

Slavery prejudice still applied to tribal peoples

The arguments that were used to defend the transatlantic slave trade bear a striking similarity to those used today by people who seek to justify the dispossession of contemporary tribal peoples like the Kalahari Bushmen.

In 2002, the Gana and Gwi Bushmen were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands inside the Central Kalahari Game Reserve and forced into resettlement camps by the Botswana government. The rhetoric used by the government to justify the eviction echoes that used by those who sought to defend and perpetuate the slave trade over 200 years ago.

It will bring them progress

Like the advocates of slavery, Botswana's leaders completely dismiss the societies they refer to, and assume they are static and 'stuck' in an anachronistic state.

Defenders of the slave trade in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries claimed that the Africans whom the trade exploited were fundamentally inferior to white people, or even of a different species; that they were backward and incapable of 'progress'; and that slavery was beneficial to them and would help to 'civilise' them. White people, it was argued, were bound by duty to 'elevate' the status of Africans by enslaving them.

'In general they [Africans] are void of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science,' wrote pro-slaver Edward Long in 1774.¹

Another pro-slaver, Michael Renwick Sergeant, wrote in 1788 that Africans were, 'indolent and little inclined to labour or industry and almost in want of every convenience of life, but what indulgent nature of her own accord supplies them with, and at the same time being subject to such an increase of population, that it is impossible for the uncultivated soil to maintain them.'²

Similarly, Botswana's minister for local government, lands and housing, Margaret Nasha, said at the time of the evictions, 'Who amongst us is living a life that he led over 100 years ago? We have all lived like hunter-gatherers in Europe and Africa a hundred years ago but we are no longer doing that.'³ Eric Molale, permanent secretary in the same ministry, told the BBC that the Bushmen's 'attempt to perpetuate a nomadic prehistoric way of living' was 'outrageous'.⁴

Even the president of Botswana himself said, 'How can you have a Stone Age creature continue to exist in the age of computers? If the Bushmen want to survive, they must change or otherwise, like the dodo, they will perish.'⁵

¹ Long, Edward: 'The History of Jamaica' Vol II, T.Lowndres: London, 1774, p353

² Sergeant, Michael Renwick, 'An address to the inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland, relating to a few of the consequences which must naturally result from the abolition of the slave trade', Liverpool 1788

³ Quoted in Mmegi Monitor newspaper, 19-25 February 2002

⁴ BBC News website, 23 February 2002

⁵ The Star newspaper (South Africa), 19 June 1997

It will civilise them

Echoing the pro-slavers, Botswana's leaders are explicit in their assertion that they have a duty to 'elevate' and 'civilise' the Bushmen.

The Acting Committee of West India Planters and Merchants wrote in 1833, '[Slavery] is not only of vital importance to the interests of the Mother Country, but indispensably necessary to the desired object of raising the Negro in the scale of society.' Its abolition would, they believed, 'throw the Black Population back into a state of barbarism'.⁶

Another pro-slavery tract from 1792 argues, 'If we do not make use of these great blessings of enlightened reason, which our creator has bestowed upon us, and communicate knowledge to the sequestered part of mankind, are we not acting like the unworthy servant, that wrapt the talent his master gave him in a napkin, and buried it in the ground? Then how can we employ it better than in bringing Pagans into a land of plenty, and mixing them with Christians, where their lives are secure?'⁷

In a similar vein, Botswana's Foreign Minister Lt Gen Mompoti S. Merafhe said in 2001, 'Our treatment of the Basarwa [Bushmen] dictates that they should be elevated from a status where they find themselves. We all came from there. We became civilised and drive expensive vehicles. They should be empowered to join the mainstream.... We have a responsibility to provide leadership on how they [Bushmen] should develop ... it would be grossly irresponsible if we didn't expose them to modern day culture. There are better ways of life which can provide them with facilities which would elevate them to another state.'⁸

Development is making us extinct

For slaves transported to the Americas, this process of 'elevation' meant the loss of their freedom, their land, their families, their cultures, and often very quickly, their lives. Similarly, the eviction of the Bushmen from their land has meant the loss of their land, their means of subsistence, their independence, their culture and often their health.

The Bushmen in the government resettlement camps are well aware of the irony of government claims that the evictions were intended to 'develop' them. One Bushman in New Xade camp told Survival in 2003, 'The government is trying to develop us but the way of bringing developments to us is making us become extinct.'

Death rates have risen significantly among the evicted Bushmen. A twenty-nine year-old Bushman woman told Survival shortly before she died of AIDS in 2006, 'I am sick now, I am about to die... We were the first people from Molapo [in the Kalahari] to be evicted. Here in New Xade there are different kinds of diseases that we do not recognise... When you get sick, you die.'

⁶ Acting Committee of West India Planters and Merchants, letter to Earl Grey, 25 February 1833

⁷ Fugitive thoughts on the African slave trade, interspersed with cursory remarks on the manners, customs and commerce of African and American Indians, 1792, anon.

⁸ Meeting with Survival, 2001

Bushman Lesolobe Mogetse, evicted in 2002, told Survival, 'Each morning we get up and we just sit around because there is nothing for us to do. We really feel sad. We think right now that our ancestors are angry with us. That's why you see that in New Xade [resettlement camp] the death rate is very high.'

Two hundred and thirty-nine Bushmen initially put their names to the court case filed in 2002 to have the evictions declared illegal. A further 135 Bushmen asked to join the case during 2006, and many more have publicly stated their desire to return home. Botswana's High Court upheld their claims, and on 13 December 2006, declared the evictions 'unlawful and unconstitutional'.

The transatlantic slave trade is almost universally seen today as 'one of the ugliest chapters in world history':⁹ a profoundly racist practice which denied its victims their most basic human rights and tore them forever from their homes and families. Like the transatlantic slave trade, it seems certain that the eviction of the Bushmen will be viewed by history as a racist and destructive endeavour, and a severe violation of their human rights.

See the table below for examples of quotes about the slave trade and the eviction of the Bushmen

⁹ Anti Slavery International , 22 August 2007, < <http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/sitemap.shtml> >

Quotes on the slave trade and the eviction of the Bushmen

<p>The slave trade benefited and helped civilise Africans Edward Long, History of Jamaica, 1774</p>	<p>Our treatment of the Basarwa [Bushmen] dictates that they should be elevated from a status where they find themselves. We all came from there. We became civilised and drive expensive vehicles. They should be empowered to join the mainstream. Lt Gen Mompoti S. Merafhe, Botswana Foreign Minister, meeting with Survival, 29 July 2001</p>
<p>I am morally certain, that this bill for the abolition of slavery will be remembered only as entailing misery on the slave... H P Simmons, pamphlet entitled Third Letter to the Right Hon. Earl Grey, First Lord of the Treasury, on the question of Negro emancipation, 1834</p>	<p>I take the view that it [relocations] has been in the best interests of many of the Bushmen. Lord St John of Bletso, British House of Lords, 13 March 2006</p>
<p>[Slavery] is not only of vital importance to the interests of the Mother Country, but indispensably necessary to the desired object of raising the Negro in the scale of society. Acting Committee of West India Planters and Merchants, letter to Earl Grey by 25 February 1833</p>	<p>We have a responsibility to provide leadership on how they [Bushmen] should develop ... it would be grossly irresponsible if we didn't expose them to modern day culture. There are better ways of life which can provide them with facilities which would elevate them to another state. Lt Gen Mompoti S. Merafhe, Botswana Foreign Minister, 29 July 2001</p>
<p>I have no doubt but that the situation of the West Indian slaves is preferable to that of the labouring poor in Europe. James Tobin, Cursory Remarks Upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the Sugar Colonies, 1785.</p>	<p>The government has been pretty generous. Nigel Jones MP, BBC, June 2004</p>
<p>When we reflect on the nature of these men, and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude, that they are a different species same genus? Edward Long, History of Jamaica, 1774</p>	<p>In the case of the Bushmen, I chose to call it [their culture] Stone Age. A more accurate description would have been Mesolithic, middle Stone Age or hunter gatherer. Why this perfectly acceptable, biological, evolutionary description should cause offence I do not know... Baroness Tonge, letter to the Guardian, 24th March 2006</p>

<p>An owner here has absolute dominion over his slave, their bodies, life, and goods, as the Kings have over those of their vassals. He may kill or sell his slaves and their children at pleasure.</p> <p>Edward Long, History of Jamaica, 1774</p>	<p>Botswana owns the Basarwa and it will own the Basarwa until it ceases to be a country. They will never be allowed to walk around in skins again.'</p> <p>Botswana Assistant Minister of Local Government, Lands and Housing, 1992</p>
<p>In general they [Africans] are void of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science.</p> <p>Edward Long, History of Jamaica, 1774</p>	<p>How can you have a Stone Age creature continue to exist in the age of computers? If the Bushmen want to survive, they must change or otherwise, like the dodo, they will perish.</p> <p>Festus Mogae, President of Botswana, 1996</p>

We help tribal peoples defend
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