

Tshwa San - Minority Rights Group

Profile

Tshwa San live primarily in western Zimbabwe. Though the government does not keep official statistics on the population of indigenous peoples, it is estimated that there are around 2,600 Tshwa. Most traditional knowledge of hunting and gathering has been lost, however Tshwa continue to use *veldfood* as a form of sustenance.

Historical Context

Until British colonization in 1890, Tshwa San primarily gained land through self-allocation. With the arrival of European settlers and the establishment of various game reserves, including Hwange National Park, many Tshwa were forcibly removed from their lands. The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 was an apartheid policy that limited the rights of land ownership for non-white populations. Traditional forms of land ownership in Zimbabwe were officially abolished in 1951 with the Native Land Husbandry Act, moving Tshwa to predetermined tracts of land. Following Zimbabwe independence in 1980, ownership of Tshwa land transitioned to local authorities.

Current Issues

Some Tshwa San communities are struggling with food insecurity as laws banning hunting forced them to trade in their lives as hunter-gatherers for subsistence farming. However, most neither possess cattle or tools nor have the training to farm successfully, as they have been excluded from the government's 2009 farm mechanization programme. Some Tshwa elders have asked for readmission to the Hwange National Park to return to a life as hunter-gatherers, as the government seems to be unable or unwilling to aid Tshwa communities to become self-sufficient. In 2015, much of southern Africa was affected by severe drought and hunger. Many Tshwa had to eat the seeds they intended to use for the next season's planting, thus furthering the food shortage. The water shortage in the Tsholotsho District, where many Tshwa live was exacerbated through the closure of numerous water facilities due to a lack of diesel fuel and parts.

The Tshwa community has also criticized the government for failing to understand their culture and traditions, as the Constitution refers to their language as Khoisan, whereas the correct name of the language is Tjwao (also Tshwao). Tjwao is under particular risk of extinction, as some sources suggest that there are little more than a dozen people left who speak the language fluently, with the rest of the Tshwa community speaking a diluted version. One of the issues highlighted by Tshwa leaders is the fact that the few Tshwa children who are able to attend school are taught in Ndebele, and as a result many are increasingly separated from their own culture. Attempts to introduce a Tjwao curriculum are made more difficult by the lack of orthography and phonology for the language. Tjwao has no written records and is currently not systematically passed from one generation to the next. Additionally, the vocabulary reflects the Tshwa community's traditional way of life in the bush, and

therefore lacks terminology for many aspects of contemporary living. Researchers working on preserving Tjwao and making it usable for younger generations of Tshwa have requested support from the Education Ministry to enable them to travel to Botswana and Namibia for learning visits to other San communities.

Highlighting the existence of prejudicial attitudes towards them at the highest levels of government, in 2015, President Mugabe expressed a belief that the Tshwa San reject integration with the rest of Zimbabwean society. This marginalization had material outcomes when flooding the previous year destroyed many homes in areas where Tshwa reside and left around 400 families displaced. The government's response to aid the community was slow and some families remained in need of adequate housing over a year later.

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