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# When a Push Comes to Hush: Promoting Mainstream Views and Silencing Alternatives through Conservation Narratives

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Gudigwa Village Hut

In March 2003, Gudigwa Camp opened to great fanfare and high expectations. For Conservation International (CI), the NGO that designed, funded and established the camp for the village of Gudigwa, the logic behind it was self-evident and unequivocal: in exchange for the villagers' support of its conservation agenda in this wildlife-rich region of northern Botswana, CI provided them with much needed 'development' in the form of a high-end cultural tourism project. However, only five years later, CI issued a report declaring the project a 'commercial failure' (despite some 'lasting positive social impacts for the community') and admitted that they made some 'fundamental and strategic errors in the early stages of the project implementation... dooming it to failure' (Smuts *et al.* 2008: iv). The project that was meant to act as a replicable model for how tourism could successfully 'address the twin challenges of biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation' was now reduced to 'key lessons learned' of how not to do it.

Unfortunately, the key lessons learned rely on understandings and analyses of community-based conservation that entail stubborn blind spots that will likely result in CI and other conservation organisations continuing to make mistakes. CI created and relied upon its own particular and problematic narrative to facilitate and help implement the project and its broader conservation agenda in ways that have silenced local voices and perspectives. Moreover, the suspect conclusions CI draws from its experience with Gudigwa Camp are being used to chart CI's embrace of a neoliberal conservation paradigm, which emphasizes market forces and private sector initiatives as the main drivers of conservation (Igoe and Fortwangler 2007). This paradigm threatens not only to hamper engagement with the alternative views

of its past and future 'targets' but also due to its goal of transforming 'community-members' to 'market-actors' can potentially foreclose this possibility altogether, thereby exacerbating some of conservation's shortcomings further.

#### *The Narrative*

CI's narrative of Gudigwa Camp is reproduced in marketing material, the information booklet given to the camp's visitors, various newspaper articles, applications for donor funding, CI's initial feasibility study and its recent review document. It is generally presented as follows:

For centuries eight nomadic Bugakhwe (Khwe-speaking San / 'Bushman') clans lived in the northern Botswana sandveld surviving on their traditional hunting and gathering practices. In 1987, the Government of Botswana encouraged them to settle in Gudigwa Village so they could take advantage of its services such as a permanent water source, a primary school and health clinic. The village's location in the wildlife rich regions of northern Botswana, and high level of poverty made it a logical choice for a project whose goals were the expansion of protected areas in the region and the generation of employment opportunities and income for the villagers. The camp's uniqueness and competitive advantage come from its additional goal of attempting to preserve the villagers' threatened Bugakhwe culture by demonstrating their traditional singing, dancing, stories, food and ecological knowledge to tourists.

While admitting that this narrative is romanticised to appeal to tourists and donors, CI staff do not provide any more details of the villagers' diverse and complex histories, including their integration into regional markets, political and cultural marginalisation and contentious relationships with

conservation. These aspects of the villagers' experiences are conspicuously absent in CI's narrative despite their significant impact on the project. After 10 years of interaction with Gudigwa, the story that CI tells of the villagers has mostly remained unchanged.

#### *The Contentious 'Bushman' and Conservation*

CI's assertion that 'the community expressed its desire to earn money by doing what they know and love – hunting and gathering on the land, living a traditional way of life etc.', directly contradicts some of the discussions I had with various villagers who expressed a certain uneasiness



Patrick Mosweu, a traditional guide at the camp, demonstrates how to build and sleep in a temporary shelter



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ABOVE: Performing a traditional healing ceremony;

BELOW: Gudigwa Camp staff

with the project's goal of preserving their culture. For example, one elder claimed that 'there is nothing I miss about my old life. The life in the past was a problem. Maybe you can say I am going to hunt and maybe that is the time you are going to die in the bushes. Or maybe you have sent your children to go hunting and some of them die in the bush. With that, it's a problem.' Similarly, after asking someone what he thought of being referred to as a 'Bushman' he declared 'we don't want to be called Bushman, we don't live in the bush. We are not animals.' While these views were not shared by all the villagers, they illustrate the

social and political complexity and contradictions of indigenous identity in Botswana that is missing from CI's narratives.

Conservation practices, including relocations from areas that would become protected areas and the curtailment of hunting rights, were viewed by the state as necessary steps to changing the Bugakhwe's traditional relationship to land and wildlife and the first steps to assimilating them into the national mainstream. However, the villagers' experience with these efforts to conserve wild spaces and species is often associated with violence and

repression. I was told by some villagers that they were beaten, arrested and harassed by the state when suspected of poaching, or being 'convinced' to relocate. One person even described his whole village fleeing across the border to Namibia after the "DWNP [Department of Wildlife and National Parks] came quietly at night with guns, beating people, shooting and threatening them because they wanted us people to move from the area so they could create a Wildlife Management Area". I personally witnessed the Botswana Defense Force (BDF) entering the village to search for illegally hunted meat. The villagers complained that the BDF was discriminating against them as it had no evidence or warrants to justify the raid and staged a general strike to protest the perceived violation of their rights.

#### *The Opportunistic Imperative*

The villagers' poverty (largely a result of lost access to resources combined with political and cultural marginalisation) has meant that they are compelled to take advantage of any livelihood opportunities that present themselves. For the past 40 years, the Bugakhwe have taken advantage of various sporadic work and welfare options but rarely were these opportunities presented to all of them in similar ways. Some, after leaving their families behind in Botswana, worked in the mines in South Africa. Others enlisted in the South African Defense Force (SADF) in South West Africa (Namibia) and received good wages, as well as numerous social and educational services for their families. Many men also worked as guides, trackers and hunters within Botswana's burgeoning tourist industry. People whose circumstances prevented them from the above opportunities became dependant on welfare programs. A few were unable to prove that they were born in Botswana and were not recognised as citizens by the state and

were thus unable to avail themselves of these programs.

These processes afforded certain advantages and difficulties with regard to wealth, income, education, language skills and nationality and directly resulted in the current stratified nature of Gudigwa village. It also created or reinforced individual, family and clan loyalties and rivalries. These differences become important when trying to understand the individual and collective responses, reactions and engagements with Gudigwa Camp. The social categories required by and imposed by CI, such as 'village' and 'community', assumed a consistency that is at odds with the villagers' experience of these categories. When Gudigwa Camp was initiated, for instance, families involved with another community-based project interpreted it as a threat to their interests. However, another larger and comparatively well-educated and wealthy family recognised it as an opportunity with great potential and dedicated themselves to it. Some individuals resented the perceived monopolisation of the camp's various staff positions and claimed they were never given a chance to benefit directly from the camp. The people who were involved with the camp resented those individuals who, after not involving themselves in the formative stages and building of the camp, were now trying to reap its benefits. This resulted in ongoing intra-community friction which continually threatened the viability of the camp.

#### *Justifying a Neoliberal Turn*

The dynamics briefly described here are conspicuously absent from CI's review of the project. In fact, despite conducting community focus groups, the report contains very little input from community members. This is somewhat perplexing as the project was established as a community-based, grass-roots and participatory



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Traditional and professional guides taking tourists on a bushwalk

conservation project in which the voice and perceptions of the 'community' were supposedly prioritised. What is of particular concern is the report's conclusion that signals CI's turn away from community to market-based conservation. It states that:

Embracing these lessons learned... CI has altered its strategy to focus attention on the private sector. By focussing on the tourism value chain and assuming the role of facilitator as opposed to that of participant, CI is attempting to utilise market forces and market players to address many of the challenges associated with tourism operations in areas of high biodiversity and poverty (Smuts *et al.* 2008: 45).

This new narrative threatens to continue to erase rather than incorporate the complexity, diversity and political nature of local histories, including the villagers' sometimes problematic relations with conservation, and existing market-forces now being positioned as the solution to conservation's various challenges. This threatens to further anonymise already faceless people, communities and cultures by reducing them to market-actors. CI's turn from 'participant' to

'facilitator' further removes it from the 'targets' of its intervention and the messy and inevitably political nature of its programmes. It will also further diminish its ability to expand its perspectives and generate new insights by engaging with the other stories people are telling about conservation. There is, unfortunately, likely no place for these rich, diverse and nuanced histories briefly discussed in this paper in proposed attempts to optimise 'tourism value chains'.

#### *References*

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