evolutionary Ecological Analysis in the Kalahari," M.A. thesis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska) 1991.

13. Ju/Wa Bushmen Development Foundation, *The Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative, 1986-1991* (Windhoek, Namibia: Ju/Wa Bushman Development Foundation) 1991a. Ju/Wa Bushman Development Foundation, "Land Issues in Nyae Nyae: A Communal Areas Example." Paper presented at the National Conference on Land Reform, Windhoek, Namibia, 1991b.

14. Ju/Wa Bushman Development Foundation, 1991a, 1991b op. cit. note 13; Richard B. Lee and Megan Bieseles, "From Foragers to First Nations: Dependency or Self Reliance among the Ju/'Hoansi-!'Kung." Paper presented at the 90th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, Illinois, 1991.

15. This was the case in Botswana, where the Nata Conservation Trust, which ostensibly is a community-based resource management program, was established with limited consultation with local people. Some individuals, including Tyua Bushmen, were excluded from the area set aside for conservation and ecotourism purposes. In addition, the region which the trust controls contains an important salt source which was a major item used by Tyua for income generation and exchange. The establishment of this project has thus led to a reduction in the income of local people.

16. Clay 1984 op. cit. note 5; Julian Burger, *Report from the Frontier: The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Press) 1987; Julian Burger, *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World* (New York: Anchor Books) 1990; John H. Bodley, *Victims of Progress*, third edition (Menlo Park, CA: Mayfield) 1990.

17. Rhoda D. Howard, "The Full Belly Thesis: Should Economic Rights Take Precedence Over Civil and Political Rights? Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa," *Human Rights Quarterly* 5(4): 467-490 (1983); Rhoda E. Howard, *Human Rights in Commonwealth Africa* (Totowa, NJ: Roman and Littlefield) 1986; Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im and Francis M. Deng, editors, *Human Rights in Africa: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution) 1990.

