



breaching the gap

We arrived at the camping ground in Tsumkwe, Bushmanland, early afternoon and by the time the tents were up and the crew began winding down, we were all enjoying a cliché Kalahari sunset. In a moment of ‘camper’s silence’, over the sound of the breeze blowing through the dusk-lit pearl grass, we heard the most adorable sound; two little bushmen children playing outside their small hut just 50 yards away, their dainty caramel figures radiant with the carelessness of childhood. They became instantly aware of our attention, their senses highly perceptive of their surroundings. One of them broke the ice revealing the secret of their giggling: “Give me sweets!” he called out to our convoy. We were pleasantly surprised. “Give me cookies!” the small voice resounded making us all laugh with adoration, and the boy cheekily withdrawing behind the small hut.

For us it was a glimpse of their reality, one only the sincerity of a child could reveal, the simple acceptance of the fact that there is a gap between those who have and those who have not – those who give, and those who take.

The San Bushmen are one of the remote tribes of the world. Their history is heavy with suffering and discrimination. Even today they are marginalized and isolated from the rest of the world around them. They have no schools, yet they are expected to integrate into 21st century society. They are not permitted to farm, yet they are confined to an area where they cannot survive as hunter-gatherers. And now, in Botswana, they are forcefully evicted from their ancestral land. They are caught in a socio-economic stalemate, unable to return to their traditional lifestyle or integrate in society.

Pilgrim Relief Society founder and president Sebastian

Tirtirau has been working with the San Bushmen since 1996 installing water systems, handing out aid, providing medical services and building necessary facilities. He says the Bushmen need our help to integrate into society.

“They are telling me - whom they adopted - that they want schools, they want medical facilities, they want to move on because they know they cannot go back to the life they once had,” Tirtirau said.

Driving from one village to the next you will find a deserted school, a rusty hand pump; the tell-tale remains of philanthropic endeavors to aid the survival of this ancient people. However, the greater spectrum of history tells a different story of the San.

The Bushmen are the indigenous people of Southern Africa. Their territory once spanned most areas of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia and Angola. It is believed that several million San once inhabited this area. However, over the centuries, they were hard-pressed from the North by migrating Bantu tribes and from the South by European colonizers. Hundreds of thousands died of various European-borne diseases. The Bushmen were left to survive in one of the harshest environments on the continent, the Kalahari Desert. After European colonization, bounties were placed on their heads, they were hunted down and European museums imported and displayed dead Bushmen from the Kalahari. Prior to 1967 Bushmen were shot on site by white and black alike, the criminals lauded on the front pages of local papers. Even as late as the 1970s, some South African writers such as R.O. Pearse stated that the Bushmen were somewhere between animals and mankind. In 1961 the Botswana government established the *Central Kalahari Game Reserve* and restricted

the Bushmen to living inside the reserve. The Apartheid regime established *Bushmanland* in Namibia for the same purpose. Today there are less than 90,000 Bushmen, the majority of them living in Botswana and Namibia.

Lukas is a Ju/'Hoansi Bushman from the village of Nama Pan in Bushmanland. He lives in a grass hut and all his belongings can be contained in a small suitcase. One day a neighbor from another tribe asked him why he didn't build himself a proper mud-brick home. "It will not feed my family nor provide water for me. What use would I have for it?" Lukas said.

The San live by the principle that everything taken from nature must meet the needs and must not be more than what is required. Anything that is taken has to have a purpose and must meet the needs of the community.

In the 1990s, the Botswana government began forcefully evicting Bushmen from their ancestral land after diamonds were discovered in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. In 2005 the Botswana supreme court ruled in favor of Bushman land rights and found that the Bushmen were "forcibly and wrongly deprived of their possessions" by the government. However, the Botswana government still refuses to allow Bushmen to return to their native land. Since the eviction, the Botswana government has granted 112 mining licenses to mining companies to explore in the reserve.

A young bushman father shares with us his concerns, the expression on his face trying to hide his desperation. Other cattle-herding tribes are now moving into the Kalahari looking for pasture. A long history of discrimination and genocide has crushed the spirit of the Bushmen and although

voice. It won't be long until his solo grows into a chorus of singing and clapping. Another log on the fire and the repertoire begins.

They live together and share everything. The word evil does not exist in their vocabulary. They are so in touch with the natural environment around them that one cannot bear to suppress the thought: who is more remote? Who is more distant from life on this planet - them or us?

The Government's establishment of permanent settlements such as Tsumkwe is forcing the San to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. They face the challenge of adapting to a way of living distant from their own. They must now learn to raise crops and tend livestock in an environment where water is scarce.

'...the simple acceptance of the fact that there is a gap between those who have, and those who have not – those who give, and those who take...'

Since 1996 Pilgrim Relief Society has been providing solar powered water systems for the Ju/'Hoansi Bushmen in Namibia in order to aid their transition to

a sedentary lifestyle. The systems tap into a large subterranean basin that lies directly beneath the Kalahari Desert. Until present, Pilgrim Relief Society has installed over 120 systems in the Kalahari Desert, providing water for more than 45,000 members of the local population.

In order to survive, the San must leave behind a life and adapt to another. Yet they face the risk of leaving behind more than just a means of livelihood. Scientists in the fields of genetics and anthropology describe the Bushmen as a type of 'genetic Adam' because they are the oldest, most genetically unadulterated, remnant of our ancient ancestors. Their culture has provided western civilization with a wealth of anthropological insight into the history of humankind.



this land is rightfully theirs, once again they find themselves oppressed and submissive to a stronger neighbor.

As the darkness settles and the dry chill of night covers the Kalahari, village members begin to gather around a crackling campfire. They talk as though they have been apart for a long time. Crickets come alive with the tranquil ambience of night. As the evening goes on, the bitter cold brings the circle of souls closer to the fire, and to each other. An elder brings out a small Bushman piano and begins to gently pluck a tune. The simple melody resonates through the night echoed by his

Scientists study Bushmen paintings and their similarities with ancient European and oriental cave paintings attempting to find a related cultural origin. The ancient Bushman art of rock painting has now been lost. The last Bushman rock painter died in 1957 killed by a police officer in Botswana. Also in Botswana, many Bushmen hunters have had their hunting licenses taken away. They are accused of exterminating livestock in the CKGR yet all the while trophy hunting is becoming more and more prevalent. The San face the very real possibility of losing much of the ancient knowledge they have passed on for generations. However, for the Bushmen



there appears to be no alternative to change.

“We want to instill in them the power to stand up and say, ‘we can change our lives, we don’t have to wait on handouts from the government, we can raise our own crops and animals, we can raise our children to become the future leaders of our tribe’ ”, Tirtirau said.

In August 2009, Pilgrim Relief Society launched a development project in the Omatako Valley, Namibia. The project is designed to introduce sustainable sources of income, services and education for the Ju/’Hoansi Bushmen in the region. The project is being implemented on a 5000-hectare property leased to Pilgrim Relief Society by the Namibian government. The compound will house a number of facilities including a boarding school for 500 children, a cafeteria, a hospital of 30 beds, wood and metal workshops, garages, a bakery, stables, gardens, beehives, farms and other facilities and services. The property and its services will be owned and run by local Bushmen for the Ju/’Hoansi community in the region.

“I believe this project will help them adapt to their changing circumstances but at the same time allow them to preserve their ancestral knowledge and culture that has been handed down for generations,” Tirtirau said.

On site, volunteer construction groups have traveled to

Namibia to build the housing facilities for the boarding school. Gardens, greenhouses, cornfields and hundreds of trees have already been planted. An air of anticipation lingers over the Omatako Valley as the desert is transformed into a fresh, green source of life. Locals have gathered from the surrounding villages eager to help, they know this project is for their benefit and want to share the responsibility. The school is still under construction, but 20 children have already moved into dormitories, eagerly waiting for classes to begin. An estimated 400 San children have expressed their desire to enroll when the school opens late 2010.

Raluca Stefan will be the Director of the school once it opens. “We will teach a standard curriculum along side manual trades and agriculture, but we will also have Bushmen teachers that will pass on the knowledge, culture and language of the San to future generations”, Stefan said.

As construction workers begin packing their tools after a long day in the sun, a dozen San children gather around the tired volunteers. They seem amused at the white people that have come to their neighborhood. Their playful chatter turns into dancing and singing. We are held spellbound by this impromptu concert that goes on for the better part of an hour, their tireless voices sharing insight into the story of the San – a story that must not be lost.

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