

# SOCIAL EXCLUSION, MARGINALIZATION AND THE THREAT OF EXTINCTION OF ETHNIC MONORITIES: A CASE OF THE BATWA COMMUNITY IN UGANDA

Emmanuel Turyatunga <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Center For Basic Research, Kampala, Uganda.

<sup>a</sup> Corresponding author: eturyatunga@yahoo.co.uk

© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print)  
ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

**Abstract:** While the rest of the world enjoys the fruits of technological advancement, economic growth, better social services, and improved standards of living generally, there are some groups of people that continue to languish in forgotten corners of the world. Using the Batwa case, this paper is concerned with the minorities who have been excluded from mainstream development, and whose very existence is under threat. The Uganda Land Alliance for Coalition of Pastoral Civil Society Organizations (COPACSO) has warned that the few thousand Batwa of Uganda are in danger of extinction.

This paper is situated within the context of sustainable human development, with a specific focus on the developing world. The author believes human development should be rooted within the grassroots communities and that it should be holistic/integral – taking care of all dimensions of a human being, such as the economic, social, political, cultural, religious, and ideological aspects.

While minority groups like People Living With Disabilities and Homosexuals, have human rights organizations fighting for their rights, the voice of the Batwa is so faint that many people do not even know they exist. Apparently the Batwa have continued to lag behind in terms of access to medical and educational services, as well as other programs meant to improve the lives of Ugandans. Striking among the key issues presented in this paper is the feeling expressed by some Batwa that their whole community is going to die of HIV/AIDS.

The significance of this paper is to give a deeper understanding of the vulnerability of the minority peoples in the developing world. The issues raised are expected to trigger a critical debate, thereby initiating the process of dialogue on the protection of minority indigenous communities in the developing

world, alongside their cultures, in order to bring about sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Minorities, Social Exclusion, Sustainable Development, Uganda

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the big news is global climatic change, politics, terrorism, economics, technology, and sports. The attention being given to scientific discoveries, as well as inventions and innovations in fashion, is incredible. However, there are some indigenous groups of people that are dying out of the scene through a seemingly unstoppable process that is continuing almost unnoticed.

In developing countries, the plight of such minority peoples is worsened by poverty, poor medical services, bad politics, low levels of education, and poor infrastructure. Despite the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, some minority groups in the Third World continue to stagger under the weight of backwardness, poverty and disease. If the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are meant to ensure sustainable and integral human development, are to be fully realized, there must be deliberate efforts put into the protection of these minority groups.

This paper mainly analyses the socio-economic dynamics surrounding the life of the Batwa community in Uganda, with the aim of unveiling the glaring danger facing minority peoples, but also suggesting solutions that can be adopted to address the situation. The paper also aims at initiating a critical debate on the subject of the protection of minority indigenous communities and their cultures as part of sustainable development processes in the developing world.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The findings delivered in this paper are results from an informal investigation conducted by the author among the Batwa settlements in 5 villages of Kirundo sub-county, Kisoro District (namely: Higabiro, Nyabaremura, Kashija, Rushaga and Kanyamahene), as well as Kisoro Town. Participant observation, informant discussions, informal meetings, as well as some interviews with researchers, Batwa leaders and other resourceful people (teachers, health workers, and religious leaders) were the main data collection methods. The author also conducted a review of some related literature, though it must be acknowledged that little has been written about Batwa.

## III. CONCEPT OF MINORITIES IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The term 'minority' is often used by social scientists to refer to a sociological group that does not constitute a politically dominant voting majority of the total population of a given society. Such groups may not necessarily be few numerically, but they may have subnormal representation on various fora in society, thus limiting their voice and participation in the development process.

Members of minority groups are prone to different treatment in the various societies they live in and in most cases they are discriminated against or at least they believe so. Their rights are always at stake. Different societies where minorities find themselves have different social structures that often suppress them. This is why, since the 20th century, the term "minority group" has often occurred alongside a discourse of civil rights and collective rights.

In socioeconomics, the term "minority" typically refers to a socially subordinate or disadvantaged ethnic group, viewed in terms of language, nationality, religion, and culture. They are often characterized by poverty, low social status, low levels of education, limited access to employment, and inaccessibility to political power. Thus, we can talk of groups like refugees, people living with disabilities, "economic minorities" (those working in poor conditions or the unemployed), "age minorities" (those who are younger or older than a typical working age), gender and sexual minorities, or ethnic and religious minorities. In recent years, some other social groups have also attempted to present themselves as an oppressed minority, such as homosexuals and lesbians.

## IV. THE BATWA COMMUNITIES IN AFRICA

The Batwa community is currently one of the few surviving forest populations. According to Kenrick (2000), the three largest groups of Forest Peoples who still, to a great extent, retain their forest resource

base are: the Mbuti (and Efe) of the Ituri Forest in the DR Congo, the Baka of South Eastern Cameroon and North Western Congo Brazzaville, and the Aka (and Mbendjelle) of Northern Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic.

The Batwa are part of the pygmoid race distributed in many parts of East and Central Africa. Anthropological studies reveal that in different countries they are known by different names – in Uganda (Abatwa, Abayanda, Mbouti, Baswa), Gabon (Bongo), Cameroon (Tikar, Gieli, Baka, Aka), Rwanda (Batwa, Impuyu), Burundi (Batwa), Tanzania (Batwa), Central African Republic (Baka, Aka, Babinga, Bi-Aka), Zaire – D.R.C (Mbouti, Efe, Basua, Twa, Cwa), and Congo Brazzaville (Twa, Bambedjelle). All these are collectively given one term – "Pygmies".

The word "pygmy" is an academic term that was introduced by colonial anthropologists to refer to "the small-stature hunter-gatherer peoples of the Equatorial forests and adjoining areas across central Africa" (Jerome 2000, p.6). This term has been used in a derogatory context to imply that these people are uncivilized. Batwa pygmies are believed to have been the original occupants of Central Africa before its invasion by agricultural Bantu peoples.

## V. THE BATWA IN UGANDA

In Uganda, Batwa settlements are in the districts of Kabale, Kisoro, Bundibugyo and Kanungu. While no accurate statistics about the number of Batwa in Uganda exist, they are estimated to be a few thousands. Batwa are thin and short (3 ½ to 4 ½ feet tall) though a few may prove otherwise due to intermarriages and environmental changes. They have short-coiled hair, very thick eyebrows and straightened eyelashes, plus round faces. Men have hairy bodies especially arms, legs and chests. In the remote past they used to clothe themselves in animal skin, and plant leaves woven on strings round the waist, but today they are seen in dirty old clothes.

According to United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda (2009) the Batwa are former inhabitants of the Bwindi, Mgahinga and Echuya forests. Today, the Batwa live as a leaderless society, staying in a distance less than 10 Kilometers from these forests. Traditionally, the forest environment used to help them develop skill in bow and arrow shooting, which made them prominent in the early Bantu wars in the region (Bakesigaki, 1994). They were however displaced from these forests by the government in the early 1990s. The drastic change to their lifestyle, along with their small number and despised status, has brought the Ugandan Batwa close to being wiped out (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).

### 5.1. Economic Situation and Livelihoods

While Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures are shooting through the roof in many countries, there are some minority groups that continue to live and die in absolute poverty. The Batwa are one example. Except for exceptional cases, most Batwa have no official sources of income. Traditionally, they used to survive on hunting and gathering of fruits, roots, nuts, insects, meat, and honey, but today, after being ejected out of forests, they mainly depend on entertaining people through music and dance, providing manual labor and begging. Others survive on hand-outs from neighbors, which they supplement with sales of animal meat poached from the forest.

The ejection of the Batwa into a non-forested environment, without giving them an alternative has strongly affected their way of life, and livelihoods, thus threatening their very existence. Currently their nutrition is poor, with a good number of them malnourished. Unlike the non-Batwa who were compensated, the Batwa as a collectivity and as individuals have not been compensated for their loss of territory (forests) (United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda, 2009).

In terms of education and human resource, the situation is worrying. According to the informants interviewed in this investigation, there is no Mutwa who has a university degree or a diploma. Most of them drop out of school while still in lower primary school because of inferiority complex as well as lack of funds to buy school uniform, food, books and other scholastic materials.

There are many programs that the government of Uganda has come up with under its Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) to improve the lives of the population. These include 'Entandikwa' scheme in the 1990s and the current "*Bona Bagawale*" ('Prosperity For All') program. Most of these programs involve giving start-up capital to individuals and groups and they have been heavily supported by the international (donor) community and thus huge sums of money have come into the country in form of foreign aid. However, most of these programs seem to be leaving the Batwa community unreached.

It is worth noting that in Kisoro, the Batwa have received some help from Muhabura Diocese (Church of Uganda) in terms of school fees for a few of their children. The Batwa of Southern Uganda also received some Assistance from Mugahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation trust (MBIFCT) in terms of land for settlement, iron sheets, seed, and farm tools. However, Kenrick (2000) observes that there was a small group of Batwa (ca. 600-1000 people, less than one percent of

the total target population) in the project areas of these interventions, though the numbers of Batwa in the project area were subsequently more accurately estimated by Kabanankye and Wily as being around 1,771 in 403 households (Kabanankye and Wily, 1996).

### 5.2. The Health Situation

In this age of science and medicine, many Batwa continue to die of preventable and treatable diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. In recent years, the Ugandan N.R.M government has started sensitizing the Batwa community about the importance of immunization of children and bringing the sick and pregnant women to Health Centers, but this has been on a very small scale and the impact is almost insignificant. According to the health workers talked to, most Batwa families only bring patients or pregnant women to health facilities when their condition has already degenerated to a level where it is almost impossible to be remedied.

Among the Batwa communities in Uganda, smoking tobacco and marijuana, as well as alcohol consumption has been elevated almost to the level of divine tradition. The Batwa talked to in Kisoro during this investigation estimated that about 8 out of every 10 Batwa drink alcohol and smoke tobacco, including children, and that about a quarter of the Batwa population smoke marijuana. This is worsened by the fact that marijuana is accessible since some local farmers have continued to plant and preserve it, claiming they use it as medicine for livestock and poultry.

The maternal health of the Batwakazi (Batwa women) is at stake. A casual interview with a few women revealed that out of 12 births, about 10 are live births, 2 are stillbirths, only 5 reach their first birthday, and only 2 or 3 reach the age of 15. According to the health workers interviewed, most Batwakazi do not know about prenatal, delivery and postnatal services; only those with serious complications are sometimes brought to the health centers. This is a situation that deserves urgent attention if sustainable human development is to be achieved.

While the rest of the world is moving forward with scientific diagnosis, medication, treatment and prevention of disease, the Batwa still have superstitious beliefs concerning illness and disease. Till now, most of them do not believe that diseases per se (without spiritual power behind) can kill anyone. Apparently, epidemics like dysentery and measles have been razing Batwa families without them going to hospitals because they attribute such sicknesses to witchcraft, curses ("Amahano"), or angry ancestors. A spiritual cause is attached even to

sicknesses like polio. As a result, the Batwa still seek solutions from local healers and witchdoctors.

However, one admirable aspect about Batwa in relation to health is some scientific knowledge they possess about plants/herbs with some medicinal value. For example, in Kirundo sub-county (Kisoro District), Batwa are well known for using and supplying “Nyakibazi” (a common de-worming plant) and “Omubirizi” (a herb that cures malaria). This could be a good starting point for any organization wishing to start a health intervention among the Batwa communities.

Another fascinating reality concerns their superb sight. For example during this investigation, it was proved that a Mutwa is able to see a honey ant (tiny as it is) and follow it for several miles until it lands on the ground and then he/she goes on the exact spot and extracts honey from there. As per now, I do not have a clear explanation for their extraordinary sight, but we could probably attribute it to very good diet – fruits, vegetables, and forest meat they had in the past.

### 5.3. The Batwa in the face of the HIV/AIDS Threat

When it comes to HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), the Batwa are exposed to a high risk of acquiring these infections. High risk cultural practices such as widow inheritance are still prevailing almost unabated. Promiscuity is also being perpetuated by many factors, including poverty. Voluntary Testing and Counseling (VCT) Services seem not to be known in most Batwa communities.

In many parts of Uganda, there is a myth that sleeping with a Mutwakazi cures certain sicknesses such as asthma. You will hear many people say to someone with asthma “Gyeenda otambukiye omutwakazi” (meaning “Go and skip a Mutwa woman”), which in actual sense implies having sex with her. Besides there is a belief that Batwa do not have HIV since they are thought to be primitive, ugly, and living far away from urban centres. So many non-Batwa are turning to them for unprotected sex thinking they are safe and because the Batwa are poor, they just accept to offer sex for little money or little alcohol.

The above situation has increased the level of desperation and recklessness among the Batwa who now believe they are all infected with HIV. According to one Mutwa leader who preferred anonymity, “the Batwa community is one big sexual network”. There is a danger of extinction by HIV/AIDS if the Batwa are allowed to remain cocooned in their hidden corners.

### 5.4. The Social-Cultural Situation

At a workshop entitled: “Towards the Batwa Development and Participation, which was held at Whitehorse Inn, in Kabale (4th – 8th May 1999), Kabanukye gave a descriptive analysis of the Batwa way of life. Batwa are organized into clans and families that are distinct. Marriages are arranged across clans from the neighborhood or distant places, such that none of the same clan marry. However, today, problems like divorce, infidelity, rape and incest, which were hitherto unheard of are becoming more and more common, due to cultural erosion.

The Batwa have suffered and continue to suffer irreparable harm to their basic rights and integrity and their very existence as a physical and cultural entity is gravely threatened (United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda, 2009). This has resulted into a severe problem of low-self esteem. For instance when referring to non-Batwa, they say: “*Tatabuja*” (master) and “*Mamabuja*” (mistress), which almost reflects a slave-master relationship. The problem of inferiority complex has not only affected the Batwa relationship with other tribes, it has also affected their participation in the few projects and other interventions targeting the area.

Batwa-Bairu (non-Batwa) relations is an important aspect to look at especially that cultural harmony has continuously become difficult to achieve in many parts of the developing world, with examples among the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, the Hema and Lendu in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, not to mention the bloody clashes in India and Somalia. In Uganda, the Batwa-Bairu relationship is marked by inferiority and superiority complexes, respectively, which sometimes has been resulting into hostility between the two.

The Batwa live in horrible housing conditions. You will find the whole family of a Mutwa staying in the same hut that is at the same time used for cooking, keeping property, and sheltering poultry. So in most cases, the husband, wife, children, babies, poultry, and property find themselves piled in the same hut. Here the issue of privacy for the husband and wife becomes a critical issue. One would wonder how, then, Batwa couples have sex in such conditions. During this investigation, all informants questioned the possibility of sex being played by couples in the hut at night because there the whole family just sleeps on a mat at random.

It was found out that when the couple wants to have sex (mainly when a Mutwakazi wishes to conceive) they have intercourse during the day in the bush or in the hut when children are away. A Mutwakazi always

has a way of detecting the period when she can conceive and so she informs the husband. Sometimes the couple goes somewhere and comes back very late at night and play sex on the way when no one is looking on. This offers partial explanation for the common belief that no Mutwakazi can conceive from her hut. It was discovered that actually this myth was created many years ago to discourage Batwa couples from playing sex in the presence of children.

It was established that all over Uganda, Batwa do not want or even expect any non-Mutwa to witness the delivery process of their baby. For this reason Batwakazi who are in labor always hide and deliver from the bush, not in their huts or medical facilities. It is claimed by the Batwa that if any Mwairu discovers the delivery spot of a Mutwa or looks at a Mutwakazi giving birth, he/she obtains power to use it in witchcraft, magic and traditional healing. On the other hand, the Bairu claim that any of them who looks at a Mutwakazi delivering or even looks at the delivery site will get tormented by "Amahano" (curses) and bad omen.

There is also a widespread belief that Batwa children are born blind and that they gain sight only after 4-7 days. However, one medical personnel who works at Rubuguri Health Center, in Kisoro, dismissed the idea. This health worker has worked as a midwife since early 1980s and she explained how for a while she took time to examine the eyes of the few Batwa babies whose birth she witnessed, only to find out they were normal just like those of non-Batwa. It may be concluded that this myth resulted from the problem of Batwa-Bairu relations. Because the Batwa sight is believed to be very excellent, non-Batwa found this myth a real tool to psychologically torture and disarm the Batwa.

## VI. THE WAY FORWARD

### 6.1. Need for Recognition

According to the African commission on Human and Peoples' Rights & International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (2009), minority people's major longing is a strong request for recognition and respect, as well as a call for improved protection of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. They need the right to live as a people and to have a say in their own future, based on their own culture, identity, hopes and visions. Indigenous peoples, moreover, wish to exercise these rights within the institutional framework of the nation-state to which they belong.

The problem of inferiority complex, which cuts across most of these minority groups needs to be dealt with. For example, as already noted, the term "Batwa" is used in a derogatory sense, though the original meaning of the word was positive. The word

"Abatwa" originated from the Kinyarwanda-Kifumbira word "Abatware" (which refers to chiefs). The term "Abatwa" is thus a coined word whose meaning is directly opposite that of the term from which it was derived. This investigation indicated that these hunter-gatherers in Uganda prefer being called "Abayanda". It is recommended that more research be conducted so that they can be constitutionally recognized by the name of their choice. Recognition of who they are opens the doors for fruitful dialogue.

It is important that the image that early researchers painted on the Batwa community be revisited since ages have passed and vital changes have taken place. Colonial anthropologists were given a biased view and so they wrote about Batwa as sub-human and very primitive beings. Till this day, they are still taken to be lazy, sub-developed, dirty, unintelligent, and uncultured, yet their present way of life suggests otherwise. The reality is that these people are not lazy; they are only disadvantaged. They are also not unintelligent, as they are portrayed to be, since those in school compete favorably with the rest. Instead, the Batwa possess some of the most admirable characteristics of human beings, such as the superb sight already described.

### 6.2. Empowerment and Provision of Social Services

The role of the international community in triggering development in the Third World countries cannot be underestimated, but there are certain latent social-cultural and economic realities, which if not taken into consideration, will continue to frustrate the efforts of Uganda's development partners. For instance it should be noted that the Batwa are still suspicious about the agenda of foreigners who come to visit or work with them. It is recommended that the Government or any other actor that goes to implement any intervention among them works through their opinion leaders. For example in Rubuguri (Kisoro), the MBIFCT resettlement project was welcomed by the Batwa because it was implemented through indigenous people that the community trusted.

The Batwa everywhere are known to be good entertainers. They are specially talented in music and dance. One of the ways of boosting their income is giving them more skills in that direction as well as exposing their talent to the rest of the world. Individual Batwa could be helped to record their music. They can also be encouraged to form new or join existing music and drama groups. Then arrangements can be made for them to make performances in different parts of the country and even beyond. This would not only give them some income; it would also boost their ego as well as divert

them from idleness, alcohol and drugs. It is recommended that some Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) come up and take the lead in this empowerment.

The Batwa and other indigenous communities need to be sensitized on the importance of education, but also assisted with school fees and other scholastic materials. It is also recommended that adult education programs be arranged for the adult Batwa that may not feel comfortable going back to ordinary schools with their children. Since the Batwa tend to be good in what requires hands-on-skills, vocational education should be promoted amongst their communities. The Government should plan to establish some schools that are tailored to the circumstances and needs of the Batwa.

The health situation calls for urgent intervention. Massive sensitization needs to be done in the area of immunization, HIV testing, maternal health, and so on. There are several Community-Based Organizations (C.B.Os) such as Community Basic Health Care (C.B.H.C) already existing in the areas where Batwa live. These could be partnered with so that their various health programs and activities can be extended to Batwa populations. It is also recommended that the Government and other actors come in to arrange for medical outreach programs that target finding the Batwa in their communities. These programs can have two components – that of providing the services, and that of providing information (sensitization). It goes without saying that in such programs, HIV/AIDS should take a centre stage since it constitutes the greatest threat to their health.

### 6.3. Recommendations to the Government of Uganda

It is important that technical personnel conduct empirical research that involves on-site visits to have an in-depth study the situation of the Batwa in order to get first hand information that can help the government make appropriate legislative provisions that protect the Batwa and other minority groups. The government needs to be assisted to adopt urgent and longer-term measures to secure the rights and well-being of the Batwa as well as other marginalized communities. Generally, the government should make special policies for all marginalized and minority groups just as it has done for the refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

The government needs to institute a clear system of sharing the various benefits accruing from the use of resources in those forest areas that the Batwa were evicted from, which are now tourist attractions and big-time foreign revenue earners for the country. The income from the three forests they were evicted from

should provide funds to compensate the Batwa and other vulnerable indigenous peoples that were affected.

The government can further empower the Batwa economically by promoting agriculture amongst their populations. This can be done through providing farming equipment, crop seed, resistant livestock varieties, agricultural extension services, as well as veterinary services. Model projects to demonstrate modern agricultural practices can also be set up in the areas where the Batwa live for their communities to learn from and be encouraged to imitate.

Finally, it is the role of the government to involve and encourage traditional/indigenous leadership and other indigenous management structures in order to increase community participation and informed consent on all matters affecting their lives. Government programmes aimed at increasing participation of minorities in leadership and decision-making processes at the community and national level should be promoted. This would greatly empower the Batwa and other minority groups, thus promoting sustainable development.

### REFERENCES

- [1] African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights & International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (2009): Report of the African Commission's working group on Indigenous Populations/ Communities Research and Information Visit to the Republic of Uganda (14-17, 24-29 July 2006).
- [2] Bakesigaki Aloysius (1994): The Batwa South of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park.
- [3] Kabanukye I. B. Kabann (1999): Abayanda [Batwa Pygmies]; Social Economic Survey.
- [4] Kabanukye Kabann & Liz Wily (1996): Report on a Study of the Abayanda (Batwa) Pygmies of South West Uganda, for Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust.
- [5] Kenrick Justin (2000): The Batwa of South West Uganda; World Bank Policy on Indigenous Peoples and the Conservation of the Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks, Bank Information Center, Washington, DC, USA.
- [6] Lewis Jerome (2000): The Batwa Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region. Published by M.R.G, U.K.
- [7] Minority Rights Group International (2008): World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Uganda: Batwa, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749c92c.html> (accessed on 31 March 2010).
- [8] United Organization for Batwa Development in Uganda (2009): Urgent Communication to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental

Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples Concerning the  
Situation of the Batwa Indigenous People of  
Southwest Uganda, Forest People's Program.

