

San Musical Futures

ETHNOGRAPHIC VIDEO 1 – CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS

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Botswana.

A country often celebrated for its political stability and economic success.

Since independence in 1966, it has been recognised for its democratic continuity, economic growth, and adherence to the rule of law. Diamond mining, cattle farming, and eco-cultural tourism have positioned Botswana as one of Africa's most prosperous nations per capita.

Yet this national narrative sits alongside a more uneven reality.

For many Indigenous communities, prosperity has not translated into political inclusion or economic security.

Among these communities are the San, widely regarded as the oldest continuous inhabitants of southern Africa. Across Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Angola, and Zimbabwe, San communities have sustained distinctive languages, ecological knowledge systems, and musical traditions for thousands of years. Botswana is home to the largest San population in the region.

Despite this long presence, the relationship between the San and the modern Botswana state has been shaped by dispossession, relocation, and exclusion. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, San communities were forcibly removed from ancestral territories, most notably from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Hunting bans and conservation policies criminalised subsistence practices that had sustained San livelihoods for generations.

Rather than recognising the San as an Indigenous people with distinct political and cultural rights, state policy has historically framed them as “remote area dwellers” in need of integration into mainstream society. Although Botswana is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, constitutional recognition of indigeneity has remained absent. This has had material consequences for land access, education, and political participation.

In 2024, Botswana experienced a significant political shift with the election of President Duma Boko, a human rights lawyer known for his advocacy on behalf of marginalised communities, including the San. Early symbolic gestures and policy commitments — including the lifting of the hunting ban and increased visibility of San languages — have generated cautious optimism, particularly among young people.

At the same time, this research was conducted under the previous administration, and many of the structural conditions shaping San lives remain unresolved. Political change does not automatically undo the legacies of displacement, poverty, and exclusion.

It is within these conditions that San youth are forging new forms of presence. Through music, dance, and performance, they assert identity, sustain cultural continuity, and negotiate visibility in a society that has often denied them recognition as full citizens.

This film establishes the historical and political terrain within which San youth cultural action takes place. It does not seek resolution. Instead, it stays with the conditions that make cultural expression a necessary site of dignity, endurance, and possibility.