“Progress or Poverty? The Dobe Area”


In 1963 perhaps three-quarters of the 466 Dobe Ju’hoansi were living in camps based primarily on hunting and gathering while the rest were attached to Black-owned cattle posts. Road access was difficult and only one truck per month visited the area. After Botswana's independence in September 1966, the pace of change accelerated and has continued to race up to the present. In 1963 there were no stores, no schools, no clinics, no government feeding programs, no boreholes, and no resident civil servants (apart from a few tribal appointees). All of these institutions are now in place and the Dobe people have been transformed in two generations from a society of foragers -- some of whom herded and worked for others -- to a society of small-holders who eke out a living by herding, farming, welfare, and craft production, along with some hunting and gathering. Today, the Dobe Ju’hoansi sit around their fires and smoke their pipes as before, but they also listen to transistor radios, make home brew, and worry about the future.

Ju villages now look like other Botswana villages. The beehive-shaped grass huts are gone, replaced by semi-permanent mud-walled houses behind makeshift stockades to keep out cattle. Hunting and gathering, the dietary mainstay in 1963, now supplies perhaps 30 percent of villagers' food. The rest is made up of milk and meat from domestic stock, store-bought mealie meal, and vast quantities of heavily sugared tea whitened with powdered milk. For most of the 1980s and '90s, government and foreign drought relief provided a steady but monotonous diet. Hunting continues, but is now so severely restricted by government wildlife laws that in some years no large game may be hunted at all.

A History of Problems

As early as 1900, some Ju had been involved in boarding cattle for wealthy Tswana in a loan cattle arrangement called mafisa that was widespread in Botswana. (Hitchcock, 1977) By 1973, roughly 20 percent of Ju families had some involvement as mafisa herders, and the number grew through the 1970s, but in the 1980s people became bitter about mafisa. They complained that without the cattle promised in payment for services rendered -- usually one female calf per year -- it was difficult to start a herd. Coupled with the periodic withdrawal of government rations, the lack of mafisa payments had soured some Dobe Ju’hoansi about their prospects in Botswana. The people saw what was happening in Namibia where the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation was helping Ju’hoansi drill boreholes and obtain cattle. Dobe people wanted their own boreholes, and in 1987 began a long campaign to secure land rights and have boreholes drilled, but years went by without success.

Some compensating developments have brightened this generally gloomy picture. From 1986 on, the Kung San Works, a small NGO started by a Peace Corps volunteer, began purchasing Dobe Area crafts, and pumped considerable cash -- about $2500 US per month at its peak -- into the Ju economy. Unfortunately, there were few opportunities for productive investment of the proceeds in infrastructure such as plows, bicycles, cattle, or horses. While some large stock was purchased, a distressing amount of cash went to beer, brandy, home brew materials, bags of candies, and sugar, tea, and Nespray powdered milk.
But lack of animals and tools was not the only infrastructure problem. Schooling and the issues facing youth were other problem areas. When the first school opened at !Kangwa in 1973, some Ju parents responded quickly, registering their children and scraping together the money for fees and the obligatory school uniforms. Most Ju, however, ignored the school or withdrew their children because of the harsh discipline then practiced in the Botswana school system. Absenteeism at the !Kangwa school continued into the 1990s in the 40 to 60 percent range.

At least four Dobe area students nevertheless went on to secondary school in the 1980s. But even for these students -- the first to get this far in the educational system -- the road was not easy. And for the large majority of Ju'hoansi with little or no schooling, job prospects were poor; a life of odd jobs combined with heavy drinking was not uncommon. In a bitter irony of underdevelopment, some Botswana youths crossed the fence into Namibia in the 1980s to join the South African army, the only job then available.

A second school, at ǂXaiǂxai, was more successful. A progressive headmaster incorporated elements of Ju'hoansi culture into the curriculum, and was rewarded with strong parental and community support and a low absentee rate. The ǂGwihaba Dancers, a troupe of ǂXaiǂxai schoolchildren, won regional and national cultural competitions and performed at Botswana's 20(th) Anniversary of Independence celebrations in 1986.

In the long run, Dobe area Ju'hoansi still face serious difficulties. When wealthy Tswana want to expand cattle production, they form borehole syndicates to stake out ranches in remote areas. With 99-year leases that can be bought and sold, ownership is tantamount to private tenure. And outsiders have been drilling boreholes in the Dobe area since the late 1980s. Without borehole syndicates of their own, the people of Dobe could lose their land for good.

**Signs of Hope**

On visits to Dobe village in 1999 and 2001, observers noted major changes. The long and twisting 90-mile road to the village was vastly improved, with travel time cut to two and a half hours from six or seven. At Dobe waterhole, the 150 residents were living in eight small villages centered around a new borehole, engine, and water tank. The pride of the village though, was a soccer field, where teams of local and outside youths played a daily pickup game. Nearby, a preschool had been set up to give students two years of preparation before attending, as boarders, the main primary school 20 kilometers away in !Kangwa. A dozen outsiders were resident in Dobe: border guards patrolling the frontier two kilometers to the west, veterinary officials, teachers, and construction workers.

On the downside, homebrew sellers, formerly confined to !Kangwa, had arrived in Dobe, bringing daily drinking parties and social dysfunction. But Dobe's most traumatic experience was the district-wide outbreak in 1995 of Contagious Bovine Pleuro-Pneumonia, which necessitated destruction of the Northwest District's entire cattle population. Some 320,000 head were slaughtered and their carcasses buried by bulldozers, including several thousand in the Dobe area. Ju'hoansi, who had built up their herds since the 1970s, lost everything. Although herd owners were compensated, rebuilding the herds was a slow process.

Ecologists, however, were heartened at the relief of pressure on the fragile ecosystem by the
sudden withdrawal of bovine biomass. The new situation refocused attention on a prime preexisting "asset" of the Dobe area: its still-abundant game populations. The creation of wildlife conservancies under the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Program (CBNRM) was an effort to combine environmental conservation with economic development. (Small-scale wildlife conservancies have sprung up throughout Africa, 28 projects in Botswana alone; see page 37.) At 'Xai'xai, near Dobe, the Thlabololo Development Trust created (with Dutch overseas assistance) a wildlife management area controlled by the Ju"hoansi. The Trust caters to tourists who want to experience Ju"hoan life and see game, but allows limited subsistence hunting and gathering by Ju.

The Ju of Dobe are now in the process of setting up a similar trust under the guidance of TOCADI, the Trust for Okavango Cultural and Development Initiatives, an offshoot of a successful Botswana-based NGO, the Kuru Development Trust. With strong community input, TOCADI adopted a 1980s plan by the Kalahari People's Fund to drill five boreholes on Dobe's outer margins. The plan would resettle Ju families and secure their land base against threats of encroachment. As described by Kabo Mosweu, a San development worker, two boreholes struck water in 2001, and several others -- to be funded by a grant from the Texas-based Kalahari Peoples Fund -- are in planning. The Dobe people's dream for land security may finally become a reality.