

The Status of the Kalahari San: Former Hunter-Gatherers in a Globalized World

The San (Bushmen) of the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa have diversified livelihoods that are undergoing significant change.

Today, the San and their neighbors face considerable challenges, ranging from poverty, dispossession and social marginalization to climate change, the impacts of globalization and the spread of coronavirus into remote places.

Numbers and distribution of San peoples – found in a variety of habitats ranging from savannas to mountains and from wetlands to deserts. They exist in 8 countries. There are over 50 named groups, each with their own languages, customs, and traditions

Table 1. Numbers of San in Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe

Country	Population Size (2018)	Size of Country (in km ²)	Numbers of San (National)
Angola	30,355,880	1,246,700	14,000
Botswana	2,249,104	581,730	64,500
Lesotho	1,962,481	30,355	450
Eswatini	1,087,200	17,364	100
Namibia	2,533,244	824,292	38,000
South Africa	55,380,210	1,219,090	7,900
Zambia	16,466,079	752,618	1,600
Zimbabwe	14,030,368	390,757	2,800
Total	124,084,566	2,676,319	ca. 130,000

A major issue for San is that some have experienced involuntary resettlement from their ancestral areas because of the establishment of protected areas, agricultural projects, roads, and mines. Some have also had to deal with the criminalization of their livelihood strategies, notably hunting and gathering. In recent years, the San have had to deal with both drought and floods, which have affected their livelihoods.

Many San seek to promote their indigenous languages and cultural heritage in the face of imposed efforts to settle and assimilate them in the countries where they reside.

The San have achieved some success in organizing themselves both locally and internationally. Notably, they have filed successful legal cases aimed at regaining their land and resource rights in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa.

The San see themselves as indigenous people, but this is not the case for the countries where they reside. Rather, these countries see them as minorities or as ‘remote area communities.’

Speakers of “click” languages, the San long predate but are significantly outnumbered by their Bantu-speaking fellow countrymen, whose origins in southern Africa are far more recent (past 2,000 years).

For archaeologists, anthropologists, and development workers, the San have served as ‘ethnographic models’ who have shed light on major issues, including the following:

- demographic transition, as San used to have the lowest population growth rates in the world
- the shift from mobility to sedentism
- the origins of agriculture and food production
- the origins and institutionalized formal leadership
- the rise of social and economic inequality
- the Paleolithic Prescription – traditional diet and health, changes in health – from low mortality to high mortality and low fertility to high fertility, increased morbidity (illness), shift from moderate to more problematic, with rise of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, tuberculosis, diabetes, and asthma, HIV/AIDS rates relatively low, coronavirus rates very low at present, but this could change; nutritional change: from generalized and diversified to specialized, with much more carbohydrates (maize meal), milk powder, cooking oil (social safety nets, SSNs); food insecurity is a major issue for many San
- common property management systems and community-based resource management, the rise of conservancies in Namibia and the rise and fall of community trusts in Botswana.
- changes in sharing and reciprocity patterns, e.g. *hxaro* (delayed reciprocity), with a shift toward more restricted social networks and sharing patterns
- the importance of art and cultural heritage – craft-making, e.g. ostrich eggshell bead production, institutionalization and commercialization of arts and crafts; the importance of crafts to women (e.g. basket-making, beadwork)
- success of some San in regaining legal access to land and resources and water, e.g. the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (KTP); legal cases are also being filed in
- the founding and expansion of San organizations, internal support and external
- the San and tourism, including safari tourism, cost-benefit analysis

- the San and intellectual and biological property rights over high-value plant products such as *Hoodia gordonii* and Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*).
- the digital divide and the expansion of wifi access among the San, including the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group in Nyae Nyae, the role of cellular telephones, computers, Geographic Positioning Systems instruments, drones
- the establishment of village schools in mother-tongue languages (the Village Schools Program), pre-schools, high school, post-secondary involvement of San children
- the coordination with the Remote Area Development Program in the Ministry of Local Government in Botswana, coordination with the Division of Marginalized Communities (MCD) in the Office of the President of the government of Namibia.
- the formation of conservancies. community forests, negotiating teams
- the issue of human-elephant conflict (HEC) which is on the increase in southern Africa
- the exploitation of indigenous knowledge systems of the San and the value of San nature valuation systems, story-telling, and oral history
- changes seen in cosmology and religion and belief systems, with an increase in involvement in Christianity and new-age churches, with a syncretic approach that includes both traditional and modern religious elements.

New Dissertations and Books on San

Babchuk, Wayne A. and Robert K. Hitchcock (eds.) (Forthcoming, 2021). *Ecotourism Impacts on Indigenous Peoples*. Lexington Books.

Barnard, Alan (2019). *Bushmen: Kalahari Hunter Gatherers and their Descendants*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laws, Megan (2019). *All things being equal: Trust, transparency, and ambivalence in a Namibian conservancy*. PhD dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Mamo, Dwayne (ed.) (2020). *The Indigenous World*. 34th Edition. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (April 2020), 784 pages.

Odendaal, Willem and Wolfgang Werner (eds.) (2020). *“Neither Here nor There“: Indigeneity, Marginalisation, and Land Rights in Post-Independence Namibia*. Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre.

Paksi, Attila (2020). *Surviving 'Development' - Rural development interventions, protected area management and formal education with the Khwe San in Bwabwata National Park, Namibia*. PhD Dissertation, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

Puckett, R. Fleming and Kazunobu Ikeya (eds.) (2018). *Research and Activism among the Kalahari San Today: Ideals, Challenges, and Debates*. Senri Ethnological Studies, 99. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, Japan (2018), 359 pages. In print and available for download from the National Museum of Ethnology Repository:
https://minpaku.repo.nii.ac.jp/index.php?action=pages_view_main&active_action=repository_view_main_item_snippet&index_id=705&pn=1&count=20&order=17&lang=english&page_id=15&block_id=22.

Suzman, James (2017). *Affluence without Abundance: The Disappearing World of the Bushmen*. New York and London: Bloomsbury USA.

Table 2. Legal Cases Involving Land and Resource Rights of San and Khoekhoe in Southern Africa

Group(s)	Locality	Country	Issue	Workers
G//ui, G//ana, Bakgalagadi (High Court case filed February 2002, case heard July 2004–Dec 2006; judgment December 13, 2006)	Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR)	Botswana	Land rights, subsistence hunting rights; Right to return to the CKGR	Gordon Bennett, Gideon Duma Boko (lawyers), George Silberbauer (anthropologist)
Hai//om San, 2015 (initial judgment August 28 2019)	Etosha National Park and Mangetti West collective action case	Namibia	Land rights	Namibia Legal Assistance Center and Legal Resources Center (South Africa)
Ju/'hoansi San, 2015	Nyae Nyae Conservancy	Namibia	Removal of illegal grazers	Legal Assistance Center, Nyae Nyae Conservancy, and Nyae Nyae Community Forest
‡Khomani San 1998	Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park	South Africa	Land rights, co-management rights	Roger Chennells (lawyer), Hugh Brody, Nigel Crawhall (anthropologists)
Khwe San, 1998	Popa Falls Prison Farm, Okavango River	Namibia	Land rights (settled out of court)	Namibia Legal Assistance Center lawyer (Peter Watson) Gertrude Boden (anthropologist)
!Kung San in Nꞑa Jaqna Conservancy	Nꞑa Jaqna Conservancy	Namibia	Removal of Fences and illegal cattle posts	Namibia Legal Assistance Center and Nꞑa Jaqna Conservancy Management Committee
Nama community, 2001 and 2003	Nama in the Richtersveld Area and Gariep River	South Africa	Co-management rights, grazing rights, gate receipts, and subsurface (mineral) rights	Legal Resources Centre and Nama people

Table 3. International, National, and Community-Based Organizations involving San and other Indigenous Groups in Southern Africa

Group(s)	Organization	Founding
All minority groups in Botswana	Reteng — the Multicultural Coalition of Botswana	2002
Naro San and other minorities in Ghanzi and North West Districts, Botswana	Kuru Family of Organizations (KFO)	1986
G/ui, G//ana and other San and Bakgalagadi	Central Kalahari Game Reserve Residents Association	2009
G/ui, G//ana, and other San and Bakgalagadi in Botswana	First People of the Kalahari (FPK)	1993
San in Botswana	Botswana Khwedom Council (BKC)	2008
San in Ngamiland, Botswana	TOCaDI (Trust for Okavango Cultural and Development Initiatives)	1998
San Youth in Botswana	SyNet	2016
San Youth in Namibia	//Ana-Jeh San Trust	2015
San in Namibia	Namibia San Council (NSC)	2012
Ju/'hoansi in Nyae, Namibia	Nyae, Namibia	1998
!Kung, !Xun, Khwe, and other San in Namibia	NꞤa Jaqna Conservancy	2003
Khwe San, Zambezi Region, Namibia	Kyaramacan Trust, Zambezi Region	2005
San, Cape Khoi, Nama, Griqua, and Korana of South Africa	National Khoi and San Council (National KhoeSan Council, NKC)	1999
San in South Africa	South African San Institute (SASI)	1996
San in South Africa	South African San Council (SASC)	1999
!Xun and Khwe San	!Xun and Khwe San Communal Property Association (CPA)	1999
San in Zimbabwe	Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust (TSDT)	2013
San in Southern Africa	Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA)	1996
San in Southern Africa	Khwa ttu: San Culture and Education Center, Yzerfontein, South Africa	2000