

# **Public theology as a tool of economic empowerment for the voiceless Basarwa in post-independent Botswana**

*Moji Ruele*

Department of Theology and Religious Studies,  
University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana

## *Abstract*

This article attempts to show through correlative methods that public theology has brought in a new awareness of the relevance of theology in post-colonial Botswana and indeed in Africa as a whole. Correlative methods makes public theology a relevant tool of economic empowerment for the voiceless Basarwa as it seeks to influence public policy through engaging with socioeconomic and political issues from a Christian and contextual perspective. Public theology through correlative methods acknowledges that while it is important to recognise significant gains made in the political sphere and a relatively present culture of democracy, some sections of Botswana, particularly Basarwa, remains voiceless because of their economic marginalisation. The article therefore, attempts to locate through this method the role of public theology in economic empowerment for the voiceless Basarwa in post-independent Botswana. It sets out to argue that voicelessness is linked socioeconomic and political injustices. The article concludes that public theological approaches shed a better light onto economic issues because the Christian faith/theology which is so pronounced, not only in Botswana but in many African countries, is a culture that encourages equality among all people regardless of their colour, gender, sex and ethnic background.

## **Introduction**

From the outset, it has been the purpose of this article to argue that economic disempowerment of Basarwa resulting from their dispossession of land in post-independent Botswana has led to their state of voicelessness. The article however, recognises that whereas the negative impact of Basarwa landlessness is visible, it is sometimes difficult to assess the extent to which it affects them, simply because it may have been overshadowed by other factors that came along with the benefits of some of the programmes which are provided by the Botswana government. As already mentioned, this article attempts to use public theological methods, that is, correlative methods, to show how land as an economic variable lead to Basarwa voicelessness in post-independent Botswana. The article also argues that since Botswana is predominantly a Christian state, it is proper to believe that God can speak for the voiceless Basarwa in the country through public theological approaches, because religion is a culture. ED Knudson (2009) reminds us that whereas it may seem unusual to associate the two terms, public and theology, because theology is often placed in the category of private opinion, the fact that religion continues to play an important role within the political life of many societies means theology can therefore be a relevant tool in arguing for the voiceless Basarwa. Theology is also relevant for such a discourse, because religion is a well established and influential institution in Botswana society as many people belong to it. I will argue in this article, that the church as the custodian of public theology also provides the voice for the poor because of its voluntary nature and her influence on the people. Furthermore, I would point out as Roger H Crook (1995:256) noted that the concepts of reverence, stewardship and voluntary duty present in the church may also be an important aspect in providing a voice for the voiceless Basarwa in post-independent Botswana. This article therefore uses public theology to show that ethnicity and power relations which resulted from Basarwa dispossession of ancestral land has made them more voiceless.

## **Basarwa as the most voiceless in the context of post-independent Botswana?**

This section of the article intends to show who the voiceless are in the context of post-independent Botswana. It notes that “Basarwa”, derogatorily known as “Bushmen” in many parts of Southern Africa, are the voiceless because their state of landlessness has led them to marginality, poverty, ignorance, and a weak position. Historically Basarwa, who were predominantly hunter-gatherers living in the more arid regions of pre and post-independent Botswana, find themselves without any land that

they can call theirs. This article recognises that one of the negative impacts of landlessness on Basarwa in Botswana is not only poverty, but also voicelessness. This is so because Basarwa landlessness and alienation from the land during the colonial era and post independence Botswana has made them poor. Consequently, their poverty, loss of human pride, low self esteem, dignity, and ethnic identity has rendered them voiceless. This article notes that the essential restlessness of Basarwa as the most dispossessed group in Botswana is the demand for land, which is precisely the echo of the biblical voice of the poor and voiceless (Exod 2:23-25). It therefore takes note of the fact that there is a “quiet” but loud voice of lamentation similar to that of the biblical Psalmist among Basarwa, as a result of their landless status. Psalm 137:1-4 is particularly useful in this article for the following reasons: (1) The Judeo-Christian tradition which Psalm 137:1-4 comes provided a voice for the Israelites when in captivity. It is also universally recognised, and therefore assists public theological reflections on issues relating to Basarwa loss of ancestral land, and how that leads to voicelessness. (2) It talks to us explicitly about what it is like being in exile, but also points us to various ways in which people can be exiled other than through the usual physical form of exile which was experienced by the Israelites (Brueggemann 2002:205). In Botswana, like anywhere else, people are attached to the land as a source of sustenance and as a means of cultural representation, identity construction and preservation. The poor people or rural communities like Basarwa depend mainly on the land for their economic, cultural and spiritual requirements. This makes the land a cultural entity. If the people lose the land, they also lose the basis of their religious-cultural identity and creativity (Bewaji 2007:297). The most unfortunate thing that has happened to Basarwa is post-independent Botswana landlessness. Basarwa are therefore poor, powerless and dependent on other ethnic groups, and this impacts negatively on their ability to have a voice. Most of them work as freehold farm and cattle post labourers with relatively low income and uncertain access to land ownership. They are at times expected to remain at the mercy of their “hosts” who own such enterprises even when they retire from their jobs (Mogalakwe 1986:25). The problem with this “courtesy” is that Basarwa cannot claim inalienable rights to land, because the farms are either freehold or privately owned, thus theirs is a culture of dependency. Hence the Basarwa are at the mercy of the land owners as they can be evicted at any time (Mogalakwe 1986:24). Mogalakwe further notes that many remote area dwellers (RADs)<sup>1</sup> who work on the freehold farms and cattle posts as labourers happen to be Basarwa. They are also landless and at times depend on government subsidies in the form of drought relief commonly known as *Namola Leuba*, which literally translates to mean hand-outs and rations for survival. The main problem with this system or arrangement is that it creates a dependency syndrome, and at the same time creates a condition and culture of silence, or voicelessness among those who depend on it. Le Roux (1999:126) for example, argues that poverty affects not only the physical and the cognitive development of Basarwa/San, but also their emotional status in many parts of Southern Africa. It also reduces dignity as they are often too busy struggling to survive. This has resulted in people from other indigenous groups despising them simply because they (Basarwa) do not have land they can call their own. The argument here is that Basarwa’s landlessness is the basic cause of their poverty and voicelessness, because all human life revolves around ownership of land.

### **How land, ethnicity and ethnic power relations lead to Basarwa voicelessness in pre and in post-independent Botswana**

In this section of the article, I will attempt to show how in being alienated from the land, Basarwa culture and its system of values that initially kept them together as a proud nomadic community have been destroyed. In doing so, I make an assessment of Basarwa traditional use and right to the land by looking through several historical windows. I will show how, before the arrival of dominant ethnic groups in the sub-continent, Basarwa freely foraged for their subsistence by hunting and collecting wild food from the veldt. I will argue that acquiring land through race or ethnicity in Botswana did not stop with the coming of independence and the introduction of the liberal constitution. Instead, it is becoming clearer, as shown in research by Edwin Wilmsen (1989), Alan Barnard (1992), Michael Taylor (2000), and others, that ethnicity, class and power have been and continue to be of great influence on how land is owned, administered and acquired in post independence Botswana. I also use ethnicity, land and power relations to emphasise that some historical events that started before the colonial period, and unfortunately continued even after independence contributed to Basarwa state of voicelessness. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Remote Area Dwellers (RADs) refers to all Botswana citizens who live outside the traditional village structure in geographic or socio-economic sense. Such people tend to live in small communities of between 5-100 persons, reside far from basic services and facilities, rely heavily on hunting and gathering as a source of livelihood, lack livestock, adequate cash income, do not have leaders of their own and are dependent on better off members of Botswana society. These people are poor and vulnerable because unlike other groups, they do not have land rights (Remote Areas Development Programme, 1978:4)

unfortunate that, in some cases, land disparities have been perpetuated under the pretext of nation building and unity promotion. It may be necessary to point out that unequal distribution of land and wealth at independence since 1966 was not so obvious because of the relatively smooth transfer of political power from the colonial master to the Africans (Gulbrandsen 1994:81). Basarwa/San have since struggled for many years with marginalisation and loss of almost all their ancestral lands in pre and post-independent Botswana. Inevitably, theirs is the voice least heard by those in the corridors of powers, because successive governments (colonial and post-colonial), not only in Botswana, but also the region as a whole, have not put any measures in place, or provided realistic alternatives for their land needs (Davidson 1994:110). It may be justifiable in this regard, that one can also compare Basarwa experiences, painful as they are, with those of the majority of black people in South Africa, particularly under the apartheid regime, because their loss of land meant that they became voiceless. Commenting on how black people became voiceless after having lost their ancestral land during that time and the consequences that followed, Takatso Mofokeng (1983) says that:

Land is not an alienable commodity. Its loss therefore, meant the enslavement of black people, exploitation, political domination, and loss of power. It also meant the loss of creativity/ imagination and the poverty of black people.

As already noted above, this followed the emergence of the colonial and capitalist state which was structured to accumulate capital along racial and ethnic lines, and the post-colonial state which unfortunately continued this trend. According to Robert Magubane (1979:55-70), the contemporary state of land use, occupation/ownership and the present ethnic power relations in Southern Africa (Botswana included), are a culmination of a complex historical process that started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I find interesting the above view of Robert Magubane that in both instances the colonial or post-colonial state expropriated land from the indigenous communities in order to ensure that this process moved smoothly. Joshua Mugonyi (1987:266) has also argued that:

Land alienation, control and use also became central in determining ethnic and power relations in Southern Africa, and at the same time, significantly altered the cultural lifestyle of indigenous communities.

Several points that arise from the above discussion show that the issues of ethnicity, land and landlessness existed during the colonial period and unfortunately continue to prevail in the rest of Southern Africa and that throughout this time Basarwa have been disadvantaged and at the same time rendered voiceless. Their way of life has also been judged to be primitive and inferior by those who dominated them. All the above points present a negative picture of the lives of Basarwa in general. Going back to preindependence history in Southern Africa, it is clear that confrontations over the land were organised predominantly along racial and ethnic lines. In countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa land laws made it the state property, outlawing the hunting of wildlife, while subsistence use of other natural resources was racially, but not ethnically defined. I would like to observe that, whereas the issue of colour and race did not predominantly feature in Bechuanaland and indeed in present day Botswana, simply because it was not institutionalised, similar customary laws were used in favour of the powerful ethnic groups. First, there were changes in the living conditions of Basarwa/ San which did not necessarily allow them the time to develop appropriate responses to new challenges. The colonial period, in particular, marked a change in the condition of the lives of San/Basarwa in relation to other ethnic groups in Southern Africa. For example, as Bangwato (powerful, dominant and aristocratic ethnic group in Botswana) territory and power expanded through the institution of a highly stratified system of social control, commoners were tied to their chiefs and those from other groups were incorporated as serfs (Good 1999:187). Thus, we can compare situations, since similar laws of the colonial state in pre-independence Botswana disrupted a vital link between Basarwa/San and the products of land. Land in pre-independence Botswana was always linked to a system that provided the basis for racial/ethnic or even gender inequality and power relations between powerful and weak ethnic groups.

Going along with Julio de Santa Ana's (1985:59-61) viewpoint that confrontations happen at almost all levels of society, questions that arise in the article, especially those that indicate the nature of the society, and again land has been seen as the root cause for ethnic power-relations, or inequality, on whom, why, and how one occupies it with those who were rendered voiceless. Here, I can point out that confrontation does not necessarily mean physical confrontation. Instead, it refers to conflicting class interests and social aspirations. Some of these conflicts result from issues relating to public policy and ethnicity on land use. With the dominance of landlords in the economy and the decisionmaking

process, ethnicity has remained a decisive factor that continues to shape the contours of land ownership and power relations. It is evident today that powerful ethnic groups continue to be instrumental in the formulation of the laws that govern the land, understand the system of land administration, distribution, and consequently use it for their own benefit to the disadvantage of the weak. Again, whatever nomadic land rights they had before Botswana was colonised, following independence Basarwa have been under threat from various land reforms, wildlife conservation strategies and the expansion of the cattle economy. The growing human pressure near boreholes and the introduction of the NPAD have also depleted plant and game resources and thus undermined the hunting-gathering economy of the Basarwa who still depend largely on veldt products for food and shelter. Furthermore, Basarwa do not have access to water resources and grazing land, so they find it difficult to keep cattle even if they do acquire them (Ruele 2006:171). There is also a lack of Basarwa representation in the institutions that administer and allocate land. Basarwa are not even represented on the Land Boards which are responsible for tribal land. It is important to note that, under the customary law, ownership of land control of the land was vested in the chief as the trustee for the people (Government No 2, 1998.2). Even though this may have changed, chiefs as traditional authorities still play an important role in land administration as overseers. Regrettably, Basarwa, do not have their own chiefs. Only recently a single mosarwa headman of *New Xade* Kgosi Beslag was appointed and elevated to the house of chiefs. The main problem, however, is that Kgosi Beslag does not represent all Basarwa in Botswana other than those of *New Xade*. My argument, therefore, is that without these important institutions of representative democracy, Basarwa views and aspirations are not directly communicated to government, nor indeed are government decisions communicated to them in their own language, or in a satisfactory way. This therefore, renders them voiceless.

### **What is public theology and how can it help restore the voice of Basarwa in post-independent Botswana?**

In order to show how public theology is a tool of economic empowerment for the voiceless in post-independent Botswana, it is important first to define it and explain how it functions. According to Pearson (2008), public theology unlike other types of theology, does not seek to “convert”, but is concerned with the secular wellbeing of society. In this way, it provides resources for people to make connections between their faith and the practical issues facing society. It is concerned with the “public relevance” of Christian beliefs and doctrines. It is in this process that public theology can engage with the social, political and spiritual issues of the day, bringing a coherent Christian perspective to bear upon public policy and cultural discourse. Public theology does this by formulating biblical and theological coherent perspectives on complex, social, spiritual and moral questions by effectively engaging in the moral and political debate that informs public policy. By public policy I refer to “whatever governments choose to do or not to do”, including both procedural policies (how decisions are reached) and substantive policies (what decisions are reached), (Dye 1975:518). Public theology through faith brings the ethical role for consideration in public policy and also attempts to show how ethics and politics relate, particularly in a democratic state. Peter Scott et al (2008) argues that, for “faith” to assimilate into public project, we must insist on it being a matter of public discourse and not just private dispositions. This brings about what ED Knudson (2009) calls public theological inquiry, which brings about several fresh and important ways, and experiences of particularised groups, each putting forward a theology from within their own experience, such as feminist theology, black theology, environmental theology, gay theology, and so forth. Much good has come of this. However, I believe it is now also time for those within voiceless communities such as Basarwa to draw on these diverse resources of “public” theological discourse with the scriptures and the history of the church as major resources. It is hoped that there can be a discussion of public theology from here (and in many other forums and efforts) that can contribute to justice and peace for the benefit of Basarwa who are voiceless (Browning & Fiorenza 1992). This starting point for public theology to help give Basarwa their voice is the realisation that natural theology, or any talk of God that is meant to benefit the people, must be based on public evidence and resources of what is actually happening on the ground. Therefore, when engaging in a public theological reflection of the causes of Basarwa voicelessness, it becomes clear that loss of the Basarwa voice of protest, demand for land and liberation on the basis of their religious-cultural beliefs, like those of the Israelites when in exile, is indeed seasoned, and that only perseverance and understanding of the root cause of this problem through public theological approaches can overcome their despair (Bruggemann 1984:15). Fortunately, today Basarwa are beginning to be proud of their ancestry and are increasingly seeing it as an important part of their self identity. This is also something that has slowly restored their voice even to protest. Their successful legal battle against relocation from the CKGR has also boosted their confidence. By resisting relocation

from the CKGR, Basarwa high regard for the land as a site of resistance, context for liberation has also grown and intensified and somewhat made their lonely voices audible. It would argue that public theology as a theory and social discourse can therefore build on this achievement to amplify the Basarwa “silent voice” through showing how having land or not, leads to voicelessness. It can also show the connection between economic exploitation of the land and natural resources as a result of the desire to make a profit, as well as how the weak and the poor are often driven out of their habitat for the sake of “development” (Gill 1985:431). I therefore agree that, since the land and other natural resources are involved, liberation of, or for creation, becomes necessary. As Moltmann (1977) puts it,

We shall not be able to achieve social justice without justice for the natural environment;  
we shall not be able to achieve justice for nature without social justice.

In this case public theology can help articulate the realities and plight of Basarwa in post-independent Botswana. Through its methodologies, public theology can interact socioeconomic and political processes of Basarwa in both the sacred and public space. This will help equip Christian faith communities, civil society and leaders to critique all the political processes and social challenges leading to economic disempowerment of indigenous communities.

The scared space, church in particular, will as David Ford (1997:725) notes constantly meet and respond thoughtfully to the challenges of their faith. Such challenges may encourage larger, more intelligent, or more practical faith. Since the church understands how the vital human issues of personhood, self-worth, and dignity of people from its perspective of Biblical anthropology embedded in God’s salvific act in Christ, namely, the restoration of humanness and how these relate to land, it can work hard to modify the existing conceptual frameworks within the field of theology in general by making them responsive and accountable to the demands of Basarwa, which are attuned to theocracy, or true democracy in Botswana (August 2001:287-296). Similar to the previous point, the church, through public theological discourse, will encourage tolerance among different ethnic groups to live together peacefully by equally sharing the land, and petition the government of Botswana for the return of the lost land, or at least help Basarwa get compensation. It is highly commendable that the Christian faith communities in Botswana are not divided along racial, cultural and ethnic lines. The church can therefore play an undisputedly major role in construing the politics of diversity and land ownership by all ethnic groups in Botswana. And, importantly, the church can educate Basarwa and other marginalised groups of people that they have responsibilities and obligations tied to the land. According to August (2001:295) the public role of the church (*of critical and constructive collaboration*) should entail assisting in the consolidation of democracy. Tolerance and respect are vital manifestations of how the church, through public theology, can help consolidate the gains of peace, democracy and economic empowerment in Botswana, as well as grant all those who are voiceless the opportunity to speak for their rights. It could do this by urging the government to legislate for the rights of Basarwa rights to the land, or claim those that are written into the Bill of Rights of our constitution. Ecclesiologically, the church of the poor is nearest to the people and the land. It understands their humiliation, marginality and rejection. It can therefore be in solidarity with them, or can easily articulate their concerns. The theme of liberation in the Bible, which was a familiar voice at the height of the anti-colonial struggle, could also be used as a viable formula for advancing the interests of Basarwa and at the same time grant them a voice. I wish to note that, the land must be seen as a “space” “site” or a “social context”, which is very significant for a public theological discourse. My argument is that through the methods of public theological discourse, a hierarchy of knowledge, economic power, class and ethnic background in acquiring land which will not disadvantage other groups will be revealed.

## **Conclusion**

In drawing conclusions on the basis of the above points, I wish to reiterate that the land question in Southern Africa, which is as old as colonial history, has always been at the centre of ethnicity, power relations and voicelessness. That is why it has always constituted an integral part of the struggle for conquest, domination and resistance, as shown first in the Dutch-Khoisan war of 1657 and subsequent wars that followed it (Wilson 1975:13). Whereas in the case of pre and post-independent Botswana there had never been any direct confrontation, a similar scenario occurred with dominant groups dispossessing Basarwa of the ancestral land and at the same time rendering them voiceless. One can therefore argue and conclude that there is an indirect link between the unfair distribution of the land and Basarwa voicelessness as well as the socioeconomic political injustice and ethnic power relations in post-independent Botswana. As I come to the end of this, I therefore want to restate my basic

argument: that land is a space and development problem, not just a piece of hard crust on which people live. Land is like a stage on which all human activities revolve – from birth to death. Having land can certainly grant someone the voice, whereas not having it can lead to voicelessness. It is unfortunate that the Basarwa loss of land has not only led them to poverty, but also voicelessness. The main focus in this, therefore, has been Basarwa's right to occupy and reclaim their lost ancestral lands. I therefore conclude this by noting that a social context, which is characterised by landlessness and poverty as is the case with Basarwa, leads to voicelessness and therefore, necessitates a process informed by a public theological hermeneutics in order to grant Basarwa a voice in post-independent Botswana.

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