



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

