

**REPORT ON EDINBURGH CONFERENCE ON  
AFRICA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES:  
'FIRST PEOPLES' OR 'MARGINALIZED MINORITIES'?**

**Centre of African Studies  
University of Edinburgh  
24-25 May 2000**

**by Robin Palmer  
Land Policy Adviser  
Oxfam GB**

The most interesting feature of this conference was its focus on people with whom historically Oxfam has had little or no contact - hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa (Namibia, Botswana, South Africa) and East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) and forest people (Pygmies) in Central Africa (Congo, Cameroon, Rwanda, Burundi). Typically, they are the most marginalised in society, lacking influence or power and heavily stigmatised by the dominant groups. I have relatively recently come to recognise the ways in which pastoralists have been marginalised in parts of East Africa and the Horn, but a day and a half in Edinburgh was sufficient to convince me that they have suffered far less than (and are now frequently in conflict with) hunter-gatherers, whose problems, it was stressed, were quite different from those of pastoralists. One participant spoke of the 'cancer of discrimination' which existed everywhere against hunter-gatherers and which needed to be confronted.

The **reasons for Oxfam's non-involvement** (I think) include: we don't work there (Botswana, Cameroon, Namibia); the people are difficult of access (Congo etc); they are very difficult to work with (as we have found with the Hadza of Tanzania) requiring innovative approaches; and many others are already working with them (especially with the San in Southern Africa).

The **support groups** present were also different from those Oxfam is most familiar with. They included the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Survival International, and the Forest Peoples Programme. There were also representatives from NORAD and Norwegian Church Aid.

The conference (the Centre's annual international conference) was proclaimed by the chair Alan Barnard (the Centre's acting Director) to be an academic one, though he was pleased to welcome activists, supporters etc.

The **format** was that groups of 3 people read (often literally) their papers, which were supposed to be limited to 10 pages. Then there was time (but far too little) for questions. With an audience of about 60, there was little effective debate or discussion; but I find this is often the way with academic conferences.

The organisers provided short **abstracts of the papers**, written by the participants, which was useful, since the papers had not been circulated in advance. In 3 cases the presenters failed to produce a paper. Of the 18 paper givers (details in an appendix), 11 came from Africa (5 from South Africa, 3 from Botswana and one each from Cameroon, Namibia and Congo). The Namibian presenter, Joram/Useb, also showed a very effective film, *Listen to us: San children on the road to education* in the Thursday lunchtime slot. It mentioned that

there were only 3 San children currently in higher education in the whole of Namibia; paying for school fees was a major obstacle.

A striking fact, presented by the doyen anthropologist James Woodburn, now retired from LSE and who has worked in Tanzania since 1957, is that **hunter-gatherers**, far from dying out or being absorbed by others, **are actually increasing in number** (though not as rapidly as the dominant groups). Their land has often been stolen and in some cases 'languages have been lost, much distinctive material culture has disappeared and the hunting and gathering way of life has been replaced wholly or partially by life as a landless labourer' but despite this, **absorption** into neighbouring groups is currently **the exception** rather than the rule.

The thrust of the conference was in implicit in its title: were the interests of the groups under discussion best served by being categorised under the rubric of **indigenous rights or minority rights?** The context was of a great deal of international work in recent decades (especially at the UN and the ILO) in support of the rights of *indigenous* people in North America, in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Only in the 1990s have African hunter-gatherers moved into this arena. Two points were made strongly. First, that there is considerable resistance in Africa, especially by governments, to regarding (say) the Pygmies as the indigenous people - as the logical implication would be to declare all others non-indigenous. The only people firmly categorised as non-indigenous were the white settlers! In this context '**first peoples**' might be a better and more acceptable formulation. James Woodburn cautioned the audience against despair. 20 years ago, he said, no one could have foretold the **dramatic advances that would be made in establishing indigenous land rights in North America and Australasia**. (This was something I had recently heard at first hand from Shaun Williams, an Australian working for the Oxfam GB Cambodia Land Study Project, who has 20 years of experience of working for the land rights of native Australians). The clear inference was that seemingly hopeless battles could be won. James Woodburn made the further interesting point that Africa would do well to look at some of the **land laws passed on other continents** with their much broader definition of ownership.

The **lawyers** banged on (as lawyers do) about various treaties and conventions and who did what in Geneva and the like. I found this rather dull stuff, but a key person here is clearly Patrick Thornberry, Professor of International Relations (in fact, Law), University of Keele, who is closely involved in the various debates.

Most participants supported the indigenous/first peoples rights path, but one of the South Africans dissented. He was James Suzman, Co-ordinator, EU Regional Assessment of the Status of the San in Southern Africa, who argued that 'far greater scope exists in the pursuit of San rights issues within a more straightforward human rights rather than an indigenous rights framework. It is far more profitable to focus on the status of the San as a marginalised minority rather than indigenous people.' He argued that circumstances in Southern Africa are very different to Europe and the Americas and that to focus on the San as an indigenous minority would raise difficult questions about who was entitled to benefit from any programme, given that San social identity is very fluid.

In the paper by Jacques Ngoun (himself a Pygmy) it emerged that Pygmies would not receive any **compensation** from the building of the **Chad-Cameroon pipeline** as they enjoyed no land rights - because they do not live in settled villages. This was echoed in many other places. Jacques Ngoun had just been to lobby the World Bank on the pipeline and had apparently persuaded it to think again.

In her Royal African Society Scotland lecture, Sidsel Saugestad, University of Tromsø, spoke of the **new leaders** being under tremendous pressure to justify themselves to their own followers and being ‘forever faced with the paradox that in order to defend their own cultural values they have to behave in ways that in many respects break with the norms and values of that culture.’ They also have to be ‘actors on many fields simultaneously.’

She made the interesting observation that African organisations had joined the international ‘indigenous movement’ in the 1990s in something of a hurry, and ‘enter the global arena of meetings and confrontations, and seek dialogue with their national governments, **without** having had the time to go through the earlier stage of **local mobilisation**, cultural consolidation and capacity building.’ Despite the difficulties, she stressed the urgent need for effective first peoples leadership.

Some of the other points made during discussions which struck me included:

- There is an urgent need for supporters, donors etc. to *ask* people for their views and to *listen* to them. This is still all too rare.
- Donors often want people to be united under one leader (yet they insist on multi-partyism in the political arena!) and want San to look and live like ‘proper’ San.
- There are serious problems of definition (self-definition had real limitations and had been abused in some cases).
- There was a need to acknowledge the **diversity** of indigenous people.
- The Hadza of Tanzania had given away their rights to two villages in return for getting title to a third, but were continuing to lose land even in the village to which they now had formal title.
- ‘While indigenous peoples are marginalised minorities, not all marginalised minorities are indigenous peoples.’

The conference concluded without any action plan, other than to have another conference!

**Conclusion: the Right to a Say?** It is clear that the people who were the subject of this conference have very little say in corridors of power and that, in principle, Oxfam should support those who are seeking to address this. In practice, it may be difficult to argue that Oxfam should shift the focus of its programmes. But I was struck by a comment from Andrew Madsen, who has worked for CUSO in Tanzania with the Hadza and written an excellent booklet *The Hadzabe of Tanzania*, just published by IWGIA. He argued the need for Oxfam to be more acutely aware of the **invisibility** of marginalised hunter-gatherer communities in some of the areas where we work and that we make greater effort to **identify them**, (1) since they are unlikely to come to us because of their reluctance to engage with outsiders, and (2) because Oxfam partners from dominant groups are unlikely to bring them to our attention, as they are considered inferior and perform useful services for them. He also believes that hunter-gatherers will be found among the displaced and refugee populations that Oxfam serves, particularly in Tanzania and Sudan. But they are also likely to be invisible to Oxfam staff, assuming the identity of fellow displaced to avoid prejudice within the camps.

## **APPENDIX: Programme**

### **AFRICA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: 'FIRST PEOPLES' OR 'MARGINALIZED MINORITIES'?**

**Wednesday 24th May 2000**

**2.00-2.20** Welcome Prof Anthony Cohen (Provost of Law and Social Sciences) Dr Alan Barnard (Acting Director of CAS and Conference Chair)

**2.30-4.00** Dr James Woodburn (Anthropology, LSE) *The political status of hunter-gatherers in present-day and future Africa*

Jacques Ngoun (CODEBABI, Cameroon) *La situation des pygmées au Cameroun*

Joram /Useb (WIMSA, Windhoek) *'One chief is enough'? Understanding San traditional authorities within the Namibian context*

**4.30-6.00** Professor Patrick Thornberry (International Relations, U Keele) *Indigenous peoples in international law : definition, claims, process*

Dr Catriona Drew (Law, U Glasgow) *Indigenous people and the right of self-determination: prospects and problems*

Dr Effa Okupa (practising lawyer, London / Namibia) *The right to a husband (conflict with treaties and conventions)*

**7.00** Royal African Society Scotland Lecture: Professor Sidsel Saugestad (Social Science, U Tromsø) *Contested images first peoples or marginalised minorities in Africa*

**Thursday 25th May 2000**

**9.00-10.30** Dr Keitseope Nthomang (Social Work, U Botswana / U Queensland) *Exploring the 'indigenous/autochthonous' minefield: social policy and the marginalisation of indigenous peoples in Africa*

Maitseo Bolaane (History, U Botswana / U Oxford) *Fear of the marginalised minorities: the Khwai San community determining their indigenous boundaries within the Okavango, Botswana*

Sethunya T. Mphinyane (Sociology, U Botswana / U Sussex) *The 'dirty' social scientist: whose advocate, the devil's or the people's?*

**11.00-12.30** Jerome Lewis (Anthropology, LSE) *Forest people or village people. Whose voice will be heard?*

Albert Barume (practising lawyer, DR Congo / U Essex) *Transnational corporations and violations of human rights: could the UNOCAL case inspire indigenous communities in Africa?*

Andrew Madsen (Copenhagen) *The Hadzabe of Tanzania: land and human rights for a hunter-gatherer people*

**12.30-2.00** Video presentation (introduced by Joram /Useb) *Listen to us. San children on the road to education*

**2.00-3.30** Professor Henry C. Bredekamp (Historical Studies, U Western Cape) *Khoisan revivalism and the Indigenous Peoples issue in post-apartheid South Africa: a question of self-identity?*

Linda Waldman (Anthropology, U Witwatersrand) *No Rainbow Bus for us: building nationalism in South Africa*

Dr Steven Robins (Anthropology, U Western Cape) *The Khomani San and the politics of land, 'community' and 'development' in the Kalahari*

**4.00-5.30** William Ellis (Government, U Western Cape) *San identity, a land claim and the three agendas*

Dr James Suzman (Co-ordinator, EU Regional Assessment of the Status of the San in Southern Africa) *Indigenous wrongs and human rights - national policy, international resolutions and the status of southern Africa's San people*

**5.30-6.00** Final Discussion