

THE BATWA IN BWINDI ARE MORE THREATENED BY COVID-19

State of The Batwa before the Corona virus Pandemic

In Uganda and globally, when one mentions Bwindi impenetrable national park all that goes to our mind is the fascinating beautiful human like apes the gorillas. This however isn't enough for we always the indigenous Batwa of south west Uganda who lived and managed these gorillas even before the impenetrable national park was gazetted. We forget that park gazettelement led to the Batwa being chased out of their ancestral land without compensation or skills to live outside the forests.

We further forget that also the gazettelement of the park wasn't because of the Batwa activities because the Batwa never cut timber, they never logged, they weren't burning charcoal and later alone cultivating. Activities like cultivating, lumbering logging, poaching etc that could have spurred gazettelement were actually carried out by the 'civilized' Bakiga, Bafumbira and other foreigners. The Batwa were simple fruit gatherers and hunters using rudimental tools not the sharp snares and guns used today and had lived with gorillas for hundreds of years in the same ecosystem without hurting or even endangering them. If they had managed the resources poorly may be wouldn't be talking about gorillas today for, they lived with them longer, and conserved gorillas when all the PHD primatologists were never in existence.

It is the fear of the poaching cartels involved in Illegal Wildlife Trade that the Batwa were not part of and the fear that this together with an increased population could lead to environmental and forest degradation destroying the forests that parks were gazetted for purposes of conservation and tourism. This made conservationists and governments make a case that for the forests to be safer, then the indigenous Batwa had to be evicted from the forests. These forests were their natural habitats and a place they called home and therefore by evicting them it meant they were left landless and homeless leaving them as beggars and dejects in local communities.

As I put this to paper, I know I am going for a polarized and global debate because globally, the position of indigenous people in conservation and tourism development debates is highly polarized for they have always been victims of conservation and tourism development processes. They are always dispossessed of their land/homes by governments and powerful consortiums of conservation tourism organizations. The Batwa haven't survived this narrative either, the establishment of Bwindi and Mgahinga as National Parks that are under Uganda Wildlife Authority and powerful tourism consortiums forcibly excluded the Batwa from the forests. They have since been marginalized, remain landless and have become squatters on other people's lands and many times live at the mercy of Non-Governmental and charity Organizations for land and food. These challenges have remained eminent whenever the talk about Batwa and other indigenous peoples are discussed.

However, even with their future bleak in a period of 30 years off their original land/home (The forests) the Batwa had started to make progress thanks to their resilience and a big body of knowledge about the landscapes in which they live. Some of them had started attaining formal education, Others worked as tour guides, potters, basket and mat weaving organizations, in the entertainment industry Etc.

The lockdown Effects on the Batwa communities.

Unfortunately, as they tried to cope up with the hard conditions brought about the dispossession of their homes/land and abuse of their rights COVID19 hit the world. The pandemic hit both the privileged and the under privileged, the poor and the rich, the young and the old but of Course hit and still hits the indigenous Batwa more than any group around the Bwindi-Muglinga conservation area. The Batwa who had gained from the selling of Non-Timber Products like honey, crafts and baskets to the tourists were the first ones to suffer the consequences of closing of boarders and the prolonged primate tourism prohibition in Uganda. They therefore lost their livelihood and couldn't turn to farming like their non-Batwa counterparts who then resorted to farming since they had their own unlike the landless Batwa.

A study that we conducted as the African initiative on and food security and environment on the effects of Covid-19 on the communities around the Bwindi Muglinga found out that the Batwa were majorly impacted even discriminately by hotel owners, business men, crafts shopkeepers and even civil society organizations regarding the immediate effects of the lockdown. As companies reduced their staff the Batwa were never included amongst the staff that would working, companies rather favored to remain with other tribes apart from Batwa. It was discovered that the Batwa were never given contracts by their employees yet the same employees gave the other tribes contracts of the same staff level. They were further never enrolled to the National Social Security Fund to benefit from their employees for social security. All these made it easy for their layoff the moment the lockdown was put in place.

This layoff of the Batwa employees made it even worse for the information sharing that is vital during the pandemic period. This mainly because many of them would get information from their work places and were now stationed at their homes where they couldn't even get information due to the fact that most of them didn't have information devices like phones radio and Tv sets and couldn't afford the cost of newspapers. They therefore resorted to receiving information through third parties and most often were taken advantage of and became the highest consumers fake news and misinformation. Those that could access radios sets would gather to get information violating the preventive measure of social distancing.

These conditions further exposed them to poverty and idleness and men resorted to alcohol and out of desperation they have resorted to Domestic Violence incidence that continue to raise as a result of lockdown measures and lack of jobs and poverty.

These injustices continue to expose industry, employers, local/National governments, conservationists and the discrimination that exists in the society against the indigenous Batwa and the quicker we fix these challenges the better for the conservation and tourism for we can't enjoy the fruits of tourism while covering up for injustice in perpetuity.

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