

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Beating around the Bushmen: a controversy revisited

Casey Kelso
#2 Wakefield Lodge
Wakefield Road, Avondale
Harare, Zimbabwe
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Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter:

In a bookshop into which I ventured, there was a line of nervous actors waiting to audition, each hoping for the big break that could launch a movie career. At a glance I could see the South African director's criteria for casting the leading man in a film tentatively titled "A Far Off Place." The young African men had varying degrees of professional polish but all were short and possessed some Bushman characteristics, such as high cheekbones or a rounded face.

Each had seen the advertisement in the daily newspaper:

ACTOR WANTED : OPEN AUDITION
Lead role in an international feature film

An international company is planning to film a classic African story in Zimbabwe and Namibia. We are looking for a small, coloured actor to play a Bushman - the starring role.

Do you meet the following requirements?

- No taller than 5'2"
- Bushman/San features
- Speak English
- 25 - 35 years old
- Physically fit

"The role of Xhabbo will require considerable research and rehearsal on the part of the actor," said Irmela Erlank, who was assisting the casting director in the search for a new Third World film star. "He must speak English and have discipline, so it has been terribly difficult finding a Bushman like that. They don't want naive actors, since the role is of a mature man who is intelligent and has been around civilization. It's nothing at all like the movie 'The Gods Must Be Crazy.'"

Casey Kelso is an Institute fellow studying Southern African societies, economies and food production systems.

The plot revolves around a kind-hearted, culturally assimilated Bushman named Xhabbo, who meets two Namibian Bushman children in Zimbabwe and must somehow return them to their family. The story of their adventures on the epic journey back home has all the makings of a box office smash by including small and inoffensive Third World people, even smaller and loveable children, untouched African vastness that now exists only in Western imagination, and absurdly simple politics.

That's the formula that created the instant popularity of "The Gods Must Be Crazy" and its sequel, both of which earned South African movie producer James Uys millions in hard foreign exchange during that country's financial drought created by the anti-apartheid boycott. In the first blockbuster comedy, an ingenuous Bushman sets out to return a Coke bottle to the modern world and becomes embroiled in the antics of a white wildlife biologist and a slapstick communist insurgency masterminded by a white Trotsky look-alike lurking in the bush.

The requirement that the new movie star speak English eliminated consideration of any Bushman, including /Gao \Oma, the man who starred in part one and two of "The Gods Must Be Crazy." That ironic situation -- South Africans hiring a non-Bushman for a commercially lucrative movie about Bushmen -- highlights how the rest of the world would prefer to exploit the romanticism we have about their hunter/gatherer society while ignoring their impoverished reality. And in an additional twist, the movie will be filmed outside of Botswana although the plot logically takes place inside that country. The film crew couldn't possibly set foot in Botswana. The government condemns the earlier movies for portraying Bushman life as idyllic, which fosters international outrage about official efforts to integrate Bushmen into the larger Tswana society. Politicians say Bushmen "development" must come even if it means largely destroying their culture, so any further special attention paid to the ethnic group is unwelcome.

Since I wrote in my February newsletter about the misery and cultural disintegration of the Bushmen in Botswana, the controversy has heated up to a rolling boil. Foreign journalists, expatriate development workers and missionaries, and even white Botswana citizens are vehemently disparaged by state politicians for ostensibly causing dissent and dissatisfaction among the Bushmen. (Apparently the Botswana government holds the same view subtly conveyed by the South African screenwriter in "The Gods": Rural Africans couldn't be militant without an outside white leader pulling the strings from behind the scenes.) And while these broadsides from the authorities are printed daily in Botswana's state-controlled newspaper, some white "guests" active in Bushman affairs are quietly being forced to leave the country.

This counter-attack has been launched in the weeks following the publication of a damning report alleging the torture of

Bushmen at the hands of police and wildlife officials, and other human rights violations. The frankly worded paper was written by the daughter of a cabinet minister, a young British-trained lawyer who was unintimidated by the storm of outrage she knew such an account would provoke. The Bushmen, quoted throughout the report, are also under fire by government officials out to punish those complaining to "outsiders." In a serious blow to the Bushman people living around Botswana's remote northern town of Ghanzi, where the human rights survey was conducted, South African-born Pastor Braam La Roux is being forced to leave Botswana. The government simply refused to renew his work permit.

If you remember from my last newsletter from Botswana, I had been searching for successful development projects involving the Bushmen in the region around Ghanzi when I met La Roux at the Kuru Development Trust in D'Kar. La Roux and his wife have worked since 1982 on a 3,000-hectare farm to foster development projects initiated by the Bushman people themselves. The two worked hard to encourage self-help industries like leather tanning and sewing groups, as well as setting up a primary school and adult education classes. As coordinator of the 900-member community, La Roux facilitated the means for the hunter/gather society to make a slow adaptation to a complex, modern world that operates on the basis of money, literacy, land ownership and business acumen.

Perhaps La Roux's greatest achievement lies in the trust's organizational structure, which he designed to promote self-controlled development by mixing the Bushman's traditional consensus making with a western-style democratic executive committee. Each Bushman enterprise at D'Kar sends a delegate to a council that meets each week with the technical staff to discuss new projects. Important decisions are then submitted to a public meeting, a procedure allowing collective decisions to be made in the egalitarian Bushman manner of talking a subject to death before any action. Discussions can go for days as everyone has their say in English, Afrikaans or the Nharo click language.

The Kuru Development Trust has been so successful that government officials have taken prospective foreign aid donors to visit, bypassing the wretched state relocation settlements where the residents' poverty matches their apathy. Such conspicuous accomplishment may have bred enemies among local district officials, who were embarrassed by the inevitable comparison of D'Kar to their own programs. Even when things were going well at D'Kar, La Roux knew his success in Bushman self-development was fragile. During our conversation earlier this year, La Roux said he believed in a positive and non-confrontational approach when dealing with the government. "The Bushman issue is more emotional than rational right now, because it has to do with ethnicity," he said. "There's an extreme sensitivity to ethnicity, a legacy from South Africa that's here in Botswana. We're trying to lure them slowly into a program that could be a flagship for Bushman policy."

Both La Roux and his wife, Wilhelmina, speak the local Nharo dialect. Both planned on proving their proficiency during an examination to obtain Botswana citizenship. That plan appears destroyed, now that they are no longer welcome in Botswana. Ironically, Wilhelmina was born and raised on a farm near Ghanzi but lost her citizenship by marrying a foreigner.

There are numerous indications that the denial was not a bureaucratic oversight. For example, I found a brief reference to the Kuru Development Trust in a newsletter published by the Kalahari Support Group, based in The Netherlands. The support group could have raised funds to send representatives of the Bushmen from D'Kar to attend this summer's United Nation's Year of the Indigenous Peoples conference. But La Roux declined the offer, stating that 1992 was too early to go to any international gatherings. "Not because Kuru would have no spokesperson, or because board members do not know what they want," he said, "but because we are still vulnerable towards suspicion and negative reactions from people around us and from the government."

A clear warning came during a public meeting at D'Kar with Ghanzi District Commissioner Samuel Rathedi. The Kuru Development Trust councilmembers, feeling assertive in their exercise of genuine democracy, wanted to elect their own representative headman from the Bushman community. Without consulting the D'Kar residents, local authorities had simply appointed their own man to administer the settlement's affairs. The Bushmen protested to Rathedi about the imposition of a Tswana outsider as their formal spokesman. Rathedi responded by warning them to "avoid tribalistic tendencies, as they can be dangerous." The people backed down after Rathedi then made a veiled threat against La Roux, whom he suspects of fomenting the trouble. Said Rathedi: "Church leaders must unite the community and not separate it."

The controversial report alleging torture against the Bushmen contributed to the government animosity behind La Roux's expulsion from Botswana. The temperature of the country's political climate and authorities' tempers rose several degrees following the publication of the human rights survey funded by the Botswana Christian Council. BCC is a consortium of about a dozen church groups in the country that have united together to speak out on different issues and coordinate charity activities. While the group receives outside funding from the Scandinavian countries, BCC is run by Botswana citizens. And the report is by a local person, lending credibility to its conclusions.

"Because of the controversial nature of this issue, we decided to ask a Motswana to make an assessment of the human rights situation, an assessment which could serve as a basis for further study and action," said BCC General Secretary Churchill Gape. Gape himself is a Motswana, the singular term in the Tswana language for a Botswana citizen. "As churches we can not remain

silent when we listen to the cries of God's people," Gape said. "Publishing this report is done in hope that all Batswana will listen to the cries of our fellow citizens and start changing attitudes, making oppressive actions revealed in this report something of the past."

The most shocking allegations concerned the torture and severe beatings inflicted on Bushmen suspected of poaching wildlife. The concept of poaching is difficult for Bushmen to understand, since for centuries they have lived off the water sources, wildlife and vegetation of the land. Today, almost all Bushmen have been moved into settlements resembling Tswana villages while their traditional land around Ghanzi is in private hands or run by the state as a wildlife preserve. Plowing and planting sorghum or corn is difficult and unfamiliar to Bushmen, but also seemingly nonsensical in a semi-desert area that gets scarce and erratic rainfall. The wild animals are their cattle, as the Bushmen put it. Most cannot understand how killing an animal in an act of survival is seen as theft from the state.

The author of the report, Alice Mogwe, documented widespread instances of torture by the officers with the Department of Wildlife and Nature Preservation and by local police. In the most common form of torture, a rubber ring is placed tightly over the testicles of the victim, while a plastic bag is wrapped over his face. "You are castrated," a Bushman told Mogwe. "You are throttled so that you excrete all which you have eaten." After lengthy custody, sometimes up to two weeks of incarceration, the court usually sentences a Bushman to a jail term even if the individual could pay a fine, according to the report. The Bushmen "poach" because of poverty or hunger, which is not considered to be an extenuating circumstance by judges. In conversations with Mogwe, government officials stressed the need for the law to be enforced stringently, regardless of the desperate circumstances of the offender. Poaching is poaching.

Other equally explosive accusations of injustice were made in the report concerning land alienation, forced relocation, and discrimination in housing, education, employment and health. The most sensitive issue discussed by the human rights report is land, since it involves the basic building blocks of human behavior: greed, self-interest, and power over others. The Bushmen argue that they historically preceded the settlement of both black and white people in the district. Unfortunately, the government's view is formed by anthropologists' conclusions that Bushmen had no traditional territories but roamed at will. Such generalizations blur the distinction between seven different groups of Bushmen who are familiar with their own defined environment and face starvation or disorientation when moved.

In 1978, the Botswana Attorney General issued an opinion that "Masarwa (or Bushmen) have always been true nomads, owing no

allegiance to any chief or tribe. ... the true nomad can have no rights of any kind except rights to hunting." In addition to the vast white farms settled at the turn of the century, large tracts of lands have been allocated to relatively affluent Tswana for commercial beef production, further rupturing the Bushman's close relationship with the land by evictions. The government created settled communities for the "squatters" and forcibly relocated them. Today, Bushmen hide in the bush from local authorities who come to cajole or compel them into moving to such settlements.

Mogwe also found -- as I did -- that the terms used for the Bushmen in government discussions illustrate the passive role they have in critical decisions made concerning their lives. As I noted in that previous essay, the word "Bushman" is preferred by almost all, even though it originally carried a pejorative sense. Officially, however, the hunter/gatherers are known as **Basarwa**, a Tswana word that derives from the negative description "**Ba-sa-rua dikgomo**" or "those who do not raise cattle." In the cattle-crazy Tswana culture, the lack of cows has a disapproving connotation.

The term **Remote Area Dweller** and its Tswana language equivalent "**Ba tengnyanateng**," which means "those who are deep inside deep," upset the Bushmen when used by Mogwe. They asked her: "It is a thing which is deep inside the earth: Has their soil covered ours? Does it mean that we are dead?" Even the term **Batswana**, which is the plural Tswana term for Botswana citizens, sparked resentment. The Bushmen describe other ethnic groups as "black people," while they call themselves "red people." The authorities' refusal to accept their words of self-definition confirms the Bushmen's fear of being merged into society as an anonymous part of the collective **Batswana**. "The **Motswana** wants to make the culture of the **Basarwa** to disappear," a Bushman said.

The controversy, as La Roux said, revolves around the extreme sensitivity to race and tribe. Both government officers and Bushman activists use the word "apartheid" when talking about the situation. "We will not have any apartheid here in Botswana, with homelands and special privileges for the Bushmen," a government spokesman told me. Proponents of Bushman rights will condemn the government's "apartheid discrimination and seizure of land." I can understand the government's wariness at allowing an ethnic group to clamor for separate status if I look at the fratricidal tribal conflicts in other parts of Africa. Yet I think the Bushman controversy touches on a far deeper issue of African assertiveness against control by Western countries.

When a delegation of Bushmen recently journeyed to the capital of Gaborone to meet with government officials, they were given a stern lecture by Pelonomi Venson, the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing. She warned them about "the indigenous minorities fashion, under whose guise some outsiders want **Basarwa** kept as a tourist attraction."

Venson said the government of Botswana is a signatory of international conventions that bind the state "to develop and integrate the Basarwa by improving their standards of living."

Mogwe's findings of torture and human rights violations have been dismissed by the government as distortions promoted by white neocolonialist foreigners. And how far can expatriates go in criticizing Botswana's domestic policies? A Botswana Christian Council worker who is white clearly has found a line beyond which he will not go. When I asked about the government's response to the report, he balked. "As a white man, I can't talk about it," he said. "That would only be carrying more wood to the fire."

The anti-white, anti-foreigner mood now seems more pronounced in Gaborone compared to a few months ago. The hostility is a large part of the casual conversation between expatriates in Botswana these days. An American professor at the university told of being jostled aside in a post office line by a self-important Botswana businessman. When the white female academic told the black man to go back to the end of the queue, the man cried: "Why don't you go back to where you came from?!" Usually, the professor remarked, the line of other Botswana would have supported her for standing up against a bully. This time, however, everyone remained silent and tense.

The wife of an expatriate development worker related her recent confrontation with a Botswana driver who doubled-parked behind her, blocking her car. After an hour, the inconsiderate owner finally returned and the American woman yelled at him. "This isn't the United States," the man retorted. "We Botswana will be very glad when all of you are out of our country!" The white woman, voicing the frustrations that had been building for a long time, shot back: "And when we do, all of you will starve!"

These are tales that any westerner could tell after a short sojourn in a foreign land. But far more significant was the snub of Alec Campbell, a British-born man who became a naturalized Botswana citizen decades ago. As the author of numerous books about Botswana, as well as its official Guide Book, Campbell is an authority on all aspects of his adopted country's culture, history and environment. Campbell founded the national museum and remains the driving force behind the Botswana Society, an influential group of industrialists, businessmen and politicians that counts many government ministers as members. Yet after completing a government-sponsored study of the Bushmen near Serowe, a major town in the east of Botswana, the Serowe District Council rebuffed Campbell when he presented his findings.

"We wish you outsiders would stop telling us what to do with the Basarwa," the council reportedly told Campbell. "Why not go back home?" This was said to a man who has dedicated his life to preserving and promoting Botswana's heritage and environment. In

another calculated insult, the council decided to conduct the entire meeting in the Tswana language, in which Campbell lacks fluency. Previously, the Serowe District Council has always conducted its meetings in English, an official language of Botswana used in all government reports and parliamentary bills.

In past controversies over environmentally damaging policies such as dredging pristine wildlife areas or erecting barbed-wire fences across wildlife migration routes, the government lambasted white Europeans for "meddling" in their affairs. Yet Botswana does respond to threats of bad publicity, such as last year's "Diamonds are for Death" campaign by Greenpeace, with compromises and policy reversals. The new-found international concern about the rights of indigenous peoples may be a lever for the Bushmen to use in their struggle against pervasive discrimination.

But that leverage is only a temporary phenomenon, because international attention can be fickle. Just ask /Gao \Oma, who was propelled into stardom by "The Gods Must Be Crazy." Among the Bushmen living around the northern Namibian town of Tsumkwe, he is known as a "rich man" with a lot of money. But the only memento left of /Gao's former celebrity status is a torn T-shirt bearing his image and that of a fellow Bushman actor dressed in suits. /Gao says he received 30,000 Rand monthly for six months for the two films, but now has no money left. Strangely enough, /Gao has a South African lawyer in charge of his financial affairs but doesn't know his name or how to find him.

/Gao enjoyed making movies because "we ate nice food and slept in soft beds." Now he waits for another white person to come to his one-room, tin-roofed shack with another offer. He asked: "Do actors in other countries also stay like me in straw houses? Are they poor and without cars?" A shake of the head prompted /Gao to add: "In this case, those people for whom I was acting are a little bit cleverer and I am very, very stupid."

For the Bushmen's sake, I hope that the world's latest concern about indigenous peoples is not a passing fad. The United Nations' Decade for Women that ended in 1985, for example, did prompt awareness of the importance of women in development. Yet after the hullabaloo of the 10-year effort, how many lasting changes resulted? Just recently, I've watched the development jet-set gather in Southern Africa at seminars marking the Year of the Child, River Blindness Action Month, and Disabled Awareness Day -- to name just a few. Each issue quickly fades from public view after the conventioners leave town.

Like promoting the status of women or preserving endangered species, changing the prevailing prejudice against the Bushmen in Botswana will take years. And even lots of international money and attention could be too late to save this vanishing culture.

Sincerely,

