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END NOTE: A NAMIBIAN PERSPECTIVE ON
 LORNA MARSHALL'S ETHNOGRAPHY

Robert Gordon

As attested by the articles in this book, Lorna Marshall's !Kung ethnography is one of the most widely cited studies in social science.¹ To appreciate fully the uniqueness of her !Kung ethnography, we need to place it within the context of San or Bushman studies. The story of how the Marshalls decided to go to Africa after the Second World War and then, on the advice of the Peabody Museum, decided to study the Bushmen is well known. Academics at the Peabody were probably intrigued by reports emanating from the popular press and the largely secondary scientific press about the uniqueness of the Bushmen, who were believed to be fast approaching extinction. What they probably did not realize was that they were dealing with a veritable, and largely South African, "Bushman industry." An enhanced appreciation of Lorna's work can be gained by examining this "industry," which could easily have entrapped a naive or neophyte ethnographer. The fact that Lorna did not become ensnared in it speaks stronger than words.

In 1929 the well-known South African publicist, Hedley Chilvers, listed what he regarded as the seven wonders of southern Africa. Nestled among such phenomena as Victoria Falls, the Rand Goldfields, and the Zimbabwe Ruins, he included "the Bushmen, ethnologically the oldest of all surviving races" (Chilvers 1929:vii). This belief in the scientific uniqueness of the Bushmen has resulted in the group's becoming probably the most scientifically commoditized human group in the annals of science. Indeed, in the same year, the traveler, Makin, complained that

As is usual with any disappearing race, the Bushmen have now become an absorbing ethnological study to many pundits in the professional world. Every year white men

come to the edge of the Kalahari desert, camp out there with an array of cameras and scientific impediments and try to entice the nomads of the desert to visit the camp. Tobacco is scattered as lavishly as crumbs to ensnare birds. And the few Bushmen who are in touch with civilization, a type that like a nameless dog will hang about the place where a bone may be flung at them, come into camp and are scientifically examined. (Makin 1929:278)

But it was more than just the belief in the necessity of salvage anthropology that drove these men of knowledge. We seem to want to believe that there are some undiscovered "wild" Bushmen lurking in the dark just outside the perimeter of our camp fires who are "uncontaminated" by "Western civilization." The search for such pristine people is, after all, the very stuff of scientific adventure.

One consequence of all this attention was that, even as Lorna started to publish her material, Professor Gusinde, who had spent a lifetime wandering the globe studying forager groups like the Yahgan, Pygmies, and Bushmen, wrote the definitive article on "Primitive People Now Dying Out" for the International Social Science Journal. For the Bushmen, he observed: "It is gratifying to be able to report that the culture and racial type of this desert people. . . can, on the whole, be regarded today as sufficiently investigated" (Gusinde 1957).

While scientists were proclaiming the Bushmen sufficiently studied, ² in the popular press the dominant image of the Bushmen was being well projected by the prominent English traveler, John Brown, who traversed the Kalahari in 1952-1953 using many of the same "contacts" the Marshall family had. Brown, whose book, The Thirsty Land was a book club selection after its publication in 1954, described the Bushmen thus:

The Bushman language. . . sounds a bit like the barking of baboons. . . . In the olden days the Boers

shot the Bushmen down like game, and there have been proposals, even in high assemblies, that the Bushmen should be classified as such to facilitate extermination. Seeing that many of them had horrible diseases and as they were considered untameable by some observers, this proposal was not as barbarous as it sounds today. In the tropics remedies tend to be as drastic as the diseases they cure, and what could not be put forward at an international conference in the temperate zone sounds like cold common sense in the jungle or desert. (Brown 1954:118)

To appreciate the importance of Lorna's work, we need to descend briefly into the sociocultural milieu of South West Africa in the 1950s, when she did her major fieldwork. White Namibians pride themselves on the myth of their hospitality, but the welcome the Marshalls received was guardedly suspicious. The Marshalls were carefully vetted by the South African embassy, and their movements in South West Africa were constantly monitored. Despite all these administrative precautions, rumors abounded and questions were even asked in the white-run Legislative Assembly about the Marshall expeditions. On 27 May 1958, for example, Dr. Grammie Brandt, the member from Grootfontein, asked the administrator twelve questions about the Marshall expeditions, including the following:

(6) Is the Administration aware of any social fraternisation between the Europeans of this expedition and the Bushman community; (7) are films and tape recordings made by this Marshall and are they censored before they are sent overseas; . . . (10) does the Administration intend establishing a Bushman reserve in this area; (11) if so, is it the result of the influence and business of this Marshall expedition; (12) will the needs of Europeans for land, be considered before this Bushmen reserve is established? (South West Africa Legislative Assembly 1957:88-89)

Even anthropologists working in the territory at the time could hardly be termed interested in the dignity of the indigenes. Lorna's ethnographies stand out from others which were being written as exceptional for the human dignity she accorded her subjects. Her major achievement, in my estimation, was in raising the level of Bushman ethnography above the level of the crudities and commonplace echoes of settler categorizations. More than most ethnographers, she has endowed her Bushman subjects with a dignity that is not only ethically attractive, but that contrasts dramatically with the local settlers' and, indeed, the current scientific image of the Bushmen. Sitting in the comfort of our American or European homes in the 1980s, it is difficult to realize how important and courageous this achievement was.

I believe another reason Lorna has produced such superb ethnography is precisely because she had no in-depth, formal training in anthropology. This lack of training had two important consequences: first, she was not a prisoner to the rigid jargonese that was starting to permeate ethnographies. Her work is refreshingly readable. Second, she had no theoretical axe to grind nor the need to score points with academic colleagues. Facts and observations, the very substance of fieldwork, do not drop ready-made from heaven but are framed by our cognitive categories, which, in turn, tend to be shaped by the theoretical issues we are trying to elucidate. But too much theory can be a bad thing, especially when it enables the fieldworker to hide behind scant data. Moreover, it can place intellectual blinders on the researcher. Nowhere is this error better illustrated than in the area of Bushman studies, and especially in the issue of why Bushmen are becoming extinct, one of the leitmotifs for the burgeoning field of Bushman studies. I think most researchers would agree that Bushmen numbers are, on the whole, declining (see Gordon, this volume).

In the same book in which he elevated the Bushmen to one of the "Seven Wonders of Southern Africa," Chilvers approvingly quotes the administrator of South West Africa:

We make no attempt to civilize the Bushmen. They are untameable. They are the savages who shot Magistrate Van Ryneveld with poisoned arrows a few years ago. They attack parties of natives from Ovamboland on their way to work in the mines. I have had to send two punitive expeditions against them this year, and more by good luck than good management, we captured some of them and punished them severely. The territory is so large and the Bushmen so cunning that an army might seek them in vain. But it is all fine country, splendid for sheep and cattle farming. (Chilvers 1929:276)

Indeed, the year 1929 saw some particularly drastic legislation aimed specifically at curbing "Bushman depredations." The Vagrancy Act was made even more draconian, and it became a criminal offence for a Bushman to carry a bow and arrow. Clearly, then, state policy was a major factor leading to the decline of the Bushmen. How did professional scientists deal with this suppression?

The history of Bushman-settler relationships is, as Reenen van Reenen³ says, not pleasant for whites to read, consequently, they (including van Reenen) tend to ignore (van Reenen 1920) or summarily dismiss it with appropriate euphemisms. The most recent example of such intellectual amnesia is a small Afrikaans textbook by Booyens entitled The San and Khoesan Today (1980), which almost completely ignores the role of colonial subjugation. By the same token, we must realize that this relationship is not a simple one that can be glossed over with naive simplifications be they regarding the "vermin" or the "beautiful people."

Intellectuals, writers, and academics have played an important role in the mystification of the Bushmen. For example, Karl Frey, who was appointed to the South African Senate because of his expert knowledge of the "natives," and who was specifically asked to represent the interests of the Namibian indigenes, explained

the circumstances of the Bushmen in the the 1950s in what can only be described as typical double-talk.

They live in the game reserves which white men may not enter. In this way the Administration, has, so to speak, created Bushman reserves where they may live undisturbed according to their old Bushman customs. . . In spite of all that the Administration is doing to prevent the Bushmen from being crowded out by the ever expanding civilization, there is no certainty that its efforts will be successful. The reason is that the Bushmen themselves remain unapproachable and do nothing to help the white man to assist them. . . he shows no sign of ever submitting himself to the customs of other races in the country. (Frey, n.d.)

The imagery and mythology implicit in this statement is widely perpetuated by popular writers in both Afrikaans and English.

Generally anthropologists have studiously ignored what has happened to the Bushmen. Often, explanations by nonanthropologists have been more fantastic and, at the same time, more accurate. Typically explanations have revolved around sex. Venereal disease seems to have upset a number of authors like Potgieter, who in trying to maintain the myth of Bushman isolation was forced to conclude that "nobody knows how the Bushmen became infected, and even the best experts on this race are surprised at the special vulnerability of the Bushmen to such diseases" (Potgieter 1937:11). The South African Blue Book on how the Germans treated the natives of South West Africa declared the chief cause of the decline in Bushman numbers to be because the "Germans persisted in taking Bushwomen from their husbands and using them as concubines" (South Africa 1918:148).

Perhaps the most important intellectual, who gave these Bushmen myths a scientific credibility and, thus, helped sustain

them, was Heinrich Vedder, missionary, ethnographer, historian and politician.

From the earliest times [the Bushmen] were despised, hated and fiercely persecuted by all other natives and so the only dwelling places left to them were inaccessible hiding places. . . Distrustful of everyone who belonged to another tribe. . . they avoided all contact with the outer world, and they live even today, their miserable Bushman life, just as their ancestors have lived it for centuries. (Vedder 1938:78)

Vedder has, on occasion, discussed the process by which the Bushmen became extinct in South Africa. Their decline occurred because:

- a) They were "natural anarchists";
- b) No settlers wanted to use them for labor because of their small physique;
- c) Their love of freedom made them "unreliable";
- d) Their love of hunting made them susceptible to stock theft. (Vedder, n.d.)

But Vedder liked to tailor his knowledge to suit his audience, thus, when appointed to the South African Senate to represent Namibian indigenous interests, he addressed that august body on the urgency of creating a Bushman Reserve. There were two basic reasons why the Bushmen numbers had declined, he said. In the early Cape, "they were unable to distinguish between game and cattle," and this inability had caused trouble for them with the farmers. In South West Africa, their decline had come about because of their strong notions of territoriality. "Every Bushman knows exactly how far his territory stretches. . . (and) it is for this reason that there are so few Bushmen. . . they have fought among themselves; they have shot and killed one another" (South Africa 1951:5616-17).

When Vedder did plead for protection of the Bushmen in the form of a reserve, it was not because of humanitarian considerations, but in the name of science or, rather, Vedder's uniquely racist-antiquarian shaped concept of science.

Their language alone justifies the preservation of this primitive race, also with an eye to the distant future, because a time will come when even the philologists, and also physiologists and ethnologists will be very grateful if there are still Bushmen in the country of whom they can make a study; especially the Kalahari Bushmen; these Bushmen, although their blood is perhaps slightly mixed, yet most of them are still thoroughbreds, and this is an ancient tribe, a tribe older than any other we have in South Africa, and perhaps even older than our European nations, because it is possible that families of Bushmen lived in the olden days in Southern France and Spain. (cited in South West Africa 1936:28)

Similarly, other German ethnologists who worked on the Bushmen, like Glass, Gusinde and Lebzelter, found it easier to talk about unpleasant processes when they were washed through the wringer of time and located in another country. They did not analyze the policies applied to the Bushmen while they were doing research for either the Germans or the South Africans. One can be excused if one thought that the Bushmen were living blissfully in an administrative vacuum.

Of course, the Germans were not alone in "blaming the victim" and ignoring the wider sociopolitical structure. In his classic The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa published in 1930, Schapera had this to say about the Bushmen in South West Africa:

. . .their numbers seem to have declined a good deal within recent years. The official estimate for 1913 gave the Bushman population. . .as 8,098, which may be

contrasted with the 1926 figure of 3,600. Allowing for probable inaccuracies in the two estimates, there does nevertheless appear to be an undeniable decrease. This may be attributed largely to the ravages of disease, especially malaria. (Schapera 1930:40)

Genocide was never mentioned. Even leading white liberals in South Africa like Leo Marquard, later president of the Institute of Race Relations, stuck close to the official mythology.

There are about 5,000 Bushmen in South-West Africa, and these people, as elsewhere, are unable to adapt themselves to European civilization. They have steadily retreated before the Europeans, and the Government is considering establishing a Reserve where they may live as they are accustomed to live, by hunting and from roots and herbs. Very occasionally they become servants of European farmers, but as a rule, they keep as far away as possible from European civilization. There are very few Bushmen left in Africa and their art and music are famous. European civilization does not seem to be able to influence them in any way. (Marquard and Standing 1939:251-252)

This mythology is still very much a part of the liberal definition. Consider, for example, the statement by Wellington in his book South West Africa and Its Human Issues:

The little folk seemed unable to alter their ways even when given cattle and sheep and encouraged by the Cape settlers to use them for breeding. The kindness seems to have been misplaced; the Bushman appears to have been unable or unwilling to adapt himself to the pastoral life and his near extermination followed. (Wellington 1967:135)

But what about anthropologists directly concerned with the

formulation of policy? Consider the case of P. J. Schoeman, former professor of anthropology at Stellenbosch, chairman of the Commission for the Preservation of the Bushmen, and onetime chief game warden. His chief informant told him; "You made us a race of nomads and refugees. Our pregnant mothers gave birth to their children while they were fleeing from you." (Schoeman 1952:12). Yet Schoeman does not go any further into this crucial topic. Later, when told that the Germans shot Bushmen like wild dogs and wolves and that the Afrikaners also shot them, Schoeman replied, "Only those of your people who murdered and stole cattle, Xameb. We must cover the truth with sand." (Schoeman 1957:206). And sand is plentiful in that desert. Twenty years later, Schoeman wrote an article entitled "Orphans of Africa." The Bushmen were dying out, he said, for there were only some 2,000 in Botswana (?), about 100 in the Kalahari Gemsbok Game Park, and between 8,000 and 10,000 in the southern Kavango region. They had become extinct in South Africa as a result of a "tragic reciprocal misunderstanding." In South West Africa, their numbers were diminishing because of their lust for tobacco. Unable to restrain their craving, they would trek up to the Kavango River where they would sell their wives to Black migrant workers returning from the mines for this drug. The migrant workers would infect all the women with venereal disease, which had fatal results since the Bushmen would flee rather than see a white administration doctor (Schoeman 1971)!

At the volkekunde (ethnology) departments of the various Afrikaans universities, the Bushmen have been accorded a place of comparatively high importance. It is necessary to explore briefly the place the Bushmen occupy in the volkekunde gestalt, if only because many officials and missionaries who work with the Bushmen were trained at Afrikaans universities and this training undoubtedly influences their explanations for Bushman behavior.

In contrast to English-speaking social anthropologists, who have displayed a minimal interest in marginal or peripheral groups (because they were unavoidably "disintegrated" or because they

provoked the ghosts of an earlier generation of anthropologists who conjectured history), the Bushmen have always enjoyed a prominent place in the practice of volkekunde. At least five volkekundiges have done research of varying quality and type on the Bushmen.

E. F. Potgieter was the first volkekundige to do formal research on Bushmen. In 1955 he published a rather euphemistically entitled study, The Disappearing Bushmen of Lake Chrissie (in the Transvaal). Potgieter apologetically introduced his study by claiming, "It was found that amongst these people there is today a marked lack of the type of social activities which are of importance to the anthropologist in the field" (Potgieter 1955:x). The implications of this study, which dealt with the last small band of Bushmen in the Transvaal, are spelled out in Coertze's introductory text.

Exaggerated conservatism as psychological phenomenon must not however be confused with cases where a people are intrinsically (innerlik) incapable of undergoing change in a fixed direction subject to stimuli derived from foreign cultures. In the case of the Bushmen, we find, for example, that despite close contact with the white on the one hand and the Bantu on the other, they became neither Bantuized nor westernized. Where it did occur, it only went to a certain level after which they die out and disappear. The intrinsic bondedness between their life-style on the one hand and their inherited racial characteristics on the other meant extinction for them. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Bushmen of Lake Chrissie (Potgieter 1955). Here it was a case where the Bushmen were apparently intrinsically incapable of adapting to changed living circumstances. The challenge of new conditions of living was too big for them, not simply because they were conservative, but because they had an inherent incapability of meeting new challenges. (Coertze 1963:47, my translation)

Coertze's position is echoed by his student Budack, the current government ethnologist in South West Africa. In discussing the creation of a Bushman homeland, he remarks that "in the process of ethnogenesis. . .territoriality is a crucial element. This process only began amongst the Bushmen comparatively recently. Apart from that they have thus far not been able to compete freely with other ethnic groups" (*Die Suidwester*, 19 April 1978).

Perhaps the *volkekundige* with the greatest long-term impact on the people of Nyae Nyae was P. J. Schoeman, the prominent Afrikaans youth *litterateur* and nature lover mentioned above. Schoeman went to the University of Stellenbosch in 1928 and majored in Bantu languages and *volkekunde* for his B.A., which was awarded in 1930. This degree was followed a year later by a Masters. In 1934 he obtained his Ph.D. with a thesis on the Swazi. That same year, he departed for London where he studied under Malinowski. After a period in journalism, he returned to a teaching appointment in Bantuology at Stellenbosch in 1936. In 1938 he was appointed to the Chair, a position he held until 1946 when he resigned as a consequence of academic politics and decided to devote himself full-time to writing. After dismally failing to dislodge Margaret Ballinger as white parliamentarian for the Cape Africans in the 1948 elections on a National Party ticket, Schoeman found himself with much leisure time. He was then appointed chief game warden of South West Africa and was immediately tapped for the Commission for the Preservation of the Bushmen. His popular Bushman book, *Jagters van die Woestynland*, was published in 1951. Schoeman's approach was vintage Malinowskian: Hunger and sex were the strongest drives in all primitive society, and these, in turn, gave rise to economic and social organization. But even fortified with a dose of Malinowski, he still found himself addressing the "all important question" of whether the Bushmen could

adapt themselves to a new way of life. . . .work
on a farm. . . .pastoral life. . . .? Judging by

their historical past, the one and only answer would be: No. . . .the Bushmen seem to lack something. . . .some inner or spiritual ability. . . .and yet one cannot deny the fact that their will to survive is as strong--perhaps even stronger than that of any other race or tribe. . . . As an idealist I would like to see the Bushmen living their own lives in one or more reserves of their own--with a Chinese wall around them. But unless the Administration is prepared to supply them with food, they will, I fear, be a continual nuisance to both the Natives and the European farmers, and they will gradually exterminate all the big game. (Schoeman, unpubl. memo., n.d.)

I have quoted this paper by Schoeman extensively because these ideas still have much currency in government circles. This fact is perhaps best epitomized by the recent Marais Report (1984), which sees the Bushmen as set on a path of self-destruction because of their supposedly inherent fatalism. It is the strength, indeed, eloquent beauty of Lorna Marshall's ethnography that she never sinks to such facile pseudo-scientific generalizations. The power of her work lies precisely in its meticulous accuracy and honesty, which makes it invaluable in combating such gross distortions.

Lorna Marshall's work is pioneering and classic, because prior to her reports the dominant emphasis in Bushman ethnography was on the exotic, on the strangeness of the subjects, in short, on how *different* Bushmen are. Her ethnography, in contrast, unwittingly forces the reader to empathize with her subjects, to reflect on how *similar* they are to us. This empathy, I believe, is a crucial tool in the struggle to prevent the genocide of the Bushmen.

NOTES

¹Based on a survey done by Cynthia Fish using the Social Science Citation Index as a base.

²Most recently by the South African Defence Force in correspondence with the author.

³Probably the most plagiarized Afrikaans writer on the Bushmen: see, for example, Basson (1935/36); Olivier (1935).

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APPENDIX

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AMONG
KALAHARI SAN

