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Memory as Claim-making in Kalahari Socio-environments

The San people of the Kalahari are the indigenous inhabitants of Botswana. Beginning in the 1990s, in response to both domestic politics and the burgeoning transnational indigenous peoples movement, many San began to explicitly organize themselves along these lines. While articulating themselves as the “first people,” they remain significantly marginalized in terms of national political representation and are generally absent from policymaking circles. Inhabiting a rural region with large wildlife populations and substantial protected areas, this exclusion often plays out in relation to environmental and conservation policy. Informed by 12 months of qualitative fieldwork, this paper examines the use of memory as a form of claim-making among Botswana’s San people, a tactic by which they contest their marginal position with regard to environmental policymaking and within the Botswana state, writ large. The community’s collective invocation of generations of environmental stewardship is deployed as a means of opposing state conservation policies, including the hunting ban and forced removals from wildlife areas. By using histories of sustainable resource use, they articulate their belief that the local environment is not threatened by their presence, but rather protected through generations of human-environment interactions. San respondents argue that their communities are holders of knowledge that is both legitimate and valuable to the effective management of the nation’s resources.

San Environmental Concerns in Western Botswana

Botswana’s national census does not collect data on ethnicity, making exact figures hard to come by, but estimates suggest the San make up about three percent of the total population of Botswana, somewhere around fifty thousand people.¹ However, they are thought to account for somewhere between 40 to 50 percent of the population in one of Botswana’s westernmost regions, Ghanzi District. This district is noteworthy because

1 Robert Hitchcock, Maria Sapignoli, and Wayne Babchuk, “What About Our Rights? Settlements, Subsistence, and Livelihood Security among Central Kalahari San and Bakgalagadi,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 1 (2001): 62–88.

67 percent of its land is zoned for wildlife, including the single largest reserve in the country, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, or CKGR.²

There are two broad types of environmental and conservation policies that are points of contestation between San communities in western Botswana and the central state. The first are the restrictions placed on wildlife products such as ostrich eggshells (used in traditional beading), gathered food products, and most recently, the national hunting ban prohibiting all consumption of wildlife for either subsistence or commercial purposes. The second environmental policy that causes deep friction between San people and the Botswana state is that of forced removals from areas demarcated as conservation zones, the most notable of which is the series of evictions from the CKGR. Both of these suites of policies have elicited broad and sustained critiques from San communities, which tend to contest this kind of environmental decision making as discriminatory and ahistorical. A prime mechanism by which these groups articulate their perceived rights to land and natural resources is through the deployment of collective historical memory, and the invocation of their community's historical stewardship of the environment.

Memory and Resource-Use Restrictions

In recent years the Botswana state has instituted a series of restrictions with regard to the use of wild plants and animals, often in the name of conservation. Members of the San community, while currently settled in villages and employing a wide variety of livelihood strategies, have a history of hunting and gathering. The use of wildlife products has remained an important source of subsistence, as well as retaining cultural significance, well into the twenty-first century. In light of this, as resource-use rights have been hemmed in over the last 20 years, San peoples have contested these shifts in environmental policy by deploying memories of sustainable resource use as evidence of their community's good stewardship. A man in a resettlement village in Ghanzi District stated:

2 Chasca Twyman, "Rethinking Community Resource Management: Managing Resources or Managing People in Western Botswana?" *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1998): 745–70.

Historically, and naturally so, we the Basarwa [San] have been living off wild animals but they have not been wiped away. Look, our forefathers having [sic] been consuming these animals but we our generation has found them and so will future generations even if hunting was to continue.³

The man's claim argues that his community is a unique wellspring of deeply held knowledge that is vital for the enactment of conservation policy. Similarly, as a well-known San activist implored, "Go and talk about an eland and see who knows more? An old woman or a biologist."⁴ By appealing to memories of local history and knowledge, this discourse attempts to weaken the state's unequivocal claim over the authority to enact restrictive conservation policies. By directly comparing an old woman to a biologist, the activist is repudiating the dominance of "scientific fact" in conservation policy and making a claim to authority based not on education or technical expertise, but rather one rooted in a historical and contemporary proximity to wildlife, cultural regard for the environment, and the community's history as knowledgeable stewards of the ecosystem.

Beyond simply asserting that contemporary coexistence with wildlife indicates a historical stewardship of conservation areas, respondents used memories about the past distribution of wildlife across the country to discredit the environmental decision-making authority of the state. An exchange with an older man from the village of New Xade is illuminating in this regard:

Interviewee: When I was a young man, before we were removed from Central [the CKGR], there were many animals. We didn't finish the animals, because we know better. Our fathers and grandfathers taught us how to hunt the animals and not to finish them. But then Bakwena and Bangwaketse [Tswana-speaking groups] came to the Central [CKGR] and made us their slaves and began to finish our animals.

Author: Why did Bakwena and Bangwaketse come from their lands to the CKGR?

Interviewee: Why, because they had finished all their animals! There were no animals left in their lands! The Tswana killed off their animals and then came to take ours. Now the government says the animals belong to the government and to the lekgoa [white people, meaning tourists]. But the only animals left are ours.⁵

3 Interview with local resident (XK), 28 February 2014, Qabo, Botswana.

4 Interview with San activist (JG), 4 March 2014, New Xade, Botswana.

5 Interview with local resident (XQ), 4 March 2014, New Xade, Botswana.

The deployment of these memories is an attempt to weaken the state's absolute claim over the authority to enact conservation restrictions, by appealing to a historical memory perceived as missing from mainstream discourses. These rhetorical imaginaries of resistance utilize their contemporary proximity to wildlife to argue that they, conservation-adjacent communities, are better suited to determining how resources are used than decision makers in the far-off urban capital city.⁶ By highlighting the failure of “Tswana-speaking people” (a euphemism for government decision makers) to protect and maintain their own local biodiversity, the respondent is criticizing mainstream society for their loss of wildlife—the same mainstream society now demanding restrictions in the name of conservation. This is a memory-based claim of environmental expertise. This man, like many others, suggested that the continued existence of wildlife in San-dominated areas was due to their long-term attention to conservation as a cultural norm. From this perspective, those state agents dictating national conservation policy—in their eyes, the “Tswana-speaking people”—had been derelict in their own environmental stewardship, yet now set the terms of national resource management. This is viewed by interviewees in conservation areas as not only counterintuitive but also dismissive of their memorialized good practices.

Memory and Land

The establishment of all of Botswana's protected areas required the eviction of people. The most noteworthy instance of a conservation-related removal occurred in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. The eviction took place fully under the postcolonial government and was the impetus for the longest legal battle in Botswana's history. When the CKGR was first established, its function was to provide a haven for human practices of hunting and gathering as well as for wildlife. When the reserve was officially demarcated in 1961 there were around 4,000 people living inside its borders. By the mid-1980s, the number of residents still in the CKGR was about 1,300. From 1986 to 1997, state authorities exerted indirect pressures to incentivize out-migration, such as freezing development, neglecting existing infrastructure, and hobbling service delivery mechanisms. By 1997 the government had cut off services to park dwellers, and most residents were moved to resettlement villages outside of the park. Another round

6 Interview with village kgosana (MM), 25 November 2013, Boro, Botswana.

of removals occurred in 2001, and in early 2002 borehole wells were sealed permanently, making continued residence difficult.⁷

Though a detailed analysis of the CKGR controversy is beyond the scope of this paper, the incident galvanized San communities in unexpected ways. The CKGR became a potent symbol of San territorial claims to wildlife areas, and is often the focal point of deployment of historical memories in the contestation of land ownership. San territoriality and land-tenure systems are deeply complex but nearly entirely overlooked by state institutions. This misreading of San land-use systems led to their areas being viewed as vacant and ripe for categorization as a wilderness space devoid of people. However, historically San territoriality was not limited to their place of occupation at any given moment, but included the larger swathe of land around which they seasonally migrated. Derived from this historical memory, contemporary San communities have much more expansive notions of territory than the current political cartography suggests. An extensive community-mapping program inside the CKGR illustrated San territoriality that conventional maps fail to capture. Inside the reserve, practitioners worked with former and current residents to account for the details left out of most cartographical exercises, by using both remembered personal experience as well as oral histories. One of the consultants working on the community-mapping program said:

[Residents of the CKGR] have got very complex territorial structures over vast areas. They've got hundreds of named units of land and they have very detailed knowledge of each of those areas. They [state authorities] see Molapo [a community inside CKGR] as a dot on the map, and until all this work was done the department never actually realized that, well that's just the point that the department knows and that all of the surrounding areas is very much [part of the territory].⁸

This brings to the fore the ways in which local memories of place, historical expanses of territory, and ownership patterns are often lost in technocratic exercises of delineation and boundary-crafting, especially with regard to protected areas. Through community-mapping exercises and the deployment of little-known San place names, members of this community attempt to reclaim space from which they have been evicted. These

7 Manuela Zips-Mairitsch, *Lost Lands? (Land) Rights of the San in Botswana and the Legal Concept of Indigeneity in Africa* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013).

8 Interview with conservation practitioner (AA). 8 February 2014, Maun, Botswana.

efforts to reinscribe San historical occupancy across land now zoned as “people free” are memory made material. This claim argues that the continued existence of rich biodiversity in this region is possible because of the co-presence of human communities, not despite it. The memories of movement, rotation, and seasonally-appropriate environmental knowledge articulated in mapping processes contest the unanimity with which the state lays claim to environmental knowledge.

Key Insights

This brief discussion of a complex case can provide some overarching insights into the role of memory in environmental policymaking. It urges policymakers to recognize the plurality and polyvalent nature of memory, and the potential for memory to be deployed as a mode of contestation by marginalized communities. This highlights the need to conceptualize alternative narratives and varied modes for collating a diverse historical accounting of memory, including the use of oral history and participatory community mapping.