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the Presence of the
Bushmen

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Laurens van der Post and the Kalahari Debate

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In anthropology today there is a great awareness that writings about culture and society create an imagery as well as present facts. This chapter concerns two arenas in which the image of the 'Bushman' is exposed. The first is the writings of Sir Laurens van der Post, who is perhaps the best known of all writers on Bushmen. The second is the set of books and articles which comprise what has come to be called the 'Kalahari debate'. That debate is between those who see Bushmen as exponents of a hunting-and-gathering culture and essentially isolated until recent times (the traditionalists), and those who see Bushmen as an underclass and part of a larger social system (the revisionists).

Anthropologists often distinguish sharply between the 'self' and the 'other'. The self includes people like the author and his or her reader, while the other includes people who are different, or who are heuristically defined as 'different'. The 'Bushman' is both the ultimate self and the ultimate other. This is why 'his' image is so powerful, both in academe and in the mind of the public. The 'Bushman' is the ultimate self for Van der Post because Bushman thought is depicted as 'primeval'—the mentality which underlies all human consciousness. In this sense, Bushmen are portrayed as better manifestations of humanity in general than non-Bushmen. Yet contradictorily, the 'Bushman' is the ultimate other because of 'his' difference. Precisely because the 'Bushman' is a 'better' human being than others, 'the Bushman' is different from other human beings.

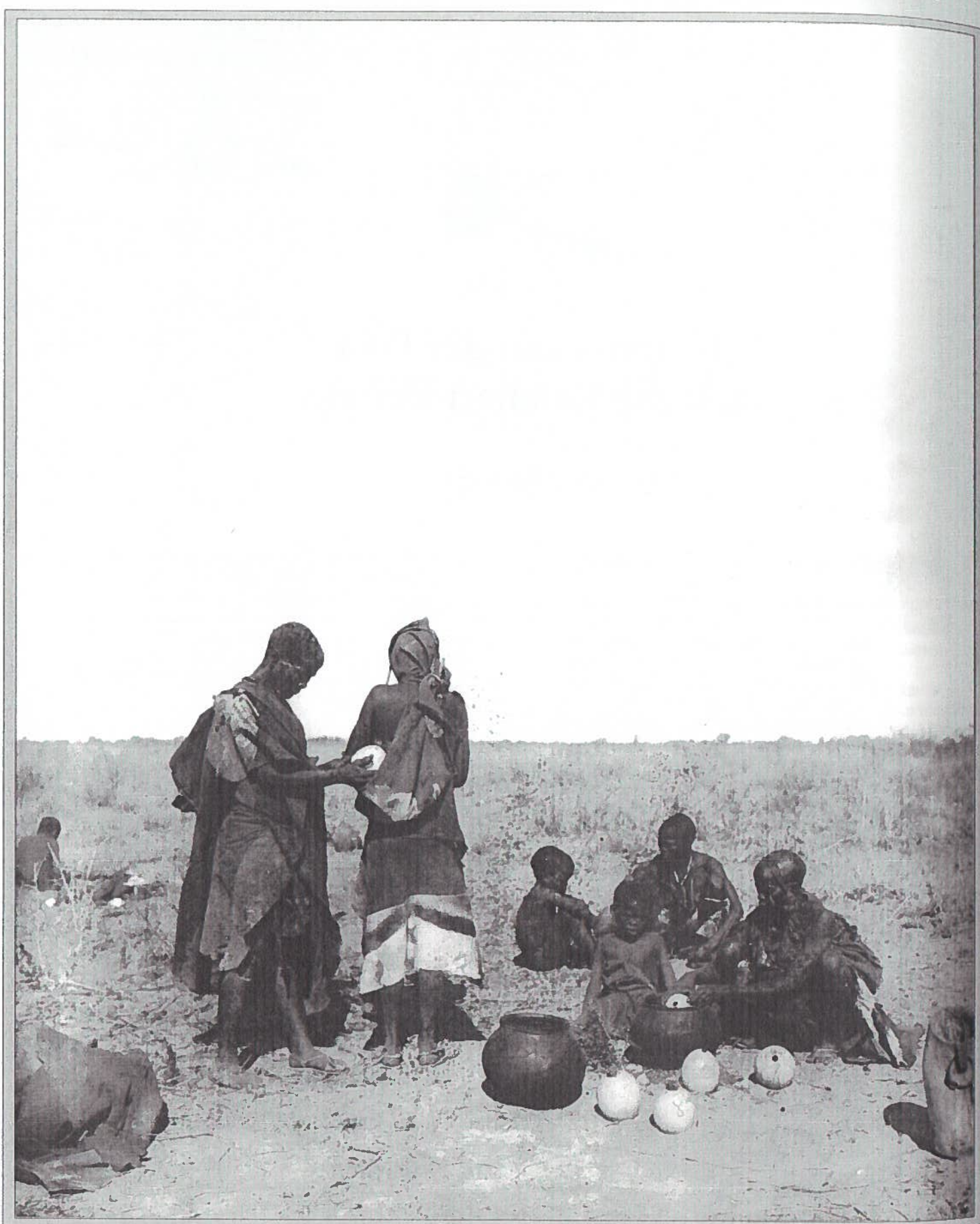
In the Kalahari debate the images are different and much less explicit. Nevertheless, they are there all the same. The traditionalists unwittingly echo Van der Post

in their search for a purer humanity in Bushmen than can be found elsewhere. Yet they construct this humanity in a very un-Van-der-Postian, 'scientific' way. The revisionists describe Bushmen in sociological terms, as a product not of the natural environment but of a hostile outside world. This, too, is an image, and one in which Bushmen are represented as incapable of controlling their own destiny.

Sir Laurens van der Post

Laurens van der Post was born to an Afrikaans-speaking family in the Orange Free State in 1906, and was partly raised by Klara, his nanny of Bushman descent. Other notable dates in Van der Post's contact with Bushmen include 1950 when he made his first government-sponsored expedition to the Kalahari, 1955 when he made the expedition which yielded his famous BBC film *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, and 1982 when he returned for a further series of films. The film, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, was first shown in 1956 on British television. His later series included six short films in collaboration with Jane Taylor, called *Testament to the Bushmen*, released in 1984.

Van der Post has written over 20 books. Not all of these deal with Bushmen or even with Africa. Several deal with his travels and the fictional exploits of his characters in other parts of the world. Some tell of his passion for Jungian psychology; others play more on adventure through war, exploration, or both. Nearly all of them touch on the depth of the human spirit, either implicitly or explicitly. I shall concentrate here on those which do describe Bushmen, with a summary of the books themselves and with some key examples of the



Masarwa women from Malatswai, Botswana, photographed in 1934, filling ostrich egg-shell flasks with water.
On the right is a wooden mortar for grinding seeds or locusts. Photograph Duggan-Cronin. MM 2185

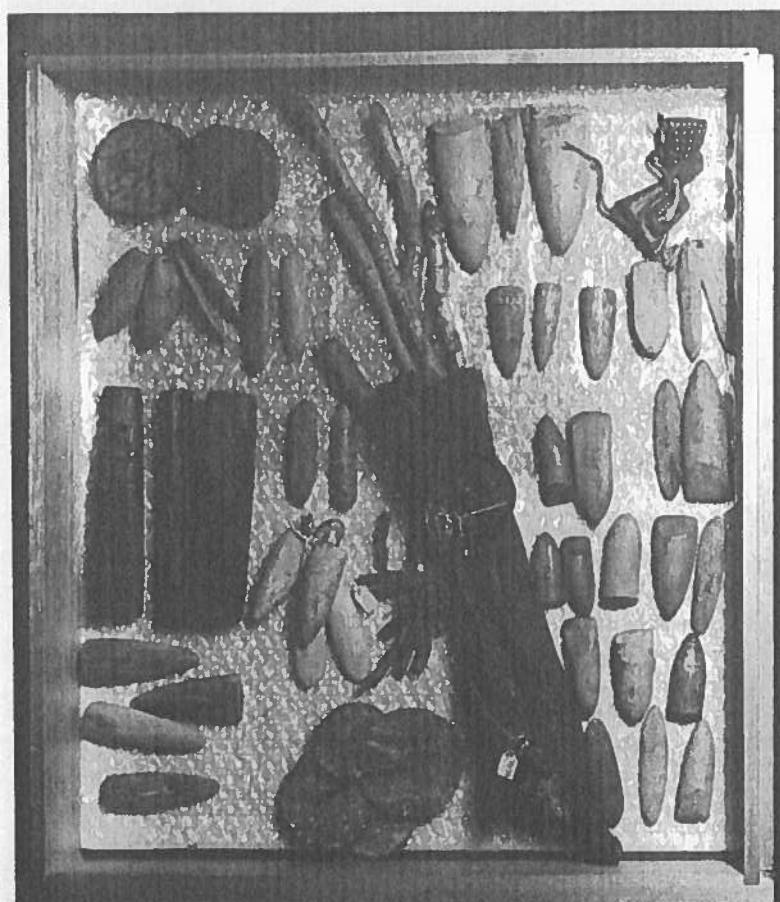


image of the Bushman revealed through Van der Post's words.

Let us start with the travelogues, the genre for which Van der Post is most famous. Van der Post's African travelogue includes *Venture to the Interior* (1951), *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958), and *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961).

Venture to the Interior is not about Bushmen, but it is important for our purposes because in it Van der Post first established the genre of the dual journey. This journey is dual in that it is both physical and mystical, through both space (landscape) and time (evolution). *Venture* describes an expedition to Malawi (then Nyasaland) in 1949. It begins with an autobiographical introduction, then leads on to the story of the expedition. Although he encounters no actual Bushmen in *Venture*, Van der Post finds both himself and something of primal humanity in his journey. As his biographer Frederic Carpenter (1969:82) notes: "past experiences interact with present circumstances, until the exploration of the interior wilderness of Africa becomes also the exploration of the interior wilderness of the heart of man". Thus *Venture to the Interior* serves as a prelude to Van der Post's first Bushman narrative, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*.

In *The Lost World* the mystical journey is more subdued, but it is there all the same. The first chapter is entitled "The Vanished People", but it is actually Van der Post's autobiography, interspersed with fragments on Bushmen encountered by his grandfather and others. The second chapter tells "The Manner of their Going". In almost revisionist style, Van der Post recounts not only clashes between whites and Bushmen, but also, for example, raiding activities of Bushmen on Sotho, and the dispossession and extermination of the Bushmen by the Sotho. In the next chapter, he returns to his grandfather's dealings with Bushmen, and only in Chapter 4 does he set off to find their 'lost world', deep in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana (then Bechuanaland).

The narrative of the journey itself is kept simple, and Van der Post is sparing with detail. He emphasises instead the dialogue he has with his companions and the images which come to him along the way. Towards the end of the book he recounts troubles with his cameraman and then with the spirits of the 'Slippery Hills' (in fact, the Tsodilo Hills of north-western Botswana). The latter troubles are particularly important for creating a sense of the 'Bushman mind' within Van der Post. After members of his party violate a Bushman taboo, the local spirits take revenge. In order to appease them, he writes them a letter, which is placed in a crack in hills near sacred rock paintings. Only at this point in space and time can Van der Post and his companions truly gain access to the 'lost world'.

Another significant element of the narrative is the



Top: A tray of divining disks in the South African Museum

Below: A set of divining disks collected in Botswana by Donald Bain in 1936.

SAM 86

Divining disks called /Xu were described by Lucy Lloyd's !Kung informant Nanni, in 1880. He said that women and little girls did not touch these objects, but respected them, and they were used by men. Lloyd recorded the following: "The /Xu is a set of four pieces of wood, two 'male' and two 'female'. Spoons are also made from the wood of the same tree. The narrator described it as follows:—The name of the tree is /ke and (it) is a food tree; (it) is not a mere tree". (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 125)

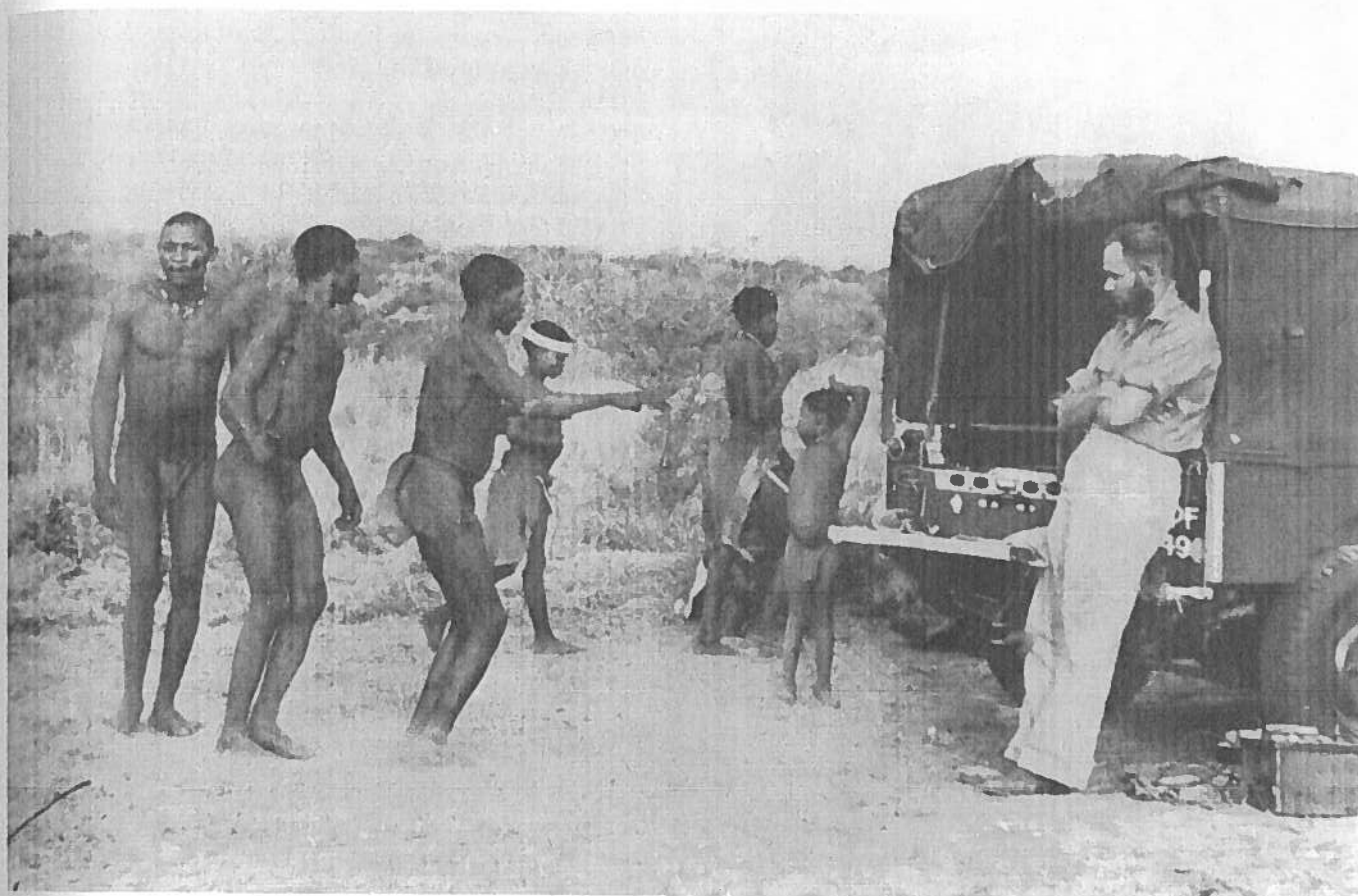


Figure 1 Photograph taken during Laurens van der Post's expedition to the Kalahari. MA: (B)men:Dancing). Photograph by H. Abrahams

'tame' Bushman, who contrasts with the purer, 'wild' version but, nevertheless, retains his Bushman spirit. In this case, Van der Post's imagery is the opposite of that of the revisionists. As we shall see, they argue that supposedly 'traditional' Bushmen have long been contaminated by dominant outsiders, whereas here Van der Post emphasises the cultural continuity between the 'wild' and the 'tame', and sees the Bushman mind in both:

I feared also that the return to the desert in the summer of the so-called 'tame' Bushman who is reared in the service of the tribes and colonists impinging on the Kalahari might complicate my task. For the 'tame' Bushman, no matter how irrevocably wrenched from the pattern of his past, cannot entirely live without the way of his fathers. From time to time he refreshes his spirit by going deep into the desert. (Van der Post 1958: 70)

Towards the end of the book, the generic 'tame' Bushman is replaced by an individual one, Dabe, Van der Post's guide for the second half of his journey. Dabe was almost certainly a Nharo from the Ghanzi area, where Afrikaners have shared Bushman land now for

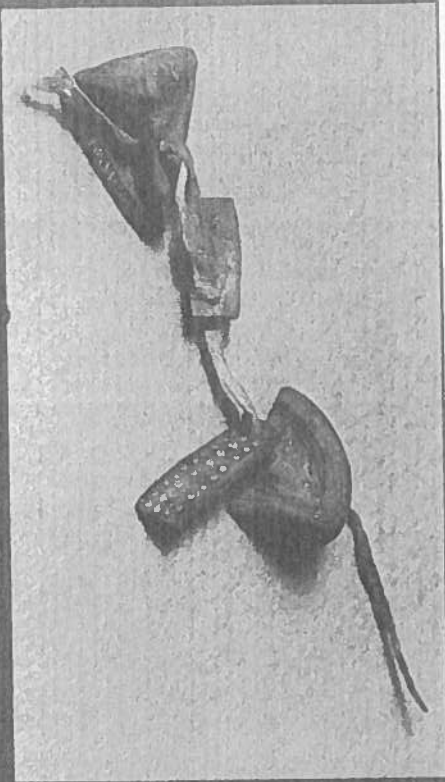
nearly a century. As a literary device, Dabe (like Van der Post himself) stands between 'us' and 'them'. He is necessary not only as Van der Post's interpreter, in a literal sense, but also as a figurative mediator between the thought processes of the 'wild' G/wi and G//ana of the central Kalahari and the thought processes of Van der Post's readers. Sometimes too, differences are intensified by physical descriptions and comparisons:

He [Nxou, a 'wild' Bushman] was taller than Dabe but slighter, with fine bones and, of course, much younger . . . All in all he [Nxou] had a wonderful wild beauty about him. Even his smell was astringent with the essences of untamed earth and wild animal-being. (Van der Post 1958:207)

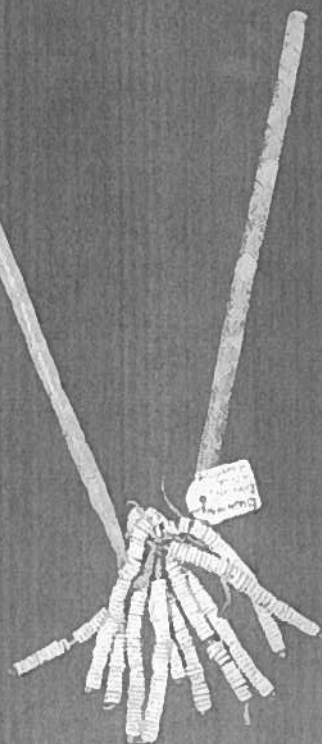
In the sequel, *The Heart of the Hunter*, Van der Post continues his story, with Dabe (now styled Dabé) as his constant companion through the first of the three parts of the book. This part, "Lost World", offers a narrative description of the central Kalahari. The second, "World Between", portrays the peculiar position of those who are neither fully in one world nor in the other (including a white settler with a Bushman wife and, in a different sense, Van der Post himself). The third, "World

Top: Divining bones collected in Botswana by Dorothea Bleek in 1913. SAM 1696

Below: Dancing sticks. MM MMK(E) 252



Divining disk collected by Isaac Shapera in Botswana. UCT 35.11



Regained", reveals the hunter's heart through the mythology recorded by Bleek and Lloyd (for example, 1911). The narrative of *The Heart of the Hunter* often gives way to Van der Post's mystical dreamworld, as the story shifts between modern and mythological times. The idea seems to be that the reader is brought closer and closer to the Bushman world-view, in which the natural and the human merge into one:

It is our own shy intuitions of renewal, which walk in our spiritual night as Porcupine walked by the light of the moon, that need helping on the way. It is as if I hear the wind bringing up behind me the voice of Mantis, the infinite in the small, calling from the stone age to an age of men with hearts of stone, commanding us with the authentic voice of eternal renewal . . . (Van der Post 1961:256)

The images created through Van der Post's travelogues are replicated in his fiction. Here again, three books are worth mentioning: *Flamingo Feather* (1955a), *A Story like the Wind* (1972), and *A Far off Place* (1974).

As with the travelogues, the first book here deals not with Bushmen but with Bantu-speaking peoples, and it establishes the genre. The hero is an anthropologist researching the 'myth and mind' of the Amangtakwena, but he is the son of a white hunter in the tradition of Rider Haggard's *Allan Quatermain*. Instead of plodding through mere travelogue, the narrative is allowed to express itself through action-packed adventures with a backdrop of communist conspiracy and the confused loyalties of the Amangtakwena. The book has an autobiographical flavour, and Van der Post apparently uses his characters to reveal both his own beliefs and his own images.

Seventeen years later Van der Post plays out similar themes through his Kalahari novels. In *A Story like the Wind*, the fictional François Joubert and his Bushman companion, Xhabbo, go through various adventures together. Like Van der Post, Joubert has a Bushman nanny, and he claims a greater understanding of African cultures than can the other whites with whom he deals. Xhabbo amplifies this understanding, as Joubert helps him return to the sacred cave of his people where he has to inform Mantis (the Bushman god) that with the death of his father, he (Xhabbo) is now the leader of his people. The relationships between Joubert and Xhabbo, and between Joubert and his dog Hintza, compete with witchcraft, intrigue, and armed conflict in the north, for the reader's attention.

A Story like the Wind ends with Joubert, Xhabbo, Hintza, Xhabbo's wife, and the daughter of a retired colonial governor murdered by terrorists, all hiding in a cave. *A Far off place* tells of their escape across the waterless dunes. At least to me, it seems that Xhabbo is portrayed as one whose wisdom and insight into

nature is as great or greater than his overt knowledge of fact. Yet he is caught up in struggles not of his own making, with Chinese communists, just as his ancestors had to fight off or flee from the encroachment of both black and white settlers. Although these two novels taken together share the narrative structure of Van der Post's two Kalahari travelogues, they allow the imposition of such a 'revisionist' theme upon the earlier 'purity' of the hunter's heart.

Another set of three books is *The Dark Eye in Africa* (1955b), *The Creative Pattern in Primitive Africa* (originally published as an essay in 1957; reprinted in book form in 1987), and *A Mantis Carol* (1975). The first two originated in lectures, both presented in Switzerland in the 1950s. They retain their qualities of verbal delivery, especially the first, which records the spontaneous question-and-answer session which followed Van der Post's lecture. The last is a mystical tale of the spirit of a circus Bushman who inhabits the dreams of a New York woman. The spirit is of a 'tame' Bushman who, contradictorily, is really "the purest of pure Bushmen you could ever possibly meet" (1975:56), "born to the last of what was left of a Stone-Age culture" (1975:77-8).

Essentially all three of these books are about the search for the depth of the human soul, which for Van der Post lies in the African interior. In the latter two books, it lies especially in the Kalahari and within the archetypal Bushman. This comes out best, perhaps, in *The Creative Pattern*: "I have chosen the Bushmen because I believe with them the primitive pattern is at its purest and most mature" (1987:8). The Bushmen are represented as both the oldest inhabitants of the world, and as a living people with whom Van der Post has a special relationship. As in other works, mythology plays a significant part in the revelation of the human spirit, and it is a mythology of anthropomorphic animal-deities whose interaction echoes the human condition.

My final choice of three books is *First Catch your Eland* (1977), *Testament to the Bushmen* (with Jane Taylor, 1984), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (in conversation with Jean-Marc Pottiez, 1986). The first is a mixture of travelogue, ethnography, and cookery, from Djibouti to Timbuktu, Dar-es-Salaam to Cape Town. Bushmen do not figure at all, but Van der Post's beloved Kalahari appears as a backdrop for his autobiographical encounters. The second book accompanies the 1984 television series of the same name. Those films, and Van der Post's concluding essay within the book, give a vivid reflection on the state of Bushmen today, on the death of Bushman traditions, and on what all this implies for the rest of the human world. The third book is an autobiographical interview with a French journalist. What unites these otherwise very disparate works in my mind is the way in which autobiography and ethnography,

travel and armchair reflection, are intertwined.

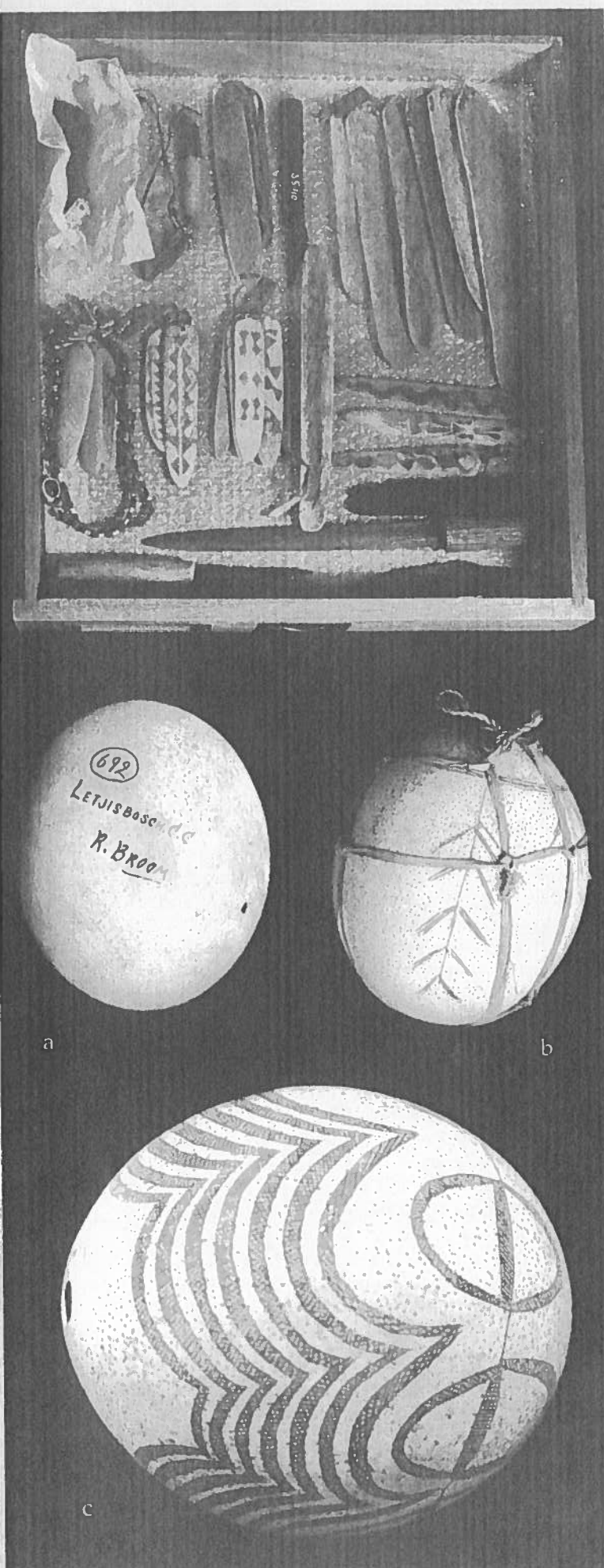
Although their subject matter is very different, each clearly comes from the same mind, a mind which is not out of tune with the problems of anthropological reporting. Anthropology, too, is based on an intertwining of these elements, and Van der Post's writings give us a more extreme version of the literary task with which ethnographers, indeed especially Bushman ethnographers, have to cope (see also Barnard 1989). We are not so different from him as we like to think we are.

The Kalahari debate

The Kalahari debate proper erupted in the late 1980s, with the publication of Edwin Wilmsen's then long-awaited *Land Filled with Flies* (1989). Yet the debate had already been simmering for some ten years, after it became common knowledge among Khoisan specialists in anthropology that there were serious theoretical flaws in the received views of the Ju/'hoansi (central !Kung) and other Kalahari groups. While Richard Lee and others had always been careful to mention the presence of Herero in Ju/'hoan country (for example, Lee 1979:401-31), most members of their general readership took little notice. Lee had described relations with such outsiders, but he had de-emphasised them and placed them in a context of 'social change'. The problem here, of course, is: when does 'traditional' life end and 'social change' begin?

One of the earliest to point out flaws in the implicit line of reasoning followed by the ethnographers of the 1960s was Shula Marks (1972). Writing, not on the Kalahari as such but on 'hunters' and 'herders' of the Cape in past centuries, she provided evidence of people shifting, back-and-forth, between these two means of production, depending on whether or not any specific small group, at any one time, had access to cattle. The 'San' of the Cape were not necessarily a distinct ethnic group from their Khoe neighbours, but rather simply Khoe who had lost their cattle and been forced to hunt and gather or to raid other people's cattle for a living. Marks' and Wilmsen's argument was a challenge both to the established mode of discourse in Bushman ethnography and to the 'liberal' tradition in South African historiography.

In the years which followed, a great number of writers, including historians, archaeologists, and social anthropologists, entered the discussion. Two sides emerged. One side, the traditionalists or isolationists (epitomised by Lee), defended with varying degrees of flexibility the received view that Bushman groups represent cultural isolates which can be analysed as such. The other side, the revisionists or integrationists (following Shula Marks but more often nodding to Karl Marx), argued that any view of the Bushmen which retained a cultural isolate model was ill-founded.



Rather, the revisionists came to see the Bushmen of the Kalahari as an underclass in contact with and subjugated by a host of outsiders. Moreover this was perceived as a long-standing rather than a recent phenomenon.

The very core of the Kalahari debate consists of a series of articles and short comments published in the journal *Current Anthropology*. The complete list, in chronological order, is Solway and Lee (1990), Casimir (1990), Wilmsen and Denbow (1990), Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Hitchcock (1991), Lee and Guenther (1991), Wilmsen (1993), and Lee and Guenther (1995). Works within the debate proper but published in other journals include pieces by Lee (1991) and Lee and Guenther (1993). There are also various commentaries (for example, Barnard 1992a; Kent 1992; Kuper 1992; Lee 1992; Shott 1992). Space does not allow full treatment of all this material here; indeed the thrust and counter-thrust of debate often focuses on minute and trivial details which are of little interest to anyone except the protagonists themselves. The complexities of changing viewpoints and subtle differences between authors of the same school need not overly concern us either. What is important is to understand the imagery rather than the detail, for it is in the imagery that the real importance of the debate lies.

Therefore, consider now some of the key texts. Let us start with the great traditional ethnographies, then look at Wilmsen's book and some of the more important articles. As with Van der Post's books, I shall summarise them very briefly and present examples of how Bushmen are portrayed, in order to give the flavour of the arguments.

Outstanding examples of traditionalist ethnography include monographs by Lorna Marshall and Richard Lee (on the Ju/'hoansi of the Botswana/Namibia border area) and George Silberbauer and Jiro Tanaka (on Khoe-speaking G/wi and G//ana in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve of Botswana).

Marshall's *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* (1976) comprises mainly a set of papers published originally in the journal *Africa*. The ethnography is meticulous and unpretentious, and it tends to represent the Ju/'hoansi as a collectivity, rather than as individuals. In these aspects it is typical of good traditionalist ethnography, and it is written in a very accessible style—a style which befits an author trained in English literature rather than social anthropology. Still, there is also a discernible functionalist premise, in that Ju/'hoan kinship, band organisation, and especially sharing practices, are portrayed as socially adaptive:

The custom of gift-giving, in my opinion, comes second only to meat-sharing in helping the !Kung to avoid jealousy and ill will and to develop friendly relations . . . The dealings in gift-giving are only between individuals, but they are numerous and

provide occasion, perhaps more than any one other activity does, for visits which bring groups of people together. (Marshall 1976:303)

Lee's ethnography (for example, 1979; 1993) is similar in some respects, but adaptation is seen in a more dynamic and theoretical way, as Lee's thinking on the Ju/'hoansi is more influenced by the social theory of Karl Marx and of the great ecological anthropologist Julian Steward. More interestingly, Lee frequently admits that his interest in Bushmen has come from his desire to reconstruct something of the foraging way of life of early humanity:

Foraging was a way of life that prevailed during an important period of human history. The modern foragers do offer clues to the nature of this way of life, and by understanding the adaptations of the past we can better understand the present and the basic human material that produced them both. (Lee 1979:433)

Elsewhere in *The !Kung San* (1979), Lee identifies benefits from this 'past' way of life, for example, communalism and sharing, but he also picks out problems. The most obvious is the high level of violence reported to him, within Ju/'hoan society and not between ethnic groups, in his own field-work area during the preceding decades (on this he is in disagreement with Marshall). Yet Lee takes foraging for granted, as a basic and adaptive way of life, an assumption which is anathema to the hard-line revisionists. He also takes for granted the fact that Ju/'hoan society is a relevant unit of analysis, in spite of the presence of members of other groups (Herero and Tswana) within their territories and at their waterholes. The Ju/'hoansi and their cattle-herding neighbours, although by Lee's frequent admission they do interact, seem to occupy different ecological niches almost as if they occupied different places.

Tanaka, in *The San* (1980), presents a finely-detailed account with an emphasis on daily activities, material culture, and residential groupings. He then goes on to a more general discussion of the lessons to be learned from studies of foragers or hunter-gatherers of Africa. He disclaims the notion that modern hunter-gatherers are identical to ancient ones (as do Lee and others), but he notes the utility is using data from Bushman societies to piece together elements of prehistory. For example,

... there is no doubt that the ethnographic facts of the present-day hunter-gatherers hold many important keys for us as we try to reconstruct man's past history. Particularly concerning the early stage of evolution of human society, our only resources are the modern hunting and gathering societies. Surely

the common mode of subsistence of modern hunter-gatherers and the fluid group structure common to most of these societies must represent elements of primeval human society. (Tanaka 1980:138)

Silberbauer's *Hunter and Habitat* (1981), except in the preface, avoids such explicit comparisons between modern and ancient foragers. Yet implicitly it too portrays G/wi society as highly adapted to the very harsh conditions of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. More than most of the other writers, Silberbauer presents a picture of society in harmony with nature and in dynamic equilibrium, prior to the great changes which have taken place since the early 1960s when he did his field-work. Most interestingly to me, Silberbauer also attempts an ecological account which is attuned to the G/wi understanding of their environment, where there is room for deities and spirits as well as humans, animals, and plants:

The phenomena that constitute the environment and the order that prevails in and among these phenomena are all seen as N!adima's creation and as being subject to his will. An account of the beliefs and attitudes concerning N!adima is, therefore, necessary to an understanding of how the G/wi view their environment. (Silberbauer 1981:51)

All of these ethnographies have one thing in common. They portray Bushman society as unchanging until recently. What is at least implicit in them is that, until such recent times, Bushman society had forms of social organisation which were both ancient and adaptive, that outside forces were of minimal influence, and that egalitarianism was the prevailing ideology, and sharing, the observed practice.

For extreme revisionists, the truth is perceived very differently. Wilmsen's *Land Filled with Flies* (1989) demolishes all these premises simply through his assumption that Bushman society is not a relevant unit of analysis. He argues that the political economy of the Kalahari is a better unit, and that this unit has been a meaningful construct for more than a millennium—since livestock were first introduced to the fringe areas of the Kalahari. Much of his argument is based on archaeological evidence and nineteenth-century travellers' accounts of trade between groups. The apparent isolation of Bushmen observed by Marshall and the others, he says, is a product of the white domination of southern Africa since the late nineteenth century. To Wilmsen, the Ju/'hoansi and other Bushmen are not even 'traditional' foragers:

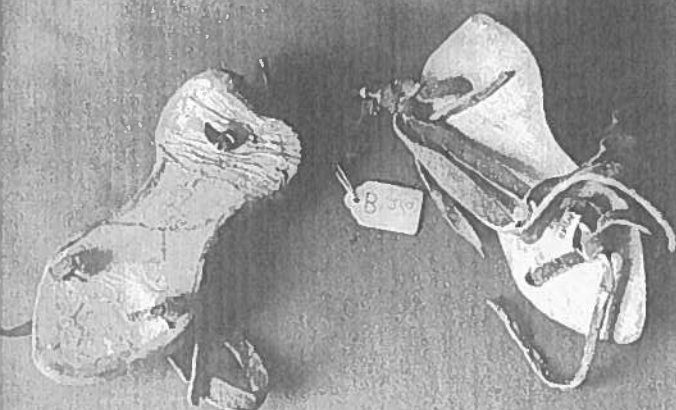
Their appearance as foragers is a function of their relegation to an underclass in the playing out of historical processes that began before the current



Hats collected by Donald Bain in Botswana in 1936. SAM 7080



Leather sandals from Namibia in the collection of the Wellington Museum, Cape.



millennium and culminated in the early decades of this century. The isolation in which they are said to be found is a creation of our view of them, not of their history as they lived it . . . A false dichotomy has crept in, a line drawn between those who produce their means of existence and those who supposedly do not, between those who live on nature and those who live in it, between those whose social life is motivated primarily by self-interest and those guided by respect for reciprocal consensus. (Wilmsen 1989:3)

For obvious reasons, Wilmsen's version has been attractive in the emerging, 'new South Africa'. His approach de-emphasises ethnicity in favour of class relations and brings to light the great disparity of wealth between supposed producers and supposed foragers. Wilmsen does not even refer to 'Bushman' or 'San', but prefers the less culturally-loaded (if linguistically not quite accurate) term, 'San-speaking peoples'. He accounts for systematic aspects of kinship, land tenure, and internal exchange relations in terms of a larger politico-economic structure of which Ju/'hoan-speakers form but a part.

That, in essence, is what the debate is really about. The historical questions which have emerged in the *Current Anthropology* articles test the limits of evidence. The first such piece, by Jacqueline Solway and Richard Lee (1990), was actually an attempt by two traditionalists to bend slightly towards the revisionist line. However, they upheld the cultural integrity of entities such as Ju/'hoan society, and thus did not go nearly far enough for the revisionists. What is more, in their abstract, Solway and Lee accused the revisionists of 'imputing links where none existed and assuming that evidence for trade implies the surrender of autonomy' (1990:109). The main part of the article concentrates on two areas of Botswana—the western Kweneng (an area of much dependency) and the Dobe area (one of relative autonomy). Their discussion is based largely on the interpretation of late nineteenth-century literature with reference to the significance of agro-pastoralism, the fur trade and clientship, and the degree to which Kalahari groups can be said to be part of a world economy.

Radical revisionists construed, Solway and Lee's vehement defence of traditional definitions of cultural units as an attack. In their counter-attack, Wilmsen and Denbow argued that "'Bushman' and 'San' are invented categories and 'Kalahari foragers' an ethnographic reification drawn from one of several subsistence strategies engaged in by all of Botswana's rural poor" (Wilmsen and Denbow 1990:489). Their evidence, too, is based mainly on nineteenth-century sources, especially the writings of the traveller S. Passarge. Much also comes from archaeological work which James Denbow and Edwin Wilmsen have been engaged in for over a decade (see, for example, Denbow 1984; 1986).

More attack and counter-attack ensued, with Richard Lee and Mathias Guenther (1991; 1993; 1995) dissecting Wilmsen's translations of Passarge and redrawing Wilmsen's maps of early travellers and the trade routes they found from the diaries and published accounts of those travellers. To the amusement of many, they even argued that what one traveller recorded in his diary was the presence of 'onions' rather than 'oxen' in Ju/'hoan country in the 1850s. Apparently, Wilmsen had misread the diary of gentleman adventurer C.J. Andersson and thereby replaced the gathering of wild vegetables with the herding of livestock! Ironically though, this example showed that detail alone cannot solve even an ethnographic question, for what both sides have been trying to do is to establish time, degree, and significance of contact between many groups in what all protagonists, in fact, agree is a complex system of social and economic relations.

Really, there are two key aspects of the debate. To put it simply, one concerns the facts of interaction between Bushmen and others at particular points in time. The other concerns the interpretation of these facts in terms of what we understand Bushman society to be. Traditionalists emphasise cultural continuity and the cultural integrity of Bushman groups. They see Bushmen as the inheritors of ancient indigenous environmental knowledge, hunting techniques, kinship practices, religious beliefs, and so on. Revisionists de-emphasise these aspects in favour of greater concern with the integration of southern African politico-economic structures taken as a whole. It is tempting to see the traditionalists simply as echoing Van der Post, and the revisionists as offering a way out of Van-der-Postian imagery. Yet this view would be an oversimplification. The fact is that all theoretical perspectives are based on their own sets of images, and these images compete as frameworks for understanding the details—whether such details are agreed upon or not.

The imagery behind revisionism is the vision of an integrated framework of social interaction—not an egalitarian framework, but one in which Bushmen are firmly placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Whereas traditionalists often emphasise egalitarianism within Bushman society, revisionists emphasise the unequal relations between Bushmen and others. Revisionism replaces one set of outsiders' images with another, and at times it has misrepresented the twentieth- as well as the nineteenth-century history of the Kalahari. As Silberbauer puts it:

Two world wars had not touched [the G/wi] directly. Whether or not Wilmsen and his fellow travellers like it, they interacted with the rest of the world very largely on their own terms, taking of—or rejecting—what was available when and how they chose. (Silberbauer 1991:98)

Neither view is necessarily at all close to a Bushman's own view of the world. This does not mean that they have no value, but merely that their value is contingent on a larger theory. For a Bushman it might be his or her place among those he or she meets. For a traditionalist it might be abstract relations between Bushman society and the natural environment at some specific point in time. For the revisionists it might be the set of trade relations which operate well beyond Bushman society, and of which Bushmen themselves may be quite unaware. Thus none of these views of Bushman society is, in absolute terms, superior to any other. Each represents only part of the whole. They are like snapshots—each taken at a different time and in a different direction. Only by putting them all together do we get the larger 'picture'.

Conclusion

All writing creates images, just as much as painting, photography, and museum exhibitions do. The problem is in creating an image which is close to the truth. Some anthropologists of postmodernist persuasion would even deny that we can ever get close to any truth, but I believe we can. The truth may be elusive, but we can approach it through a well-constructed and meaningful set of images.

Van der Post's image is one of a primordial mentality preserved in the Bushman mind, and in Van der Post's mind; he believes that he can help 'us' to access it and thereby better ourselves. The traditionalist anthropological view is of Bushmen as better exemplars of natural man for ecological reasons, whereas revisionist thinking has made them into an underclass. None of these views can tell the whole story. There is truth in all three, but what is missing in all three is serious attention to the views of Bushmen themselves on their relations with others. The details of such views are very rare in academic writings on Bushmen (an exception is Köhler 1989). Not all Bushmen are the same. Not even all 'farm Bushmen' of the same ethnic group are necessarily the same. Nharo Bushmen of the north-eastern Ghanzi farms, for example, differ in many ways from Nharo Bushmen of the south-western Ghanzi farms, and they may represent themselves differently (see for example, Barnard & Widlok 1996). Greater account needs to be taken of this diversity too.

Ultimately, we need an understanding of Bushmen which can be provided through a wider human vision, such as Van der Post has given us. We also need a scientific understanding such as the traditionalists have given, and a historical understanding like the one emphasised by the revisionists. When at last we take greater account of visions provided by Bushmen themselves, then, and only then, can the Kalahari debate be properly concluded.

Miscast

(1996)

p. 248 (attach to
Barnad)



Detail from a painted shelter in the Upper Brandberg, Namibia. Date unknown, though this painting could have been made at least 2000 years ago (see Pager 1989). Photograph David Brown

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