San of the Kalahari

Living in what is now southeast Angola, northeast Namibia, and northwest Botswana, the San of the Kalahari desert are the most thoroughly studied of all the hunter-gatherers who remained foragers into the twentieth century (Peoples and Bailey 2006:109). Like other indigenous minorities in many parts of the world, the San people have been struggling with their heritage and identity in the globalized world.

Geography and Population

Suzman (see Hitchcock, Biesele, and Babchuck 2009:171) estimates that there are between 90,000 and 100,000 San across six Southern African countries. The majority are in Botswana (about 48,000) and Namibia (about 34,000), with smaller populations in Angola, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: San populations in Southern Africa (Ohenjo 2006)

Social Organization

Traditional San life is based on bands (small, mobile groups of 50 or fewer), linked by marriage and their respective families (Wiessner 1983; see Barnard 1979). A band migrates seasonally from one waterhole to another, so as not to exhaust the supplies of water and wild food (Lee 2003:40; Wiessner 1983). In the wet season, temporary waterholes are formed, and a band splits up to make use of greater resources. During the dry season, bands return to a permanent waterhole (Lee 1979:51-53, 366). The size of a band is flexible and adjusted according to food availability. San traditionally maintained an egalitarian society through sharing. Sharing the limited resources and materials within a group strengthened social bonds and contributed to survival in the harsh environment (Kent 1993:480). The concentration of power in one person or party was not tolerated and ideas of ownership did not exist (Lee 2003: 10; Kent 1995:301).

Figure 2: A San family in Kalahari Desert (South Africa's People 2007)

Fission and Fusion

San social organization is characterized by the fission (splitting into small subgroups) and fusion (joining together in a larger group). Visitors are generally welcomed, especially younger members, who have greater work and reproductive abilities (Lee 2003:63). A resource sharing network is also maintained between different camps (Kent 1993:483). Fission and fusion also function in conflict resolution. Increasing band size may lead to a higher frequency of conflict. In such cases, the feuding parties are pressured to leave (Lee 2003:64).
Reciprocity

Reciprocity amongst the San takes several different forms. San inhabiting the area around Botswana’s Botetle River have developed a system of balanced reciprocity with local the Bantu villages. San cannot own farms and are unable to benefit from the resources in the area (Cashdan 1980:16). The San do provide a cheap source of labor, and are therefore hired by the Bantu land owners. In exchange for labor, San are able to procure the goods they need (Cashdan 1980:17). Along the Nata River, resources are scarcer (Cashdan 1980:16). In order to ensure the general welfare of all groups, the San rely on generalized reciprocity (Cashdan 1980:23). The !Kung San call their system hxaro. Based on kinship ties and formal agreements, the hxaro ensures a generalized reciprocity consistently supports San society (Wiessner 1982:66). Each band has rights to specific areas of land, which it migrates around during a given season. If a particular season is bad, bands which have hxaro agreements with other bands will be able to make use of other areas of land. In kind, the band that has been helped by one group is then required to help that group when they need help (Wiessner 1982:66). Through this pattern all members of society are protected from most hardships that might emerge in a foraging society (Wiessner 1982:61).

Subsistence

Traditional Patterns

The San, historically, have been a hunter-gatherer society. Plants provided a major source of nutrition for the San people, due to the reliability with which they could be gathered (Lee 1966:98). With game being more erratic than plant life, meat was of lesser importance in the San diet, though hunting was still a major part of San life (Lee 1966:99). Despite a large variety of plants (over 200) and animals (roughly 220) present in the Kalahari, the San of the past relied chiefly on nine types of plants, and seventeen animal species (Lee 1966:100).

Current Patterns

Some groups, such as the Ju’hoansi San living in Northwestern Botswana, have continued to maintain their ancient substance practices, even through the 1990’s (Hitchcok 1996:154). Sometimes foraging is not enough to live off of, at which point San may be forced to accept government aid in villages (Sylvian 2002:1074). While there are some groups of San that continue to follow the traditional ways, many San tribes have been forced into modern forms of subsistence. In order to survive, San hire themselves out to white or Bantu villagers (Silberbauer 1978:181). Working as unskilled laborers, either farming or herding animals, San barter their services in exchange for food (Heunis 2007:Area 2).
Lifestyle

Religion

The traditional San religion is based on the worship of Superior Beings and nature. They believe in a three-level system, where spirits live in levels above and below the "Ordinary World" which ordinary people live in (Ouzman 2001:238). The major power of the San's supreme being is the control over water (Kilson 1976: 136). Religious rituals relied on dances for different reasons, including blood, death and rain. These were presided over by medicine men that would lead the dances in a deep trance (Lewis-Williams 1980:471). Despite the continuity of the Supreme Being’s role in traditional San religion, myths and stories greatly vary depending upon what group or individual tells the story (Dawson 1988:117). Today, many San do not follow the traditional religion but rather an indirect form of Christianity, due to the history of European influence on the region (Robins 2001:15-16).

Art and Culture

Historically, art has been very important to the San people, as evident by the numerous rock art drawings across Southern Africa. San have created rock art for thousands of years, the oldest being from between 19,000 and 27,000 years old (Butzer, Fock, Scott, Stuckenrath 1979:1203). The paintings commonly included people and animals in metaphorical representations of nature. Drawing of rain dances and including certain animals in different dance scenes is just one example (Deacon 1988:136). Rock Art was drawn in locations with strong religious concentration that were thought to be where the “spirit world’s immanence [would] manifest” (Ouzman 2001:238).

Contemporary Issues

Socioeconomic Status
The San today exist in the lowest socioeconomic status as agricultural workers and domestic servants at farms owned by the white and Bantu-speaking farmers (West, Igoe, Brockington 2006:259; Sylvain 2005:359). San men are generally engaged in tending cattle while San women do housework, such as cooking and laundry. Their living is described as “extreme poverty” (Sylvain 2005:359) and many San groups relocate from farm to farm in search for employment, food, and shelter. Those who are unable to work due to their age and health condition stay in resettlement camps. Some San in Botswana receive governmental support of cash and commodities, and some in Namibia obtain a pension (Hitchcock 2002:798; Sylvain 2005:359). Government services and monetary support, however, has led to the government’s on-going pressure for the San residents to leave the resettlement reserves since 1970s (Hitchcock 2002:805-807). Low payments for San farm workers stem from stereotypes among farm owners that the San are primitive and have no knowledge of family finance (Sylvain 2005:360). Stereotypes provoke more injustice and hardship for the San, such as increasing violence against San women by people outside San communities (Becker 2003:8). There is a stigma that San women are “primitive and promiscuous,” and thus they are placed at the lowest social status (Becker 2003:17; Sylvan 2004, see Ohenjo 2006).

Illiterate San often make a target of exploitation by the ruling majority. Sylvain (2005:361) describes a case where government officials such as police deceive San people with false documents and expropriate their cattle, land, and water rights.

Land Issues

The San have made some progress in returning to their native lands. In 1999, the South African government returned about 40,000 hectares (154 sq. miles) to the San peoples. The land was purchased from white farmers in the area by the government for $4 million (Barnett 1999). San living in Botsawana have not been as fortunate as those living in South Africa. From the late 1980's to 1997 the government has been removing San from their reservations and forcing them into camps in New Xade and Kaudane. In all, about 2,500 San were forced from their homes in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, despite government assurances that relocation was optional (Arenstein 2000). On 13 December 2006, Botswana’s high court ruled that the removal of the San people by the government was unconstitutional, and that the San people could return to their native home (Namibian 11 January 2007). In spite of this, when San attempted to return on 31 December 2007, they were chased away by guards (Namibian 11 January 2007). Subsequently, San and San activists have appealed to the UN Human Rights Committee for help (Namibian 25 July 2007).

Health Issues

Low health status is an on-going issue with the San. United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) intertribal research in 1996 and 1998 (Suzman 2001) exhibits the San's world-lowest Human Development Index (HDI; a combination of life expectancy at birth, education [adult literacy and school enrollment], and income). Ohenjo et al. (2006) argues that poverty contributes to reducing the San’s health status, causing serious issues such as excessive alcohol consumption, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, and a high mortality rate and short life expectancy.

Psychological studies (McDonald and Molamu: 1995; see Ohenjo et al. 2006) illustrates how alcoholism is ingrained with the “existential and physical” pains of San people who are robbed of their traditional lifestyle. Poverty plays a major role in alcohol abuse, being “the cheapest form of sustenance” to “kill the hunger” (Sylvain 2002; see Ohenjo et al. 2006). Kent (1995:298) argues that a sedentary living has caused a breakdown of familial support network, and ethnic conflicts and tension are often solved by alcohol abuse. Alcoholism serves one major cause for increasing domestic violence against women (Becker 2003:14).

Before the resettlement, the San had little exposure to HIV/AIDS (Ohenjo et al. 2006). However, San’s sedentary living in reserve camps has lead to a rising number of HIV/AIDS cases. This contributes to a higher mortality rate and a falling life expectancy in Botswana (Ohenjo et al. 2006). (See: “Population Reference Bureau in 2005”)
Identity

The San are well-known for their engagement in “global activism and local struggles” for their rights as indigenous people (Sylvain 2005:354). Hitchcock (2002:799) points out that the San’s movements are intentionally internationalized and are receiving great attention from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Ironically, however, their increasing media exposure has reinforced a stereotype of the San as “timeless and primordialists” reclaiming their ancestor’s land (Robins 2001:834). Such stereotypes not only hinder the San’s socioeconomic improvements but also threaten their cultural identity. Many NGO programs focus on the San’s ‘cultural survival’ against globalizing forces. The ‘traditional’ lifestyle is considered as means of earning income, and NGOs encourage them to engage themselves in tourism venues (Sylvain 2005:363). While the San struggle with legal and economic adjustments, they are socially and culturally separated from the rest of the society as exotic Others.

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