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The Past and Future of !Kung Ethnography:

Critical Reflections and Symbolic Perspectives

Essays in Honour of Lorna Marshall

Edited by
Megan Biesele
with Robert Gordon and Richard Lee

Megan Biesele
"A tribute to Lorna Marshall"
pp 11-20



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Quellen zur Khoisan-Forschung sind eine Schriftenreihe, die sich vorzugsweise der Veröffentlichung von Quellenmaterial im Bereich von Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur der khoisansprachigen Bevölkerung Afrikas widmet. Darüber hinaus bietet sie die Möglichkeit zur Vorstellung, Besprechung und Diskussion analytisch ausgerichteter Studien. Die Reihe erscheint in loser Folge und nimmt sowohl Monographien als auch Aufsatzsammlungen auf. Beiträge sind zu richten an:

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Preface

Though the authors who contributed to this volume share an appreciation of Lorna Marshall's work, they do not necessarily share the same scholarly traditions in the spelling and representation of Bushman language words. The Editor has chosen not to unify the spellings of these words throughout the book but to leave them as they appeared in the original manuscripts.

Similarly, the bibliographies for the various papers have been left as they were and appear at the end of each paper instead of in one unified section. Each contribution is thus whole unto itself for easier reference (and photo-copying).

Mention is made in several of the papers of two funds which have been established in aid of Bushman peoples. Groups of these people, who once lived as mobile hunter-gatherers in the way Lorna Marshall described in the 1950s, pursuing independent, self-sufficient lives in remote desert areas, now reside in sedentary communities, no longer possess rights to their land, and depend upon government handouts, wage labor, or serfdom for subsistence. In the worst cases hunter-gatherer life has been replaced by service in the South African Defense Forces, squatter settlements, drunkenness, malnutrition, and disease. Since 1973 efforts to aid the self-determination of the Botswana Bushmen have been carried out by the Kalahari Peoples Fund. Contributions to this fund may be made to the following address: KPF c/o Dr. Robert I. Ebert, 3100 Ninth St. Northwest, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87107. A second fund in aid of the Bushmen of Namibia has also been established, and the name and address are: The !Kung San Foundation, c/o Cultural Survival, Inc., 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, Mass., 02138.

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The Editor is indebted to Dr. Robert Gordon for the original suggestion that a celebratory volume be prepared for Lorna Marshall. She also thanks him for arranging matching funds for preparation expenses at the University of Vermont. Dr. Gordon assisted generously in the preparation of background material which was used in the book, as well.

To Dr. Richard B. Lee go thanks for his indispensable help in developing the concepts of this Festschrift volume. The Editor would like to thank him, too, for continuing his scholarly support of this endeavor through a time of major personal tragedy.

Finally, acknowledgment should go to Ralph Swenson of the Graduate College, University of Vermont, for administering project expenses and matching funds. For excellent copy-editing, thanks are due to Jane McGraw of Montpelier, Vermont. The manuscript was typed and word-processed by Jan Wilson, Woodville, Texas. The Editor commends her on meeting numerous challenges posed by the project, among them the rendering of exotic languages and complex charts into press-ready printouts.

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A TRIBUTE TO LORNA MARSHALL

In November, 1983, Lorna Marshall was honored at the 82nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago. The event at which she was Guest of Honor was a session called "Women and Their Families in the Field," and the sponsoring groups were the AAA Committee on the Status of Women in Anthropology and the National Women's Anthropology Caucus. Convened by June Helm of the University of Iowa, the session honoring Mrs. Marshall was attended by many of her colleagues and admirers - and, appropriately, by members of her family. Some of the family members (her son John Marshall, an ethnographic filmmaker, and her daughter, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, an ethnographic novelist) were important participants in a family field experience which spanned a generation and continues today.

In her graceful way that day in November, Lorna deflected much of the praise meant for her to her children. Yet it was clear that the audience assembled there had come to celebrate Lorna's work itself, her painstaking ethnographic labors in the field and her possibly even more painstaking care in the craft of ethnographic writing. For Lorna is among other things a serious stylist of the English language: fine writing in the service of conveying the truth about Bushman society is her specialty and her life's work. At 87 years of age now, she is still at it. Every day. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the house where she has lived and worked and entertained world travelers for well over fifty years.

Having known Lorna Marshall since 1968 and having had the privilege of working for her for several years as assistant and apprentice, I want to describe my overwhelming impression of her work and the way she works. The impression is one of CARE. Lorna has been above all else scrupulously careful in her assembling of facts about Bushman people. I was astonished, when I went to work with the !Kung myself and had occasion to repeat some of her questions, at the minute correctness of her facts. She worked

with interpreters and others of us have not, but her work is replicable to the tiniest detail.

The care Lorna takes doesn't end there. It extends, too, to great care in expression in writing, a concern which is rather rare in the anthropological profession. Her search for exactly the right words, her use of the entire range of the English language to show what was going on in the Bushman world when she was there, have made of her ethnographies documents that are one of a kind, unique translations of culture. Though her facts are replicable by others, there is no one else who could have written these ethnographies for us.

But Lorna never allowed her ability to make eloquent, precise word choices to lead her, as it might have, into grand theorizing. In fact the work of her entire family, including her husband Laurence, as well as Elizabeth and John, is marked by a steady refusal to go beyond careful description. Methodological syntheses were suspect: all members of the family strongly felt that these might ultimately be misleading. Nor did Lorna or her family ever allow their considerable personal eloquence to overshadow or mask the eloquence of !Kung individuals. A culture, after all, can be known only through its individuals, and this, with John's films, Elizabeth's The Harmless People, and Lorna's monographs and books, is just how we know !Kung society. There is in all this work a clear, constant portrayal of contemporary individuals in a dynamic relationship to their tradition. Everyone who reads Lorna's work has noticed the freshness and immediacy with which persons come forth from her texts to describe their society to us, seemingly with no intermediary.

As must be well known by now, there was actually a time in the not too distant past (1950) when no anthropologist could be found who wanted to join an expedition to study the Bushmen. So Lorna added a third career to those of instructor in English literature and of community service, and made herself, self-

taught, into an ethnographer. Between that time and now she has enabled what amounts to a sub-field in Bushman studies to flourish within anthropology for over a quarter of a century. Her work has also been the basis for a solid educational enterprise in developing teaching materials for high schools and colleges, one which has had wide-reaching effects. American schoolchildren now know about Bushman life in many of its minutest details, a fact which, when you think of it, is extraordinary in itself.

But there is a third aspect to the care taken by Lorna in her work. It is the care she has extended to her friends and colleagues, many of whom went after her to study Bushmen or other hunter-gatherers. Lorna has a large number of friends in anthropology all over the world, many of them young people whose lives and careers she has followed and lovingly fostered. If she is sometimes impatient because of the slowness with which her work becomes ready for publication, she must remember that this caring too has been an important part of her anthropological work. She has spent so much of her time and attention "being present," as she says, to all of us. Her generosity in this has been a perfect illustration of one of her own most famous writings: social life and human understanding are indeed maintained by "sharing, talking, and giving."

* * * *

Lorna Marshall was born in the mining town of Morenci, Arizona, on September 13, 1898. In her youth she traveled extensively with her widowed mother: stories she tells about this period include one of sailing up the Yangtze River in China and coming back to find that the radio had been invented. She studied at the University of California at Berkeley, receiving her B. A. in English literature in 1921. She taught English as an instructor at Mount Holyoke College from 1923 to 1925. In 1926 she married Laurence Kennedy Marshall, who was later the founder of Raytheon, Inc. Lorna studied further at Radcliffe College in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and received her M. A. in English literature there in 1928. She then taught 7th grade at the Lee School in Boston from 1928 to 1930. Her children Elizabeth and John were born in 1931 and 1932. From 1938 to 1940 Lorna was assistant to the Director of Shady Hill School in Cambridge. During the 1940s she was active with the Cambridge Community Center as a volunteer and on the Board of Directors: she also worked as a nonpartisan for election reform with the League of Women Voters.

The decade of the 1950s saw the beginning of the Marshall family's anthropological adventure with the Bushmen. Lorna has told, in The !Kung of Nyae Nyae, the story of how their first expeditions were mounted. Altogether they spent 24 months in Namibia (then South West Africa), Botswana, and Angola during the course of five separate field trips. Their research was conducted principally with !Kung San (Bushman) in the Nyae Nyae area of Namibia. They made shorter comparative studies with !Kung and with San of other language groups in Botswana and southern Angola. The research trips were as follows:

- 1951 !Kung of Nyae Nyae (2 months in the field)
- 1952-53 !Kung of Nyae Nyae (13 months in the field)
- 1955 !Kung of Nyae Nyae; /Gwi, !Ko, and Nharo in Botswana (4 months in the field)
- 1959 !Kung of Nyae Nyae; !Kung in southern Angola; Kwengo in the Caprivi Strip; Tsexa in Botswana (2 months in the field)
- 1961 !Kung of Nyae Nyae; !Kung in Botswana; Nharo and Tsaukwe in Botswana (3 months in the field)

Funding for the expeditions was largely provided by the Marshall family. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' book, The Harmless People, other articles by Elizabeth and by John Marshall, an enormous film archive made by John, and about 20,000 color slides and black and white stills taken by Laurence Marshall provide an irreplaceable document of the family's research. Lorna Marshall's

own ethnographic publications, which have been cited hundreds of times in anthropological literature since they first appeared, include:

- 1957 "The Kin Terminology System of the !Kung Bushmen", Africa 27 (1):1-25.
- 1957 "N!ow", Africa 27 (3):232-240.
- 1959 "Marriage Among !Kung Bushmen", Africa 29 (4):335-365.
- 1960 "!Kung Bushman Bands", Africa 30 (4):325-355.
- 1961 "Sharing, Talking and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among !Kung Bushmen", Africa 31 (3):231-249.
- 1962 "!Kung Bushman Religious Beliefs", Africa 32 (3):221-252.
- 1965 "The !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert", In J. Gibbs, ed., Peoples of Africa. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 1968 Discussion. In R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., Man the Hunter. Chicago: Aldine.
- 1969 "The Medicine Dance of the !Kung Bushmen", Africa 39(4):347-381.
- 1976 The !Kung of Nyae Nyae. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- 1980 "N!ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman", Odyssey 10-15.
- In progress: Beliefs and Rites of the Nyae Nyae !Kung.

A more recent publication, due out in 1986, is called "Some Bushman Star Lore". This paper appears in another volume in this same series, Quellen zur Khoisan-Forschung V, entitled Contemporary Studies on Khoisan. Written in the last few years, the paper shows, in my estimation, the completed development of Lorna's particular craft of ethnographic writing. After 25 manuscript pages or so of carefully presented sleuth-work on the star beliefs of the !Kung, Lorna reaches a section called "The Pleiades, Canopus, and Capella". I have requested permission to quote part of this section, because it illustrates so well how, when basic anthropological work is thoroughly done, the glory of nature and of human understanding may be brought home by plain, honest language:

"In !Kung tradition, the Pleiades, Canopus and Capella are seen as a constellation. The stars are relatively near together in right ascension. The Pleiades rise only about an hour and a half before Capella. Capella precedes Canopus by about an hour. In celestial latitude, however, the stars are far apart; Capella and Canopus are separated by ninety-eight degrees. To understand how such widely separated stars are seen as a constellation by the !Kung, one must see them at a certain time of year in the eastern sky at dawn.

The !Kung name for Pleiades is Tshxum. This is a name, informants claimed, not a word with translatable meaning. Capella and Canopus together are called the Horns of the Tshxum (Tshxum !Khusi). Capella is singled out by the unlikely name the Green Leaf Horn. The Green Leaf Horn is a barra thing, the !Kung said; it comes when the first flowers bloom. (Barra is the "season of the rains".)

When I began inquiring about the stars, the Pleiades were among the first stars to be pointed out and they were identified as the Tshxum. No confusion arose. R. H. Allen (1963:402) quotes Pliny as saying of the Pleiades, "So evident in the heaven, the easiest to be

known of all others...". Canopus was also easily recognized and was clearly identified as one of the Horns of the Tshxum. However, the Green Leaf Horn eluded me. People would point to a place in the northeast sky about forty-five degrees above the horizon and say the star would appear there. But it seemed not to do so. It became a quest confounded by confusion caused largely, I believe, by the fact that the star was visible in the sky much of the time when I was asking about it, but not in the exact position in which it is recognized by the !Kung as the Green Leaf Horn.

In 1961, our expedition arrived in the Nyae Nyae area on September 17. Old Gau had remembered that I wanted to see the Green Leaf Horn and the first morning after our arrival he came before dawn to waken me, saying he could show me the star. I quickly pulled on some clothes, climbed out of my sleeping tent, and saw a moonless sky blazing with a myriad of stars. The Pleiades were nearing the zenith. Aldebaran, their husband, according to Hottentot myth, was near. Sirius and Canopus in their brilliance dominated the lower east and southeast sky. Away in the northeast was the star Old Gau pointed to. It had not occurred to me the star would be so distant from the others or so far to the north. I had not learned to identify the northern stars and had to get out the star atlas and a flashlight to learn that the star was Capella, a Aurigae. While I was studying the atlas dawn came. The lesser stars faded away. The horizon began to glow in sunrise crimson. Venus had risen and gleamed near Sirius in the crimson light. For a moment of breathtaking beauty in a seeming arc soaring over the sunrise glow, Capella and Canopus were paired, matched in brilliance and color, marking the north and the south. An arc drawn between them would bracket the earth. With the Pleiades they formed a great embracing triangle.

At last I had seen the stars as the constellation. Furthermore, to my pleasure, I had seen them at exactly the right time of year. In that arid land some of the drought resistant vegetation does not wait to be quickened by the rains. Not a drop of rain had fallen as yet that season, but we had noticed green blades in the sere golden grass clumps. Lilies had thrust shoots up through the dry sand from their succulent bulbs and had burst into patches of great pink blossoms. The first rain fell on September 24. The first great drops from a passing cloud of the so-called "little rains", spattered separate circles in the sand and a few filled the air with the fragrance of wet earth. Flowers and stars had signalled the rains, as the !Kung had said.

While Old Gau and I were looking at the stars, I had set a pot of cocoa to heat on the coals of our campfire. In excitement and delight at seeing the Tshxum and both its Horns in such glory, I got out some bread and a can of bully beef. Old Gau and I sat down to a little feast of celebration. Over the ages the Pleiades, Canopus, and Capella, as separate entities, have had special importance in many cultures. Allen (1963: passim) tells us that each has been chosen to mark the beginning of the year in one ancient culture or another. All have been associated with rain and have been worshipped and prayed to. Capella (the Goat) was called the Rainy Goat Star by the Romans (Allen, op. cit., 86). The Pleiades appear in the myths about the flood, and are especially prominent in the deluge myth of the Chaldaea (Allen, op. cit., 398). Canopus was called God of Waters in Egypt (Allen, op. cit., 71). Four great Egyptian temples built in 6400 B.C. were oriented to Canopus' rising before sunrise at the September equinox (Allen, op. cit., 70). Their many people may have feasted in honor of these stars. Old Gau and I were just another pair of feasters.

I wondered, however, if ever before these stars together as a triadic constellation had been honored by a feast. The early Arabs drew the Pleiades and Capella together into a constellation calling the Pleiades a herd of camels and Capella their driver (Allen, op. cit., 87), but the three together are not recorded as a constellation in any of the cultures mentioned in Star Names by Allen. Nor are they seen as a constellation by the other Bushman groups we visited - including the !Kung in Chimbaranda. Those !Kung called the Pleiades Tshxum as do the Nyae Nyae !Kung, but they do not join Capella and Canopus with the Tshxum in any way, certainly not as "horns". The concept of this triadic constellation may be unique to the Nyae Nyae !Kung, or it may not. I do not know. I felt quite certain, however, that our little feast of celebration was a unique event - an old Bushman and a middle-aged American woman feasting at sunrise on bully beef, bread, and cocoa, to celebrate a certain triad of stars and the coming rains."

* * * *

Deftly and lightly, Lorna has included herself as ethnographer in the story of discovery. This account illustrates the value to anthropologists, as well as to the people they study, of using the human arts of sharing, talking, and giving. New and idiosyncratic as these terms were for both categories of behavior and modes of participant observation, they were nevertheless eagerly adopted by students and fieldworkers. Lorna's 1961 paper by this name has been read and re-read in countless introductory anthropology courses and in courses on hunter-gatherers. In 1976, it was reprinted, with her permission, in Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers, the joint effort of the Harvard Kalahari Research Group edited by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore, and has been extensively quoted from that source as well.

Likewise, her work in !Kung kinship has been widely quoted and discussed. Marriage, the family, relationships with bands and between bands--all these have received meticulous treatment in Lorna's work. Her published works on religion and beliefs of the !Kung, soon to be collected and augmented in a second major book, are models of both succinctness and depth. The forthcoming book, eagerly awaited by both anthropological readers and a substantial general public, will contain sections on the !Kung gods, on the curing dance, on food avoidances, on childbirth, on hunting-, rain-, and initiation-rites, and on N!ow--this last Lorna's well-known seminal contribution to the understanding of a symbolic complex of the !Kung which links weather, childbirth, and hunting.

For many years, Lorna Marshall's work did not receive the recognition it deserved in anthropological circles, perhaps because she had no formal training in the discipline and was not attached to a university. Now at last it is being taken very seriously by the world of anthropological thinking, as well as by a thoughtful public. It is considered not only a document of a time and human place now forever gone, but also a document of understanding by a fine Western mind. In presenting this book of essays to Lorna Marshall, we her students and colleagues are celebrating not just the past and present of !Kung ethnography but a future which her care has made possible.

Megan Bieseles
Woodville, Texas
December, 1985

Part I

The Past of !Kung Ethnography

This book views the past, present, and future of the ethnographic study of hunter-gatherers, centering on the generation of fieldwork and writing done on the !Kung of southern Africa. The !Kung case is both exceptional and exemplary for anthropology. Since Lorna Marshall began field studies with them in 1951, work with the !Kung in a variety of anthropological subdisciplines has continued virtually unabated right up into the present. The Marshall expeditions were succeeded in the sixties by the Harvard Kalahari Research Group of DeVore and Lee and in the seventies by the University of New Mexico Kalahari Research Project. At this moment field work is continuing and new projects are in preparation. Through numerous publications for school, college, popular, and academic audiences, the !Kung have become one of the best-understood societies on our planet. They provide a well-researched contemporary example of the long-lived hunting and gathering form of human adaptation.

Because of the recent trend in anthropology to reassessment of ideas and styles in past ethnography (e.g. Malinowski/Weiner, Mead/Freeman, etc.), and because the work on the !Kung and other hunter-gatherers represents such an important "baseline" within our discipline, the time seems right for a critical look backwards at this body of materials. Accordingly, the first half of this book presents essays with a reflexive focus, scanning back to the early days of hunter-gatherer studies with a critical and contemplative eye.

Authors in this first section examine the ways in which emphases and purposes in anthropology have changed during the last thirty years and discuss how these changes have affected our view of the !Kung and other foraging societies.

In the section on basic issues, Mathias Guenther's essay on the names given to the hunter-gatherers of southern Africa by travelers, missionaries, white and black settlers, and anthropologists, far from merely addressing merely linguistic issues, focuses upon the political results of the various appellations through history. This issue is one with which Lorna Marshall too has had a continuing concern. The paper by Robert Gordon reiterates a second basic question - what are the actual numbers of the !Kung and other Bushmen? - which also has political ramifications. Both Guenther's and Gordon's papers articulate a basic truth of reflexive anthropology: how a people are viewed from outside, what the prevalent images of them have been, have much to do with both the possibility of understanding their situation and with that situation itself.

Under the section "Critical Reflections on !Kung Ethnography", a thoughtful introductory essay is provided by Melvin Konner and Marjorie Shostak. They consider and expose, by reference to the recent Samoan controversy, both an insidious romanticism and an ethnocentrism in ethnographic writing which have deeply penetrated anthropology for many years. They cite studies of many "ethnographic" peoples, such as the Zuni and other Pueblo Indians and the Semai of Malaysia, which helped to embed in the literature various unfortunate stereotypes of human nature. Konner and Shostak go on to suggest remedies for our ethnocentric blinders, antidotes for the unslaked desire to see a Shangri-La in traditional hunting-gathering societies. They insist we must pay attention to the full complexity and the contradictory propensities of culture, and, like Lorna Marshall, to recording the autonomy of individuals long before we arrive at theories about how they will behave.

Richard Lee's article, "The Name Relation: Kinship and the Process of Discovery", provides a concrete illustration of the importance of Shostak and Konner's emphasis on viewing ethnography modestly as "attempts to describe a portion of the natural world". Lee has spent as much field time as any anthropologist

painstakingly eliciting kinship information: in fact, the standard !Kung impersonation of him in the Dobe area of Botswana involves a mock-gravelly voice saying...."And your father's father's FATHER'S name was what?" Yet in this essay he lets us in on the process of discovery (much as he did in "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari") of how the rules - in this case, of kinship - are used and manipulated by individuals. This too is a reflexive kind of thing for an anthropologist to do: like Lorna Marshall describing herself and old Gau eating bully beef and watching the dawn stars, Lee includes himself in the process, making reader discovery possible as well.

Next, Polly Wiessner's paper takes a novel perspective on old data as a way of reflecting anew on ethnographic realities. New perspectives are being generated at a fast clip by the subdisciplines of ethnohistory and ethnoarchaeology, and Wiessner's contribution is no exception. Basically, she shows that while much recent work has illuminated !Kung history since contact, little has been done on the history and continuity of relationships internal to the society. Accordingly, Wiessner's concern in the paper here is to reexamine data on land use over a generation and on the ways hxaro (trading) ties are passed down to offspring, with a view to showing the relationships of both land and hxaro ties to marriage choices. The generational perspective she has taken is a departure from the norm in such studies. It is also clearly a productive one, and as such, provides a reflection on the way this branch of ethnography has been conducted in the past.

The final essay in Part I is by two anthropologists who work not with !Kung but with another group of hunter-gatherers, the Batek of Malaysia. Kirk and Karen Lampell Endicott have taken on, though, a point in hunter-gatherer studies which has seen much of its development within the arena of !Kung studies, namely the question of territoriality. The territoriality issue has much relevance for ethological themes of human evolution and even human nature raised early in this book by Konner and Shostak. The Endicotts present a comprehensive but condensed review of

the contending views on this topic, all the way from Ardrey through cultural-ecological arguments based on energy-efficiency. They point out that Lorna Marshall's clear ethnographic presentation of the distinct territories (nloresi) inhabited and used by separate bands of !Kung has provided a basis for significant advances in our understanding of hunter-gatherer territoriality. They mention that Elizabeth Cashdan, who argued in The American Anthropologist in 1983 that defense of a bounded space is not the only way a group can efficiently manage its resources, makes good use of Mrs. Marshall's material. The Batek case is then presented by the Endicotts as a further contribution to the understanding of hunter-gatherer rights to land and resources. Peninsular Malaysia with its rainforests provides an instructive contrast with the Kalahari environment: Batek territoriality too presents a striking contrast with that of the !Kung.

These six papers, by Guenther, Gordon, Konner and Shostak, Lee, Wiessner, and Endicott and Endicott, have two main things in common. First, they are all reexaminations or reinterpretations or new approaches to questions in !Kung and hunter-gatherer ethnography. Second, they are contributions to a celebration of the work of Lorna Marshall, whose pioneering work on the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert has contributed substantially to our understanding of societal and cultural processes. Her monograph, The !Kung of Nyae Nyae (1976, Harvard University Press) is a standard reference work on hunter-gatherers. The research done by her and her family is cited in practically every introductory anthropology text book and in a large number of introductory text books of the other social sciences as well. She is at present teaching all of us how to age gracefully by writing a book on Bushman belief and ritual at the age of eighty-seven. What makes her achievements all the more laudable is the fact that she managed to accomplish them despite the fact that she is a woman with no formal academic qualifications in anthropology.

Moreover, she belongs to the vanishing class of scholar-patrons of higher learning. At her behest, her family has

financed several large projects involving not only anthropology, but also botany, ornithology, entomology, and musicology. At the same time, she has not forgotten the people with whom she did research and has heavily endowed two funds, The Kalahari Peoples Fund and the !Kung San Foundation, to assist in their welfare; in so doing she has set an example which the social science profession would be hard-pressed to emulate.