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Narratives of Identity and Assertions of Legitimacy: Basarwa in Northern Botswana

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For many Basarwa in Botswana, the introduction of the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) Programme has provided a context in which rights to land and wildlife can become publically debated and contested. Based on the assumption that decentralisation of management over natural resources will provide local benefits, and thus encourage their conservation, CBNRM has, over the last five years, been introduced to many of the most rural areas of Botswana – areas in which Basarwa often comprise a significant proportion of the population. CBNRM raises issues that are central to the situation of many Basarwa, particularly its promise to reverse the trend of alienation from land, wildlife and natural resources. These are debates in which expressions of identity by Basarwa often play an essential role, particularly as a means of legitimising rights of access to resources. This paper places expressions of identity by Basarwa within the wider contexts of debates over CBNRM, as well as dominant conceptions of Basarwa as people who lack *molao*, or ‘law’. In doing so, I argue for new ways of conceptualising and understanding Basarwa identity and ethnicity.

The research upon which this paper is based was conducted over fifteen months in three villages in the northern sandveld of Nagmiland, Botswana: Gudigwa [pop. 650], Khwai [pop. 360], and Mababe [pop. 290] (Figure 1). The residents of Gudigwa and Khwai call themselves Bugakhwe, and those of Mababe refer to themselves as Ts’exa. Bugakhwe and Ts’exa are northern Khwe-speakers, and comprise two of the more than ten language groups in Botswana that are encapsulated by the label Basarwa (or San or Bushmen). Although the main focus of my fieldwork was on the dynamics of ‘development’ as reflected in CBNRM [Taylor 2001], I dwell in this paper on narratives of identity, and how these are often related to legitimising access to natural resources. In my analysis of identity, I suggest that hunting and gathering is important in understanding Basarwa identities, not because Basarwa represent leftovers of a prehistoric way of life, but because *contemporary* contexts make ‘hunting and gathering’ an important label of self-designation by Basarwa in certain contexts. In other words, the salience of hunting and gathering today is more as a *symbol* that carries meaning to both Basarwa and their neighbours in the contemporary political economy of Botswana, especially considering experiences of dispossession and alienation from land and

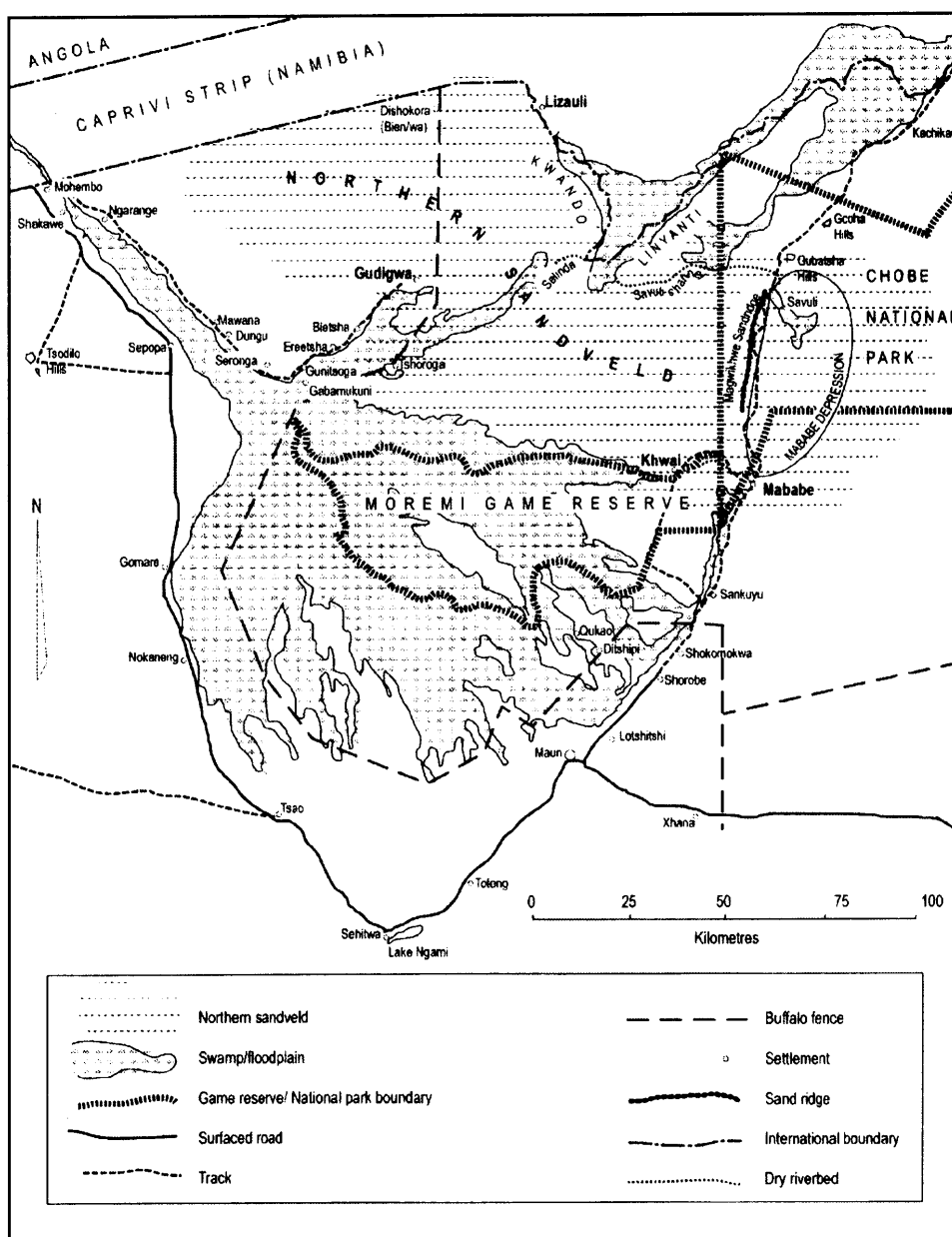


Figure 1. The northern sandveld of Ngamiland, and location of Khwai, Gudigwa and Mababe

wildlife.

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND CONTEXT

Studies of 'hunter-gatherers' have hitherto been dominated by a tendency to catalogue the architecture of social forms that characterise the subjects of their research. Attention has thus been paid to describing such distinctives as egalitarianism, sharing networks, modes of sociality, or physiognomy [e.g. Kent 1992: 52]. This approach has perhaps been motivated primarily by *our* categorisation of hunter-gatherers as different, a difference that has inspired and maintained the sub-discipline of hunter-gather studies. Focusing instead on how *Basarwa* constitute difference between themselves and others involves acknowledging the ongoing processes of cultural, political and social self-production, and the changing contexts in which these processes take place. Cultural patterns do not become defunct in such an analysis, but their salience is realised not so much in the forms they take, as in the relations they inform that mark 'us' from 'them'. I therefore analyse identity primarily as a *relation* rather than a *thing*: 'a relation inscribed in culture' [Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 51].

Acknowledging that 'culture informs, shapes and underpins resistance at least as much as it emerges situational from it' [Ortner 1995: 181, cf. Fischer 1999], I argue that culture itself is the level at which oppositional struggles are often made. In other words, certain activities that carry collective meaning, such as hunting, become an important part of a collective identity that is in some respects aimed at sustaining cultural distance from a society that seeks to dominate them by incorporation. My interest in the role of identity in contesting processes of resource allocation and 'development' means that I emphasise its instrumentalist role. This is not to imply, however, that identity is invented to suit political purposes. A sense of identity is developed by acting in the world and interacting with others [Barth 1994: 14], and it derives its potency from this repertoire of shared symbols and shared experiences. These common experiences, which include dispossession as well as practices such as hunting, are central in considering Basarwa identity.

Narratives and practices of identity are therefore a means for Basarwa to articulate with the regimes of authority that attempt to shape their lives, an essential component of attempts by Basarwa to assert a form of control over their world [cf. Comaroff 1985:13]. In asserting, and practising, difference from a government agenda oriented towards conformity and singularity, Basarwa present a challenge to hegemony and the identity space in which its subjects live. Self-definition is thus decisively a question of empowerment. It is an attempt to address material conditions of deprivation by challenging their roots; the wider webs of meaning that allocate to people different value and unequal position in society [cf. Saugestad 1999: 9].

The changing political climate of Botswana has seen increased opportunities for the assertion of ethnically based claims to rights, particularly in the 1990s. At

the beginning of the decade, an observer had noted that Basarwa had 'no support movements, they are not at all organised beyond the level of band or settlement groups, and they have no connection to international Fourth-World organisations' [Gulbrandsen 1991: 84]. However, 1992 and 1993 saw high profile national conferences at which Basarwa representatives were for the first time given platforms in the centres of political power. The decade also saw the birth and growth of three pan-Basarwa support organisations: Kuru Development Trust; First People of the Kalahari; and the Working Group for Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa [documented by Saugestad 1998: 237-83]. Furthermore, the 1990s saw the first major cracks in Setswana hegemony in Botswana. Equal representation by non-Setswana speakers in the House of Chiefs, and mother-tongue education (rather than only Setswana and English) became hotly debated – and, by the end of the decade, as yet unresolved – issues in the parliament and national press. Ngamiland, the most ethnically diverse of Botswana's districts, also saw the birth of two organisations, ostensibly to promote the language and interests of two of its 'minorities': *Kamanamakao Society* [by Bayei]; and *Mbungu* [by Hambukushu]. Locating itself within these wider processes, this paper examines narratives of identity at the end of the twentieth century by Basarwa in a part of Ngamiland that, over the past three decades, has increasingly aroused the interest of conservationists, tourists and bureaucrats.

Despite a greater appreciation over the last decade of the extent which 'hunter-gatherers' have been an integral part of wider social and economic networks, little attention has been paid to how *Basarwa characterise themselves*, and how identities are acted out in social interactions and encounters [cf. Saugestad 1998: 136]. This paper explores how Basarwa in the northern sandveld represent themselves, and how these representations are often related to legitimating access to resources from which they have been alienated. Following a discussion of the theoretical issues pertaining to Basarwa identity in Botswana, I examine how Basarwa represent their identity, which is often in terms of their hunting and gathering heritage, and material poverty. The next section examines such expressions of identity as a means of asserting rights against government policies, against dominant values, and against various local 'others'. This leads to the final section, which moves from the neat definitions of 'self' and 'other' to explore the ambiguity that exists in social action and relationships between dominant and subordinate, and the ways in which Basarwa negotiate these dichotomies.

ESSENTIALISING IDENTITY: HOW BASARWA SPEAK ABOUT THEMSELVES

Expressions of identity are rooted in dialectics that not only define 'us' as distinct from 'them', but also make sense of the changing world in which we live. 'Those caught up in a process of radical change come to terms with their history by means of suggestive oppositions', contended Comaroff and Comaroff [1992: 159]

from their work on Barolong experiences of colonialism in South Africa. They argued that the distinction in speech between *bereka* (wage labour) and *tiro* (work for oneself) exemplified the different worlds of exploitation and autonomy. In the same way, Basarwa often speak in dualisms that contrast a *Sesarwa* way of life based on wildlife and wild food with *Setswana* (based on pastoralism) and *Sekgoa*¹⁾ (based on cash and the consumption of manufactured goods). As Moses looked back in middle age over his life, he characterised it in such terms:

I took my wife and had my first child while I was still working at Khwai River Lodge. At this time I was living a life of *Sekgoa* and had left the *Sesarwa* life. I was different. I worked and had left behind our life of hunting. As I had more children, I started returning to a life of hunting. I bought a gun and used it to hunt. ... I had eight children, all of whom I brought up in *Sekgoa* only. I brought them up on money, not fruit. ... Today everything is done with money.

The imaginary worlds of *Sesarwa*, *Setswana* and *Sekgoa* are, like the different livelihood strategies they represent, not discrete in lived experience, but intimately articulated with each other. Their separation in speech arises from the emotive metaphors that they provide to explain and categorise their world and their experiences in it. *Sesarwa*, *Setswana* and *Sekgoa* are categories that, as Raymond Williams [1973: 291] suggested in his seminal work on the opposition between 'country' and 'city' in Britain, represent experiences and interests for which there is no immediate vocabulary. Similarly, the moral contrast between experiences in town and village in different African contexts has provided a powerful resource for social critique, and has been well documented [e.g. Mayer 1971; Epstein 1981; Mitchell 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992]. Village life has provided powerful alternative 'moral images' [Ferguson 1997: 138] to be contrasted against urban realities conceived as artificial, immoral, corrupt and anomic. Comparative oppositions that Basarwa use are similar in that they are a product of experiencing, and means of explaining, the rapidly changing world in which they live. However, these oppositions carry a deeper level of meaning to Basarwa, for whom they describe not only experiences that articulate imaginary worlds, but also a sense of identity as a separate category of people.

The world of *Sesarwa* is often rooted in either of two oppositions: as a product of the bush rather than agropastoralism or towns; and as a world of poverty rather than wealth. These oppositions provide an immediate and evocative vocabulary with which to define both an identity in opposition to a dominant majority, and as moral narratives against current inequalities.

PEOPLE OF THE BUSH, PEOPLE OF POVERTY

In one of the only ethnographically-based explorations of contemporary

Bushman identity, Suzman [2000] argues from his research with Ju|'hoansi in a very different context – on the Afrikaner and Herero farms of Omaheke in eastern Namibia – that Ju|'hoan identity is constituted, not in terms of cultural institutions left over from a hunting and gathering past, but in terms of their marginalisation and domination by others. They were relegated to stigmatised underclass by the emergent political economy, and, Suzman argues, came to constitute their own identity in terms of their dependent underclass status. Like Suzman, this paper argues that in studying former hunters and gatherers, it is necessary to move beyond the theoretical frameworks and models generated for the study of them as 'hunters and gatherers'. However, Basarwa from the northern sandveld, unlike Ju|'hoansi in Omaheke, draw not only upon their underclass status, but also their hunting and gathering past. Perhaps because Basarwa in the northern sandveld have not been subject to such brutal and sustained subjugation, and because the limits to hunting and gathering are not environmentally, but politically, constituted, their history of hunting and gathering remains an important element in contemporary narratives of identity.

Conversations in the northern sandveld about the current situation of Basarwa and their place in the wider social economy of the region often turned to the legendary figure of Kharal'uma, the first person God put on earth, and progenitor of all Basarwa. The story of Kharal'uma is set in the times of *kx'ei-am* (*kx'ei* – long ago, *am* – sun or time, in Bugakhwedam, thus 'the times of long ago'), of creation, when the trajectories were set for social relations manifest today, and speaks of the division of the world into hunter-gatherers and agro-pastoralists. The following version of the story was written by Merafe Amos, a young resident of Khwai:

The old Khwe people believe they were the first people to be put on earth, and they were followed by the Bayei, who they call their cousins. The first Khwe person on earth was Kharal'uma, the hero of all Khwe people. They say that while he was walking around the land with his family, they came to a river, on the banks of which was a *mokoro* [dugout canoe]. They saw lots of animals on the other side of the river, and so wanted to cross. Kharal'uma put his family in the *mokoro*, jumped in himself, and started beating the *mokoro* with a thin stick to make it move, but of course this was impossible. Moyei then came along and said to him, 'My uncle, let me show you how to do this'. He fetched a long straight pole, and used it to push the *mokoro* with Kharal'uma and his family to the other side. He left them there, and took the *mokoro* for himself. That is how Bayei and Khwe people started their relationship.

After that, Kharal'uma didn't bother with the *mokoro*, as he knew that his nephew the Moyei had it, and could help him with it when he needed it. Kharal'uma instead chose to concentrate on hunting and gathering wild fruit. On his hunting and gathering trips he came across ploughed fields, and in the fields he found melons, which he ate. But when he found sorghum, he broke

the heads off and roasted them whole, trying to eat the seeds one at a time. This annoyed him, because it took himself so long to fill his stomach in this way. Then along came Moyei, who showed him how to grind the sorghum, and make sorghum porridge. He found the porridge delicious, but complained it took too long to make, so he decided to leave the fields as well for his nephew Moyei. He went instead into the bush, knowing that if he needed he could get crops from Moyei whenever he needed them.

Narratives of Kharal'uma are a clear example of the essentialist imagery that 'first peoples' worldwide often use in representing themselves to the outside world [cf. Sharp 1996; Fischer 1999]. Such stories represent a world in which Basarwa are a people whose way of life has been set from the beginning of time to be one derived from the bush, in contradistinction to their Bantu-speaking neighbours, who became agro-pastoralists. Within this scheme, one of the key markers of what it means to be Mosarwa is the use of wildlife. 'There is no life now because there is no meat', exclaimed Petros, an old blind man from Khwai, or in the words of Mmadifalana, an old woman in Khwai: 'I want to live by meat, because that is the seed [*peo*] of culture [*ngwao*] that our parents left us'. Eating game meat is thus represented as more than a subsistence option – although the hunger caused by not having easy access to wildlife is at times very real – but an essential element of their identity as Basarwa. Phentse, a middle-aged man from Mababe, explained this to me in terms that he thought I would best understand: 'I could not survive without game meat, because it is something like vitamins for me'. An identity tied to wildlife is not only expressed verbally. Some men display visible markers of this identity, especially horns from large antelope such as eland and kudu, in their homes or tied to the fences around their yards. It is, of course, also a lived identity; one that is practised in the form of regular hunting and gathering.

In the same way that most Basarwa have experience of hunting and gathering, and the contemporary restrictions on doing so, they also have experience of poverty. In a conference in Gaborone in October 1993, Aaron Johannes, a founder member of First People of the Kalahari, took the stage and announced of those that have come to fall under the name *Basarwa*:

We have many different names, and come from many different places with many different languages. But one thing is common to us all: we are the people with no money.

This was more than a statement of circumstance, or an observation that many Basarwa happen to be poor. Poverty is often a defining feature of how Basarwa represent their identity as a category of people, and is reflected in the names Basarwa call themselves. The term *Xukhwe*, for example, is an all-encompassing term used by Bugakhwe and Ts'exa to refer not only to themselves but also all other people that would otherwise be known as Basarwa. A commonly used self-

referential term, Xukhwe appears to be one of some antiquity, noted, for example, by Seiner [1977] on a trip through Ngamiland in 1905/6. I asked both Bugakhwe and Ts'exa what 'Xukhwe' meant, and each time I was given a similar answer: '*xu* means to leave or forsake, and *khwe* means person, so *Xukhwe* means the forsaken people. We are the people that are thrown away'.²⁾

The current explanation of the name *Xukhwe* is one example of the way in which Basarwa frequently represent themselves as a people marked by poverty, or as 'People of the short blanket' [English *et al.* 1980]. A similar explanation is often given by Basarwa on the meaning of the word 'Mosarwa', as in the following exchange on a visit to Ju|'hoansi in Namibia by delegates from the northern sandveld in July 1998. As they shared ideas in a meeting, the issue of naming arose:

Ju|'hoansi : You call yourselves 'Mosarwa'. Where does that name come from?

Visitors : Mosarwa means *mo sa rua*; someone that does not own stock. That is our name because we are poor.

Ju|'hoansi : What, then, is the opposite of 'Mosarwa'?

Visitors : The opposite of 'Mosarwa' is *morui*, a person that has livestock, a person that is rich.

For many Basarwa, one of the most salient markers of their identity is their common experience of dispossession, mistreatment, or neglect by those more economically or politically powerful than themselves. Characterising themselves as a people marked by poverty is thus not so much an intrinsically negative self-image, but a commentary against a pattern of domination that is seen as responsible for their poverty. The twin images Basarwa present of being people of the bush and people of poverty are mutually interdependent. Being materially poor means much of their livelihood is gained from the bush, and being people of the bush means – in the current policy context – *made* to be poor. As explained by Sangando, an old man from Gudigwa:

For those of us who have no cattle or jobs, wildlife is our life. But the government's legislation is making some people poor and some people rich. I am destitute. I am Mosarwa.

NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF RIGHTS

To take Basarwa representations of themselves as hunter-gatherers as evidence that they constitute an ethnic group of hunter-gatherers, would miss the point of such narratives. An equal misinterpretation would be to argue, on the basis of narratives of poverty, that the category of people labelled Basarwa is simply an underclass created by capitalist penetration into the Kalahari. The realities of their

lives speak against such simplicities. Such assertions are primarily statements of *ideology*, directed at those who would rule and change them [cf. Keesing 1992: 226]. These discourses are part of their struggle, which is, in Scott's [1985: xvii] words:

Not only one of material objects, but appropriation of symbols, of how past and present should be understood and labelled, to identify causes and lay blame . . . a contentious effort to give partisan meaning to local history.

Statements of identity are thus used to constitute a local 'moral economy' [Thompson 1975], grounded in local views of norms and obligations, which legitimate for everyday practice what has become illegal and illegitimate. That a subordinate class of people should develop moral economies to sustain and legitimate practices defined as illegal is not a new discovery. Peasants in eighteenth century England [Thompson 1975; Hopkins 1985] and contemporary Malaysia [Scott 1985, 1990], hill people in northeast India [Karlsson 1997], and residents on the peripheries of Zambian National Parks [Balakrishnan and Ndlovu 1992] have all created alternative moral economies. Such moral economies have been based on customary rights to land and its products, and have served to sustain and legitimate access to resources that have been legally closed to common access. In this sense, Basarwa share both a dilemma and a means of legitimating common practices with many others in a similar situation, including non-Basarwa around the Okavango Delta. However, the moral economy that Basarwa vocalise is more than an appeal to customary rights of tenure, but a very identity that is based largely on the use of these resources.

Narratives of Khara|'uma the progenitor of all Basarwa are widely known, not only among Basarwa, but also by many of their Bayei and Hambukushu neighbours. As such, they provide a wide currency with which to establish a moral universe of relationships between themselves, their neighbours, and the environment in which they live. This is a universe in which:

- Basarwa were first in the land.
- God gave Basarwa all natural resources.
- Basarwa chose to live off wild food, leaving black people to domesticate cattle and crops.
- The relationship between Basarwa and their non-Basarwa neighbours was supposed to be one of mutual co-operation and assistance.

The strength of narratives of Khara|'uma lies in their malleability. They are a common codification that can be manipulated to provide a moral commentary on current ethnically-structured inequalities. For example, Manne Thamaga, the younger brother of Gudigwa's headman, referred to Khara|'uma in questioning their domination by Hambukushu and Bayei, with whom they were united under

Okavango Community Trust in the CBNRM programme:

Blacks came and took our cows because they saw they were useful and valuable, and they left us with the wild animals because they saw they were dangerous. After killing cattle with ease, Kharal'uma tried to kill buffalo, but found they were very vicious and they nearly killed him, so had to flee up a tree. Mokoba [Moyei] took the cattle, leaving the dangerous ones for us. We lived happily with the wild animals, taking what we needed. Then today they see that animals can make money, so they have decided to take those as well. They want to make a business with those dangerous ones as well, but those are ours. Why do they want a share now, when in the beginning they did not look after (*rua*) them with us, saying they are too dangerous?

Although their circumstances in Okavango Community Trust prompted Manne in this instance to assert a local moral economy against their immediate non-Basarwa neighbours, such narratives are usually directed against the laws and values of *molao*, embodied by the government. Moral economies not only legitimate illegal activities such as hunting, but also criminalise the state for denying Basarwa what should be rightfully theirs:

When I poach [*utswa*, lit. 'steal'], my heart does not tell me I have stolen. What may hold me back is the fear of being arrested, beaten and jailed. Who then will feed my family? I can't say some Basarwa poach and others don't. All of us will take an animal if we get the opportunity because they have been ours since the beginning. It is the same for us as you going to the fridge and getting out a loaf of bread. (*Moses, Khwai*)

When we steal animals, it is not that we despise the government, but we are hungry. It is the government that is at fault if we steal, not us, because they have taken our *phapadi* [wild foods]. If I could see, I would be hunting. I have waited for the government for a long time, thinking this person called government will change. What will we live by? Those that see should go and steal. It is not us at fault, but government. They should pay the fines if there are any. What kind of law is it that can refuse us mice - mice! – which is what springhares are? (*Petros, Khwai*)

If I go into my kraal and take a goat out and kill it, who can tell me I have done wrong? The government says we are *disenyi* [law-breakers], but it is government that brought in the safaris that shoot all over the place. When I [i.e. Basarwa] was in charge, there were many animals, so the government is *sesinyi*. (*Joubere, Mababe*)

Equating hunting for Basarwa with getting a loaf of bread out of the fridge for

white people, or with a Motswana taking a goat from his herd are commonly used metaphors by Basarwa. Idea, the budding hawker from Mababe, for example, told me that, 'Wildlife is my bread. In Maun they eat loaves, I eat wildlife. God divided us that way.' On another occasion, I asked July Kangondo, a middle-aged resident of Khwai, whether he had ever owned livestock, he shook his head, then laughed and said, 'Of course I have owned livestock; buffalo, pythons, impala, lechwe. . . .', and proceeded to reel off a list of wild animals. The use of such metaphors has been a pattern of speech for a long time, as indicated by Stow [1905: 282] who was told at the end of the nineteenth century by a lone surviving Bushman in the Orange River valley that, 'all the game was our cattle'. As Raymond Williams [1973: 291] suggests, bread and wildlife, cattle and buffalo, all provide immediate metaphors for deeper experiences, and passionately felt beliefs about what should be legitimate. Using the metaphors of dominant pastoralist economy serves to translate the rights accepted for pastoralists to 'hunter-gatherers'. By inverting the opposition between pastoralists and hunter-gatherers – categories that dominant society is in part responsible for creating – they reveal and challenge the premises of the form of Setswana hegemony that seeks to control Basarwa by incorporation.

ARTICULATING WITH MOLAO

The struggle to assert a local moral economy against *molao* [law] is especially difficult, as it challenges not only an overt legal system, but also the associated, and unwritten, package of values that underlie what it means to be a proper person. *Molao* is a pivotal concept in understanding the construction of Sesarwa ethnicity, and is used by all Sotho-Tswana speakers [Schapera 1955: 35-6; Gluckman 1955: 164] to refer not only to a body of legal rules, but 'law' in its widest sense, encompassing a sense of order, authority, and even civilisation. Dominant representations of Basarwa as 'people of the bush' have implied that they lack this one essential ingredient of sociality; *molao*, and are thus wild and unpredictable; lacking in the social institutions that grant them proper humanity. Basarwa response to such constructions has generally been a mix of conforming to *molao* in some respects, and in others attempting to counter it with a conception of their own Sesarwa *molao*.

The authority of *molao* pervades and regulates all aspects of life. What Basarwa discussed, the appropriateness of different contexts for discussing different issues, and the way these were framed, were all bound by *molao*'s invisible system of values and mores. For example, early one morning the man whose family I was staying with in Mababe went out hunting. He returned a few hours later, complaining that his hunt had been unsuccessful. Yet later in the morning he went to the outskirts of the village and returned carrying a sack. As we sat together at lunchtime eating fresh meat, however, any comment from me about enjoying the fruits of the morning's hunt would have been inappropriate. Verbalising what we

all knew would have been tantamount to explicitly placing my host in the category of 'thief'. Not talking about it allowed him, instead, to retain an air of respectability. Conversations about illegal hunting were thus often framed in ways that *molao* deemed acceptable, although their unspoken subtext communicated a very different message.

While the pervasiveness of *molao* demands that everyday speech conforms to its dictates, Basarwa are also vocal in decrying its consequences. 'Molao is killing us', I was told several times, in reference to both the physical hunger caused by legal restrictions on hunting, as well as the challenge *molao* makes to a construction of Sesarwa culture in which wildlife is a key marker:

We lived off the veld, our parents getting food from plants, and killing animals with spears and arrows. We learnt to use these, but they serve no purpose because we are not allowed to hunt. *Molao* [law] has killed us Basarwa. (*Mathias, Khwai*)

Moses was especially vocal about *molao* – not only the consequences of its manifestation in the law, but also its power of incorporation, as some of the younger generation appeared to adopt its values:

It is *molao* that is killing *Bosarwa* ['Bushmaness'], that is where it is heading. Once government says something, it is a decision, and you cannot change it. We are powerless in the face of government. If something is done by a vote and you are a minority, what can you do? The young people outnumber us, and they don't want animals to be put aside for *tlholego* [heritage]. Our lives will be changed and we will be living in towns wearing suits. They want *sekgoa* [ways of white people] to come in. They want to be part *Lekgoa* [white person], part Motswana, but nothing Basarwa. Like in America, there are Basarwa [first people] who have lost their culture. In the end, Basarwa will be doing what you are doing: going to other countries and asking about their culture [because they will no longer have any of their own].

Government says that people must keep their culture, but they are not saying that to Basarwa. Motswana has livestock, shops, and farms. Whites have factories. Mosarwa has wildlife, but the government says these are not ours, and belong to all Batswana. That makes me give up on my *Bosarwa*. The government should give us our areas to govern, and they can make sure we do it well – and we will, because that is what we have always done. They have finished the wildlife in their land, leaving only names to show there was once wildlife there, because they wanted cattle. We are supposed to *rua* [look after/own] the animals, but they are not ours. All those other people want to get rich from wildlife as well, and as they have finished theirs, they

want ours now. They are already rich, but still want our wildlife.

If we go and sell our wildlife to whites, we have killed our own culture, but if we are a minority, what can we do? *Bosarwa* will die. Whites and Batswana will keep getting money from our wildlife, but we are losing our culture, because they want these animals. We will also lose our culture because some of us despise it, and want nothing to do with the bush.

We want to govern this area ourselves. It means nothing to a Motawana if these animals die, they still live on their cattle. They put fences to preserve their animals. They eat in our area, but we do not eat in theirs.

Moses asserts Basarwa culture as one primarily based on wildlife, the sense of dispossession from which has heightened its salience as a marker of Sesarwa 'tradition'. As *molao* defines such use of wildlife as illegal, by implication Basarwa culture becomes illegal and illegitimate. Moses' response is an impassioned defence of what he defines as Basarwa culture. The passion behind his words, and those of many others, speak against the instrumentalism of observers such as Wilmsen, who present such primordialist claims as '*nothing more* than claims to ownership of the past and rights to use it for present purposes' [1996: 3, emphasis mine]. This passion indicates an affective attachment to these markers, and an affinity that goes beyond mere instrumentalism.

A parallel response to Moses' defense of Sesarwa 'culture' is to invoke a Sesarwa *molao* as a counter to official *molao*. Moitshoki, a younger man from Khwai, spoke of the government's *molao* as restrictive, but their own as giving them the freedom to hunt:

The difference between our *molao* and the government's is that our *molao* allowed us to chase animals and kill them, that is how we used to do it. We also dug traps and used snares, bows and *gondo* [long hook for catching springhares]. We didn't use guns. We used medicine made from urine, mixed with herbs, to give endurance and success in hunting. The way we killed did not cause the animals to flee. Today they run away because of guns. Guns are not bad in themselves, and they were given to us by the government. ...³⁾ The government has taken our land, we are left with nothing with which to support ourselves. The mistake was not bringing guns, but taking away our food.

Although set in opposition to a dominant *molao*, Moitshoki's conception of a Sesarwa *molao* is not one that precludes options such as hunting with guns. As such, he also challenges the dichotomy that, as 'people of the bush', they do not have the rights to goods and services that other people have, and furthermore, that access to such goods necessarily undermines their stewardship of the environment.

Many Basarwa see the Community Based Natural Resource Management Programme as providing an opportunity to turn the tables and assert *molao*

themselves over tourism operators in their area. Forming a legally registered Community Trust requires a constitution, referred to in Setswana as *molao motheo* (*molao* – law, *motheo* – plan). For the first time, they had an opportunity to assert a *molao* of their own in *written* form, thus reflecting the power of the written *molao* (constitution) of Botswana. With the promise of assistance from an external advisor (funded by an NGO), Khwai rejected the standard pro forma constitution provided by the Technical Committee, and took the opportunity to make their own *molao motheo*. In an early workshop to discuss their constitution, in March 1996, they decided to declare in it that Khwai is a Basarwa area, and non-Basarwa will not be allowed to partake in the benefits of their Community Trust unless by marriage. This clause was nonetheless rejected by the Technical Committee as discriminatory when their constitution was submitted in 1998, and led to a deadlock, with Khwai unable to register their Trust. This deadlock lasted until 2000, when Khwai withdrew the clause so as to register their Trust.

THE COMPLEX FACES OF HEGEMONY

Representations by Basarwa of their identity as different from others around them are linked to attempts to assert autonomy and a sense of control over themselves and their environment. However, these representations are just that; representations of clear-cut dichotomies that represent a world that is in reality a lot more ambiguous than they suggest. Ambiguity arises not just from the diversity of everyday practice, but as a product of the interplay between dominant and subordinate. It is in this relationship of differential power that attempts are made by the dominant to characterise, define and make subjects of the subordinate, and expressions of identity are in part a means of resisting these efforts, and asserting autonomy from them. In this symbolic struggle – in which material resources are nonetheless at stake – the meanings associated with ethnicity and identity change as they are asserted, adopted, challenged or rescripted. Resistance is ‘an experience that constructs and reconstructs the identity of subjects’ [Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 19], and as such it changes people, defining the way they are subject to others, and how they come to be tied to their own identities [cf. Ortner 1995: 187]. At the same time, self-definition by Basarwa untidies and distorts the larger identity space in which they live, and which those in power attempt to fashion.

Although the concept of ‘hegemony’ was proposed by Gramsci to understand how forms of power encourage consent, it is equally useful in understanding struggle. Roseberry [1996:80] argues that the concept of the naturalising power of hegemony is helpful in illuminating:

the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organisations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. What hegemony constructs, then,

is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting on social orders characterised by domination.

Hegemonic forms of control attempt to render identity problematic by turning unconscious, unreflexive acts into problematic, conscious and conspicuous ones [cf. Morris 1989: 150-6]. Hunting and gathering therefore become not just neutral means of procuring subsistence needs, but activities loaded with symbolism. Patterns of living that are attached to a notion of 'Sesarwa culture' – precisely because they are different from those of dominant society – become sites of contestation between those that practice them and the state. While the hegemony of the state attempts to control and even eradicate them, they become key cultural markers for Basarwa, and symbols with which to *challenge* Setswana hegemony.

In speaking of their own identity, therefore, subaltern people often do not escape hegemonic frames of reference. In other words, they use the definitions of them that are propounded by the dominant. The label *Mosarwa* (or *Masarwa*)⁴ itself is an immediate example of this. Despite being a Setswana term, it is now commonly used as a term of self-designation by Basarwa in Botswana, in places to the exclusion of previous terms of self-appellation. Describing themselves as 'people of the bush', or 'people of poverty' also mirrors dominant representations of Basarwa in the same terms. However, these markers and symbols are reworked in new ways [cf. Comaroff 1985]: being people of the bush is a *positive*, rather than a derogatory assertion; and being characterised by poverty is turned into an accusation at the policies and laws that make them poor.

Responses to Setswana hegemony are a complex mix of what could be classified as resistance, accommodation and complicity. Much of what Sesarwa culture symbolises is directly contrary to dominant values and conceptions of what 'development' or 'progress' should entail. Basarwa therefore assert some aspects of what they have come to define as their culture, but bury others.

Resistance to dominant norms and laws may at times be overtly expressed. For example, Kanjiye's proclamation to a Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) official as she walked off into the bush one morning, ostensibly to dig *tswii* (water lily roots): 'I am a Mosarwa and this land is mine, I will take what I want from it'. On another occasion, Jewe, Khwai's champion springhare hunter, shouted as he walked out of the village with his hunting gear, '*O a tlola*' ('You have no right to tell me that'), to the game guard who told him, 'You are not allowed to hunt, Jewe'. Yet, such bold statements in the face of authority are made with care. In neither case was there (yet) physical evidence of a misdemeanour, and both assertions were made with a smile to people they knew. As Scott [1985] observed, subaltern challenges to authority are rarely overt and explicit, but are instead conducted on the 'backstage' of village life.

In public and power-laden arenas, which is most often in the *kgotla* with visiting officials, sentiments are generally expressed that outline a grievance, but

stop short of challenging – and often actually affirm – the structures of authority that gave rise to the grievance in the first place. For example, Amos, an elder from Khwai, asked DWNP officials in a meeting about their wildlife quota: ‘If our animals are cancelled, as *you, the owners of the animals* say, then how will we live? They are our lives’. Roles affirming the status quo are played out in these settings, such as Mma Lebonang approaching the open microphone on her knees in a meeting with their MP, and the several people who prefaced their comments to him by: ‘I am only a Mosarwa, so forgive me if I do not express myself well ...’. In such circumstances, power is addressed and recognised even as it is protested against; a recognition that protest must adopt the forms and languages of domination in order to be heard [cf. Roseberry 1996: 81]. At other times, the usual metaphors were inverted in the face of authority, such as in the way Smit – a regular hunter from Mababe – defended himself to DWNP officials who accused him of poaching ivory: ‘I am a cow, and know nothing of the bush. I get lost when I go there’.

In some cases, complicity with the dominant values is seen as the best means of avoiding the stigma associated with being Mosarwa. In 1933, for example, a colonial commission reported that Basarwa who were settling down to cultivate and raise stock, were ‘anxious to pay taxes, because the act establishes their position as men and not as animals’ [Pim 1933: 115]. In a similar example, Wily [1976: 7] reported that Basarwa at Bere were pleased that fees were introduced once their privately-initiated school was taken over by Ghanzi District Council, saying, ‘Now we are seen as citizens’. Sometimes rhetoric reflecting dominant values is reproduced by Basarwa, especially by those that have been through school. Mma Kereleng’s 32 year old daughter, Kereleng, who lives in Maun, explained, for example: ‘The Council told us the way we are living is not good, and we should go to school to learn life’. Having taken their advice, she gave her view of Basarwa ethnicity:

The only difference between me and other Batswana is my language, otherwise I am like any other Motswana. I do not have the *tlhaloganyo* [mindset] of a Mosarwa. The time of living in a Sesarwa manner has passed. If you use Sesarwa *tlhaloganyo*, you will be at the bottom, or else you can think like anyone else and be the same. Our *tlhaloganyo* was inferior. If we were well fed we were okay, we did not plan or think of the next day [Jewe, the daily springhare hunter, drinking nearby, agrees]. I have learnt from life in Maun. There you use money. Here, you wake up, dig *tswii*, then come and sell it. I see no progress from living in Khwai.

Kereleng’s comments on the ‘inferiority’ of a Mosarwa mindset echo similar comments that Basarwa often make about the ‘old ways’ of thinking, that appear to parody perjorative dominant representations of Basarwa ethnicity. ‘We Bushmen are still the same; our brains still work in the old ways’, a Nharo informant told



Photo 1. Mma Kanjiye and her daughters

Guenther [1989: 68], for example, after recounting their loss of livestock and crops in the creation myth. This is evident too in the degree of mistrust and suspicion with which the few families that do continue to live primarily by hunting and gathering are regarded. As with general representations of Basarwa by Batswana, their closer association with nature gives them an element of unpredictability. One such family is Mma Kanjiye and her daughters in Khwai (Photo 1). Soon after arriving in Khwai, I was warned that I should be wary of her, as she was able to ride people like a witch (*moloji*). Towards the end of my fieldwork, I spent ten days walking from Khwai to Gudigwa with her and her family. It was not until afterwards that I found out about the concern this had created among some people in Khwai, that she would kill me and use my body parts for medicine. A similar attitude prevailed with Nyamanyama and his family in Gudigwa (Photo 2). He was one of the most recent arrivals in Gudigwa, although during my fieldwork the following year he was in prison beginning a three-year sentence for illegal possession of a rifle he used for hunting. Apart from being a regular hunter, he was also a healer.⁵⁾ Nyamanyama, his nickname by which everyone knew him, means *ledimo* – a mythical half human, half supernatural giant. His ‘deep’ ethnicity provoked mistrust among his neighbours and kin, and stories were exaggerated about his supernatural attributes that emphasised his liminality. The same mistrust is shared of non Khwe-speaking Basarwa elsewhere. Derisively called *badimpanyana* (the little people with big bellies), stereotypes abound, such as Mma Kgosi’s comment of !Xõ (none of whom live in the area around Mababe): ‘They kill you if you pass them and do not offer them tobacco’.

Although interpretations by Basarwa of their own ethnicity often appear to be



Photo 2. Kokoro, Nyamanyama's widow, in Gudigwa

influenced by the representations of the dominant, pragmatic reasons were generally given for doing so. The key marker of hunting and gathering, for example, is a practice few stated they would want to live primarily by, even if given the opportunity. Nonetheless, this attitude is not simply an imitation of dominant derisory attitudes to this mode of subsistence. The reality of hunger, as well as the ravages of predators and diseases such as sleeping sickness and malaria, was commented upon by Basarwa and confirmed by early travellers: 'Hunger is the main cause of the dying out of this ancient race' concluded Passarge [1997: 134], for example, from his journeys through the Kalahari at the end of the nineteenth century. Hunger was not always prevalent, as seen in Livingstone's comment on Basarwa in the Mababe area as 'fine, well-made men' with the abundance of game and wild fruit [1857: 149]. Nonetheless, periodic lean times were inevitable in such a highly variable environment. In the absence of any formal statistics, anecdotal evidence suggests that life expectancy was comparatively short. Many elderly people, for instance, report that they were still children when their parents died.

That most Basarwa are physically more similar to their Bantu-speaking neighbours than the common stereotype of what Basarwa should look like, means that their identity is not necessarily embodied. They can choose whether to present themselves as Basarwa or not in contexts where their background is unknown. This flexibility is valued, and factors such as Sesarwa names, that could reveal identity, are generally avoided. Although most people have a Bugakhwedam or Ts'exadam name or nickname, younger people almost invariably use a non-Sesarwa name on official documents. One young man in Gudigwa, for example, found himself the

butt of his friends' jokes for making the irreversible 'mistake' of using his Bugakhwedam name on his school certificates and National Registration card. As is well documented, the boundaries between 'hunter-gatherers' and their neighbours are more fluid than is often supposed [Woodburn 1997: 348]. Some Basarwa, especially those that have succeeded in formal sector employment, live in Maun, have partners from elsewhere, and speak Setswana to their children, such as Kereleng who works as a chef in a lodge, Galebone, a professional guide, Omphile a primary school teacher, Baeti, a game guard (Photo 3), and Kebuseditswe, a Council driver (Photo 4). Although such people may hardly emphasise a Basarwa identity in most contexts, they generally retain close links to Khwai, Mababe or Gudigwa, to which they pay regular visits.

In a sense, Moses embodied the complexities – or what would superficially appear as contradictions – of attitudes to Basarwa ethnicity. He was a regular hunter and defender of an essential Basarwa 'culture', but in other areas very much a conformist. Critical of the generation below him adopting dominant values, yet careful to avoid activities associated with the 'wilder' side of Sesarwa ethnicity: hunting trips that last longer than a day (unless for remuneration); climbing trees to find honey; or healing dances. He firmly stuck to the English name given him when he began work as a young man for Khwai River Lodge, rather than ||Xanitsho, the name he was given at birth. He was also explicitly sceptical of the value of drawing too deeply on practices associated with Sesarwa ethnicity:

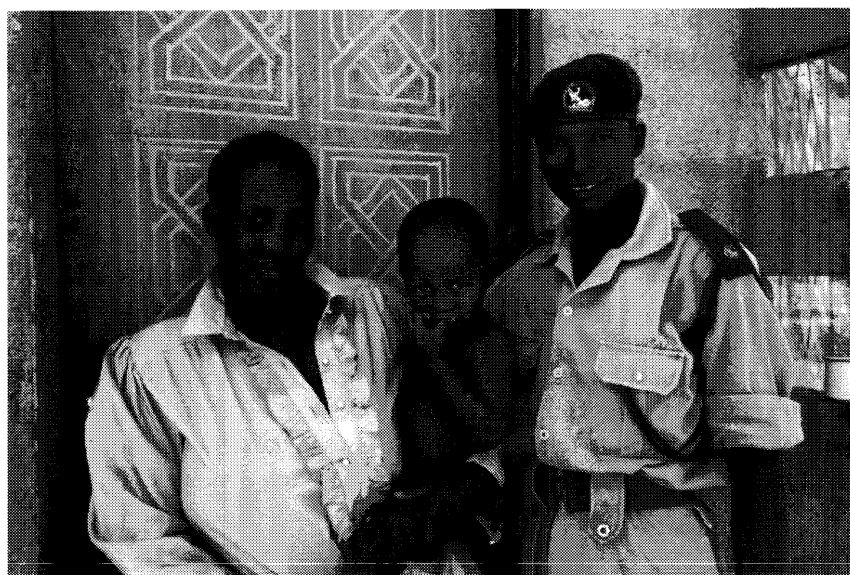


Photo 3. Baeti (from Khwai) with his family at his house in Maun



Photo 4. Kebuseditswe (from Khwai) at his house in Maun

Mma Kanjiye's is the last family to live like Basarwa. They put *Bosarwa* ['Bushmanness'] forward as a goal, which is not right, because it is a hard life. They have taken their kids out of school so that they can be together. But what future do those children have?

As with others who have experienced the dehumanising effects of colonialism, Moses and other Basarwa in the northern sandveld have to differing degrees appropriated both the power of colonialism and an objectified version of their own 'tradition', welding them into a transcendent synthesis [Comaroff 1985: 12]. Escobar [1995: 220] refers to this as 'hybridity'. Despite its biological connotations, it is not meant to imply the mixing of pure strands of tradition and modernity, but a shifting simultaneously backward (in their own terms) into cultural heritage and one's social group, and forward, cutting across social boundaries into progressive elements of other social formations. Through this process, the apparent contradictions are transformed and brought together in a unitary social structure. Integrating some of the institutional forms, symbols and techniques by which the dominant society defines its relationships to Basarwa thus allows Basarwa in some measure to control them on their own terms, and for their own benefit.

CONCLUSION

Coping with the stigma that so much of the society in which they operate places on the essential markers of Basarwa ethnicity poses a challenge to Basarwa. The challenge is an especially difficult one, as so many of the markers of Basarwa culture are interpreted by dominant society as not only backward and antithetical to progress and 'development', but illegal. Yet, the cultural struggle to be regarded as human has to be largely conducted *within* the idioms of dominant society [cf. Morris 1989: 121]. In practice this means that Basarwa in the northern sandveld have accommodated to, and resisted, dominant values to different degrees. People of different circumstances have developed differing *bricolages* of overlapping values, a hybridity that implies not just a creolisation along frontiers, but an ongoing process in which both dominant and subaltern have been transformed by the 'long conversation between them' [Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 59]. Rather than being the broken beings described by Brody [1999: 45] of 'indigenous people' who have 'lost' their traditions,⁶ this *bricolage* contributes to an identity that, despite being born from difficulty and contradiction, can be relatively comfortably worn by most of its bearers.

Despite the complexities of how Basarwa have articulated with Setswana hegemony, narratives of identity often present a clear dichotomy between Basarwa and their Bantu-speaking neighbours. These dichotomies operate within the idioms of dominant society by reproducing representations of Basarwa as people of the bush and as people of poverty. At the same time, however, they challenge hegemonic representations by inverting their premises: their poverty not as a result of the inferiority of their culture, but because of oppression, discrimination and neglect; being people of the bush means not that they are wild and beyond sociality, but that they have rights to land and other natural resources. Metaphors of dominant culture are also used to translate the rights they imply to activities such as hunting and gathering. Expressions of identity are thus a logical form for Basarwa of contesting the regimes of authority that attempt to shape their lives, by contesting the wider webs of meaning that underpin the root causes of their material dispossession.

This analysis highlights the need for questions of power and inequality to be placed at the centre of studies with Basarwa. I have attempted to demonstrate how the salience of the label 'Mosarwa' lies not as much in a certain set of cultural patterns, as in a means by which both domination and local struggles for resources, rights and dignity have been ciphered. 'Basarwa' is thus a unifying label because it implies a common structural position in the socio-political economy of Botswana. This moves our focus, alongside wider moves in the discipline of anthropology, away from prior attempts to delineate who 'the Basarwa' (or 'the Bugakhwe', or 'the Ts'exa', etc.) are. Escaping the artificiality of bounded holism involves a focus on the dynamic nature of socio-political systems in which people continually affirm, rework and challenge the patterns by which they live their lives, and the

meanings attached to these patterns. Basarwa have been more prone than most people to be classed as, to use Clifford's phrase, 'endangered authenticities' [1988], a view that is as disempowering as it is fallacious.

Most of the younger generation of Basarwa in the northern sandveld today speak Setswana better than they do Bugakhwedam or Ts'exadam. Some are fluent in English, and, through their work with tourists, are able to exchange pleasantries in Italian, German or French. Most households have a second home in Maun, the district capital, where they are integrated into wide social networks. Radios are ubiquitous, and with them comes a familiarity with national and global events and processes. Most Basarwa hunt and gather at times, but for few is this a primary source of subsistence. A great variety of social and political currents and crosscurrents exist among those encapsulated by the label *Mosarwa*, a diversity that defies singular descriptions. Nonetheless, commonalities exist: a shared heritage of hunting and gathering; pervasive poverty; and the profoundly political nature of the shared label *Mosarwa*. Although what is implied by this label is continually being reaffirmed, challenged and altered, it remains important to those that carry it, and Basarwa today in the northern sandveld generally consider themselves no less *Basarwa* (or any of its equivalent labels) than their ancestors were.

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NOTES

- 1) *Sekgoa* is a Setswana word that is used to refer to the English language or the ways of white people.
- 2) This contemporary explanation probably does not, however, reflect the origin of the name *Xukhwe*. Köhler [1989: 183] was told several decades earlier by Kxoe in the Caprivi Strip (who also call themselves *Xukhwe*) that this was the name given to them by ||Anikhwe in the distant past. His informants maintained that ||Anikhwe and Bugakhwe were the same people, until the ||Anikhwe went to live along the Okavango River, leaving Bugakhwe in the bush, thus naming them *Xukhwe*: 'the people who are left behind'. Nonetheless, the current explanation in the northern sandveld reflects the ways in which narratives of identity are moulded by contemporary circumstances. Its current use to refer to all Basarwa (adopted by Ts'exa as well) also reflects the widening of a pan-Basarwa identity in Botswana.
- 3) In the 1970s, the government confiscated muzzle-loaders and Martini-Henry's from their owners, many of which were over one hundred years old, and were considered dangerous. It compensated owners with shotguns or rifles.
- 4) The prefix *ma-* is used in Setswana of foreigners (such as *Makgoa* – white people), and as the prefix for class six nouns. Although 'Masarwa' is still often used in general discourse (by both Basarwa and non-Basarwa), official policy is to use the more politically correct 'Basarwa'.

- 5) Nyamanyama died in prison at the end of 1999, probably of an AIDS-related illness, which was most likely contracted from contact with blood in healing practices.
- 6) 'The anger of tribal people is intense, but often directed inward. And they fall into a deep silence ... They ... have absorbed the lessons of their oppressors: indigenous customs, history and ways of speech are matters of shame. ... Shame and grief, accumulated from generation to generation, can tie the tongue tight' Brody [1999: 45].

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