



Northeastern Namibia, site of the largest Bushman population. Source: Robert J. Gordon, "The !Kung in the Kalahari Exchange," in C. Schrire, ed., *Past and Present in Hunter Gatherer Studies* (New York: Academic Press, 1984). Reprinted by permission.

Chapter 1

The Bushmen: A Merger of Fantasy and Nightmare



Ethnology [is] at once the child of colonialism and the proof of its death throes: a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple object, and in which we gain advantage from our externality to the other.

—Todorov

Some films can kill. One such film was the blockbuster *The Gods Must Be Crazy*,¹ which played to packed houses in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere. This film, with its pseudoscientific narrator describing Bushmen as living in a state of primitive affluence, without the worries of paying taxes, crime, police and other hassles of urban alienation, has had a disastrous impact on those people whom we label "Bushman."²

The film unleashed a veritable vortex of television and film crews on what is officially known as "Bushmanland." In 1982 alone more than nine film crews visited Tsumkwe, including an eleven-member Japanese team and the famous Sir Laurens van der Post, bringing to realization, in an unanticipated form, a prophecy made in 1929 by the traveler Makin: "Perhaps someday, the Bushman will degenerate into that final humiliation—an exhibit by a travelling showman" (Makin 1929:275).

The success of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* gave a major boost to the Namibian Department of Nature Conservation's proposal to develop Bushmanland as a game reserve. In the world envisioned by Nature Conservation, Bushmen would be allowed to remain, provided that they "hunted and gathered traditionally." Of course most tourists would come not to see wild animals but to see "wild Bushmen."

In the same period the South African Defence Force (SADF), which had been fighting a low-intensity guerrilla war with the South West

Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) since the early 1960s, made a concerted effort to recruit Bushmen. Indeed by the early 1980s Bushmen held the unique distinction of being perhaps the most militarized ethnic group in the world.³ One of the major reasons for military recruitment was the belief that Bushmen were "natural" trackers and thus would be effective counterinsurgency operatives. The SADF also exploited them culturally. The SADF was so proud of what it had done for (and to) these "last representatives of the stone-age" that, as a matter of course, visiting foreign journalists were shown the Bushman base at Omega.⁴ These journalists recorded a rich fund of characteristics that the white soldiers attributed to Bushmen. According to one senior officer, "The Bushman's senses in the field are unbelievable. If a patrol has a Bushman with it, then it is unnecessary to post guards at night. The Bushman also goes to sleep, but when the enemy is still far away he wakes up and raises the alarm" (*Die Burger*, 6 January 1982). Another white soldier believed: "They have fantastic eyesight and they can navigate in the bush without a compass or map. . . . With the Bushmen along, our chances of dying are very slight. They have incredible tenacity, patience and endurance. They've taught me to respect another race" (*Time*, 2 March 1981). Even experienced, battle-hardened mercenaries were impressed. A *Soldier of Fortune* article exulted:

Able to survive long periods on minimal food and water, the Bushman has an instinctive, highly developed sense of danger, and has proved to be an astoundingly good "snap" shot . . . [but his] forte is tracking. . . . If you've never seen a two-legged bloodhound at work, come to South West Africa and watch the Bushman. Actually, the Bushman puts the bloodhound to shame. [In addition, Bushmen are] good at estimating mortar projectile strike distances because of their age-old weapon—the bow and arrow. (Norval 1984:74)⁵

According to that view, the superhuman qualities of Bushmen were grounded not in humanity but in animality. Their inability to herd cattle was attributed to their lack of self-restraint. As they are "extremely emotional," their women cannot be deprived of the men, and this determines the length of patrol (*Pretoria News*, 26 February 1981). *Time* magazine assured us that they are often distracted from a guerrilla track by honey, and when they sight a hyena, they laugh uncontrollably (2 March 1981).⁶ The transmogrification of Bushmen is still very much an issue.

The wave on which both the South African Defence Force and *The Gods Must Be Crazy* rode to acclaim both in South Africa and in the United States was clearly part of a larger current in contemporary scholarly discourse. This is the idea that Bushmen have always lived in the splen-

didly bracing isolation of the Kalahari Desert, where, in uncontaminated purity, they live in a state of "primitive affluence" as one of the last living representatives of how our paleolithic forebears lived. Indeed, the Bushmen, more than any other human grouping in the annals of academic endeavor, have been made a scientific commodity. Their continually rediscovered stature in the eyes of scholars has been exploited not only by academics but also by diverse groups, ranging from the South African Defence Force and the Department of Nature Conservation to ordinary Namibian schoolchildren, who all subscribe to the myth of primitive affluence and its various intellectual contours. Have the Bushmen become prisoners of the reputation we have given them?⁷

Despite the fact that most recent work in the Kalahari has stressed history and the wider context, almost all contemporary anthropology textbooks *still portray* Bushmen as if they live in a state of "primitive affluence." There is no simple answer to that question. In order to begin we must look at the history of research. Nancy Howell, one of the most prominent members of the Harvard Kalahari Project, recalled that the research project of which she was a member ignored the paraphernalia of Western "civilization and poverty"

because we didn't come all the way around the world to see them. We could have stayed at home and seen people behaving as rural proletariat, while nowhere but the Kalahari and a few other remote locations allow a glimpse of the "hunting and gathering way of life." So we focus upon bush camps, upon hunting, upon old fashioned customs, and although we remind each other once in a while not to be romantic, we consciously and unconsciously neglect and avoid the !Kung who don't conform to our expectations. (Howell 1986)

The Bushman issue raised troubling questions for me, both as a Namibian and as an anthropologist. The dissonance between scholarly textbook rhetoric and actuality was forcefully brought home to me in 1980 when John Marshall, an ethnographic filmmaker, invited me to accompany him to Tsumkwe, the "capital" of the Apartheid-inspired Bushman homeland. What I saw there on my brief three-day visit was profoundly disturbing. I had never been in a place where one could literally smell death and decay, as in Tsumkwe. Indeed the death rate exceeded the birthrate. It was a prime example of what Robert Chambers called integrated rural poverty: The Tsumkwe people were caught within the mutually reinforcing coils of isolation, poverty, physical weakness, vulnerability and powerlessness (Chambers 1984:103).

When I grew up in southern Namibia, stories of the treacherous "wild Bushmen" and how they had to be "tamed" by tying them to



Bushmen: pregnant women and malnourished children. This photograph, taken in the 1930s, has appeared in books and newspapers with misleading captions, such as: "Bushmen after a raw meat feast"; "They have filled themselves with locusts, exactly as did their ancestors, the 'wild Bosjes'"; "Bushmen after a feast." Source: *Windhoek Observer*, July 24, 1982. (Photo courtesy of *Windhoek Observer*)

windmills and force-feeding them mielie-meal were common coin. One of my most vivid childhood memories was looking at a picture in the Luderitzbucht Museum that showed Bushmen being hung from a camelthorn tree. Was I dreaming? Or are we dreaming now? How to reconcile or indeed evaluate these discordant images of those labeled "Bushmen" is the guiding motif of this book.

The Politics of Labeling Bushmen

The images that I have sketched were not, of course, invented or dropped ready-made from heaven. They are instead the products of discernable sociocultural factors that are firmly located in a history. This book analyzes the interplay among that imagery, policy and history. The indigenous people at the center of this book do not see themselves as a single integrated unit, nor do they call themselves by a single name; it follows thus that the notion and image of the "Bushmen" must be a European or settler concept. The focus is thus not so much on the Bushmen/Kung/Ju-/wasi/San or whatever one might like to call them but on the colonizer's image of them and the consequences of that image for people assumed to be Bushmen.

Social identity becomes meaningful only in relation to others; thus, in order to understand the image of the Bushman, we must consider that image as the product of interactions between those encompassed by the label and their "significant" others. "Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships and by placing them back in the field from which they are abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inference and increase our share of understanding" (Wolf 1982:1). Because the Other cannot exist without the Self, this is a study not only of history but also of the sociology of knowledge.

One of the many issues academics have argued about concerns the label they impose upon these people. Some, like Guenther (1985), prefer the older term *Bushmen*. Others reject this term because they believe it is racist and sexist and prefer to use the term *San* (e.g., Lee 1979:29; Wilmsen 1989a:26–32; Wilmsen 1989b:31) on the grounds that *San* is derived from the terms like *Sonqua*, which were used by Khoi speakers in the Cape of Good Hope to label these people. More important, they argue that *San* can be glossed as 'original people', but that explanation must be examined within its (neo)colonial context. Is there any significance in the fact that the fashionable gloss of 'original people' became stylish when scientists were interested in Bushmen as representatives of the Paleolithic? 'Original people' is simply one of many glosses for the meaning of *San*. Theophilus Hahn (1881) is usually cited as the definitive authority for that gloss. But the matter is much more complex. In his 1881 monograph Hahn wrote:

The meaning of this term is not quite intelligible, and I frankly confess that, after nine years, of which I have spent seven amongst the Khoikhoi [Nama], I did not succeed in arriving at a quite satisfactory etymology, and I must still adhere to the interpretation which I first gave in the *Globus*, 1870, where I traced the word Sa-[b] to the root *sa*, to inhabit, to be located, to dwell, to be settled, to be quiet. *Sa[n]* consequently would mean Aborigines or Settlers proper. (quoted in Nienaber 1989:831)

However in 1870 Hahn had said of *San*:

The meaning is unclear. . . . The nearest explanation is pariahs, outcasts, pursued [*Gehetzte*], an explanation which is grounded in reality. A second explanation is based on the root *sau*, 'to follow' in which case they were the underlings [*Knechte*]. Wallmann, formerly Rhenish Mission Inspector, derives *Sab* from the root *sa*, 'rest' and explains it thus as the original inhabitants [*Sesshaften*]. Also this explanation is not to be ignored. (Nienaber 1989:831)

Nienaber claimed that Hahn's gloss of San as 'original inhabitants' was copied from Wallmann, who used it more as a term denoting teasing in the sense of 'people who enjoy rest'. Nienaber, certainly no radical, noted that this change in gloss was politically expedient to Hahn, as it fitted in well with the emerging theory that the Bushmen were the original inhabitants of the country, who were then dispossessed by the Khoi-khoi and Herero; that theory provided a valuable justification for European conquest of Khoi and Herero in Namibia. Such an interpretation calibrated well with Hahn's political activities in Namaqualand at that time (Nienaber 1989:834).

There are other possible explanations for the origins of the word *Bushman* (authoritatively discussed by Nienaber 1950, 1989). Perhaps the most common explanation and one that has the most credibility is that it is derived from the term *bossiesman*, meaning *struikrower*, glossed as 'bandit' or 'outlaw'. Interestingly enough, the name that the Khoi (Hot-tentots) gave Bushmen, *Sonqua*, from which the term *San* is derived, also means bandits (Nienaber 1950:37-38). It is significant that early travelers were able to provide a fairly substantial amount of information on the different Khoi groups, their language and customs, but those travelers were unable to provide much information on Bushmen, who were seen as peripheral people. Within the context of southern African history this explanation makes the most sense, whereas the other two folk explanations of origin merely underline the pejorativeness of this social "misbehavior." The term *Bushman* is thus a "lumpen category" into which all those who failed to conform or acquiesce were dumped. It was not an ethnic group but a sociopolitical category derived from the wider setting. The fact that we find it pejorative is testimony to the effective socialization that we as members of that larger sociopolitical entity have undergone.

Contemporary use of the term *San* appears to be restricted to (Khoi) Nama speakers in Namibia, and its continued use by academics serves to further mystify the tragic situation of those labeled "Bushmen." In Namibia, everybody uses the term *Bushmen*. Changing the label does not reduce the racism and invidiousness implicit in the relationship, since words get their emotive content from the social milieu in which they are used. To feel compelled to change the label is to submit to the effectiveness of colonial socialization. In order to confront this restrictive socialization we need to confront the same terms and infuse them with new meaning. Many labels, like "Christian" and "Quaker," were once also highly derisive and derogatory. I use the term *Bushman* because I feel that it is important that we make social banditry respectable again, for of all the southern African people exposed to the colonial onslaught,

those labeled "Bushmen" have the longest, most valiant, if costly, record of resistance to colonialism.

Another solution to this issue, and one which Wilmsen (1989a) favored, is to use the term that the people use to refer to themselves. This would, however, fragment the discourse. For example, the following is a partial listing of some of the groups officially recognized with some of the spellings used by academics and bureaucrats:

- I. Nama-speaking groups (Nama-San):
 - A. Khoe; Kwe; Khwe (Mbarakwengo); Hukwe (River Bushmen) [Kavango and West Caprivi districts]—estimated population: 5,000
 - B. Nharon; Aukwe; //Ai-khoe (Naron) [Gobabis district]—estimated population: 1,500
 - C. Hai-//omn (Heikom)
 1. Xwaga [Owambo district] (Heikum)
 2. Keren [Owambo and Outjo districts]
 3. Hai-//omn [Grootfontein, Tsumeb and Kavango districts]
Estimated population: 11,000
- II. "Bushmen proper" (IKhu-San):⁸
 - D. Angola IKhu (Kung)
 1. IO-IKhu
 2. Kwankala
Estimated population: 6,000
 - E. Ju-/wasi (Zhu-/hoasi) [Grootfontein, Tsumeb and Bushmanland districts]—estimated population: 7,000
 - F. //Khau-//esi; =/Auin (Auen; Makaukau) [Hereroland and Gobabis districts]—estimated population: 2,000
 - G. Ovambokavango-!Khu (Nogau) [Grootfontein, Tsumeb and Kavango districts]—estimated population: 6,000
- III. Cape Bushmen (Cape-San)
 - H. !Xo (Magong) [Gobabis, Mariental districts]—estimated population: 300
 - I. /Nu-//en (Nusan) [Mariental district]—estimated population: 100
 - J. /Auni [Mariental district]—estimated population: 200

(Sources: Malan 1980:13-14; Marais 1984; population estimates derived from Budack 1980)

Contemporary population estimates for Bushmen in southern Africa range from 30,000 to 87,250.⁹ In Namibia most Bushmen are to be found in the region known to the white colonizers and some blacks as the Omaheke, a vast, flat, seemingly monotonous, stoneless expanse covering northeastern Namibia. Sometimes this expanse is arbitrarily

Table 1.1 Distribution of Bushmen by District

	1970 Census	1981 Census
Magisterial districts		
Gobabis	5,212	4,837
Grootfontein	3,815	4,461
Tsumeb	3,888	3,506
Outjo	1,347	1,827
Other districts	890	1,288
No. within Police Zone	15,152	17,207
So-called homelands		
Kavango	3,478	2,672
Ovambo	1,814	2,790
Hereroland	911	2,361
Bushmanland	459	2,245
Other homelands	95	357
No. in homelands	6,757	10,425
No. not distributed	—	573
Total	21,909	29,441

Sources: Robert J. Gordon, *What Future for the Ju-!wasi of Nyae Nyae?* (Boston: Cultural Survival. Occasional Paper No. 13, 1984); François Marais et al., *Onderzoek na die Boesmanbevolkingsgroep in Suidwes-Afrika* (Windhoek: Direktooraat, ontwikkelingskoördinerer, 1984).

divided into the Kungveld, the Kaukaveld and the Otjimpoloveld. At other times the whole area is referred to as the Kaukaveld¹⁰ (see Table 1.1). The Kaukaveld provides the focus of this work.¹¹

Speaking for the Bushmen

My inquiry into how Bushmen made their own history within conditions that were not of their own choosing proved to be a challenge. The Bushmen's role in shaping Namibian history has been denied or ignored by historians as diverse as Vedder (1981), Bley (1971), Drechsler (1966, 1980), Katjavivi (1988) and Mbuende (1986). This underlines the current relative powerlessness of people practicing a peripatetic or foraging mode of existence. History, as we know only too well, is concerned with success stories or with those who wield power or have the loudest voices. As a result Bushmen have been relegated to the shadowy underside of Namibian history.

The search for a Bushman voice proved to be rather frustrating. The Bushmen were remarkably inarticulate, perhaps the most damning evidence of their powerlessness. Not only was there little material in the archives from which one could infer a Bushman voice, but even a close

scrutiny of criminal court records and affidavits was disappointing, offering mute testimony to the smothering history of their victimization. Indeed, it is remarkable that they were as articulate as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, but even this testimony is problematic, as I argue in Chapter 22.¹²

In this book, then, rather than treat Bushmen *as if* they are an isolated self-sufficient society, I seek to analyze their role within the wider context of the emergent Namibian social formation. It is not so much an ethnohistory of a particular group as it is a regional history shaped by an ethnographic enquiry.¹³

Most of the information I collected and synthesized belongs to the public domain and is located principally in the Windhoek State Archives. In consulting this material I was struck by the rhetoric and especially the vocabulary used by officials and settlers to describe Bushmen and their relationships to them. This rhetoric is, I believe, an important aspect in understanding the role of Bushmen within settler society. I have thus quoted these texts extensively but have tried, as Todorov put it, to avoid

the temptation to reproduce the voices of these figures "as they really are"; to try to do away with my own presence "for the other's sake" [and also] to subjugate the other to myself, to make him the marionette of which I pull the strings. Between the two, I have sought not a terrain of compromise but the path of dialogue. I question, I transpose, I interpret these texts; but also I let them speak . . . and defend themselves. (Todorov 1985:250)

The problem is complex on another level as well. Labels or categories like Bushmen tend to be reified by settlers and academics, and as Eric Wolf warned, "by turning names into things we create false models of reality. By endowing nations, societies, or cultures with the qualities of internally homogenous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like . . . billiard balls" (Wolf 1982:6).

The results of these false models were pervasive in "Bushman Studies," and their political implications in the South African setting ubiquitous. The major intellectual and moral tasks of anthropology flow together in the debunking of dangerous contemporary myths, more so if it has played a role in creating such myths.¹⁴ Working in southern Africa, the social-anthropologist-cum-historian is forced to deal with contradictions on the personal, social and structural levels. This study belongs to that genre of social science literature known as *exposé* ethnography, the most elementary historical ethnography possible in such

situations. As a Namibian I am acutely conscious of both the freedom and the obligation to develop a critique of the so-called national society to which I belong, but by the same token, this study is more than a specific critique of Namibian settler society. If we cannot be proud of the history of settler-Bushman relations, we must also recognize that it is not a simple story and avoid naïve simplifications, whether they be of the "vermin" or "noble savage" variety. The Namibian situation is not unique. Striking parallels can be found with numerous other settler societies, most notably South Africa, Australia, Argentina, Canada, the United States and the English conquest of Ireland. The banality of evil and indeed of genocide is universal. It is my hope that this material might be used to develop a comparative study of genocide and the vulnerability of small-scale sociopolitical formations.

In this book I suggest that the popular image of Bushman, which derives its authority largely from (a selective reading of) the scientific¹⁵ discourse, was used by various parties to reflect their own purposes, including the justification of ethnocide or genocide of those people commonly labeled "Bushman." Far from being "beautiful people living in primeval paradise," they are in reality the most victimized and brutalized people in the bloody history that is southern Africa. If we anthropologists are concerned about the future of humanity, then it is incumbent upon us to try to understand the processes by which Bushmen were brutalized. More important, we need to try to understand why no scientists seriously addressed the issue of why Bushmen were becoming "extinct."¹⁶

Storyline

Until recently, ethnographers tended to dismiss the Kalahari Bushman past as timeless and endless; their historic presence begins around the turn of the century. That presence has been depicted as a series of exploitative interactions with whites, unfortunate dealings with blacks and a rather unsatisfactory resolution of matters that leaves the Bushmen straddling an uncomfortable border between Botswana and Namibia, under the effective thumb of the South African government. Bushmen emerged in the major ethnographies as relics of the past, trapped in a fast-moving present frame that supports the notion that they have, until a few years ago, been traditional hunters and gatherers.¹⁷

The first section of this book explores the historical records relating to Bushmen in the *Kaukaveld* Kalahari to reveal their complex interrelations with numerous other people through time. It complements the prehistoric findings by Denbow (1984, 1986) and Wilmsen (1989a, 1989b), which suggest several millennia of interaction between Bushman for-

agers and local pastoralists. In addition, by presenting a record that goes beyond generalizations about economic modes and into the actions and aspirations of individuals, Part 1 describes a situation of complex interactions between different groups that is probably analogous to that which pertained centuries earlier in the southern tip of Africa, as recorded in the early colonial Dutch records and analyzed by Szalay (1983) and Parkington (1984).

The picture that emerges is complex and changing. The old notion of these people as passive victims of European invasion and Bantu expansion is challenged. Bushmen emerge as one of many indigenous people operating in a mobile landscape, forming and shifting their political and economic alliances to take advantage of circumstances as they perceived them. Instead of toppling helplessly from foraging to begging, they emerge as hotshot traders in the mercantile world market for ivory and skins. They were brokers between competing forces and hired guns in the game business. Rather than being victims of pastoralists and traders who depleted the game, they appear as one of many willing agents of this commercial depletion. Instead of being ignorant of metals, true men of the Stone Age, who knew nothing of iron (Lee 1979:76), they were fierce defenders of rich copper mines that they worked for export and profit. If this section has a central theme, it is to show how ignorance of archival sources helped create the Bushman image that we, as anthropologists, wanted to have and how knowledge of these sources makes sense of the Bushmen we observe today.

After having discussed life in what early German maps revealingly termed "the masterless area" in Part 1, I move in Part 2 to the onset of the colonial state. It was with the onset of settler capitalism (Denoon 1983) that settlers created the "Bushman problem," which they referred to as the "plague." The plague was not a punishment visited upon the good settlers by the Almighty but was a direct consequence of various state activities, in particular its land policies. The imposition of the state and the resultant land rush had dire ecological consequences. Reigning settler ideology, supported by science, at that time defined Bushmen as "untamable" and believed it was only a matter of time before Bushmen inevitably became extinct. Bushmen did not accept these settler developments passively but audaciously resisted. It was only after World War II that, for a variety of ideological, international, academic and economic reasons, the administration decided to create a Bushman reserve. These factors, including the role of the missionaries and academics in the cultural uses and abuses of those labeled "Bushman," are charted in Part 3, especially the value these elements of the bourgeoisie attached to constantly reinventing "wild Bushmen."

In exploring the relationship between image and role in society in Part 4, I employ the concept of rural underclass¹⁸ as a framework to examine the nature of the social relationships that led to the particular style of incorporation of foragers into the colonial order. It is in this process that the entity known as the "Bushmen" was created and transformed into an underdeveloped segment of Namibian society. The contemporary social problems in Bushmanland, the Apartheid-generated "homeland," which John Marshall so movingly captured in his film *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman*, are thus not the result of isolation but are rather the product of the texture of the Bushmen's ties with the wider society. Intellectuals, writers and academics played a crucial role in underclass formation by engaging in mystification.¹⁹

I conclude (Part 5) by extracting some points from this case study that might be pertinent to developing an anthropological understanding of genocide. For an explanation to be satisfactory, it must, as Max Weber long ago insisted, be adequate on the levels of both cause and meaning. Apart from emphasizing the causal processes of land dispossession and techniques of labor coercion, any analysis of these relationships must also include a discussion on the realm of meaning, of culture. I show how, almost universally, writers and academics played an important role in developing the ideology justifying settler expansion, be they mystifications as "vermin" or "beautiful people."

Ironically *The Gods Must Be Crazy* represents a crude but accurate caricature of the Bushman scholarly enterprise, although not surprisingly, most of the academics involved in protesting the film did not examine this issue.²⁰ Actions, including image making, have consequences. Are academics prepared to accept responsibility? Before they can do that they must be conscious of the effect of their actions. But do they have the requisite self-consciousness? This is no trivial matter. As Robertson pointed out, "The only way in which the vexatious gap between theory and practice may be closed is by restoring to anthropology some overtly moral concerns" (Robertson 1984:301). Such an exercise is necessary if we are to understand the contradictory nature of ethnology. Fortunately it is already a keynote of current research in the Kalahari.

Part 1

What's in a Name?

