



## This land is our land

Since 1997, thousands of Bushmen have been evicted from their villages in the Kalahari. The Botswana government says it is for their own good – nothing to do with the desert's diamond reserves. Now only a few Bushmen remain, but they are fighting for their homeland. Report and photographs by Lottie Davies

Watermelon store in Molapo, one of the four remaining inhabited villages in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve

**M**idday in Gugama, a small village in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, southern Botswana. The air is dusty and hot, skinny dogs are lying in the shade, and a small boy in a green top is chasing a wheel with a stick. The adults sit outside the inner compound, waiting for news about a court case being heard 300km away at the High Court in Lobatse, a case which will decide whether or not they can stay on land where they have lived for thousands of years.

Hanna, the 65-year-old patriarch of one family, has left the reserve only once in his life; his people have lived here for generations. He has a message for the president of Botswana: 'Tell Mogae to leave us alone. This land is ours, it has nothing to do with him.'

The Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) was established by the British in 1961, in the former British protectorate of Bechuanaland. It is roughly the size of Belgium, and until 2002 supported some 3,000 Ghanana and Gwi Bushmen who lived in small villages in the reserve. Since the late 1990s, the Botswana government has been pursuing a programme of resettlement, persuading villagers to leave the CKGR with promises of cattle or money, or simply by intimidation. The first group were moved in 1997; the second in 2002, transported in trucks to government camps in New Xade and Kauduane on either side of the reserve. But in the past three years some 250 Bushmen have returned to their villages, many walking the 100km distance with their donkeys.

In July last year, 243 people from a Bushman group called First People of the Kalahari launched a landmark suit against their government to be allowed to return to their ancestral land. This is the weightiest case ever to come before the High Court, and almost certainly the most expensive litigation in the short history of Botswana's legal system.

The government claims that the changing nature of the Bushman settlements and their continued hunting in the CKGR is endangering the future of the wildlife in the reserve; it contends that it is helping the Bushmen to relocate for their own benefit, to provide them with effective healthcare and education. But there is another factor muddying the water. Botswana's economy is heavily reliant on the country's mineral wealth, principally diamonds, and, since 1997, concessions have been granted to mining companies such as De Beers to search for diamonds across virtually the entirety of the CKGR.

'In the months immediately following the latest relocations,' says Gordon Bennett, the British barrister who has been representing the First People of the Kalahari, 'there was a surge in issuing prospecting licences, and one question which presents itself is whether that is really a coincidence. It is clear from the government documents that there is a real concern about squatter camps in the reserve; in the event of future mines, exploiting the resources would not be easy to do if there are still people there. It would be simpler if they got everyone out. But who knows? It's a matter of speculation.'

Botswana's permanent secretary for the ministry of mines maintains that 'diamonds have nothing to do with it', as the subsurface mineral rights have been the property of the state since 1903. But if a mine is set up within the reserve, it would inevitably attract a number of people looking for work; squatter camps would grow up around it, creating a need for services such as clinics, schools and water provision. The government would then be



faced with a dilemma: either to provide such services, thereby creating a large permanent settlement in a 'de-zoned' section of reserve, which would further degrade it as a wildlife sanctuary and lay the government open to accusations of hypocrisy; or surround the mine with fences, within which services would be provided to the mining operatives, and outside which would be a growing number of people living in camps with insufficient water, food or basic services. Either of these scenarios could lead to an international public-relations disaster for a government which prides itself on its liberal international reputation.

Many Europeans have gleaned what they know about Botswana from Alexander McCall Smith's *No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* books. He paints a picture of a peaceful happy African country where the Bushmen are virtually invisible, inhabiting a distant place fraught with danger and the unknown. This picture is probably quite accurate for the majority of Botswana's 1.9-million population, which is composed mostly of people with a pastoralist heritage; for these, cattle and land ownership represent wealth and social standing, and for most, consumerism is a welcome result of progress and westernisation. Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, a mere village at independence in 1966, now proudly boasts busy roads, growing office blocks and hotels, and two shopping malls. The truth is that Bushmen are third-class citizens in a country which claims to be ethnically blind. For most of the population, the Bushman way of life is wholly alien - Botswana's president Festus Mogae has referred to the Bushmen as 'Stone Age creatures' - and they find it somewhat bizarre that anyone could want to reject the benefits of progress and a blossoming economy.

**Hot, dry and interminably sandy, the Kalahari Desert** looks as if it could support little, if any life. However, the Bushmen (or San) have been living off the land for 20,000 years. There are now only four inhabited villages in the CKGR: Gugama, Molapo, Metsiyanong and Mothomelo. Each is very similar; a collection of small huts built with wood and grass, protected from predators by a fence of bleached branches thrust into the ground. Children chase chickens and there is a smell of woodsmoke everywhere, as the Bushmen sit discussing the day's gossip, the symbol of authority being a plastic garden chair on which the elder sits. The Bushmen mostly wear western clothes, occasionally adorned with strings of beads, or safety pins. Shoes are in short supply, people often wearing odd pairs or none at all.

Prior to the evictions in 1997, the government provided mobile health clinics and maintained the water supply within the reserve; short-wave radios were used in each village, and the children attended schools outside the reserve. Since the relocations, the mobile clinics have ceased and the boreholes providing water have either been left in disrepair or closed over with cement. Police have confiscated the Bushmen's radios, meaning little news can get out about what is happening inside the reserve. Meanwhile, in spite of the ongoing court case, the evictions continue.

In Mothomelo, a small settlement in the south of the reserve, an elderly couple offer us boiled gemsbok from an enamel cup. Gemsbok is one of the many species of antelope native to the reserve; meat which is not made into biltong at the site of the kill is shredded and boiled either in its own fat or in watermelon juice. Meat of any kind is valued

### Seven Bushmen were tortured for hunting illegally on the reserve. One was tied upside down to a post

**Top left** New Xade, one of the resettlement camps. **Above left** Kaingota Kanyo and his granddaughter in Molapo. **Above right** a makeshift hut outside the cattle town of Ghanzi. **Right** Tshokodiso Bosilwane and his wife in Metsiyanong, in the CKGR

more than any other food by Bushmen, but hunting is now illegal. In July, seven Bushmen were tortured for hunting on the reserve. Letshwao Nagayame was handcuffed and tied upside down to a post. 'They beat us up badly,' he says. 'I am an old man but they didn't consider this when they handcuffed me, suspended me on a rope tied to some poles with my head dangling, my legs hanging in the air and my knuckles on the cement floor. The officials pulled my testicles and penis, beat me up, and kicked me, while one man smashed my knuckles on the hard floor.' Another Bushman had petrol poured into his anus, and two were handcuffed by hand and foot to the bullbar of a vehicle and dragged for about a kilometre.

But the men continue to hunt, usually with traps and spears (other traditional hunting methods, such as poisoned arrows, are dying out), while women gather berries, beans and roots. Each compound has a collection of plastic jerry cans, bottles and buckets for collecting water. During the wet season, water is collected from the nearby salt pans, during the dry, from the few remaining bore holes in the reserve. These provide barely enough, and most people cultivate watermelons in small



plots. Our guide, Jumanda, once lived for six months in the reserve without water, using melons and milk as his only source of liquid.

In the next village, Molapo, there is much talk of the food and water shortage; the store of watermelons, which must last until the wet season, is small. Food is scarce, as the men of the village have not been able to hunt for some time, afraid of reprisals from the wildlife officials. As far as the Bushmen are concerned, they own the Kalahari in the same way that farmers own their land elsewhere in Botswana, and the animals living on it.

**Eight hours' hard drive from Molapo is New Xade, the larger of the two resettlement camps. I had expected it to be a place of horrific poverty, disease and misery, but it is quiet and orderly. Huts have been built inside square compounds, many of which have small shower blocks. There is a new clinic, a school, a police station. People appear healthy, better clothed than in the reserve, and considerably more westernised: one young man I met was wearing an Arsenal strip.**

But amid this orderliness, there is a feeling of emptiness. Families sit in front of their small fires as they do in the reserve, but their demeanour is one of bored resignation and apathy. Groups gather at crossroads when food dumps – known as 'destitute rations' – are delivered. Many Bushmen are dependent on this government aid, but if a family is lucky enough to own a few goats or chickens, they don't qualify and are thrust back on their own resources. It is illegal to hunt here too, and anyway there is insufficient wildlife in the area to support the 2,500 people now living in New Xade. The countryside around the camp has some vegetation, but it is not enough to supply the wild foods which they rely on. Wood for building huts, fences and fuel is scarce and becoming more so. We met one elderly lady who had walked for half a day to carry firewood back to her compound.

Xanne, from Molapo, told me with tears in his eyes, 'It is very difficult to live here because we don't really know the area, unlike our home where we are familiar with all the corners of our land, and where we know which place to go to get food.' Inactivity and lack of purpose takes its toll on anyone, and Bushmen are no exception – their time is mostly occupied by sitting around or drinking at one of the camp's many shebeens. Alcohol was never introduced to the reserve itself, and the Bushmen are falling into the same trap as many other indigenous peoples around the world, susceptible to the lure of cheap beer and its consequences. Many have become alcoholic.

The camp's community hall, provided for social gatherings, lies entirely unused behind its broken fence. The tannery, bakery and chicken-rearing sheds, intended to provide employment for the residents, are covered in graffiti, empty except for a growing collection of empty beer cans and condom packets. I was told that there is no market for goods produced by Bushmen, even if they could transport them the 160km to the nearest town. In short, there is nothing to do; many of the older inhabitants are just waiting to die.

**The barrister Gordon Bennett believes that a mutually beneficial management plan for the CKGR is a realistic solution. Mark Wright, the conservation science adviser for WWF-UK, cites examples in neighbouring countries where local management strategies are proving successful: 'Some 20,000 people live in the Niassa reserve**



**'It is very difficult to live here because we don't know the area, unlike our home where we know where to get food'**

**Above** Xanne Gaotshobo Gwe, with his wife and daughter, at New Xade. **Below** the tannery in the resettlement camp. **Bottom** Gugama, in the CKGR



in Mozambique, and in north-eastern Namibia 4,600 mainly Khwe bushmen co-exist within the Bwabwata Park, and rely on the natural resources that it provides. There is a role for communities to be engaged in co-management of resources; in fact this can bring real benefits for both the communities and the wildlife.'

The Bushmen's case has now been adjourned until February, but after 18 weeks of hearing, the transcript already runs to more than 8,000 pages; much of the evidence is redundant or over-long. Bennett is worried about the financial implications of the adjournment. 'The Bushmen are the most impoverished section of the population and Botswana has no legal aid system to enable representation for the poor.' They are being financed by Survival International, the pressure group that campaigns on behalf of tribal peoples.

Bennett feels that a simple solution is entirely feasible, allowing back into the reserve those people who want to return, while admitting that political reality demands that some measure of regulatory protection is afforded to the wildlife. 'There needs to be a balance. There is a genuine sense that the government is wondering why everyone is complaining so much. The San are fiercely articulate people; they can't read or write but they are by no means stupid. They are very clear about what they want.' And what they want is to live undisturbed in the CKGR as they have done for so long.

'This is a practical issue, not a romantic one. The Botswana government should allow people to change, but in the direction and at the rate which they choose to change. People crumble if exposed to intolerable pressure, and it is not in the interests of Botswana for this to happen.'

Since its independence, Botswana has made huge advances in a very short space of time. In comparison with its neighbours, the country is rightly proud of its democratic government, stable economy and peaceful way of life. The authorities seem unable to compromise. To back down now would mean immense loss of face while admitting that their vision of a modern Botswana is flawed. *To make a donation to the Bushmen's cause, contact Survival International: 020-7687 8700; survival-international.org*