Batwa: Indigenous Displacement in the Name of Conservation

Historically, the Batwa have lived in forests in the Great Lakes region of Africa, and resided in areas covering Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Eastern Congo. The Batwa territory in Uganda is mainly in the south-west, intersecting with two national parks: Bwindi impenetrable National Park (BINP) and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park (MGNP). However, following the eviction from their ancestral lands, many Batwa live as tenants or squatters in nearby villages and farms. As is the case in Rwanda, they do not own land and do not generate enough income to move to central areas, and thus live in harsh poverty in both countries.

The socioeconomic livelihood of the Batwa depends on the forest. As indigenous forest-dwellers, Batwa people subsist on hunting and gathering, but their cultural and spiritual traditions are also deeply connected to the forest. When their ancestral homeland was cordoned off as a national park and they were evicted, their livelihoods were permanently affected well beyond the eradication of their food source. Eviction has had a devastating effect on the survival of the Batwa, as communities and families are fragmented and often homeless. They were not only forced to find another place to live, but also to configure new means of living, because the government did not arrange any access to resources.

In Uganda, the Batwa also currently face persecution for hunting within their own ancestral lands because the act is deemed illegal poaching. The Ugandan government renders this heightened discrimination valid because the national park covers part of the Batwa territory, and poaching is forbidden for the sake of environmental protection. Anti-poaching measures contribute directly to the displacement of the Batwa, as the food source they have relied on for centuries becomes unavailable to them. To make matters worse, their main mode of survival is now a punishable offence; there has been no initiative to accommodate the Batwa’s transition to new or adapted livelihoods.

In Rwanda, a similar situation for what concerns their ancestral land was worsened by the tragic events of 1994, when the Batwa were targeted by the genocide alongside the better known Tutsi community. A report by the UNPO issued following an extensive mission that year looks in detail into the situation of the community.

In a broader sense, environmental protection incorporates a great number of essential initiatives, many of which also protect the livelihoods of indigenous communities. However, in the case of the Batwa, as well as the Baka in Cameroon, which has recently gathered international attention, environmental protection comes
without provisions specifically addressed at these groups, nor accountability measures or compensation mechanisms and therefore becomes another alias for marginalisation.

Under the mantle of “conservation” efforts, national governments are afforded opportunities to maintain national parks with the help of funding from international environmental organisations. Conservation initiatives attract funding from environmental organisations and are often endorsed by international entities because they are generally considered to benefit indigenous groups rather than hinder them. However, when an area is designated as a protected environment, the majority of implemented procedures do not extend the same protection to the people living within that environment, that are treated as an external element, potentially even harmful for the abstract “environment”.

The consequences for the Batwa include psychological, physical, and cultural damages, with civil and political ramifications. The Ugandan authorities are publicly lauded for prioritising environmental protection, but are not held accountable for the human rights abuses that derive from this decision.

When conservation initiatives fail to take into account the multifaceted uses of land, namely as a tool for survival within indigenous hunter-gatherer populations, they enable practices that maintain a dangerous façade of progressivism while endorsing a destructive reality.