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Line in the Sand:
Digging in During the Dry Season

By James G. Workman

METSIMENONG, BOTSWANA, Wednesday 16 July–Just before noon we hear the government vehicles rumbling toward us across the Kalahari. A breeze carries the engines' noise through the winter air of this semi-desert and interrupts the small gathering of Bushmen meeting here to exchange news.

For the past half hour two Bushmen leaders from outside the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) — Roy Sesana and Mathambo NgaKaeaja — have been updating these last intransigent peoples on the slow progress of a court battle being waged to make the government let them remain legally in their ancestral homeland. In turn, the three-dozen men, women and children tell what it's like to stay put for months on end while officially cut off from water, food, communications or medicine. As the powerful Land Cruisers approach, voices momentarily fall silent.

Mathambo breaks off in mid-sentence and turns. "You guys better hide your cameras," he says, and we rise to move. As the first Naro-speaking Bushman to graduate from college, and with a degree in geology, Mathambo was wooed by mining companies and government agencies offering high starting salaries. Instead he leads the Working Group on Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) for Botswana. For years he has worked as Bushmen spokesman and organizer, in-country and abroad, sometimes pitted against those same powerful would-be employers. This is Mathambo's first excursion deep inside the CKGR, and he's cautious. He was granted a temporary two-day travel permit for this journey, but it is only a piece of paper. Local officials may defensively revoke or ignore it, regarding any meeting as an effort to undermine their authority or to coordinate

resistance to their policies. Which of course it is.

The engines come from the South, grinding hard. Starting from any direction, they must have been burning fuel for many hours through a monotonous landscape across hundreds of miles of thick sand toward this meeting. We know why we faced the miserable 'roads.' We can only guess at their motives.

Nar Bapalo turns to look in the direction of the sound. As the village elder, Bapalo doesn't know what draws the officials here either, but he has suspicions based on previous run-ins. Early this year, he recalls, the government announced that its relocations were complete. [Minister of Local Government Margaret] "Nasha predicted that we [who remained] would be tortured by thirst and hunger and would ask to be relocated by the government. But I didn't ask as they predicted. Later, I was surprised that the District Commissioner came here all the way from Molepolole to ask relocation for me. Again I stayed. But he promised that the government would return, and it was going to bring more people the next time. So maybe these are the people he meant and they have come here to fight."

Maybe. An air of uncertainty lingers. Behind the two yellow-green vehicles, dust-swirls rise against the cloudless sky. The vehicles pull up and stop just outside the kraal, and shut off their diesel engines.

"They must be following us," mutters Paul Weinberg under his breath as we wrap notepads and photographic equipment in a jacket and lower them into a dry, empty oil drum behind a thatch hut. After my last near-disastrous trip here, I promised myself, and my funders (yes, yes, and my anxious mother) that I would not again make such an impulsive, ill-prepared journey alone. In the convoy vehicle Paul is my seasoned Virgil of the Kalahari; he has been photographing the San peoples throughout Southern Africa since the mid-1980s for two documentary books[1]. As outsiders, we share a kindred outlook toward the sad, ironic, sometimes-hopeful Bushman situation and because of his photos and writing Paul — here as a tourist with his son and son's friend — is officially less than welcome.

Local and federal officials have taken a rather keen interest in our journey and have begun to feel like a shadow presence. Roy and Mathambo, both well-recognized political figures, first bumped into them accidentally when we stopped for supplies two hours north of Gaborone. The next day, in our first debriefing/meeting with displaced Bushmen in the resettlement camp of Kaudwane, a police truck circled and pulled up. It watches, asked a few questions from the periphery and departed in a hurry. We twice crossed paths with local and federal police on the road to Khutse Gate. At the gate itself one official recognized Roy and Mathambo and only half-jokingly vowed to follow us to the ends of the earth. As I filled in forms and paid the fees in the office another fired off a series of questions, which I could answer truthfully.

"Where did you meet these three Basarwa riding in with you?"

"Gaborone. They needed a lift after they lost their own means of transport."

"Hmm. And what happened to it?"

"On a roundabout, a motorist struck them from the side and their truck rolled, totaled. But they weren't too badly hurt, which is certainly a relief."

He seemed unmoved by their survival. "How many of you are there besides them?"

"Two adults, two children in two vehicles."

He went outside to verify ages, and returned a minute later. "So…you are journalists?"

This is the toughest question, but I didn't want to lie or contradict anything Paul might have said. So I took a deep breath and answered: "I'm a fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs set up in the 1920s to send people like me overseas to study issues of global interest like water scarcity along transboundary rivers between nations like Botswana Namibia Angola South Africa namely the Okavango or Limpopo or Inkomati and examine the patterns in which the various interest groups and governments may work together to manage flows along watersheds in a way that is mutually beneficial in a dynamic called hydro-solidarity and…"

Halfway through my monologue his eyes glazed. Splendid. I had hoped to bore him to tears, and my ploy seemed to be working famously. He waved me silent, asked no further questions, stamped my form, fled the office and sent us on our way as quickly as possible. We had seen or heard no more from Botswana's officials until this moment.

* * *

Dressed in camouflage fatigues, several officials dismount from the vehicles and stretch after what must have been a long, arduous journey. One turns to relieve his bladder against an acacia. Two others swagger casually through the gate toward the half-circle squatting on the sand and appear to recognize the Bushman sitting impassively at its apex, Roy Sesana.

I have learned that 'Sesana' means 'stump' — as in the sharp, half-buried broken thing that punctures your tire, or the twisted rise that trips you in darkness, or the last part of a deep-rooted tree that you can't extract. Though Bushmen are not organized into hierarchies, or even united tribes, I am told that a general ballot of all the disparate clans and bands would elect Roy hands down, probably unchallenged.

So before our journey began I was enthralled that

[1] *In Search of the San*, and *Once We Were Hunters*

fate had handed me the opportunity to drive such a great and respected leader across his homelands to the resistance. The novelty gradually wore off. He became more like an irascible family patriarch, 'stumping' allies and antagonists alike. After an hour of laborious gathering of fuel for a fire outside Gugamma, he groused that we brought him back the 'wrong' kind of deadwood. We then proceeded to cook his meat longer than his palate desired. In the morning we offer him tea with milk and honey (having read anthropologists' descriptions of this 'Bushman delicacy' for which San tirelessly track Greater Honeyguide birds, Indicator indicator, to distant hives, smoke away bees to get at the golden nectar, then leave the comb for the bird). Roy practically spit out the honey flavor and then dumped in three spoonfuls of sugar, which he prefers. He rejected my music and puts in a tape of his own, then borrowed my harmonica to try a tune painfully unrecognizable to all. One morning, shortly after the sun broke, I emerged from my tent and greeted him warmly. "Dumela!"

To which he squinted up from the fire he kindled and croaked "You sleeeep…tooo much!"

Ah well. So what if Sesana happens to be the most finicky and demanding Bushman Paul or I have ever met? It serves their collective cause. Rather than be elected to his leadership role, Roy assumed it — after the untimely death of mixed-blood leader John Hardbattle — as the simple result of his defiant and outspoken charisma. Charisma is of course two-edged. Like one American politician in America who comes to mind, Sesana appears to share a weakness for pretty women. Like that certain leader, his political opposition attempts repeatedly to discredit him on this basis. They accuse him of "womanizing" and even of polygamy, shamefully neglecting two wives on the side. Such slanderous accusations are not just ridiculous — Roy is old, difficult, of limited means, cackles in laughs like a wheezing rooster and has only nine fingers since a meal-grinding accident as a child — but patently false. I can say with absolute certainty that Roy Sesana does not shamefully neglect two wives. He unabashedly keeps four quite happy. And in Gaborone, every time the BBC cameraman glanced away, Roy started working on making the blonde Swedish sound editor his fifth. "The Bushmen people have been decimated over time," he explained, which leads to its logical conclusion: "We must repopulate ourselves."

Yet like that other politician, Sesana's charisma deftly turns others' words against them. In early July I attended a key Appeals Court hearing in Lobatse to determine whether the case (Sesana et al vs. The Government of Botswana) could proceed, after a lower-court judge delayed and then later dismissed it on trivial technicalities back in April. Before the hearings everyone was milling about in the cold morning sun. Then the crowd shifted, which resulted in a brief, impromptu showdown between Sesana and the Attorney General, with the Director of Wildlife at his side. The exchange crystallized the essence

Roy Sesana: "All Africa was once a place of wild animals. Now there are none in Gaborone, but there still are where we live."

of the fight more clearly and concisely than any thick report or court submission. Roy was wearing, top to bottom, traditional beads and the skins and head of his totem Steenbok, dark sunglasses, an Adidas sweatshirt and pressed slacks. Face to face, the robed and well-attired AG pointed to this motley outfit. He was laughing, a bit nervously it seems, and others were laughing along with him. Sesana simply smiled.

"You see here, you no longer wear only skins of Basarwa, but Western clothes. Don't you want to develop like the rest of us?"

"Yes," Sesana responded, never taking his eyes off him. "We want schools and rights and goods and services. But we see no reason why we can't have them where we are. Where we live."

The Attorney General shook his head in protest.

Roy continued. "You did not leave your home for them, did you? Nor will we."

"But that Reserve is a place for wild animals!"

"So was the place where you were born and live. All of Africa was once a place of wild animals. Now there are none here, but there are where we live."

Just like that, onlookers were left wondering whether 99 percent of Botswana was on trial for living in the wrong place, and not these few dozen Bushmen at home in the

CKGR. The Appeals Court also gave the day to the San, promising them at last their day in court, recognizing the urgency of the case, and making the locale convenient and advantageous to them. The San attorneys were encouraged, but Sesana was not.

His ancestral home is Molapo and his chief is Seco Ga//nako. Two years before, in Paul's book, Seco predicted "They will move in one day soon and order us out of here; they will come here with guns and lorries." If they do, he vowed, "we will just sit down. If the government wants to shoot us they can shoot us; we will not climb into their cars." In January 2002 they did come, not just with guns and lorries, but offering cattle and money, and, of course, cutting off water. Seco climbed into their cars, along with nearly all of Molapo's remnant population. But he still refuses to put down roots — or skeletal-hut foundations — in the wasteland of New Xade, and now vows to return home, despite the cut-offs, water or not. "Did I survive in Molapo my life by drinking water trucked in?" he asks. "No. I grew up there without drinking water."

He awaits only instructions from Sesana. Sesana told reporters before the court hearing: "I feel strong, like a hunter on behalf of my people. Sometimes we make a kill. Last time we did not. But whether this time we kill or not we will go home with our people." Despite the hearing's positive turn, it seems his chief and a thousand others must legally wait even longer for a final verdict. When he must break the news, Sesana must explain that he neither made a kill nor missed his game but simply let fly his arrow and it will take months to land. That's too long. He bangs his fist on a table impatiently, vowing to lead exiled Bushmen, like a modern Moses or Gandhi-of-the-Bushmen, "back right straight through the gates even if they are stopped, beaten or shot" en route to their homes. All are stumped. As we depart and prepare to head into the Reserve no one, including Mathambo and the lawyers, can decide whether he will do so.

* * *

'Metsimenong' is the English transliteration for the phonetic Tswana word 'Mazeamanong,' adapting the San word 'Geingha,' meaning "vulture's water." Long ago, wandering Bushmen saw vultures circling and descending in the distance. Assuming there was a recent kill to scavenge, they raced ahead, planning to chase off the birds and eat the carcass themselves. Instead of meat they found the birds flocked around something far more valuable: a small shallow pan of water. They established themselves nearby and used the seasonal pan until each year it evaporated in the dry season. This year it dried up in late February, not long after the government raced in and chased most of the villagers outside the Reserve.

Waiting for the signal: Woman in Kaudwane asks when she can return home.

Now the government has circled and descended again. The three officials in camouflage fatigues are spaced ten meters apart, looking around, but striding closer. Outside the Reserve, among displaced people, Sesana would rise to speak for them and argue for their right to return home. Yet here, in the middle of nowhere, he remains seated and silent.

For this last band of Bushmen was never displaced. Metsimenong is still the home of people, albeit reduced in number and mostly related by blood or marriage ties, who never left. So it is up to them — not their guests Mathambo or Roy (certainly not Paul or I) — to respond one way or another to these approaching officials. Confrontation seems inevitable, reaction is hard to predict. I wonder in the moments ahead whether they will draw a 'line in the sand' that helps define who belongs where in the shifting vast expanses of the Kalahari. Have they already crossed an intangible point of

no return? What will the confrontation reveal about the character of these last 'die-hard, bitter enders' of free Bushmen that could resonate elsewhere among Southern Africa's indigenous people?

It has been argued that you can't truly *know who you are unless you know where you are*: identity and integrity are largely an outcome of one's sense of place. For several days, with Mathambo as interpreter, we have been interviewing the last peoples who have remained in this particular place, this thirstland, asking: Why are you staying here? How do you survive? What makes you stick it out, or dig in during the dry season? Beyond the simple but accurate David-versus-Goliath nature of the struggle that draws international attention, I am curious how these "gentle people" manage to resist within and without.

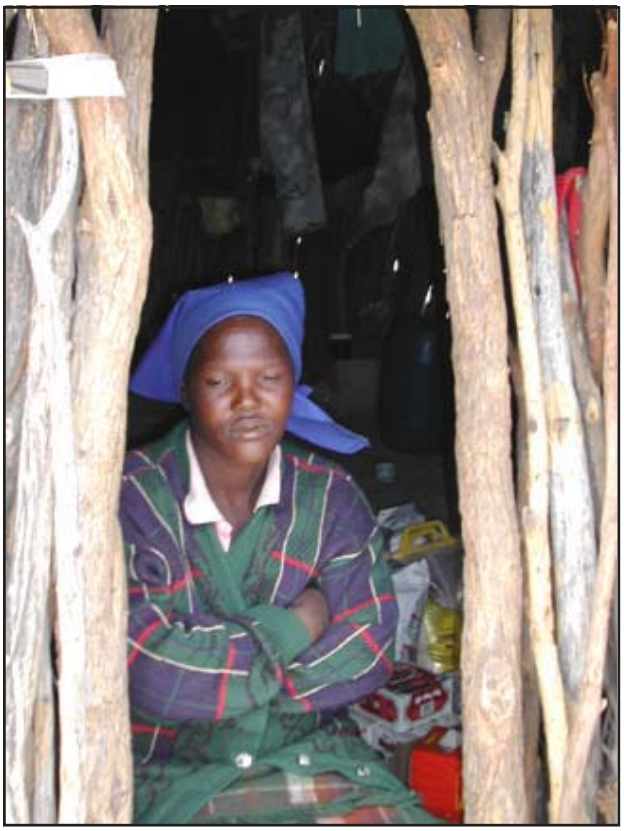
Confrontation is traditionally not an option; any lasting or severe internal fights would risk unity and thus survival of a band. When irreconcilable trouble arises within their band — infidelity, theft, abuse, disrespect etc. — the Bushman approach runs exactly counter to the modern platitude, "you can't run from your troubles." Bushmen in fact can and do. For 30,000 years they have walked away. Moved on. Run. Gone elsewhere for a long time, or sat under a tree until tempers cool. But at this point in the beginning of the 21st century, there is simply no place left to go. No free space to run or walk to. All exits have been blocked, and other places hold no appeal.

Their background and situation is of course not my own. Yet despite the huge contrasts, it strikes me that the San's last stand to survive free-yet-isolated within their CKGR home reflects something larger in our species' struggle to live free within the confines of our orbiting blue 'home' as we hit the absolute wall of finite resources — especially water.

* * *

After years of watching friends and relatives trickle outside the reserve toward abundant water, those who remain in the two villages know the grass is not at all greener on the other side of the CKGR fence. Indeed, despite all that water there is scarcely a blade of grass anywhere for miles around the bleak resettlement camps. Amoleng Segwetsane, the 'hitchhiker' from my first excursion, has seen first-hand what lies on the other side of the CKGR boundary. He said the government has offered him 80,000 Pula ($12,000) to leave and sign away his rights in Gugamma. Instead he refused to let them tape-measure any of his family's plot or compound. "This land belonged to my grandfathers," he said. "If they sold it for money, it couldn't be here. So I stay. And resist. My grandparents managed to live off this land and it didn't deteriorate. That is the way I found it, and so I cannot sell it for money."

When we drop Amogleng off at his home in Guguamma, his wife Gaobosediswe Tshotego emerged



Gaobosediswe Tshotego: "Money… is like constipation. One day your stomach gets filled with food, and the next day you're hungry again."

angrily from the village at the sound of our approach. She and her neighbor, Gakeipee Tshotego, at first mistook us for officials and came to drive us off with digging sticks used to unearth moist roots. She echoed her husband's dismissal of the relocations then delivered the simplest critique of international currency-driven capitalism I have yet encountered: "I just said money is useless. It's like constipation. One day your stomach gets filled with food, and the next day you're hungry again."

Then her grandmother, Bashelwago Ramaila, spoke up. Small but not frail, dressed in pale-blue mourning for her late husband, she refuseed to sit when offered a stool. Likewise, when the officials came months before, "I just refused to go. I knew that if they wanted to fight, I was ready to take a stick and fight back. But I refused with my mouth." She told them "You found me here. You started giving me food and water, and you stopped that. Where do you want me to go to follow these services? Just let me die. Let me die here. When I took my husband to the hospital the others were moved. My husband passed away after that. I wanted to bury him next to his father and mother. This was not possible. But I'm going to be buried here. Are you listening to me?"

* * *

It used to be that San would bury someone then leave the place until the grave was forgotten. But years of cultural mix and a more sedentary life have changed that

The resistance of "Vulture's Water." Mongwegi, left, listens to Nar Bapalo, on right: "At times we die, and the animals eat our bones, and other times the animals die, and we eat their bones."

pattern. They do not move away, or forget. They point out where hundreds, if not thousands of Gugamma's ancestors have been buried — beneath trees, mounds, kraals, even the sand beneath huts where they cook, eat and sleep. Invisible graves are everywhere. I am told that the same burials have taken place over the centuries in and surrounding Metsimenong, where the officials have followed our tracks. As they come within a few meters of the half-circle, Nar Bapalo rises and turns to face them.

It has been some time since officials came here, but it is not Bapalo's first confrontation. "When Minister Nasha visited," he recalls, "The choice was like a driver offering you a ride. He says there is room for you, or your luggage, but not both. When I pointed this out to her, that we want to stay and have our water and services, she replied, 'That is up to you. It is your problem. We will see what to do. If you stay you must find your own water'."

That bleak prospect overwhelmed many, including two former residents visiting here from New Xade. The elderly Kadiwela Gaoberekwe says she "didn't leave here voluntarily. I only left here because I was afraid of the thirst." Her granddaughter Sentemogeng didn't want to relocate either, but "since I am a modern youth I am very much used to water. So when the government told us it was going to cut the water, I had to go. I didn't relocate by choice."

Though they drink better, or at least more, water in New Xade thanks to government, they say they live and eat better in Metsimenong. But they are leaving. "Because I am used to the water I need to go back," says Sentemogeng. Her grandmother nods. "The government made us get used to the water, but if the water is here, we will return."

So water appears to be the decisive factor. For months no one on either side of the debate could tell me when this dependency began. Some thought water deliveries here were to compensate for the water withdrawals for mining, cattle fences and wildlife boreholes. Others guessed deliveries started with the new government in 1965. Finally I spoke with Arthur Albertson, a 28-year-old who has been doing GIS mapping on horseback and foot. "In 1985, there was a severe drought," he explained. "Dried up everything. No water, little vegetation, children and old people on the edge of starvation and dying. A really bad situation."

It was not the first, only, or perhaps even worst dry spell that the Bushmen had lived through during their 30,000 years here. But new cattle fences and properties on all sides limited their nomadic range. As the climate continued to grow drier (the original San word, Kgalagadi, means "the great drying up"), silt built up in rivers to the north, and plate tectonics tilted seasonal flows farther away to the east. The Bushmen endured. Perhaps those inside the Reserve grew even stronger and evolvedtighter bands from the aridity. The difference was that few outsiders had previously witnessed death, starvation or thirst among them. Out of humanitarian empathy, coupled with policies to serve the destitute nationwide, Botswana's 20-year-old government stepped in and aided them with relief food, water and medicine. And so the dependency began. One lingering irony is that by "saving" the lives of individual Bushmen, the govern-

ment helped erode the integrity of the bands today. Conversely, those who relied the least on water deliveries then, now appear best able to resist forced relocation when the water is cut off.

"That's why I must have the strength to look for and find my own water," says Bapalo.

And that is what the people of Metsimenong have been doing since the last rains fell, nearly six months earlier. Clouds are unlikely to appear and open again for another three months, well after the final Court hearing. And yet while they wear the same clothes that I found them in back in March, and note that they cannot bathe themselves or wash those clothes, they do not appear to be suffering from thirst. They find abundant melons, and get 90 percent of their daily moisture from those. As an emergency reserve, they have stored at least five drums full of fresh, clean water in the shade of a tree, water harvested from the vulture's water pan.

"Maybe," thought Bapalo as the officials approached, "maybe they have come at the District Commissioner's request, sent with sticks to 'kgatho' me." Kgatho is hard to translate, but is place-based, arising from a hunter-gatherer's technique of extracting food — a lizard from a crack, an antelope from dense thorn scrub, a porcupine from its lair, juicy roots from underground — out of its habitat into the open where it is exposed, vulnerable to its fate.

Bapalo sees the officials coming straight toward him, "as if ready to fight." Before they get any closer, before they open their mouths, he speaks first. His voice is not gentle, or timid, or vague. He tells them to go away. "Stand aside, we are still in our meeting here."

Taken aback, the officials stop. They look surprised, even hurt.

"Even if you have your guns, I'm asking you to stand aside."

Now Mongwegi, the talkative mouth-harp player chimes in as well. "You are not invited. We are having a meeting and you just barge in on us."

The wildlife officials protest. "You misunderstand… we are simply coming to, to greet you."

Says Bapalo, "That does not matter. You are not welcome. You can't divorce from your wife and then come back and expect to be welcome. You must go and collect many people if you want to re-marry."

Mongwegi: "Your animals are out there, outside our kraal, beyond our village. Go to them. Go look to your animals, not here."

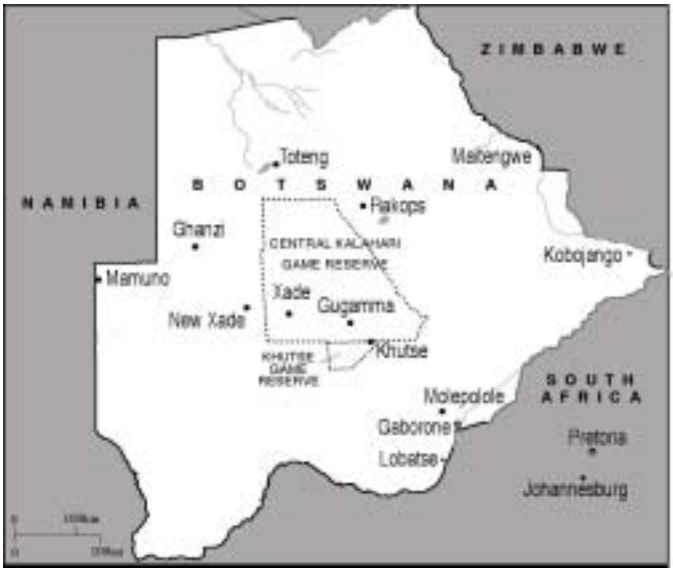
Soon, emboldened, and perhaps as surprised at their own reaction as the officials are, the rest of the others in the meeting begin chiming in, standing and pointing and shouting. It seems very "un-Bushmanlike," and quite effective. In less than two minutes the officials have retreated, turned back to the vehicles, climbed in and driven off. The unarmed "gentle people" who refuse to be kgotha'd from the CKGR have managed to evict the armed government opposition from their ancestral home instead.

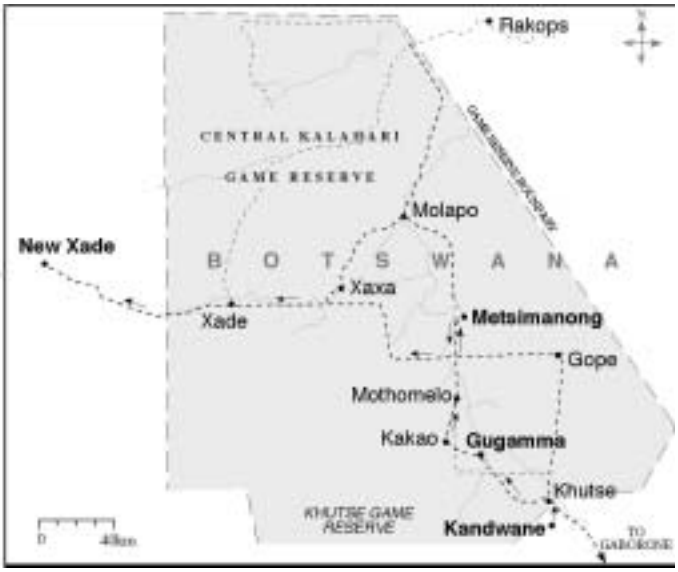
"You government," he says to their absence after they have driven off. "When you are moving us from here, what don't you like about our being here? If you are saying because this place is for the animals, we are saying, no, the animals are ours. We know the animals. At times we die, and the animals eat our bones, and other times the animals die, and we eat their bones."

* * *

The following day Bapalo brings a farewell present that hurts us to accept: three melons. Filled with moisture, these melons could help bring the village through a desperate emergency day in the future. But it seems they want to show the world they have no intention of collapsing or relocating willingly, and in that spirit we accept their gifts.

We start to drive off in silence, but Roy Sesana's mood





appears restored. He is humming. He has grown more expansive almost from the moment we entered the Reserve. Days ago, once past the Khutse Gate, he started singing, then pointing out lion and leopard tracks to Paul's boys. His song lifts as we come across kudu, and gemsbok and springbok and hartebeest, and then, suddenly, two consecutive herds of eland, the world's largest antelope, and one of its shyest. I had never seen even one in the wild and now there are hundreds running alongside us for miles, leaping over each other, kicking up dust clouds. A joyous vision. But it is these people who make Roy's spirit truly soar; rather than bring news from the outside to strengthen their will, their resilience and determination have strengthened our own.

As we depart for the southern route to our final meeting in New Xade, he mentions that he would like to visit his old village, Molapo, via the longer northern route. Having traveled it several months earlier, I recall the road as pretty bad. It would eat an additional jerry can of fuel, fuel I already had to sell to an opposition-party Bushman councilor a day before. My radiator and right rear tire already both have slow leaks, and even with two Bushman guides I don't want to be stranded again. So I say no, we'll take the southern route out, if that's all right. Sesana says, Fine, but I know he wished otherwise. "Tell you what," I propose, fortifying my voice with enthusiasm. "We'll go back when there's people living there once more."

I think this will provoke a smile but he gets the same impenetrable look as the old women in Gugamma as they point out where relatives have been buried beneath trees, huts and fires in their ancestral sands. "There may be no living people there today," he replies slowly. "But my home, Molapo, it is not uninhabited." ❑

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