

Basarwa in Botswana: The Role of Perceptions and Name Giving by other Population Groups in Enduring Poverty

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the way in which perceptions and name giving contribute to the socio-economic circumstances of a named group. The understanding of the Basarwa as a people in Botswana as well as how they have been perceived in history by “new invaders”—including Christians—is used as an example. This article explores the influence of the attitudes or perceptions of “invaders” on the original inhabitants of the sub-continent. It is difficult to address the topic of the Basarwa with any amount of certainty due to insufficient records, more particularly due to lack of any records written from the perspective of the Basarwa themselves. This article shows that perceptions about the Basarwa as well as the names given to them by “invaders” play a defining role in the enduring poverty of the Basarwa people in Botswana.

Keywords: Basarwa; Bushmen; San; Botswana; poverty

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Introduction

This article is concerned with understanding how the Basarwa¹ as a people in Botswana, have been perceived in history by “invaders”—including Christians. Erickson’s (2001, 164–165) three prevalent images of how people have been perceived throughout history are very helpful in this discussion. He argues that where humans are treated as machines, they are perceived solely in terms of what they are able to do. In this approach described by Erickson, persons are basically regarded as things, as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. They have value as long as they are useful. The dominant interest here is their strength, energy, skills and capabilities. In a number of ways, Basarwa have been perceived this way. The second image Erickson (2001) describes is that of humans as animals, where there is no qualitative difference between humans and animals. The only difference is one of degree. In his third image, humans are viewed as pawns of the universe, at the mercy of forces in the world which control our destiny but have no real concern for us.

Christians generally agree that all human beings are created in the image of God. However, Scripture does not spell out what exactly “being in the image of God” means. It is not the intension of this article to discuss the concept of “creation in the image of God” in any great detail. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to observe that theologians throughout the ages have made attempts to specify what it means to be created in the image of God. Grudem (2010, 443) shows that some have suggested that the image of God consists in a human’s intellectual ability, his/her power to make moral decisions and willing choices, a human’s original moral purity, his/her creation as male or female or his/her dominion over the earth. For Grudem (2010, 443), giving such a list does not do justice to this subject; it suffices to say that “every way in which man is like God is part of his being in the image and likeness of God.” A fresh understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God is essential in order for people, including Christians, to transform the way we perceive and treat each other in our communities.

Background of the Basarwa

Schapera (1930, 26) indicates that it is generally agreed that the Bushmen were long regarded as the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa and have occupied the country from the time of remote antiquity. More recently Tlou and Campbell (1984), Hermans (1980) and Kiema (2010) have confirmed this view. Evidence exists that for many centuries the Basarwa people have been interacting with other population groups like the Bantu, the Dutch settlers, the missionaries and traders (Sales 1971).

Botswana is one of the countries of southern Africa where records (missionary and government) show that the Basarwa, also known by other names such as the Bushmen and the San, are the original or the oldest human inhabitants in this region. Historians (Tlou and Campbell 1984) believe that Basarwa have probably lived in Botswana for twenty to thirty

¹ There are different names to describe the Basarwa people, for example Bushman, San and others that will be discussed in this article.

thousand years. Basarwa differ physically, linguistically and ethnically from the other population groups in Botswana (Hermans 1980, 1). It is difficult to determine the size of the Basarwa population in Botswana today, because the national census process no longer identifies people on the basis of either ethnicity or language.

The government of Botswana has since independence in 1966 settled Basarwa into Tswana-like village settlements. There are 64 such settlements spread across seven administrative districts and the majority of the people in these settlements are Basarwa. It is also noteworthy that their interactions with other population groups have impacted on the way the Basarwa live, though most of the impact is negative as will be demonstrated later. The primary concern of this article is to explore the attitudes or perceptions of these “new invaders” on the original inhabitants of the sub-continent. It is difficult to address this topic with any amount of certainty due to insufficient records, more particularly due to lack of any records written from the perspective of the Basarwa themselves. It is, however, important to note—as Mazonde (2002, 57) rightly observes—that “[p]erceptions are one of the most important aspects of social or man-centred development, particularly with respect to indigenous people. Perceptions have played a crucial role in the life of the Basarwa because the plight of these people is to a large extent attitudinal in nature; it hinges on the way they are perceived and treated by the mainstream or dominant non-San communities, most of whom are the ‘Blacks’.”

Some aspects of the perceptions of the “new comers” are evident in their disparaging attitudes and the general discrimination to which they subject the Basarwa. The dominant population of Botswana fails to recognise the Basarwa’s knowledge systems and their modes of production. The Botswana population also fails to recognise the Basarwa modes of leadership, concepts of territoriality and ownership of private property. Basarwa have a totally different understanding of private property ownership, where one only owns the things they have made with their own hands like clothes and tools; and what God or nature has provided remains to be shared by all. These themes will be explored in some more detail in the sections below.

Disparaging Attitudes: Names

The idea of giving names to the conquered seems to be a general feature all around the world. Names like pygmies, gypsy, Aborigines or American Indians are all examples of this practice. The Basarwa are among those people of the world who were named, or rather labelled, by those who conquered them over the years. On the one hand, it is uncertain whether those who are given such names are comfortable with them. On the other hand, it seems as if the ultimate meaning of such names rests not with those given such names, but with the giver. The situation where one group gives a name to another seems to be part of the characteristics of poverty and powerlessness. In giving names to the original inhabitants of southern Africa, the new comers were categorically declaring their perception of them as those who lack the capacity to identify themselves. The following observation from Kiema (2010, 71) with regard to externally imposed identity is helpful in this regard:

The names imposed on us have resulted in self-condemnation, self-estrangement, submission, powerlessness, apathy, dependence, land loss and erosion of our identity. Our self-esteem, potential for self-actualisation and dignity have been ironed out of us.

There is abundant evidence that invaders had negative but also deprecating attitudes toward the Basarwa people that they found in southern Africa. One of the aspects in which this tendency is clearly traceable is in giving names to these people. The invaders hastened to give names to these people instead of taking the time to learn from *them* what their true identity was. Some of these names reveal what one may call a judgmental or derogatory attitude towards the Basarwa, as will be demonstrated in the following examples.

Bushmen

This is probably the name that has been used longer in the literature than any other in recorded history, with reference to this population group. Records show that this word was first coined in 1682 by the Dutch settlers in Cape Town. Hermans (1980, 4) contends that the Dutch considered them to be “little people” living in the bushes. In one sense, when one looks at the average size of the physical body of a Dutch adult—in contradistinction to that of a Mosarwa (Bushman) adult—the physical size would be the most striking difference that comes to mind in light of the above statement. It could, however, also mean that the term “little people” is used metaphorically to refer to the socialisation of these people in the human evolutionary process; that they are people who have not yet developed full human status. It is, therefore, a generally agreed position that this word was coined by the new comers, more particularly the Dutch, in reference to the original inhabitants of the southern tip of the African continent.

Kiema (2010, 68) argues that inference was made to the fact that these were “people without their own land ... who wondered around the bush looking for food ... with no emotional attachment to any land.” Several issues are important here. According to Kiema (2010, 68), the Bushmen—as perceived by the white settlers—were people whose livelihood is dependent upon animals and wild fruits. Since their lives are spent pursuing animals and fruit they have no land because they are regularly moving around searching for animals, which are in one place today and in another the next. He further observes that Bushmen—as perceived by the white settlers—are people with no sense of land ownership, such that in every situation where the Bushmen and animals are found in the same vicinity, the former came in pursuit of the latter, but that these people have no sense of ownership of that land whatsoever (Kiema 2010, 68).

Kiema (2010, 68) also takes issue with a definition of Bushmen given by two of Botswana’s renowned historians, Tlou and Campbell (1984), who, according to Kiema, perceive Bushmen as people who “occupy unoccupied land.” For Kiema this is a very strange definition in that the occupation of a piece of land by the “so-called Bushmen” is not seen as “occupation” or at least not seen as an occupation that serves as proof of ownership of some kind. This argument shows that right from the early contacts to post-independence Botswana, land that is occupied by Bushmen is still perceived as unoccupied and can still be grabbed.

The point here, however, is that in relation to occupation of space, the word Bushmen illustrates the perception that these people were seen as those who own or need no land. As a consequence, the dominant groups have over centuries refused to recognise and respect any claim made by Basarwa regarding land. This is one of the major factors in the enduring poverty of the Basarwa (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1997a&b; 1998a&b).

Boko (2002, 98) insightfully argues that “non-recognition of the unique land tenurial system practised by these forager communities as vesting any land rights in the Basarwa amounts to a declaration that Basarwa land was uninhabited and, therefore, *terrae nullius*² to the extent that no rights were seen to exist, none could be seen to have been violated.” The word Bushmen—in as far as it is a description of landlessness—therefore serves to justify the land grabbing and general dispossessing practices of the dominant groups. It further represents the unfavourable perception that these people have been subjected to for many centuries by the mainstream populations, that is to say, being regarded as those people who do not have a place in the community; those whose place is in the bush; those who do not have to be consulted about issues that affect them directly; those whose land can wantonly be taken over, demarcated, privatised and apportioned by others. This name (Bushmen) indicates that from the very early times, these people were perceived as those who live outside society (in the bush) or at least on the margins of society. It could as well be that the word Bushmen was used to denote the distance that these people were from the main centres of power like Cape Town or for that matter a Tswana centre of power like Serowe, Maun, Kanye and Molepopole.

Given the above reasons, Kiema (2010) rightly rejects the use of the name Bushmen with reference to his people, because it conveys layers of negative perceptions that other people have had about his people over many centuries. Being perceived as those who either lack the concept of land ownership—or have no need thereof—could be the main reason why even the church did not see any offense in the grabbing of Basarwa land. Not only that, but the church did not even see the need to preach the gospel to these people until 1968, as evident from the work of Crafford (1982, 294) who writes about the situation in Gantsi. Erickson’s (2001) image (cited above) of humans perceived as animals may be applicable in this situation.

San

According to Kiema (2010, 69) “the word *Saa* is a Nama-Damara verb meaning to pick up from the ground or out of a dustbin because of poverty.” Kiema (2010) argues that this name is not suitable because it links the identity of his people with a particular socio-economic situation that is prevailing at a given time and that his people are subjected to. For him, the Basarwa are not the only people who subsist through this mode, “there are many people who pick up food from the ground, dustbins and other filthy places for daily survival, more especially in the urban areas, and all these poorest of the poor are not called Saan [San].” In

2 Vacant or waste land.

this sense, he argues that children from other population groups who gather food from unusual places like rubbish bins can also qualify as San (Kiema 2010, 69).

Kiema (2010) is aware that the word San has gained popularity among those struggling to help improve the conditions of his people and in some academic circles where it is considered the most neutral and unifying name for all the first inhabitants of southern Africa. He further asserts that the huge sums of donor money attached to the term San have compelled many to promote, develop and legitimise it. It seems that Kiema (2010) and probably some of his people are uncomfortable with the use of this name in reference to them.

In terms of perceptions the word “San” denoted a misunderstanding of a particular mode of subsistence that does not fall within the mainstream production systems. The fact that these people depended on this particular way of subsistence was based on their clear knowledge of the ecosystem in which they found themselves. The San chose this particular mode of subsistence because they knew that the area in which they lived is semi-arid and severely lacking in surface water, except for short periods during the rainy season. They knew that the rainfall is generally low, and often highly localised and irregular in amounts and that droughts are frequent. The San way of life—contrary to the perceptions of the new comers—was informed by the knowledge that the environment in which they found themselves was not conducive to the sedentary mode of existence. The San knowledge of the environment in which they lived, therefore shaped the distinct economic adaptation, social organisation and tenurial concepts of their communities (Saugestad 1998, 85).

Despite the fact that their mode of production was so different from the methods followed by the dominant groups, Lee and Guenther (1993, 59) show from a study on the nutritional value of the Kung San group diet that their diet was well balanced in terms of vitamins and minerals, and with an adequate calorie level. A total average intake of 2 355 calories per person per day was estimated to include 690 calories from meat, 1 365 calories from *mongorongoro* nuts, and 300 from other vegetables. It is, therefore, clear that despite their mode of subsistence, these people had a well-balanced and healthy diet. Again there is clear evidence that the word San is based on misconceptions and the scornful tendency on the part of new comers towards anything they either do not understand, or that is different from the way they do or see things.

Basarwa

The word Mosarwa (singular) or Basarwa (plural) has also been used by Tswana speakers for a very long time in reference to this population group. The word also represents a particular way in which this population is perceived, in this case by their Sotho-Tswana-speaking neighbours, though there is the likelihood that it could have equivalents in other Bantu languages. Kiema (2010, 68) argues that the word originally meant *basarua*³: “those with nothing: no tribal territory, no livestock, no culture, no property, no rights, no language, no ethnic identity, no human dignity, even no chief.” It is, however, noteworthy that Kiema

3 Those who do not rear livestock.

(2010) provides no evidence to support this claim. The only reason for citing him here could be the fact that Kiema is himself a member of the said population group and therefore possibly speaks out of the historically stockpiled collective experience of the population. This makes outright dismissal of his claim difficult. Kiema's claim may be informed by the treatment meted out to them and how they are perceived by the non-“San” ethnic groups. Boko (2002, 96) concurs with Kiema that the word Basarwa has become something of a derogatory reference. It is used by the Tswana-speaking population to mean “a servant.” Boko (2002), however, like Kiema (2010), makes no effort to substantiate his claim on this matter, which again makes it difficult to support this claim.

Tagart (1931, 5) admits that the origin of the name “Masarwa” is obscure. He, however, alludes to the fact that it has been suggested that it is connected with the Sesuto word *sirwa*⁴ and means “the people of the south.” The same understanding was corroborated by Maphakela Lekalake⁵ at the London Missionary Society conference held in Serowe in 1935. He observes that Masarwa are called Barwa⁶ by the Batlhaping.⁷ In this use, the same Sotho-Tswana origin of the word is demonstrated. This shows that, despite the historically acquired negative connotations that the word has acquired in history, which convey both pejorative and derogatory connotations, this word in its etymological sense meant natives of the southernmost tip of Africa. When looking at both the Tagart report of 1931 and the London Missionary Society report of 1935, there is no doubt that the name Basarwa was not meant to be derogatory. However, one would not deny the fact that in the way it has been used in history it has acquired depreciatory undertones. The word Basarwa, therefore, more appropriately refers to the people of the south and their cultures, traditions, customs and even civilisations. In this sense, this study contends that this is the more suitable name for these people and therefore the preferred one for this study. The word, however, in its current use is in the languages of other population groups; and the article thus contends that maybe an equivalent in the Sarwa languages could be more appropriate.

Remote Area Dwellers

In post-independence Botswana, this is the latest name by which the sections of the population that have over the years been relocated to certain settlements inclusive of the Basarwa, are called. It is the nomenclature that is used in official documents in reference to the population groups among whom the Basarwa are the majority. The term “Remote Area Dwellers” was first introduced in 1978, signifying a shift in government policy from the identification of the target population by ethnic origin to the geographic targeting of people living in remote areas (Ministry of Local Government, Revised Remote Area Development

4 Sirwa should more appropriately be spelled *serwa*, which may refer to the culture, language, mannerisms, customs, taboos, practices and even geographical location of the people—as indeed shown by Tagart (1931).

5 Maphakela was the first African person south of the Equator to be ordained to Christian Ministry. He served his entire life as a minister among the Batlhaping in Kuruman, though originally from Botswana. He was speaking at the conference from his experience of the relationship between Basarwa and Batlhaping, another Tswana group in South Africa.

6 The People of the South.

7 A Tswana-speaking group among which the missionary, Robert Moffat, settled in the Kuruman area.

Programme [RADP] 2009, 1). There is, however, some discomfort with the use of this term both among the Basarwa and in academic circles.

Kiema's (2010, 69) discomfort with this word is twofold. In one sense, it refers to the distance that Remote Area Dwellers are perceived to be from the developed urban Botswana, from sources of power, influence and wealth. In another sense, the word conveys the fact that these people are perceived as those who are in deep darkness, a long way from civilisation. He particularly uses the Setswana translation (*tengnyanateng*⁸) to reach this conclusion.

Saugestad (1998, 30) also points out that this term is deeply resented by those who are so called. The term has been described as "a non-ethnic bureaucratic term that is consistent with the Government's painstaking, almost compulsive concern about not appearing to single out, favour or disfavour one or another of the country's ethnic groups." Here again we see that the term "Remote Area Dwellers" has created deep-seated resentment among those so called and may not be the best term to use in reference to this population group. The problem with this term seems to be that, like others, it perceives and describes these people in terms of a government programme that targets them. This means that in the event of change in government policy or the target population's geographical location, their identity will also have to change. Put differently, if a Mosarwa person who lives in a remote area is called a Remote Area Dweller, what is the name of a Mosarwa who lives elsewhere in Botswana? It could be that the name actually more accurately describes these people as perceived by policy makers as those who have no place in the urban and more developed Botswana. This name shows that government's interventions among the Basarwa come at a cost of trading their ethnic identity with an identity that is linked to a geographic location to which they have been relocated. This is more so, given the fact that there is still a lot of uneasiness regarding the processes of the relocations of Basarwa and how they were handled. This, therefore, though probably inadvertently, is one of the names given to Basarwa that they find difficult to accept as it continues the age-old tradition and tendency of the dominant groups to give names to other people that often express their own prejudiced and ill-informed perceptions. It is with this understanding in mind that this article will give preference to the words Mosarwa or Basarwa, and not to all other terms like San, Bushmen and the Remote Area Dwellers.

Enduring Poverty

Failure to Recognise Basarwa Knowledge and Skills

It is a well-known fact that Basarwa as a people are very knowledgeable and skilled. Some of the areas in which these people have demonstrated expert knowledge over the centuries, include traditional medicine, arts and craft, tracking and tracing, and (rock) paintings in many parts of southern Africa that have served as some kind of foot print of their earlier occupation of such places. There is, for example, plenty of evidence that Basarwa have extensive knowledge of plant life, as a strong indication that they have lived in the same environment for an extensive period of time and that they have adapted to a hostile climate with considerable skill (Hermans 1980, 9). Apart from this, we have shown above that the

⁸ This is a difficult word to define exactly, but it describes extreme remoteness.

Basarwa people's way of life is shaped by their understanding of the harsh environmental conditions of Botswana and the rest of southern Africa. Despite the beliefs of the Bantu people to the contrary, there is evidence that Basarwa were once involved in both cattle farming (Mazonde 2002, 58) and long-distance trade with Tswana middle men (Bennet 2002, 6). Despite this knowledge, the dominant groups have always perceived the Basarwa as a backward, ignorant race that is almost at the same level with the game they live alongside. Hermans (1980, 16) observes that one feature that has been common among all the people dealing with the Basarwa throughout history, is the lack of sensitivity towards their knowledge and skills. The practical implication of such insensitivity to the Basarwa way of life needs to be explored further.

Failure to Recognise the Basarwa Modes of Production

Failure to recognise non-conventional modes of production or the modes of production of minority groups like Basarwa, has been raised before. Basarwa are foragers, in other words they use hunting and gathering as a mode of providing their basic needs. According to Saugestad (1998, 86) the basic difference between hunting and gathering on the one hand, and farming and herding on the other hand, is that farmers and herders mould nature to make it reproduce the way they want to, while foragers live more or less with nature as it is given. The point here is that this mode of production is not a problem for Basarwa—if anything, it is a problem for the new comers. The “invaders” perceived these people as those who lack a mode of production. The fact that they do not have a specific area that is marked out, fenced and paddocked—for which each person or family holds a particular title deed— makes people from outside this community think they do not have or need an area for their foraging activities. The problem in this case was, however, with the “invaders,” who thought their way of subsistence was the only one. In other words, anybody who subsists differently either does not have a mode of production or uses what is considered a backward or primitive mode of production. It is doubtful as to whether Basarwa in their traditional setting ever perceived themselves as poor; rather this was the perception of the outsiders regarding their economic and political systems.

Lee (1981, 15) on the contrary, argues that despite a variety of ideologies of land ownership, all hunters have developed elaborate rules for reciprocal access to resources. After analysing a number of differences between the foragers and the more sedentary farming communities, Lee (1981, 16) concludes by refuting the assumption that foragers do not own land, and argues that land is divided into territories or tracts—used primarily but not exclusively by a band or camp—from which outsiders must seek permission to use the resources of a given tract. The perception that the Basarwa and other forager communities do not have a mode of production or do not need land for their mode of production, could well be one of the root causes of their dispossession and loss of land rights. There is indisputable evidence that Basarwa had a mode of production that is proportional to their family or band size and was responsive to their environmental realities. The practical implication of the misplaced perception that Basarwa do not have a well-defined mode of production, and therefore by

implication have no need for land to be used for this purpose, is another matter that must be explored further.

Possession and Ownership of Land

The Basarwa were (are) perceived by the other groups as those who have no concept of territory. In other words, they were seen as those who did not have well-marked and demarcated territories belonging to the various bands or family groups. Saugestad (1998, 89) argues that this stereotype—that Bushmen lack a concept of land ownership and territoriality—was expressed in 1978 by a litigation consultant for the Attorney General’s Chambers in the statement: “As far as I have been able to ascertain, the Masarwa have always been true nomads ... [who can have no rights of any kind other than hunting].” The point is that the concept of land ownership that a particular group adopts is determined by the use to which such land is put and the knowledge of the climatological features of the region or area.

Basarwa, out of their extensive knowledge of the region of their residence and their unique ability to adapt to the ever-changing environmental conditions, adopted a mode of production that is more suited to their environment. Saugestad (1998, 89) insightfully argues that the misconception of the Basarwa concept of territoriality and the language used in reference to these people like nomadic disposition, reflect unwillingness on behalf of the planners to recognise foraging as an economic system, different from but comparable to other systems of production. Failure on the part of the dominant groups in Botswana to recognise the Basarwa people’s concept of territories and the shared use of such territories for the common good of the wider society, is responsible for: first the doling out of the land that belongs to Basarwa; secondly for the assumption that the land occupied by Basarwa communities is *terra nullis* (vacant or waste land); and thirdly that any land that is not occupied by the Bantu groups was considered vacant land. This misconception has in many ways distinctly disadvantaged the Basarwa and could be one of the root causes of their state of poverty. The practical implications of failure to recognise the Basarwa understanding of territoriality and the unique way of shared land used, is not in the scope of this article and needs further exploration.

Possession and Ownership of Private Property

Like the question of territoriality and the related question of the Basarwa mode of production, these people were also perceived as lacking a concept of private property ownership. We have dealt with this in passing in the above section. Here it is essential to say that the Basarwa concept of property ownership was different from that of the dominant groups in that it was shaped by the distinct economic and social organisational arrangements in which they lived. Lee (1981, 16) vehemently refutes the assumption that Basarwa do not have concepts of property ownership. For him, these people are different from the farming communities in that, while the farming communities are driven by the values of saving or husbandry of resources, the Basarwa communities would be driven by a different set of values like sharing and generalised reciprocity, which is central to their way of life. The following words from Lee seem to inform the general mindset of Basarwa towards ownership of property and perishable goods in general:

It is in the distribution and consumption of resources that the collective character of the foraging mode of production clearly emerges. Food is never consumed alone by a family; it is always shared out by members of a living group or “band” of up to 30 or more members. Even though only a fraction of the able-bodied foragers go out each day, the day’s returns of meat and gathered food are divided in such a way that every member of the group receives an equitable share. The hunting band or camp is a unit of sharing, and if sharing breaks down it ceases to be a camp. This principle of generalised reciprocity within the camp has been reported for hunters/gatherers on every continent and every kind of environment. (Lee 1981, 15)

From the above statement, we can surmise that a poor person in these communities would be the one who refuses to participate in the life of the family band and share with others basic resources, like food, that are needed to sustain a life of dignity. There is no doubt that this position is very close to the biblical idea of fellowship. Lee (1981) concludes that while in these communities land and its resources are always collectively owned and utilised, this does not mean that these communities do not have a concept of private or individual ownership. He argues that tools and other belongings are very much the property of the individual owner. Non-perishable goods are dealt with very differently from foods (Lee 1981, 23).

It is clear that the notion that the Basarwa do not have a concept of private property ownership is based on a misunderstanding of their way of life and worldviews. The practical implications of the failure by other groups to recognise different, yet well-established forms of property ownership among Basarwa, also need to be explored further.

Failure to Recognise the Basarwa Leadership

The leadership style of forager communities remains one of the contentious issues in their interaction with the outsiders. According to Saugestad (1998, 91), “the fluid composition of Bushmen bands and leadership based on consensus has made it difficult for outsiders to identify positions of leadership. Especially in contrast to Bantu neighbours, and the extremely well organised hierarchy of positions of chiefs and headmen that mark the Tswana system, leadership among Bushmen appeared weak.” Leadership in the Basarwa community was recognised differently from the way it was in the Tswana society. For example, Saugestad (1998) argues that a leader was one who was able to give permission, leave or licence on behalf of the band to non-members wishing to have access to water and other resources of the territory. In other words, leadership in this community was about the stewardship and care for the communal resources instead of a status or a standing in society that is above the others.

It is further noteworthy that decision making was a group affair and not an individual matter, such that the decision-making processes were consensus driven instead of individual authority-based either on a birth right, military or intellectual prowess. The inability or refusal by the new comers to recognise the leadership formations in these communities does not in actual fact mean that these communities lacked such leadership. That it was different from that of the Tswana groups is indisputable, but the claim of non-existence of any form of leadership among the Basarwa is unreasonable and preposterous. Closely related to the perception of leadership is the perception that the Basarwa had no concept of self-

government. The fact that Basarwa were considered as people who have no sense of self-government resulted in leaders from other tribal groupings being imposed on Basarwa for many centuries.

This is still the case in independent Botswana where many Basarwa settlements are ruled by Dikgosi⁹ who are non-Basarwa and this was found to be a source of some disquiet in some of these communities. There is a need to give more attention to the practical implications of refusal by the invaders to recognise the Basarwa modes of leadership.

Relocation in order to have Access to Services

In post-independence Botswana, the generally negative perceptions of Basarwa by the dominant groups persisted. As a result, many Basarwa were relocated or removed by the government from what they deem as their ancestral land into the present Tswana village-like settlements. According to the RADP (Ministry of Local Government 2009, 1), the rationale for the relocation of the Basarwa was the recognition of lack of development in the predominantly Basarwa-inhabited areas despite the Accelerated Rural Development Programme. In this case, the Basarwa are those who were perceived as needing assistance to adapt to the fast evolving economy of Botswana. This goal would, among others, be achieved through provision of amenities such as schools, health facilities, roads, settlement leadership structures as well as introduction to Tswana-type pastoral and arable agriculture. In this context, development was inextricably linked to assimilation, in other words for Basarwa being developed meant being made to adopt the Tswana way of life, community structures, leadership patterns, the socialisation of children and youth, and modes of subsistence.

Literature, however, shows that the concerned communities were increasingly dissatisfied with the social and economic consequences of the relocation (Nthomang and Monaka 2006). In some cases, like that of the relocation from the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve, the Basarwa resisted being relocated. Much of the resistance against the relocation policies is due to the fact that the relocation policies are fraught with injustices, deprivation and marginalisation. Basarwa think that “the new settlements with social amenities were not suitable for their livelihood and the exercise of their culture” (Nthomang and Monaka 2006, 142). The Basarwa community’s distrust of being moved to modernity is based on the fact that social, economic and demographic policies behind such removals have been formulated from a monolithic perspective; a one size fits all, which completely overlooks the importance of diversity and differences.

It is equally important to note that while traditionally, poverty situations have been perceived mainly in terms of income and capability levels, it has:

... emerged from recent consultations that lack of participation constitutes yet another critical dimension of poverty which needs to be incorporated in the analysis of the nature and extent of poverty in Botswana. This view with particular reference to Basarwa was taken against the background that the Basarwa have virtually been excluded from all decision-making

9 Tswana word for a chief or ruler.

processes due to the negative perception and general disrespect that is displayed towards them. In their case, therefore, poverty cannot just be attributed to lack of incomes and human capabilities, but also as exclusion from decision making that affects their lives. (National Strategy for Poverty Reduction, 2003, 3)

The practical implication of the post-independence era concept of development pursued by the Botswana government deserves further consideration.

Conclusion

In this article we have established that Basarwa were generally viewed in a negative and demeaning way by the Batswana, the Tswana Chiefs and missionaries. Though not much is available on the attitude of the colonial administration towards the Basarwa, the following outburst from a certain Charles Rey, a Resident Commissioner in Serowe before independence, may explicate this point. He is reported to have complained about “the uselessness of preserving a decadent and dying race, which is perfectly useless from any point of view” (Bennet 2002, 9). As a result of these negative and derogatory perceptions, the Basarwa of Bechuanaland and later independent Republic of Botswana were ignored, excluded and in some cases intentionally wronged and dispossessed; and even turned into serfs by the dominant groups with the help of the church, which endorsed the then prevailing conditions. The London Mission Society (LMS) condoned the notion that the Basarwa, due to their developmental station, did not have sufficient capacity to make decisions for themselves and that their condition at the particular time in development was just a stage that all other people and nations have gone through in the evolutionary process from the hunter-gatherer stage to that of farming; thus justifying others making decisions for them and on their behalf, which notion persists to the present day in Botswana.

It is also noteworthy to underscore the fact that the LMS openly and unashamedly advocated the assimilation of the Basarwa into mainstream Tswana communities. The attempts to assimilate Basarwa into mainstream Tswana societies seems to be the root cause of the present difficult relationship between the government of Botswana and the Basarwa people. It is equally important to note that the church also advocates the need for the Basarwa to observe Tswana cultural norms and be subject to the rule of Tswana chiefs and their representatives in the Basarwa areas, as a condition for being allowed to continue to reside in such areas. It is not certain as to whether at this stage the LMS was aware of the long-term consequences of such an assimilation strategy. Attempts at assimilation by the Botswana government and the resistance of the Basarwa who fear loss of socio-cultural and linguistic rights as well as ancestral land, is one of the main issues of contention that remain unresolved in the politics of Botswana today, and carries the potential of reversing the gains made by Botswana as a shining example of democracy and good governance.

It is also essential to highlight that while the Basarwa themselves may have been initially indifferent about the way they were perceived, the names imposed on them and such other tendencies on the part of the dominant groups, these practices are now being questioned and in some cases vehemently rejected. This bears testimony to the fact that perceptions are not

cast in stone, they evolve over time. The way the Basarwa perceive themselves and their relations to the other groups has changed, as shown by the work of Kiema (2010). They reject identities that are imposed on them from the outside as well as demand certain inalienable human and political rights. The Botswana government's response to these new attitudinal changes among the Basarwa has often been to blame some conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory being that some outsiders like tourists, Western civil society organisations or the media are influencing the Basarwa in this direction.

All these do not, however, help in resolving the new demand of Basarwa for recognition as people in their own right. The reality seems to be that Basarwa reject the externally constructed identities, the historical serfdom and the resultant poverty conditions to which they have been subjected over time.

Overall, it is likely that there is a link between the negative and contemptuous perceptions shown by the dominant groups and the way the Basarwa have been treated since their early encounter with other population groups. The negative perception must have, in one way or another, contributed towards or precipitated the deterioration of the already precarious living conditions of the Basarwa.

This article concludes with the observation that there seems to be a general problem that cuts across human society everywhere, being that governments and humans generally are unable to deal with differences or diversity. It could be part of the survivalist instinct that drives human life, but this feature is evident in many situations of contact and interactions of different population groups or even sub-cultures. Due to this inherent inability, various population groups often regard the differences in, for example, modes of production, leadership styles, property and land ownership, marriage patterns, religious observance and others as a measure of either how advanced, primitive or poor a particular group is. Since, however, these groups vary in a number of ways like population size, technological advancement, political organisation and modes of subsistence, the smaller and in some ways differently arranged groups, tend to be disadvantaged. From the above discussion it seems that it is a sellable proposition to say that despite the fact that Christian anthropology in theory is very positive and attractive, in practice it is rather narrow, suspicious, and fearful and to some extent exclusivist. In this regard the Christian view of humanity has not always been helpful in resolving some of the challenges that have bedevilled human society. If anything, the very theological traditions have been used to justify segregation on the bases of race, class and others.

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