

TEACHER'S CORNER: !KUNG IN THE 1980'S

The !Kung bushmen or San are among the best known people in the anthropological literature, familiar even to elementary and secondary school students through the writings of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (The Harmless People) and the films of her brother John Marshall ("The Hunters," "Bitter Melons"). Yet this traditional way of life is rapidly disappearing.

In 1982 and 1983 I lived for an extended period at Dobe, a San waterhole on the Botswana/Namibia border in the northwest part of the Kalahari Desert. Since my first visit to Dobe in 1968 and 1969, I had made several extended trips to the area to carry out archeological and ethnographic field research. Over this period I was able to record some of the major changes taking place.

Hunters and Gatherers

In the 1950's, when first contacted by anthropologists, the Dobe San were largely isolated from the outside world. In 1963 when Richard Lee began a long-term study at Dobe, they were living almost entirely by hunting and gathering wild foods. They did not own livestock, nor did they plant fields. Most of their simple material needs were supplied by the natural resources of their local environment. In the dry season, a large group of up to 50 people camped at the Dobe waterhole; while during the rainy

season, small groups and nuclear families moved out into the surrounding bush, harvesting nuts and other abundant vegetable and animal foods. Although this rainy season utilization area included a substantial chunk of what is now Namibia (formerly South West Africa), no fences or other barriers impeded San movement across this unnatural political boundary along the 21st parallel of longitude. Archeological evidence suggests that people living a similar way of life and possessing a similar material culture minus the iron elements inhabited this general area for over 20,000 years. In addition, the history of human hunting and gathering in this area goes back over 200,000 years.

Forces of Change

During the last 15 years, three major factors have brought the San peoples into direct contact with 20th century material culture, a modern economy and modern political realities: 1) Botswana's independence and internal development plans, 2) intensive study by anthropologists, and 3) encroachment on and restriction of San territory due to political events in Namibia. While the Botswana government has tried to settle and educate nomadic people and to provide economic incentives through agricultural training and the development of a local crafts industry, anthropologists have attempted to establish San rights to



their traditional lands by helping dig wells, register land claims and provide capital for livestock purchases. At the same time, the border with Namibia has become increasingly 'closed' to San group movement, although individuals continue to visit on the other side for short periods and to marry across the boundary.

What are the results of these forces of change? In June, 1968, when I first visited Dobe, the residents lived in an intimate circle of small round grass huts which blended into the landscape so thoroughly that at 100 yards distance, only the cooking fires and the sound of women cracking mongongo nuts marked the camp's location. Almost all clothing was made from animal skins, decorated with ostrich egg shell beads and a few glass trade beads. When I looked in people's three-legged iron cooking pots and in the ashes of outside fires around which almost all in-camp activities occurred, I saw mongongo nuts, wild tsama melons, game meat and various wild root vegetables. At night, when the temperature dropped below freezing, people huddled in their thin skin clothing around the fires and coughed. Since many people were ill with coughs and flu, curing dances were held almost nightly. As I sat around the fire listening to the chanting and clapping, relishing the intimacy of the group and its remoteness from the materialism of my own world, I often thought, "Take away the metal cooking pots, arrow heads, awls, and knives, and this could be the Stone Age."

Herders and Farmers

After a further visit in 1969 and a long field season in 1975-76 and 1977, I returned to Dobe in August of 1980. The changes were striking. At the old waterhole, no one ran up in curiosity to greet our truck. Large numbers of cows stared at us from the thorn bushes while groups of goats scattered at our approach. Thorn and rail fences were everywhere, enclosing four separate "villages", their fields, a communal well and various outlying households.

At the village, where our main informants of the 1960's were still living, the intimate circle of small grass huts had been replaced by a completely cleared area the size of a football field. Along the north side of this area stood eight circular mud houses whose thatched roofs towered over ten feet high. Split-rail fences enclosed the house area and separated it from the circular cattle, goat and donkey enclosures to the south. When neighbors, friends and relations had constituted the principal insurance against hard times, people's doorways had faced inward towards other members of the group. Now each doorway looked outward to the animals which represented a new form of capital insurance and investment.

The Modern World Intrudes

Although there were no large fireplaces outside the houses, people in western clothes and army boots sat around in front of the houses and ate mongongo nuts. Nearby someone scraped a skin. It seemed almost like old times. Then meal time arrived and with it, the newly married daughters of our two informants, on a visit from the settlement at Tchum!kwe in Namibia (55 kilometers away). A three-legged pot, filled with a strange yellow porridge, appeared out of one of the huts. "What are you eating?" we asked. Again, out of the hut, someone dragged an enormous bag marked "Gift of the People of the United States of America." We were later to learn that the ration of relief food reaching Dobe each week consisted of thirteen 50-pound sacks of this corn-soy-milk mixture and several gallons of soy oil for about 100 inhabitants. No wonder even the dogs were fat!

One of the teenage girls ducked into a hut and staggered out with an amplifier that would have done justice to the Rolling Stones. I began to notice just how much stuff was hidden in these huts and how little was out in plain view of everyone. "Uncle," she said

"lend me your knife!" When her uncle produced the tool, she deftly unscrewed the back of her gramophone and a mass of wires tumbled out. Quickly she hooked up the correct wires to the correct terminals in the amplifier and soon we were assaulted by a peculiar brand of southern African rock music called gumba gumba which could have been heard back at Tchum!kwe. "Ah," I thought, "add a little more asphalt and this could be in downtown Washington."

By 1982 most families had saved up enough cash to buy bicycles on which their adolescent sons made frequent trips to Tchum!kwe for supplies. A young married woman whose childhood face illustrated the desert hunter-gatherer in many an anthropology textbook, gave me this year a can of Japanese peaches as a farewell present. A few San were serving in the South African army for the astonishing wage of ca. \$450 per month. The comparable legal minimum wage in most of the countries of southern Africa is between \$75 and \$110 per month. Like most soldiers, these individuals now hold substantial life insurance policies, which may ultimately result in unheard-of windfalls of cash.

Away from Equality

The most significant change in 1982, however, was that one man had emerged as a 'headman' who spoke for the community to the outside world, and who spent much of his day sitting on a special chair under a tree settling disputes among Dobe residents. Designated leadership goes against traditional values of the San which place a strong emphasis on personal equality, sharing and humility. Even in 1976 we could not persuade any member of the Dobe community to assume responsibility for handing out daily rations of food at lunch to workers at our archeological site. Indeed, the conflict between traditional values and the need for personal hoarding, resource conservation and dispute settlement mechanisms in a semi-settled community of subsistence farmers is perhaps the central difficulty for the San becoming independent farmer-herders.

A second major change was the increasing role of non-San individuals in the economy and social life at Dobe. To become the dependent servants of a Herero or Tswana cattle owner, when hunting and gathering is no longer viable, is to take a relatively painless road to development. San servants are often viewed as 'children' for whom the cattle owner adjudicates disputes, sets priorities, takes ultimate responsibility for fields and animals, and stores the surplus, so that traditional intimate camp styles and personal mobility patterns can be maintained if the San group desires. Inter-marriage between San and non-San is a frequent feature of the relationship, and the children of such a union are further assimilated into the cattle owner's culture. Soon, the San will probably be assimilated into the dominant cultures and nations of southern Africa. Eventually their distinctive languages and physical appearance will disappear, as has already happened over most of South Africa itself and much of Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana, where Bantu-language speakers have lighter skins, broader faces and more prominent cheekbones than their counterparts to the north, and where 'click' sounds form an integral part of some Bantu languages such as Zulu and Xhosa.

It is not hard to look down the road and see that within a generation, the traditional independent hunting and gathering way of life depicted in the films and books of the 1950's and 1960's will no longer be visible.

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Recent references:

Lee, Richard B. The Dobe !Kung. (Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology.) Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983.

"N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman", a film available from Documentary Educational Resources, 5 Bridge St., Watertown, MA 02172. "The San in Transition" guide included.