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## Botswana opens path for Bushmen to study at university

**GABORONE:** Growing up in a dusty hunter-gatherer village in Botswana's Kalahari game reserve, Bihela Sekere never even knew what a university was, much less thought of becoming a graduate.

His childhood was spent in one of Africa's most marginalised communities, among the San Bushmen who were southern Africa's first inhabitants but have faced centuries of exclusion and discrimination.

"It was never easy growing up as a San child, especially those who wanted to go school because the nearest school was kilometres away," the 28-year-old said.

But Sekere is about to finish his master's degree in development studies through the new Research Centre for San Studies, which was launched earlier this year.

"I am happy that I can now address people as a learned San youth," he said.

The centre is housed at

the University of Botswana and is meant to formalise local studies of San culture, which currently were based mainly at overseas universities.

The San have been locked in a long legal battle with the government of Botswana over their right to live in the game preserve, which the government says was a voluntary effort to turn the hunter-gatherers into settled farmers.

The relocations were needed to provide the San with schools and other public services, according to the government.

Critics accused authorities of clearing the land for tourism and diamond mining projects.

Sekere was among the communities that say they were forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands, an argument that Botswana's courts agreed with in a landmark 2006 ruling that allowed the San to return to the game reserve.

They are now locked in a new legal battle over water rights, a contentious issue for people living on the fringes of the Kalahari desert.

For Kuela Kiema, a San author who wrote about the

evictions in his book "*Tears for my Land*", the research centre is somewhat a consolation for their suffering.

"At least the government has finally realised that we are part of Botswana and that we deserve better. We may still be having issues with the government but at least they have done something for our benefit," he said.

The centre's acting director Maitseo Bolaane the goal is to become the leading research centre for San studies while helping more San youth access higher education.

Norway has funded the centre's start-up with a 1.9 million dollar grant, which provides scholarships to San students to study either at the University of Botswana or overseas.

"We hope to get other financiers so that we can be able to assist more San youth who wish to pursue their studies," said Bolaane, adding that about 10 youth are already going through the programme.

Few San children go to university for the simple

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reason that they struggle to receive decent, basic educations.

"Their environment is different because they have to walk long kilometres to their nearest schools, a thing which negatively impacts on their performance," she said.

About 100,000 Bushmen remain spread across Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. In all three countries they struggle to protect their ancestral lands, while coping with 21st century curses of unemployment, poverty, alcohol abuse and AIDS.

Sekere said he hoped the centre would help make higher education possible for more people in his community.

"It is my wish that more San youth would benefit from this centre. We have been undermined for a long time and it's high time we started making a positive mark in this country," Sekere said. — AFP



San children at a ceremony.