Conservation, Development, and Dispossession: The implications of UNESCO World Heritage designation for the Bayei people in the Okavango Delta, Botswana

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Introduction

In December of 2012, I visited the village of Jao for the first time. The village, located on a small patch of dry land deep in the heart of the Okavango Delta in Northern Botswana, is one of the only remaining settlements in the Delta’s interior and all residents are members of the water-based Bayei tribe. Jao is also one of the few settlements located within the boundaries of a recent World Heritage site designation of the Okavango Delta by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). While much attention has been paid to the unique ecological qualities of this immense and pristine wetland, far less is known about the people of the region, including the Bayei people whose livelihoods and cultural identities are tied to the Delta’s waters. As one Bayei woman said, for them, “water is life.” The Bayei constitute approximately 40% of the population of the Okavango Delta region, but are an ethnic minority in Botswana more broadly. Many Bayei people consider Jao to be their homeland, even if they no longer reside there. But, as the population of the village had dwindled to just 229 residents in recent years (Botswana Census Bureau 2011), many Bayei fear that Jao is on the brink of disappearance.

On that first trip, it took nearly four hours to get from the village of Etsha 6 to Jao by way of an old motorboat, owned by my guide, John. John, a Bayei man who lives in Etsha 6, was born at Jao and has many family members that still live there. He slowly guided the boat through narrow paths of tall papyrus and grasses, and by pods of hippopotamus in open
lagoons. After setting up our campsite on the edge of the village, we visited with the local headman and other elders, and I was quickly introduced to a man who gave his age as 102-years-old. Not wanting to take much of this man’s time, I asked him only one question, “How has this village changed over the course of your life here?” He immediately responded that he is the last person who was born at Jao that would also die there. He went on to tell me that the government will begin to force people to relocate from Jao to the dryland edges of the Delta in the coming years, and that when they do so, it will be the same as throwing the residents of Jao away “like trash.” It was in that moment that I knew this story – the story of Jao and the Bayei people who call it home— is one I would tell. But to understand the story of this place, and the concerns people have for its future, you have to understand the longer histories of conservation, development, and dispossession in Botswana.

This paper presents qualitative findings on the Bayei people and their concerns for Jao from a research project conducted from 2012-2014. It situates these findings within the long histories of marginalization of ethnic minorities in Botswana and practices of conservation- and development-related dispossession in the country. In so doing, this paper makes three contributions. 1) It presents new knowledge about the Bayei tribe and Jao, both of which have received little attention from social scientists. This adds an often-missing social dimension to understandings of the Okavango Delta. 2) By connecting the World Heritage designation of the Okavango Delta to the histories of marginalization and dispossession in Botswana, it shows the importance of understanding local contexts and implications of World Heritage sites. 3) It makes recommendations for the creation of more inclusive policies related to the World Heritage designation of the Okavango Delta, with lessons for designations more broadly.