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James Workman is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying the use, misuse, accretion and depletion of fresh-water supplies in southern Africa.

African Zion: **Homeward-Bound, Away from Government Water and 'Development'**

By James G. Workman

"Look very carefully at the landscape so as to be sure to recognize it if ever one day you travel to Africa, through the desert. And if you should come upon this spot, please do not hurry on. Then, if a child comes towards you, if he laughs and if he refuses to answer questions, you will surely guess who he is. Write to me quickly to tell me that he has come back..."

—Antoine De Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*, 1943

AUGUST 2002

CENTRAL KALAHARI GAME RESERVE, Botswana—I was resting in the shade of a wind-bent Shepherd's tree when Jumanda Gakelebone, our 28-year-old Bushman translator, motioned me over to what appeared to be an empty thatch hut. The whole 'ghost village' of Molapo seemed just as empty as it had back in March, shortly after its last 200 inhabitants had been evicted to a government camp outside the Reserve. It felt bleak, depressing. I'd only stopped here to let the Australian TV crew with us film springbok and kudu and to let myself escape the heat and hard driving.

But Jumanda had become my eyes, ears and tongue; I trusted his instincts. So I crossed the barren heart of the dead village and joined him to see what was up. It was an ordinary dome Bushman hut, rare only in that it was still standing after the hasty forced removals. Then I noticed it had no door; someone had woven the opening together. I peered through the thatching into the shadowy interior and my eyes just managed to trace the dark outline of a solid plastic container. I glanced up enquiringly.

"Water," Jumanda said carefully. "I had heard from Roy Sesana¹ that they might try to stash some here in Molapo somewhere, hidden in case people were ever ready to return, to help their transition home."

"Do you think they ever will come back?"

"I don't know. Maybe someday. I hope so."

But he sounded despondent, and for good reason. It was the late dry season of an arid El Nino year, the worst possible time to try to leave predictable government plumbing and return to chance an isolated life in the semi-desert. The previous week had brought electric storms yielding a two-minute downpour no one could use; the real life-restoring and pond-filling rains were still four months away.

Dryness deterred even more fiercely than the armed officials who want to rid the CKGR of anything but animals and tourists. Three days earlier, patrols from

¹Sesana is the charismatic Bushman leader who has been leading resistance to the forced removal from outside the Central Kalahari in a court battle and in the media; when we last went through the CKGR in JGW-6 he wanted to visit his vacated home Molapo to pay respect to buried ancestors. Until the case is heard he has been urging people to move back to strengthen the political and legal position of the Bushman land claim.

five different local and national government departments² had driven through the Central Kalahari, harassing defiant Bushmen in the last two villages to the south, Metsimanong and Gugamma. The rumors of increasingly restless and politically active Bushmen outside the Reserve had circulated not only to Jumanda but also to those officials. If they had discovered this cache, they would have emptied the container, confiscated it and tightened security at all gates, as they had in the past. The fact that water was concealed here in a nondescript hut was a minor triumph of ingenuity and of hope over experience.

We shared the discovery with the Aussie TV-news crew but asked them not to film it since doing so could jeopardize the delicate situation. They agreed. Then we piled back into the two 4-by-4 vehicles and rolled slowly through the scattered and broken remains of the village toward our target campsite still some five hours' drive away. In the minutes that followed we were silent, extremely alert, scanning the horizon because the TV crew needed to film more Kalahari animals.

In the past, only a fine line distinguished Kalahari's wildlife and humans; Bushmen know and revere all animals from antelope to praying mantis. They depend on them, dance as them, trance into them, stalk behind them; they even migrate with them toward the best forage and water. Roy Sesana once described a symbiotic relationship in which "The eland used to take care of us, and now we take care of the eland." During our trip Jumanda said casually, with a double meaning he may not have intended: "The government says we cannot coexist with animals here in our home but that does not make sense. We are like the animals. We are part of the game."

Yet the abundant game animals (whose conservation is the government's rationale for the Bushmen evictions) had proven shy and elusive. This route north, through

Molapo, offered us proximity to Kalahari watering holes where we had the best chance of viewing gemsbok, giraffe, eland, wildebeest, ostrich, steenbok, hartebeest and...

"What the hell kind of animals are those?" I asked Jumanda.

"Where?"

"Over there, at about two o'clock on the horizon. Just on the ridge."

He picked them out quickly, and recognized them immediately, but paused, unable to believe or articulate what he saw.

"They almost look like...goats." I said.

"Goats?" asked the TV producer, Mick O'Donnell. "Here?"

"They *are* goats," said Jumanda.

"But how...I mean, what the hell would they be doing here unless—"

"There must be people," Jumanda said, scanning left to right.

"No way."

"Yes, yes. There!" his voice cried out, jubilant.

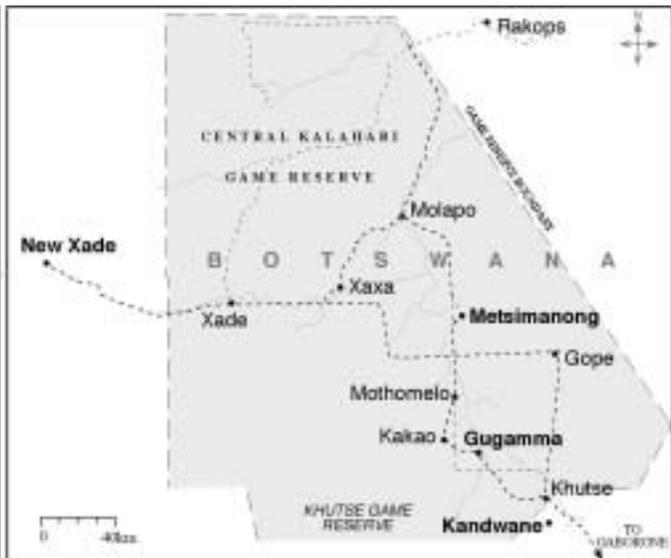
I stopped the car with a jerk and looked where he was pointing. Squinting into the glare of the sands, we could just make out the silhouette of two figures, young men, turning toward us and pointing back.

"My god," I said.

"I don't believe it. I am so happy," said Jumanda, bouncing in his seat.

People. Here once again. I thought of these figures, making an informed, rational decision to return to this inhospitable place at the worst possible time and against the hostile will of a strong, democratic and prosperous government. I watched dumbfounded as they rose and began to walk across the desert toward us.

"But my little chap did not seem to be either lost or dead tired or dying of hunger, thirst or fear. He did not look like a



² With Ghanzi Police, Federal Wildlife officials, the District Commissioner, the Ghanzi District Council Secretary, and the federal Criminal Investigation Division all circling, it must have resembled a medieval siege.

child lost in the middle of the desert, a thousand miles from any inhabited region."

* * *

The Aussies scrambled to capture the meeting in sound and on camera. It was a professional scoop, but far more. Smiles wrapped around our faces. The TV news presenter, Jennifer Byrne, with Jumanda and me, stepped out of the vehicles and tried to keep from sprinting toward the two men. Instead, we shook hands and introduced ourselves as if we had gathered in this clearing for a staff meeting in the conference room.

Their names were Sehapano Buela and Sethilo Thekiso. They were both fathers in their twenties who had spent the last six months in New Xade, removed there from Molapo by the government. There was freshness about them, an uncertainty about their immediate future matched by an unrestrained joy at being on familiar ground.

Coming from months of abundant government water and services, they appeared bathed, clean-clothed and healthy. Yet apparently man cannot live by water alone. They said they were sick of the government resettlement camp, New Xade, calling it "the most horrible place on earth." A strange disease was spreading in that camp, they said. It had piped water, yes, but no good food, no work, nothing to do. Here there was health and activity in the familiar open wild landscape. They arrived here yesterday by truck with the goats and had begun to reconstruct their kraals and lives and "to prepare."

Prepare? Yes, they said through Jumanda. For the others. Tomorrow, they said, their wives and children, among several dozen others, would join them to revive the village and continue their way of life before they were dragged off (or persuaded off or threatened off or bribed off, depending on whom you ask) to the New Xade development zone.

The two had much work to do, and we had a long drive still ahead, so after less than an hour of encouragement and discussion and questions, we parted. Jumanda was ecstatic almost to the point of tears. We camped at Xaxa, near a waterhole pumped exclusively for animals, and wondered at the day's events, and what might unfold. The following afternoon, before departing the Reserve and just inside the gate at another ghost village of Old Xade, we passed three incoming trucks filled with Bushmen singing and laughing and waving at us.

The drivers stopped briefly to talk with us and confirm that they would permanently be joining the two men



The Pioneers: Sehapano, left, and Sethilo prepare to reconstruct their lives in the bush, turning their backs on government orders, and water.

already at Molapo. They were headed home, for despite its difficulties and deprivations — namely no government services of food, schools, medicine, and communication — they had endured such hardships for 30,000 years. They believed they'd make it somehow. It was their homeland, where the ancestors were buried. But they were in a hurry, running late; it would be dark by the time they arrived. We waved them off and wished them luck, wondering at how they would make it through the remaining dry season.

One sits down on a sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet one can feel a silent radiation. "What makes the desert so beautiful," said the little prince, "is that it hides a well, somewhere..."

* * *

In this water-stressed landscape, is the human tide shifting from ebb to flood? If so, was it coincidence that the magnetic pull coincided with a full moon? Such were my reflections: after roughly a thousand miles, driving, and a thousand hours, living upon it, the Central Kalahari starts to take on features of a vast ocean. You realize you don't so much as drive it as spray, coast, surf and glide across its indifferent waves in a self-contained four-wheel boat stocked with gear and water and provisions and searching for two remaining populated but widely-spaced atolls marked on a not-always-quite-accurate map. You seek signs, sounds and 'wakes' of other boats on the horizon, wondering if they are friendly or hostile. You cannot stay in one place forever; the barrenness requires constant motion: hunting meat, vegetation, firewood, water. You alight onto a surface not unlike a floating dock.

That featureless oceanic surface alternates between flat and undulating, and reflects a spectrum of hues



Like two 'ships' passing...in an ocean of sand. As we Western visitors depart, entire families return home to Molapo.

throughout the day. Like salt water, you can use sand to scrub and clean dirt and oil from hard surfaces, but the contact dehydrates your fingers to a leprous state. Beneath your vehicle lies nothing solid for 200 to 300 feet, growing colder with depth. The sand absorbs and devours and digests whatever is left on or just beneath its surface — animal bones, dried leaves, sticks, ashes, waste, water, foreign objects (including one red Land Rover's license plate CA 932324) and countless generations of beloved and deceased human inhabitants. Distances and directions are difficult to measure without sun or stars or a trusted Bushman companion.

And like an arid sea, or indeed often like the Bushmen who survive here, the Kalahari takes readily with a subtle gratitude that is hard to measure. It yields only reluctantly after a long, careful struggle that is difficult to prepare for or learn. It drains you. Each time I depart the CKGR — fatigued, burnt-out, running on fumes — I vow to leave it behind. After fresh food and some long hot showers, I start itching to return, better prepared and recognized and, hopefully, welcomed by the handful of its inhabitants as more than a bringer of news and smuggled rations.

Months ago, on the banks of the Okavango River I shared my limited experiences with Bernard Horton, a safari guide and bow-hunter who has spent many years living and working with Bushmen outside the Reserve. He knew my dilemma of Westerner among Bushmen, wanting neither to use nor to feel used by 'the quiet people.'

He said: "I once asked an old Bushman friend, 'Why is it when you guys are so independent in so many ways you are always were asking me for stuff? The men, the women the children, you're always asking and taking goods and services and favors from me, and never offer-

ing me anything in return.' Well, the old man just looked at me and answered, "'But you never ask.'"

Point taken. If we are not to pay hard currency for a packaged Bushman experience for tourists, we must learn to ask, and answer, and to think of our relationship in terms of the age-old, deeply-ingrained Bushman culture of 'gift exchange.' In return for my questions, I have no problem offering my steel knife to Roy Sesana in New Xade, my sandals to Amogelang in Gugamma, my imitation Leatherman tool to Nar Bapalo and his grandson Moagi in Metsimenong. I exchange my English vocabulary for a few clicking words of G'wi or Naro. They can use these things, just as an old man afflicted by a festering foot wound after stepping on a sharp twig can use the anti-bacterial ointment and bandages from our first-aid kit.

I ask from not only the few dozen die-hards who remain inside the CKGR, but also from those Bushmen who move in and out, who live in both worlds. Answers come gradually, or not at all, or unexpectedly, but always revealing layers between and within family webs and what it means to return to, or stay in, this arid undeveloped home.

"It took me a long time to find out where he came from. The little prince who asked me so many questions never seemed to hear mine. It is thanks to the odd word, here and there, that everything was revealed to me. The information would come very slowly."

* * *

GUGAMMA – I asked entrance to the village by "knocking" on an invisible wall after dark. Due to a late start from Gaborone, and another delay with interrogations at Khutse Gate, and a half-hour spent watching gi-

raffes running at sunset, we had arrived in Gugamma after the fire flames had collapsed to embers and no one was stirring within the kraal. I remembered how fierce and jittery they were about official harassment on previous visits, rushing out armed with sharp digging sticks to protect their children and homes from what they supposed might be another government eviction. So I asked the Australian crew to wait in the vehicles. Then I cautiously approached the kraal on foot and began hollering out the names of the people I have come to know in previous: *"Gaobosediswe! Amogelang! Bashelwago! Letserwe!"*

After a few minutes they emerged, accompanied by a half-dozen young visitors who were not there previously, and welcomed us in for the night. The next morning they were still laughing at our clumsy arrival, and Amogelang imitated me calling out in the darkness. "That is how we knew you," he told me through Jumanda, "that is the Bushman way. When he is walking on a hunt for something, he will shout out and greet the trees and the sand and the hills and the valley that are familiar to him because he has been there before. He calls out to them by name. It eases his way."

It seems that—first—the CKGR boundary is permeable, allowing some visitors back and forth from government 'houses' to their Kalahari 'homes.' Second—those visiting 'home' from the government-made reservations at New Xade or Kaudwane never say they voluntarily or permanently relocated, but temporarily left because the government bribed them with money or coerced them with deprivation, or took their spouses or family members and so they followed. Finally—the two villages appeared to be growing ever so slightly over the months I have been visiting. This has serious implications. The government's policy has always been to 'persuade' the last free Bushmen to relocate inside-out 'for their own good.' That was hard enough. Now it must increasingly try to keep dozens of 'developed' and 'relocated' Bush-



Jumanda, living in both worlds. Hands that hold a cell phone also weave plants into steenbok snares: "We are part of the game."

men from returning to the CKGR outside-in.

Speaking casually beside the fire the night we arrived, Jumanda offered his own split perspective. He possessed a structural house outside the reserve yet owned an intangible home inside it. He lives divided in both worlds; I first met him with a cell phone in one hand but he later used the same hand to strip plant fibers and roll a handmade twine for snaring small game. Hours earlier, we had left Jumanda in the vehicle so as not to draw attention to Jumanda and our purposes. "We fear each other," he said of the government. "I am afraid they will turn me away at the gate, and they are afraid, once I'm inside, because it is my home. Here at home I am the boss."

The Bushman sense of 'home' appears to be a series of outward-radiating concentric circles, starting with a nuclear family hut, then a shared fire, then a kraal, then a village like Gugamma or Metsimenong, then a hunting and gathering bushveld area within walking distance, then the CKGR, then the Kalahari, then Botswana and Africa. Interestingly, the government officials respect some of these circles; they will enter a village and circle a kraal, but not penetrate the kraal uninvited.

Throughout a long acrimonious history and reams of legal paperwork, much of the complex, decades-old political struggle here boils down to drawing the proper boundary of 'home.' Jumanda recalled, "When we brought Roy Sesana's brother Mathambo back to bury, they tried to stop us at the gates, but we went through anyway. We said: 'For you officials, it is the CKGR. But for us, we are going home.'"

* * *

To stay home, perhaps they can benefit from reports and dispatches like this one, or the Australian and BBC TV news documentaries, or the pressure work of Survival International or Ditshwanelo's legal case. But only if they understand how. As we ask questions, and take notes and pictures, and run TV cameras in order to help disseminate their story, there is an undercurrent of confusion. "You are not working for the government which will come to relocate us," said Bashelwago, the old widowed granny in blue. "So what is the help of your asking us these things?"

I'd faced this question before, but never really managed to answer. So I asked, "Have you ever seen photos of yourself?" They hadn't. In exchange for taking more, I assembled the entire village and opened my laptop. I had downloaded digital photos of them from previous visits. I asked if any of them had ever seen a computer before.

All shook their heads.

As I fiddled with the touch-pad and cursor, children reached out and touched the screen, and keyboard, and soon, pushing the buttons I indicated, they started a 'slide show' of photographs of themselves and others they

knew elsewhere in the Reserve, or in relocation camps. By seeing themselves for the first time, they made the connections with my camera, and their faces lit up. Then one of them pointed at the machine and asked,

“But what is it for?”

“This? Um, well. You see it, ah...” Dozens of hunter-gatherers looked at me for an explanation of a laptop with microchips and Intel Inside.

Then I remembered the short-wave radios they had, before the Botswana government confiscated them in January.

“What did you use the radio for before the officials came?”

“We mostly used it to greet people in other villages,” said one, after a pause. “And for entertainment,” added another. “And to ask how they were and tell them how we are here, for news of game or if the government was coming or might make trouble for us all.”

Right, that pretty much captures 99 percent of e-mail and the internet, I thought. “This is similar,” I said. “Now imagine as many villages out there as there are stars at night. The TV crew and I are trying, with these computers and tools and cameras to get your greeting and situation and voices and images out to all those villages who could then perhaps keep you connected and not alone and isolated.” To my astonishment, some nodded in comprehension.

* * *

METSIAMENONG—I finally grasped family ties, between fathers and sons, cousins and aunts, a brother and sister. I also discovered the true motivations of Moagi, the 14-year-old “boy” who helped translate in broken English my first trips. As someone between the children and adults he seemed more likely drawn to cities and schools, but he had twice explained that he remained inside the reserve only because he liked hunting with his grandfather, nothing more. This time, as we were speaking I saw him smile as an attractive young woman in a tattered green shirt walked past.

‘Your girlfriend?’ I asked.

‘My wife.’

‘Ah.’

That explained the incentive for him to learn to hunt and prove his worth. The next morning, we held a jolly, plump baby boy that had been the center of attention the entire stay here. It was an encouraging sign of health and permanence in the village.

‘Will you and your wife make a baby someday?’ I asked Moagi.

‘That is our son,’ he replied.

‘Ah.’

* * *

Nar Bapalo, who always seemed to me to be the sinew that bound the village together, was out in the bush when we arrived. He was spending the day with several others unearthing massive, turnip-shaped roots to nourish the goats, which in turn provide survival milk and meat for the Bushmen. He embraced me upon his return,

the most visible show of affection I had witnessed among Bushmen.

I learned his double-barreled nickname, by which he introduced himself many months ago, derives from the Setswana ‘nyare’ or a corruption of English ‘buffalo,’ both meaning the same thing in different languages. I said it fit him perfectly: “When the lion hunts, all other animals will flee in panic, except for the buffalo, which just looks nonchalantly back at it...”

Interrupting the translation, Bapalo picked up on my analogy to agree that “And when the government comes to chase us, others have left the reserve, but I do not move or run away. I stay here where I am, ready to fight!”

We then pantomimed the dangerous African bovine chasing off Botswana officials, much to the amusement of the other villagers. “Yes, we know this one,” he told the Australian TV crew through Jumanda, thumping me on the shoulders. “He is always solitary, like a male gemsbok. He may travel with other families and groups, but still he remains and travels alone.”

* * *

I reflected on his casual metaphor. They had noted what must be my strangeness to such a tight-knit, interdependent clan, where human marriage and family is as



Sharpening Spears: Through the hunt a ‘boy’ (Moagi, at left) proves he can become husband and father, learning skills from his own grandfather, Nar Bapalo.



At a mission project outside the CKGR, tourists pay to absorb a preserved but sanitized and packaged Bushman culture; inside, one can adopt the culture of gift exchange to experience a messier, more spontaneous reality

much for love as for survival. Perhaps it is easier to remain solo under certain circumstances: the gemsbok can travel anywhere alone with no need for drinking at water holes or pans where being alone would be vulnerable to predators; the American can travel anywhere alone with water and provisions in the back of his vehicle, all linked to ATM's and credit cards. If so, I wondered, did it follow that access to "development" in the Western sense must as a consequence erode the very bonds of marriage and family we so highly esteem?

The question was not simply rhetorical. Hovering over this trip was the knowledge that 500 miles due south, the world's leaders were assembling en masse in Johannesburg to disagree on targets and timetables to provide food, water, electricity, education, health services, technology, etc. to the billions of the world's poorest people. Within Botswana, officials repeatedly failed to move the last families outside the reserve where the government offered exactly that kind of 'development.' Shortly on our heels, a well-meaning delegate from the European Parliament visited the same villages and then told reporters he planned to set aside hundreds of thousands of Euros to help the Bushmen 'develop' right where they are, paying to drill boreholes for the Bushmen to operate and pump water, for example.

Despite all these contrasting ideologies, perspectives, tools and methods, all seek the same overarching goal of channeling funds toward 'development.' There doesn't seem to be any disagreement on the inherent need and

even right to 'development.' The only debate turns on where and how fast and how much money by which the 'poor' can be 'developed.' (It is generally assumed that the Bushmen are among 'the poorest of the poor.')

Poor is always relative, even (or especially) in southern Africa, but it is usually defined as 'lacking access to resources that can improve their lives.'

Yet what if the 'poor' don't lack that access? It is hard, watching the Bushmen, to think of them as 'rich.' But the fact that people are trickling back to Gugamma and Metsimeng, willing to work hard and compete for finite resources in the middle of the dry season indicates (and answering

our questions, confirms) that, ironically, there is more access to development in the undeveloped Reserve than in the concentrated, government-'developed' zones outside of it. If that is the case, it may be that doing absolutely nothing for the 'poor' Bushmen may be the best way of letting them develop.

Such a hypothesis is heresy to some, dismissed as ridiculous by most. On August 28, angered by news reports and stung by the EU delegation's criticism, Botswana President Festus Mogae reaffirmed that the Basarwa³ must be given opportunities to develop in the same way as all other citizens of Botswana: "We do not think the Basarwa are game [animals]. They are Batswana, they must live outside [the reserve] in villages, their children go to school, be able to attend clinics. That is our position," he said. "There are about 65,000 Basarwa in this country, but people report and talk about 20 of them as if they were the only ones."

Perhaps. But on the eve of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, we report and talk about those few (and growing) dozens inside because they *are* the only ones working against what the rest of the world's top delegates consider progress. It may be that few ask Bushmen what they consider development because they might not like the answer. Development aid is often seen as a universal good, but "I wish the government had never provided water and other services in the first place," said Goney, a pretty 15-year-old visiting her relatives in Gugamma and acting as a spokesperson/second trans-

lator for the village. "Life could be better. Before they brought us goods and services, we could live comfortably. Now the young are born used to water, and tablets, and mealie. It has hurt us."

As I start a long drive south toward the Summit in Johannesburg, it strikes me as delightfully ironic that tens of thousands of powerful delegates are descending on Africa's richest and most densely populated square mile to *talk* about sustainable development at the precise moment that a few dozen dissident Bushmen are migrating toward Africa's most sparsely populated square mile, a place where currency is worthless, to *practice* it.

The little prince crossed the desert and met with only one flower. "Where are the men?" "Men? I caught a glimpse of them several years ago. But one never knows where to find them. The wind blows them around. They have no roots which makes their life rather trying."

* * *

Since departing from the Reserve, I have been trying to piece together what moved me so much about the concealed water container, the two pioneers, the truckloads en route to Molapo and the gradual trickle, of both young and old, back into the die-hard villages of Gugamma and Metsimeng. Much of the appeal may be its socio-economic novelty: in a continent, indeed world, where cities have been rapidly draining rural inhabitants, these Bushmen were swimming against the current, finding more comfort and stability and opportunity in the middle of nowhere.

Some of the excitement may be the legal and political implications: moving home tips the nation's balance of power both inside and out. For more than a decade, Botswana's ruling party has been insisting (and, even after cutting off services, continues to insist) to the world that it has never once used force, intimidation or threats to evict the last free Bushmen from the CKGR. For decades the Bushmen insisted that it has. With no outside witnesses ever present during the removals, it was one word against another. When we tracked down Sesana in New Xade and told him that Molapo is once again inhabited, he cackled and nodded knowingly. We asked if this was a strategic leadership move. "People think for themselves," he answered. "They want to go home. But while government lawyers insist that they were not forced, this shows that they *were* forced." In other words, the disenfranchised were testifying and voting with their feet.

But a fraction of the appeal may be personal and spiritual. Like that lone wandering gemsbok Bapalo compared me to, I have voluntarily relocated farther and further from a loving suburban home into a dynamic, exciting yet rootless cosmopolitan and international scene, moving 23 times in 15 years, recently living nomadically out of vehicle and tent. I have met only a handful of people who still live where they were born. I sense the ebb and pull between houses and home. And I suspect that the seemingly simple and easy decision of going home is in fact the most deeply complex, difficult and profound act of faith one can make.

Without using a politically-loaded word, it is hard to describe a dedicated migration that reverses the Diaspora of a unique people and culture. But I can't help writing that, as those truckloads vanished from sight, heading for Molapo to chart their own course in an undeveloped 'home,' perhaps what I was witnessing was the first stirrings of an African Zion. □

³ Basarwa is the Setswana word for Bushmen. Some Westerners feel both are derogatory, but the people of the CKGR use both to describe themselves proudly. More revealing, and interesting to me, is that the word Basarwa comes from a Bantu phrase that means 'those who do not own cattle.'

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