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Bushmen of the Kalahari

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A primordial urge to preserve ancestral lands is a common denominator of indigenous tribes across the world, be it the Red Indians of the Americas or the Aborigines of Australia. The land use practices of the tribes of Africa are no different in stewardship and sustainable use of natural resources.

Ironically, these tribes are often at loggerheads with greedy governments and large conglomerates who try their grab land with scant regard for the environment. This stark reality is apparent in Botswana, and the tribal lands of the San aka the bushmen of the Kalahari are at stake.

The San of the yesteryears were a happy people, who cared little for personal property or wealth, and they willingly shared with others whatever they owned. They presumably go back to 80,000 years as hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari with unmatched skills to survive and even thrive in the desert.

Everything they needed - clothing, food, and tools - came from the men hunting with hand-made bows and poison tipped arrows, the poison being made from ground beetles. The women went out with digging sticks and were responsible for gathering fruits, insects, berries, tubers, and ostrich eggs. Empty ostrich eggshells were used to store water and were

sealed with straw to keep the water from spilling out, particularly when the men needed them on a hunt that took them far away.



The beautiful rock art of the Tsolido Hills, bears witness to the lives of the San, and is 20,000 years old. These environmentally friendly people had faced oppression and eviction from their homelands for many years, and like many other indigenous peoples, their once thriving cultures are now on the edge of extinction.

The main reason for this plight is due to the diamonds and mineral wealth to be found in the San's hunting grounds. In the Seventies, the ancestral land conflict between the San and the Botswana Government became more intense, resulting in one of the longest and most expensive court cases in the history of Botswana.

In the evictions of 1997, 2002 and 2005, the Government of Botswana forced almost all the San people off their ancestral lands in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Their homes were dismantled, their school and health post were closed, the main water hole was capped, and hunting was forbidden. The San were harassed, threatened, and then taken away to compounds on the fringes of the Reserve. The Botswana government indicated that the San were removed because they were incompatible with the wildlife, not because of the rich diamond reserves discovered beneath the sands and stated that they left willingly.

An organisation fighting for the rights of the San people, finally managed to help them take their grievances to the High Court of Botswana in 2006, where a ruling by the judges decreed that the Government's eviction of the San, from their ancestral homeland, was "unlawful and unconstitutional". They were given the right to return, to hunt and to gather within the Reserve and did not need to apply for permits to enter it. One of the judges commented that the Government's refusal to allow the San to hunt 'was tantamount to condemning them to death by starvation."

That was the day when the San cried tears of joy instead of tears of misery. However, the San's joy on hearing this recommendation was short lived as the judges also declared that the Government was not obliged to provide services to the San who returned to the Game Reserve.

The Government narrowly interpreted the ruling, only allowing a certain amount of San to return, but members of their families had to apply for permits allowing them to stay in the Reserve, only one month at a time. They appealed in 2011, seeking boreholes to be re-opened. The judges upheld the ruling in favour of the San saying that the degrading treatment of the people was tantamount to "A harrowing story of human suffering and despair." The Government was also ordered to pay the costs of the trial incurred by the San.

By 2013, the Botswana Government was still blocking access to water, having only drilled one borehole for use by the wildlife. This was when a fourth court case was taken to the High Court, to contest a government requirement that forced Bushmen to apply for permits to enter the Reserve. The Government attempted to have the case thrown out on a technicality. Due to the banning of the San lawyer, British barrister Gordon Bennett, from entering the country, the week before the trial, the case was dismissed, leaving the San at the mercy of the Botswana Government, yet again.

In 2014, a new diamond mine opened on the San's Ancestral lands and was permitted to drill boreholes, on the understanding that no water was to be given to any San, who may still be residing in the Reserve, but could be used by the wildlife roaming the land.

Permits were granted for expensive safari camps to use the Reserve, allowing the owners to set up luxurious camps that will lure wealthy members of the public into disturbing the environment even more.

Imagine being a San and seeing tourists enjoying the water of a cool, clear pool, when they are not allowed to access to precious water. Tourists, most unaware of the plight of the San, are treated to special 'Bushman Experiences', where they learn about the early life of the hunter-gatherers, and watch the traditional 'trance-dances', but were they to visit the camp of Xade, it would shed a different light on how they would view the San of today.

Dependent on Government handouts, the life of the once proud San is now restricted to squalid camps, where alcoholism, depression and illness are rife. When would this utter disregard for people and their culture end? Should we not use the knowledge of these original environmentalists, instead of rejecting their culture in favour of material benefits? The San awaits answers.

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