

The Hunter-Gatherer Myth in Southern Africa

Preserving Nature or Culture?

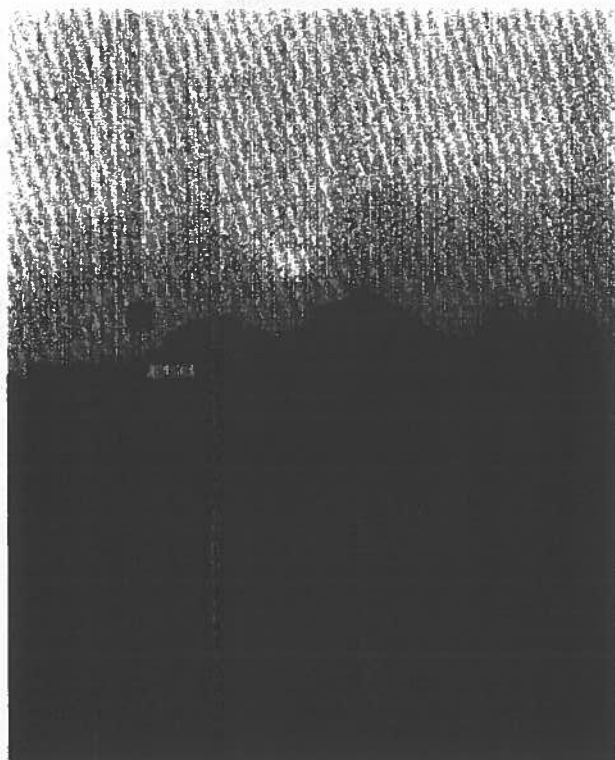
Toby Alice Volkman

It would be a biological crime if we allowed such a peculiar race to die out, because it is a race which looks more like a baboon than a baboon itself does . . . We have so far got about 20 who are just about genuine . . . It is our intention to leave them there (in the park) and to allow them to hunt with bows and arrows but without dogs. We look upon them as part of the fauna of the country.

Thus spoke Colonel Denys Reitz, Minister for Native Affairs, in the South African Parliament on April 3, 1941. He was referring to a group of southern Bushman people who survived on an abandoned farm near the Gemsbok Kalahari Park, from which they had been recently evicted for hunting game. The conviction that "just about genuine" Bushmen should be preserved as zoological curiosities still holds sway nearly half a century later, not just in popular imagination but in the minds of policy-makers in southern Africa.

On August 18, 1984, the South West African administration released a report entitled "Survey of the Bushmen Population in SWA." The report follows government ethnologist K.F.R. Budack's classification that "the San (or Bushmen) can only be defined today on an ethno-historical basis: the starting-point must always be the hunter-gatherer culture, even among those groups whose livelihood is now obtained by other means."

Of the 29,441 people the report classifies as "Bushmen," all obtain their livelihood by "other means": 27,641 are totally dispossessed of their land. The majority, 15,918 people, live in white farming districts where they survive on rations in a subsidized agricultural economy that has never been able to support them, or in towns. Somewhat more self-sustaining are 8,184 Bushman people who live in black districts (reservations or homelands), often with access to some land and livestock. A few Bushman communities in black districts can still supplement husbandry and cultivation with hunting and gathering. An additional 2,521 Bushman people are reported to live in the West Caprivi game reserve, clustered around the military bases of Omega and Bagani. (More accurate estimates place this figure as high as 10,000, consisting largely of Angolan immigrants.) The only Bushman people who still retain some of their ancestral lands are Ju/wasi who live in Bushmanland, in northeastern Namibia. The government report lists 2,245 Bushman people in Bushmanland; of these, most are not Ju/wasi but are in-migrants settled or recruited by the South African army since 1978. The prevailing pattern is clear: Most



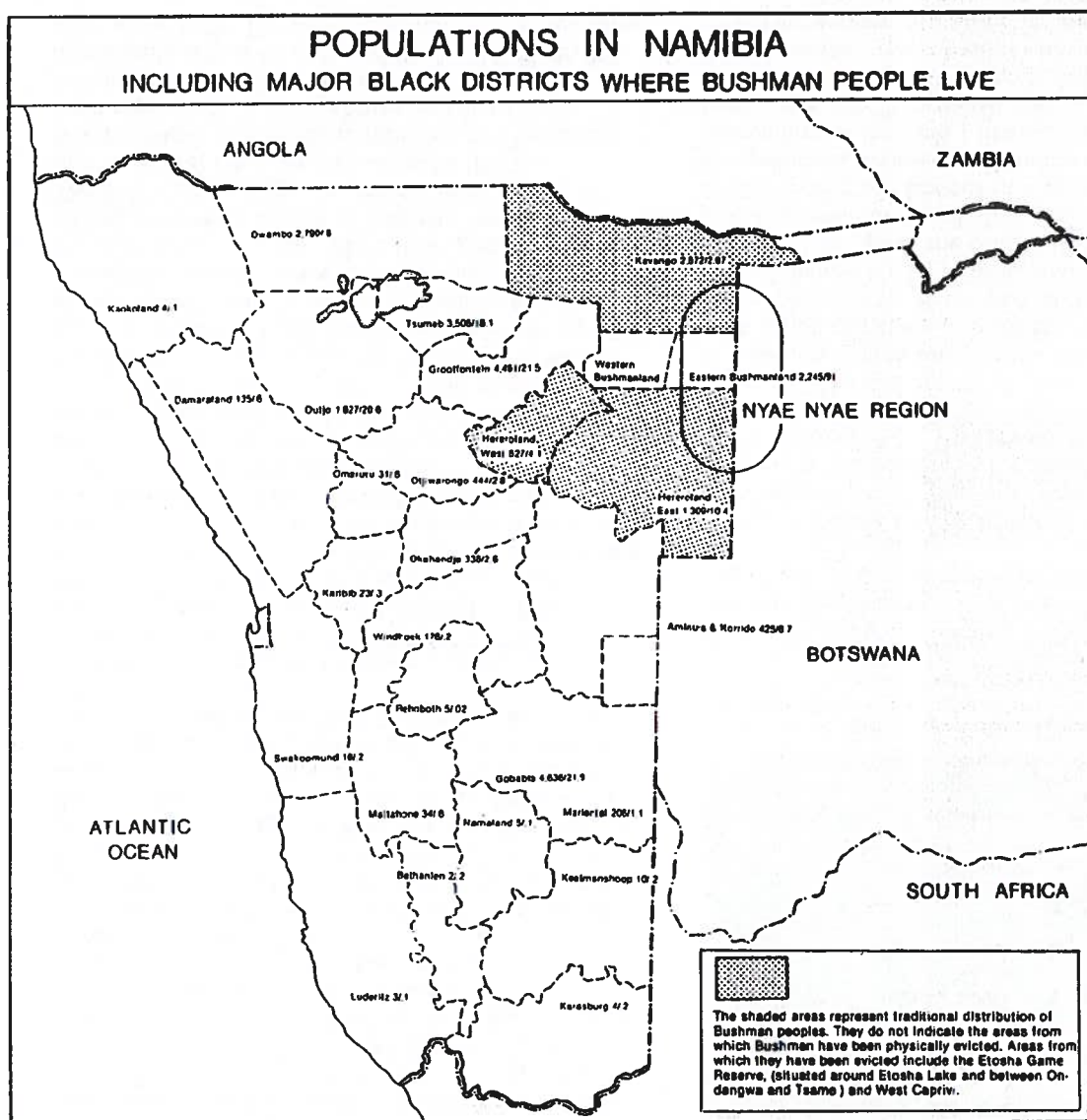
Government housing and army tents replace the Bushman peoples' traditional grass *scherm*s.

© Claire Ritchie for The !Kung San Foundation

Bushman people in Namibia are without land, subsistence or community, and must depend entirely on wages and rations of menial or military employment.

Hunter-Gatherer Label a Misnomer

In spite of social, linguistic, economic and historical differences the authors of the report combine all Bushman peoples — who speak three different languages and 11 dialects — into a "hunter-gatherer" category. The description of "hunter-gatherer culture" is based on a misreading of the literature about the only group of people in southern Africa, the Ju/wasi of the Nyae Nyae region who, in the 1950s, still supported themselves by hunting and gathering. The Ju/wasi, who speak the central dialect of the !Kung language and numbered about 1,000 persons in the 1950s, were made famous in that period by anthropologists, writers and filmmakers. The modern misreading of the earlier literature occurs on two levels: one, the "hunter-gatherer" label is applied not just to the Ju/wasi but without distinction to over 29,000 people, most of whom have long practiced mixed economies, not foraging; and two, it is a



distorted account even of the literature about the Ju/wasi, some of whom lived and worked on farms in the 1950s, and none of whom conformed to the ideal type described in the report — heedless of the future, lacking "objective" knowledge of the natural world and lacking a history of their own.

Today the Ju/wasi live on 6,000 sq km in Eastern Bushmanland, the only fragment of land left to the Bushman people in Namibia. Recent archeological work shows that the ancestors of the Ju/wasi have hunted and gathered on this land for at least 1,000 and perhaps 23,000 years. This is the only land still lived on by Bushmen on which a viable subsistence based on cattle husbandry and seasonal cultivation can be developed.

It is this land that the report recommends be proclaimed a nature reserve, with restrictions on subsistence activities. The survival of the Ju/wasi may depend on the outcome of this proposal, a proposal founded on a myth of timeless hunter-gatherers, which the reserve would itself perpetuate. Disregarding its own data, the government report denies that Bushman peoples have histories, that their lives and choices have been radically constrained not by their

mysterious "Bushman character" but by, for example, draconian legislation and loss of land.

Bushman People Exploited Historically

To understand this situation requires a brief look at Bushman history, a history that reveals a shift from economic to ideological exploitation in southern Africa. From unpaid farm laborer to symbol of primitive or natural man, Bushman people have served the dominant white culture of southern Africa. The most recent version of Bushman-as-symbol is the popular South African feature film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*.

After the Herero-Nama war of 1904-07, the railway's expansion and new veterinary vaccines, German settlers poured into the northeastern frontier, but failed to recognize Bushman claims to land.

By 1911, the local press was filled with reports of the "Bushman plague." Settlers' proposed solutions ranged from declaring Bushmen to be vermin, to settling them on distant reserves; official policy proposed to send them to work on white farms and in the Luderitz diamond mines. The capture of Bushman people and their resistance led to such violence that

by 1915, the Germans had to dispatch a special company to Grootfontein to pacify them.

Later, when South Africa administered the territory, official policy encouraged white farmers to settle in Bushman areas. Bushmen who could, fled; those who stayed became laborers on new white farms. Although the press described them as "parasitic," "like wild animals," a "deteriorate race," they apparently were desired as cheap farm labor.

In 1920, the Stock Theft Act, which provided for the pursuit and arrest of Bushman people suspected of killing livestock, led to atrocities as growing numbers of starving Bushman groups killed cattle to survive. One scene in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, where the wandering and hungry Bushman shoots a goat and lands in prison is eerily reminiscent of these incidents.

The Vagrancy Act, also passed in 1920, provided for arrest, imprisonment and deportation (often to the diamond mines of Luderitz) of unemployed blacks in the white districts. This act severely affected Bushman peoples who were living on their own expropriated lands with nowhere to go (no reservations to be deported to) and no means of subsistence. In 1927, the Bow and Arrows Act made it a criminal offense for a Bushman person to possess a bow and arrow (although Herero could possess Herero bows, and whites could possess any bows as curios).

Surveying and fencing farms increased steadily through the 1950s. At least 10,000 Bushman people may have been dispossessed of land from Gobabis north to Tsumeb between 1930-60. Many found work on farms. In 1955, Bushman people comprised 29 percent of the labor force on farms in Grootfontein and Gobabis districts. Homestead ranching, still common then, could co-exist to a limited extent with hunting and gathering. Farmers often supplemented their diet and income by hunting expeditions in which Bushman people could participate. Bushman people could also find seasonal employment for rations by cutting wood and fence posts, herding and watering stock in the difficult dry months on homestead farms and could return to hunting and gathering when the rains made water available in the veld. But the spread of commercial ranching and stricter enforcement of vagrancy and pass laws effectively terminated these activities for Bushman people in the 1950s. They simply could not get to the lands beyond the farms to forage without risking capture or arrest.

Namibia Economy Declines

Growing need for skilled farm labor left more and more Bushmen stranded, as mechanization and technical innovations like automatic watering displaced menial laborers. Fewer farmers tolerated unproductive, hungry Bushmen on their farms, although the 1970 census reported 15,121 Bushman people in white farming districts. Perhaps even more critical, the future of farms in Namibia began to dim. Economic decline and rising unemployment plagued and continues to plague farms as well as the rest of the Namibian economy. By mid-1978, an estimated 30 percent of farms in Namibia were abandoned and land prices plummeted. Drought has accelerated the trend. By 1982, the national cattle herd had shrunk by two-thirds.



Young boys have replaced toy bows and arrows with toy guns.

© Claire Ritchie for The !Kung San Foundation

In the gloomy context of the decline of farms in Namibia, the economic rationale for maintaining the Bushman population as a source of barely-paid labor vanishes. On the contrary, the presence of a dependent population is a major economic burden. This burden is now substantially borne by the army in the form of annual payroll for Ju/wasi soldiers; neither are the administration's civil expenditures for roads, health or education slight. Some day the army will not be around to foot what is already a woefully inadequate bill; even with this support Bushmen are dying out.

Population figures reveal this clearly. Between 1970 and 1981, the national decline in Bushman population was at least 1,000, and possibly 3,000. The decline is not a result of out-migration: there is nowhere to go. On the contrary, there has been considerable immigration of !Kung refugees (including many mercenary soldiers and their families) from Angola, following the end of the war in Angola in 1976. Many of these refugees have been recruited by the South African Defense Force: the recent government report lists over 2,000 Angolan !Kung in Namibia; both Laurence van der Post and government ethnologist Budak estimate 6,000 !Kung at Omega Base alone (in the Caprivi); and the Army's own most recent estimate is 10,000. This in-migration accounts for the population bulge between ages 15 and 30 and masks the high death rate due to poverty, disease, poor diet and malnutrition, alcoholism, squalor and lack of access to health services. Also of note is lack of access to education: over 87 percent of all Bushman children between ages 5 and 19 are not in school; 95 percent of all Bushman people have never been to school.

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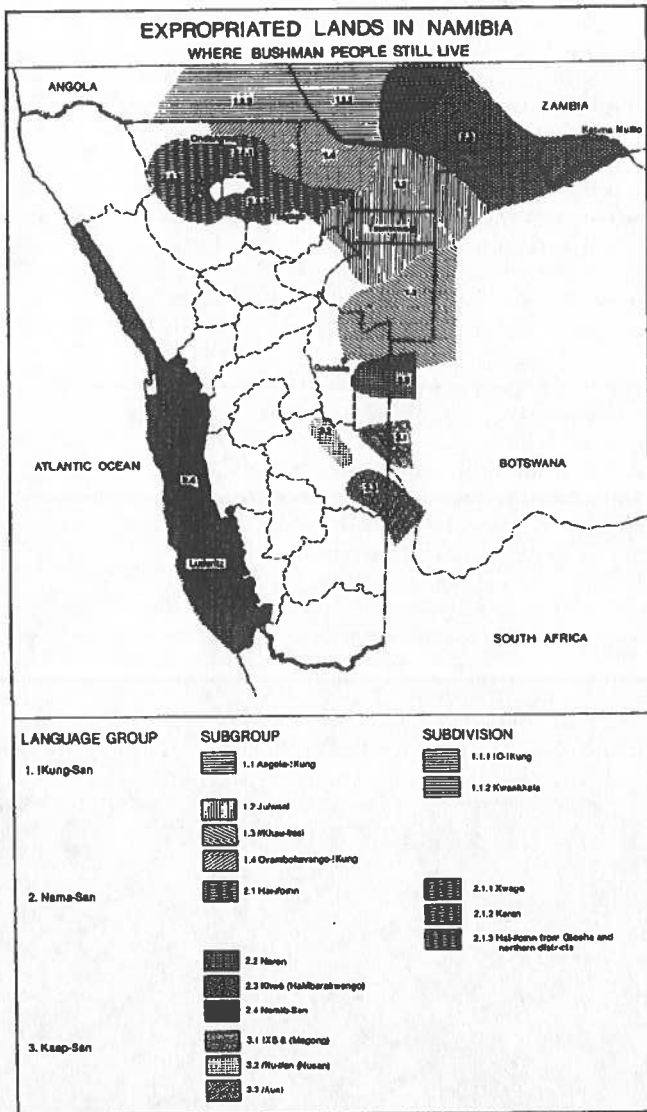
Growing need for skilled farm labor left more and more Bushmen stranded, as mechanization and technical innovations like automatic watering displaced menial laborers. Fewer farmers tolerated unproductive, hungry Bushmen on their farms, although the 1970 census reported 15,121 Bushman people in white farming districts. Perhaps even more critical, the future of farms in Namibia began to dim. Economic decline and rising unemployment plagued and continues to plague farms as well as the rest of the Namibian economy. By mid-1978, an estimated 30 percent of farms in Namibia were abandoned and land prices plummeted. Drought has accelerated the trend. By 1982, the national cattle herd had shrunk by two-thirds.



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Eventually the economic onus of supporting the Bushmen will fall on the government. How can the government possibly wish to prevent the Bushman people from supporting themselves? Short of attributing genocidal motives to the administration, the only sensible explanation is a total lack of comprehension of the possibilities for Bushmen to participate, like all other Namibians, in a mixed economy. What underlies this enormous lack of comprehension, this powerful resistance to change, is a deep acceptance of a distorted, paralyzing myth of Bushman hunting and gathering culture.

The Myth

They are the sweetest, most innocent people on earth, proclaims *The Gods Must Be Crazy*; lacking all knowledge of property, money, jealousy or the wider world, Bushman people go about their daily foraging as their ancestors have done from time immemorial. In extreme form the South African film represents the same myth that is the operating principle of policy toward the Bushmen.

The myth, as expressed by the government and in its recent report, is simply that "Bushman" are still and always have been people of the bush, making their

living by hunting and gathering. A secondary aspect of this myth is that there is such a thing as a homogenous Bushman culture. For the most part the report ignores history: the history of colonization and law which prevented Bushman peoples from supporting themselves by hunting, gathering or husbandry; the evidence that when Bushman peoples did have access to water, grazing and a means of acquiring (and keeping) livestock, they became mixed subsistence farmers. !Kung with domestic animals, including pigs, were reported in southern Angola in 1928. In the 1930s, Bushman peoples in Ovamboland possessed stable herds of goats and cattle. Since the early decades of this century, several groups of Ju/wasi have lived more or less sedentary lives in close association with Herero and Tswana pastoralists in eastern Nyae Nyae (Botswana). In 1981, several groups of Ju/wasi returned to their ancestral waterholes, with cattle, to establish new communities supported by mixed economies in Eastern Bushmanland. Yet the authors of the report are oblivious to all such historical divergences from the ideal type, with this partial exception:

Up till now no information has been forthcoming about other productive sectors in which Bushmen are involved, and unless the contrary can be proved, we can only accept that the

FILMS SPUR SUPPORT FOR

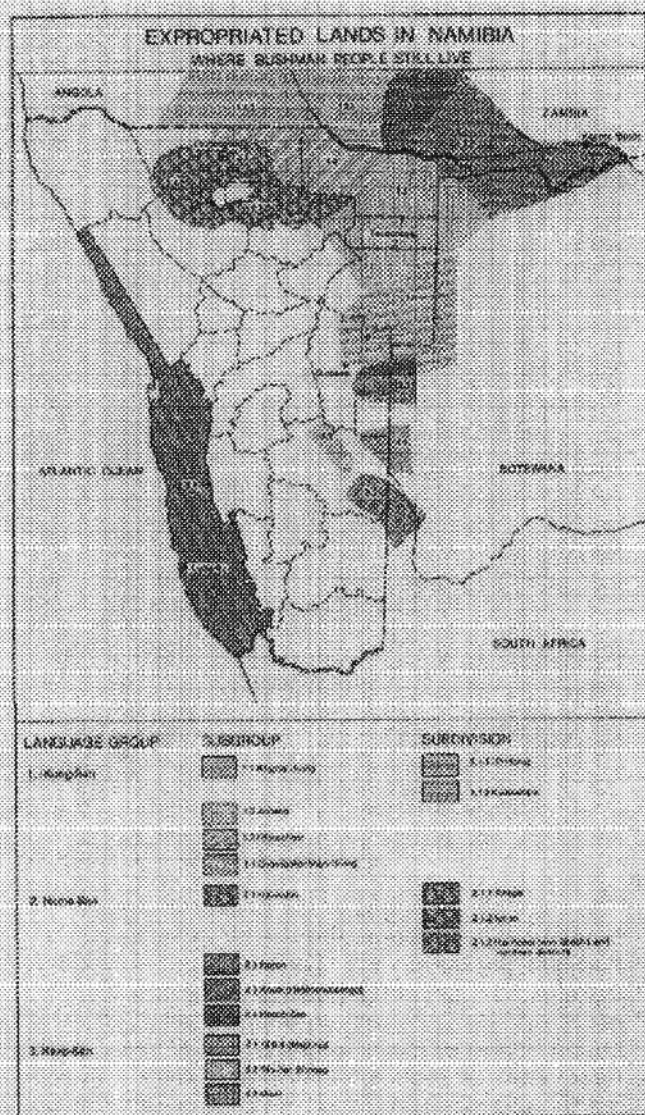
A spontaneous display of political and humanitarian support for the Bushman people of Namibia followed the screening of *THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY* and *THE BUSHMAN* at the University of the Witwatersrand Film Festival on September 22, 1982. The audience, which consisted of 75 participants in the International Conference on Ethnographic Film, the students of the Institute for Cultural and Social Studies of the general public, showed an unusual reaction to the films.

(1) The screening of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* into the South African cinema.

(2) The screening of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* on television in the South African.

The Bushman people of Namibia and Botswana have lived in the region for more than 23,000 years and during this time survived through gathering and hunting. In modern times, however, they have been hunted and exterminated. They were extremely athletic and strong and the most widely known hunter-gatherer people in the world and the people who lived in the region of the Kunene River. The Bushman people of Namibia and Botswana are the only people in the world who are still hunting and gathering.

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- (1) The recruitment of Bushman into the South African army and
- (2) The proposed establishment of a game park on Bushmanland in Eastern Namibia.

The Bushman people have lived in the Kalahari desert in Namibia and Botswana for more than 23,000 years and through the 1950s survived through gathering and hunting, a mode of subsistence once common to all humans. They were extensively studied and filmed, and are the most widely known hunter-gatherers both to students and the general public. Recently they have been romanticized in the popular movie, *THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY*, the filming of which is depicted in *N!A! THE STORY OF A KUNG WOMAN*.

Since the 1950s, the Bushmanlands have been reduced to one-seventh of their original size, which has made subsistence by gathering and hunting impossible and forced the Bushmen people into a cash economy wherein a few depend on

Bushman's present areas of employment are restricted to farming in which he is a worker, and in the services where, primarily in the Defense Forces, he makes an important contribution.

According to the report, because of their "cultural base" (*kultuurbodem*), the Bushman cannot raise livestock or plant crops to support themselves. Government officials are, of course, not the only makers of this myth. For many years anthropologists and ethnographic as well as popular filmmakers also chose to ignore more glaring if less romantic realities all around them in Namibia. The recent report continues to ignore that for decades throughout Botswana, and in the black districts of Namibia, Bushman peoples have developed the same mixed subsistence — husbandry and seasonal cultivation supplemented by foraging — as their pastoral neighbors.

The nature of this "cultural base" is elaborated in the report. The following characteristics of "the children of nature" who still exist by hunting and gathering are noteworthy:

- They are incapable of planning ahead and cannot provide for future needs. (Ju/wa planned children's marriages years ahead because people acquired rights to waterholes and resources by inheritance, and established or reinforced these rights by marriage.)

- They are not objective about the natural world. (Have hunter-gatherers ever survived without extensive objective knowledge of the natural world?)
- They do not get excited or emotional. (They call themselves "the owners of argument.")
- The principle of collective property explains "the absence of compiled capital assets." (What great economic opportunities have they overlooked to compile their assets? Why do Bushmen on military bases or in Tshumkwe buy blankets, tables, chairs, tea sets?)
- They are "conditioned" to killing animals and so cannot raise them.
- They have no experience of or knowledge of farming.

As a basis for government policy the idea that Bushmen cannot raise domestic animals and plant crops because they are people of the bush may prove disastrous. One consequence of this idea is the plan to proclaim a nature reserve.

The Reserve

The reserve that the Namibian Department of Nature Conservation proposes to proclaim in Eastern Bushmanland would stretch west from the Botswana border about 60 km. This area includes *all* the open waters that remain to the Ju/wasi and all their foraging territories with their varied and familiar resources of bushfoods and game.

Extraordinarily unconvincing, the reasons given in the report for a nature reserve include: the shortage of similar areas in Namibia (but there are many); the presence of scarce game species (the only unique species is a certain tree); the "naturalness" (*natuurlikheid*) of Eastern Bushmanland as a wilderness area (what is "natural" about evicting people who have lived 20,000 years in an area, so that they can starve around its borders?); and the uniqueness of the Bushman people as a part of nature.

There is nothing unique about the reality that the Bushmen, like any people, need to survive. That they can no longer survive by old-fashioned hunting and gathering on a fragment of land, even if they wished to, has been well-documented. So too has the possibility of a viable mixed economy combining husbandry and some foraging and wage labor. The reserve, however, will not permit such developments.

- Ju/wasi will be forbidden to keep cattle and other livestock or pets, to maintain gardens, to practice subsistence farming.
- Ju/wasi will be allowed to hunt only with bows and arrows, and to gather with digging sticks "forever."
- Ju/wasi children may be taught in school how to hunt and gather; some may be taught how to tan skins.
- "Hunting bands" will be organized at overnight posts so that they can be supervised by "bush rangers" and seen by "a special class" of tourists who will be flown to campsites. Conservation officers, including about eight Ju/wasi, will lead "nature walks." Other Ju/wasi, presumably wearing skins, will be the tourist attraction.
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THE BUSHMAN PROFILES

army attacks and raids and made for hungry. In 1976, the South African army began recruiting Bushman to fight against SWAPO (the South West African Peoples Organization). The Bushman people now have the highest rate of military service of any ethnic group in the world. They are being drawn into a war that means little to them, and yet in which they are unknowingly staking their very survival.

NAL, THE STORY OF A IKUNG WOMAN is a film by John Marshall about one woman's life from 1952, when she was 10 years old and first met the filmmaker, through 1978. It follows her from the days of self-sufficiency to virtual economic helplessness. Since 1978, some Bushman people have adopted mixed subsistence farming and cattle husbandry at their traditional waterholes. This encouraging move toward a viable economy is jeopardized by a proposed game park that would appropriate the only waterholes in Bushmanland. **FULL OURSELVES UP OR DIE OUT** covers the effects of the military on the Bushman people, the establishment of cattle farming and the consequences of the proposed game park. Both films are distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 3 Bridge St., Watertown, MA 02172.

To protest the creation of a game park in Eastern Bushmanland, send a letter to the Office of the Administrator General, Government House, Windhoek, Namibia, Southwest Africa, 910. To protest the recruitment of the Bushman people in the South African army, write a letter to any South Africa embassy.

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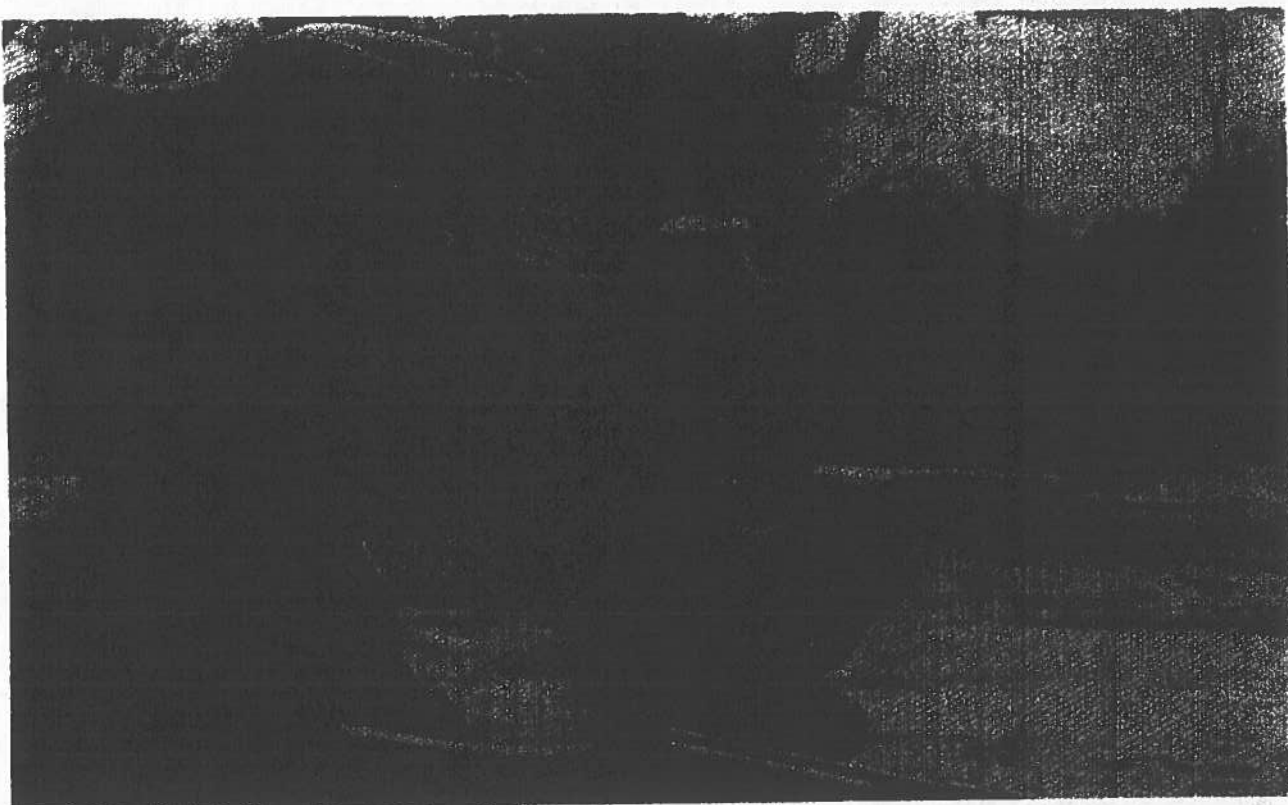
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Ju/wasi soldiers on maneuvers at Tshumkwe.

© Mike Gavshon for The !Kung San Foundation

live and farm. John Marshall, and Claire Ritchie, coordinators for the !Kung San Foundation, estimate that this patch of land might support three families.

- The subsistence communities that now support about 250 people in traditional territories would be forced back to the enclosure or relocated in Western Bushmanland at deep expensive boreholes which they could not afford to maintain. This would also be the fate of most of the people now living in and around Tshumkwe. In Western Bushmanland the Ju/wasi would have to live alongside !Kung Bushman refugees from the war of independence in Angola, now working for the South African Defense Force. Although the myth of Bushman culture disregards differences between distinct "Bushman" groups, the Ju/wasi regard the !Kung, whose language they do not really understand, with fear and trepidation.
- But the most basic problem is sheer survival. In contrast to Eastern Bushmanland, most of the west is mantled in deep sand and waterless forests. An uncertain water table lies 100 m beneath the surface. Game and bush foods are scarce; gifblaar, a plant poisonous to livestock, is prevalent. Until the army sank expensive boreholes deep into the sand in 1978, no people had ever supported themselves — by hunting, gathering or agriculture — in Western Bushmanland.

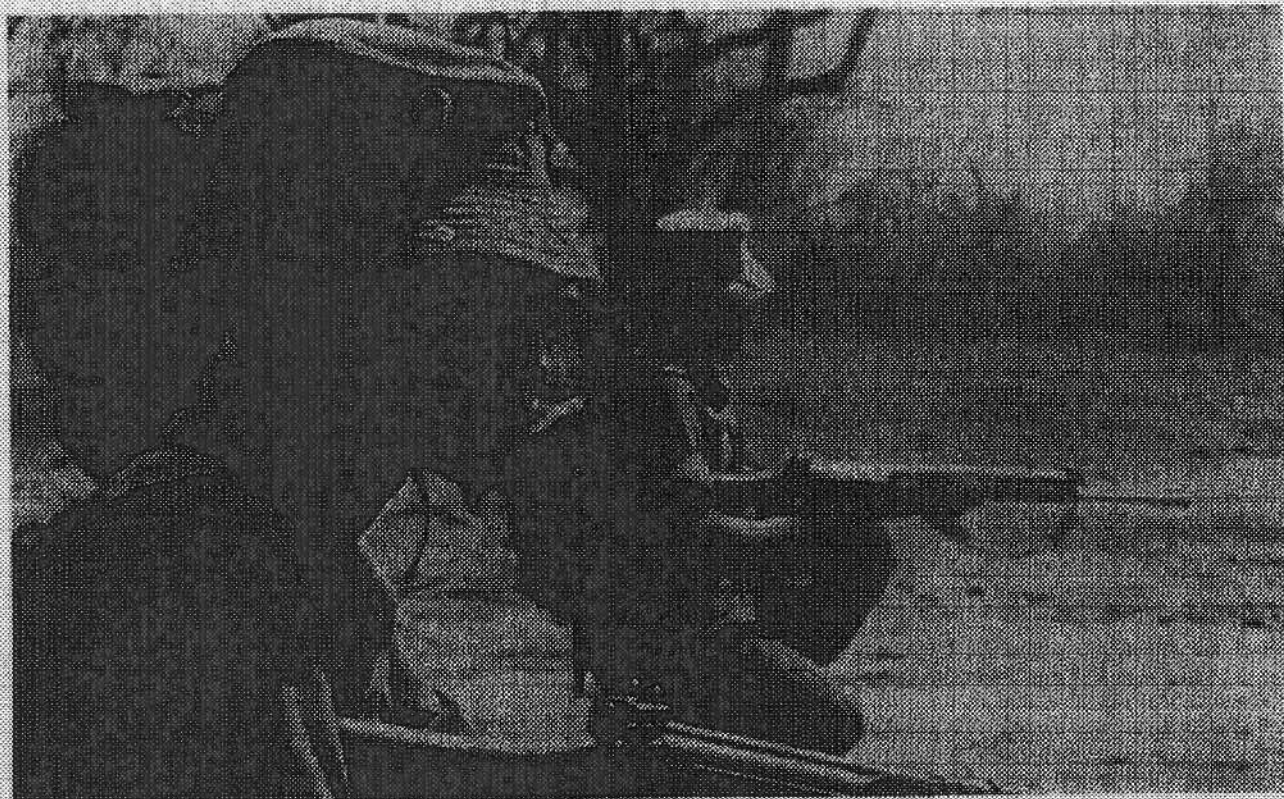
Other Prospects for the Future

Demographic data is complicated by problems of defining who are Bushmen, as well as counting them. At the beginning of the twentieth century estimates

ranged from 10,000 to a more probable 50,000 Bushmen (in Namibia). By 1960 their population had been reduced by extermination, dispossession, starvation and disease to 11,000. In 1981, 29,000 people were classified as "Bushman" in Namibia.

In 1981, Marshall and Ritchie conducted a demographic study at Tshumkwe on Eastern Bushmanland. In the 1950s, Tshumkwe was simply a traditional waterhole utilized by a group of Ju/wasi who had hunted and gathered in its vicinity for years. In 1959, the waterhole was chosen as the site for a South African government administrative post. C. McIntyre, the first Bushman Commissioner stationed there, experimented with goats and gardens, and urged Ju/wasi to join him in a more settled life. As Ju/wasi observed and were attracted to the changes at Tshumkwe, its population slowly grew. Dramatic change came only after the establishment of Bushmanland in 1970. The Ju/wasi of the Nyae Nyae region lost over 70 percent of their ancestral territories and three of their seven permanent waterholes.

The proclamation of Bushmanland meant that about 1,000 people were required to live in an area that formerly supported 275 people by hunting and gathering. The hunting and gathering economy that had continued to supply about 40 percent of the diet throughout the 1960s collapsed permanently after 1970. Tshumkwe, on Bushmanland, was the only alternative, and there menial wage work and welfare replaced subsistence development. Employment rose from nine Ju/wa men working for the administration in 1969 to 85 in 1972. Each employed man dragged an average of six people, who came to rely on his wages, into unemployment. The Tshumkwe population exploded, hunting and gathering became impossible, diet deteriorated, the death rate rose. In the 1970s, that



Ju/wasi soldiers on maneuvers at Tshumkwe.

© Mike Gavshon for The !Kung San Foundation

live and farm. John Marshall, and Claire Ritchie, coordinators for the !Kung San Foundation, estimate that this patch of land might support three families.

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Bushman mother with alcohol.

© Paul Weinberg

rate began to match and sometimes exceed the birth rate. In 1978, the army replaced the administration as the major employer. Despite rising army salaries, most Ju/wasi did not have enough to eat. Death rates rose to 36/1,000/year in 1980-1981, due largely to poor diet, the opening of a liquor store and social disintegration.

Equally tragic is the overall pattern of a dying people revealed in the data for the Bushmen people throughout Namibia. Comparing the censuses of 1970 (22,786 Bushmen) and 1981 (29,221), and taking into account Angolan refugee immigrants, Marshall and Ritchie calculate a staggeringly high death rate for the Bushman population in Namibia of 36/1,000/year, a crude birth rate of 60/1,000/year, and a necessary reproductive growth rate of 2.4 percent/year. The data also show extremely high infant and child mortality rates; 40 percent of all Bushman children born in Namibia die before the age of 10. The birth and fertility rates that would be necessary to replenish and maintain the Bushman population are physically impossible.

Is there any hope? Consider Edward Wilmsen's data from /Kai/Kai, just across the Bushmanland border in Botswana. Since the 1920s, three Ju/wa groups have lived with the Herero, who settled with their cattle at the /Kai/Kai waterhold. In 1951, one group of about 35 people lived more or less permanently with the Herero and worked for them; the others supported

themselves largely by hunting and gathering. By 1958, several families owned goats, horses and donkeys, and were planting gardens. Some had acquired cattle through *mafisa*, a system whereby a person who manages an owner's herd is rewarded with a percentage of the increase of that herd. In the mid 1970s, there were over 100 Ju/wa at /Kai/Kai; in 1979, they owned 91 head of cattle and continued to expand their areas of cultivation. Subsistence provided 87 percent of the diet; cash provided the remaining 13 percent. A healthy population growth rate due to reproduction of 2.5 percent per year has been recorded for Ju/wasi in this area of western Botswana since 1960.

There is even a glimmer of hope closer to home. In 1981 four groups of Ju/wasi left the degradation of Tshumkwe to establish communities with cattle at their traditional waterholes and territories. They built kraals in which their cattle were milked and protected from predators at night, and crushes for veterinary inspection. Productivity and diet improved. By 1984, the products of husbandry — milk, milk products, beef — supplied about 30 percent of the diet, supplemented by hunting and gathering (15-20 percent), salaries of sons employed by the army or administration (30 percent) and crafts sales (5 percent). Army rations and welfare provided only about 10 percent, a polar contrast with Tshumkwe. Today, directly and indirectly, these communities support about 250 peo-

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Bushman mother with alcohol

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The !Kung San urgently need your help to build a future. The !Kung San Foundation assists the Bushman people to purchase cattle, set up water pumps and other small scale projects that help the modern Bushmen produce a viable subsistence on their ancestral lands.

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Occasional hunting of animals such as Rei spring hare, supplements a diet based on cornmeal.

• Paul Weinberg

ple in their traditional territories. Perhaps more importantly, they provide the only positive example to the majority of Ju/wasi, still mired in the dependency, drunkenness and despair of Tshumkwe, that there are alternatives in the real world.

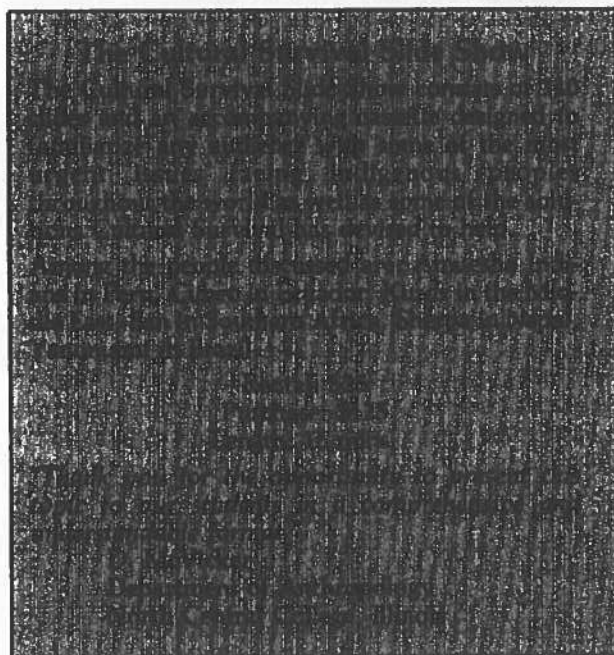
The government, however, does not appear to be impressed; in December, as a group of Ju/wasi installed a handpump on a borehole in the traditional territory of //Xaru, government representatives appeared and ordered the Ju/wasi to stop. The matter remains undecided. The pump was installed in spite of government orders, and people have begun to build houses, a kraal and a new subsistence community at //Xaru. Their sense of dignity and determination is, for the moment, overriding the whims of government. A group of Ju/wasi wrote to the administrator/general of Southwest Africa:

And people are growing old, and they do not know where they will go, because now their children have cattle and the government wants the Ju/wasi to leave their land with their cattle and go to a strange land. And people's hearts are sore because people will be destroyed. We will stay here.

What will happen to these Ju/wasi if the game reserve is proclaimed? The answer seems all too clear. There is no room in the new plan for Bushman people raising cattle and they, like most of their fellow Ju/wasi, will probably end up somewhere in Western Bushmanland, trying to wring a living from a dry and unknown land: a land of sand, of soldiers they do not know or trust, a land to which the powers-that-be have, in this final expropriation, pushed them in the

name of nature conservation. Who in the West will object? We can see them in the movies, long after they are gone, and wax nostalgic about the closeness with nature that we, non-natural man, have lost. □

Toby Alice Volkman is an anthropologist with the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of The San in Transition, Volume I, CS No. 9.





Occasional hunting of animals such as Red spring hare, supplements a diet based on cornmeal.

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The Cultural Survival Slide Show

The Cultural Survival Slide Show consists of 140 slides and an accompanying cassette designed to familiarize any audience with some of the most urgent issues facing indigenous peoples throughout the world as well as some of the solutions Cultural Survival has devised to help.

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The Hunter-Gatherer Myth in Southern Africa

Preserving Nature or Culture?

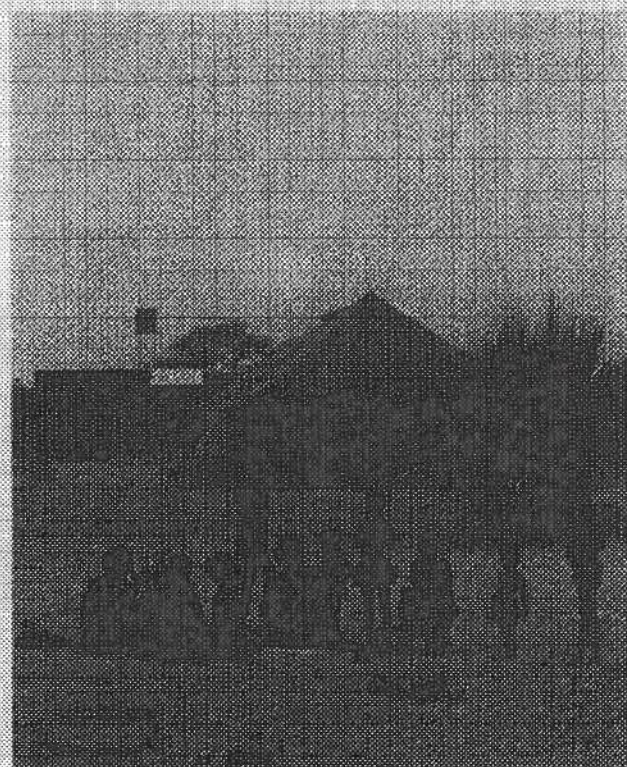
Toby Alice Volkman

It would be a biological crime if we allowed such a peculiar race to die out, because it is a race which looks more like a baboon than a baboon itself does . . . We have so far got about 20 who are just about genuine . . . It is our intention to leave them there (in the park) and to allow them to hunt with bows and arrows but without dogs. We look upon them as part of the fauna of the country.

Thus spoke Colonel Denys Reitz, Minister for Native Affairs, in the South African Parliament on April 3, 1941. He was referring to a group of southern Bushman people who survived on an abandoned farm near the Gamsbok Kalahari Park, from which they had been recently evicted for hunting game. The conviction that "just about genuine" Bushmen should be preserved as zoological curiosities still holds sway nearly half a century later, not just in popular imagination but in the minds of policy-makers in southern Africa.

On August 18, 1984, the South West African administration released a report entitled "Survey of the Bushmen Population in SWA." The report follows government ethnologist K.F.R. Budack's classification that "the San (or Bushmen) can only be defined today on an ethno-historical basis: the starting-point must always be the hunter-gatherer culture, even among those groups whose livelihood is now obtained by other means."

Of the 29,441 people the report classifies as "Bushmen," all obtain their livelihood by "other means": 27,641 are totally dispossessed of their land. The majority, 15,918 people, live in white farming districts where they survive on rations in a subsidized agricultural economy that has never been able to support them, or in towns. Somewhat more self-sustaining are 8,184 Bushman people who live in black districts (reservations or homelands), often with access to some land and livestock. A few Bushman communities in black districts can still supplement husbandry and cultivation with hunting and gathering. An additional 2,521 Bushman people are reported to live in the West Caprivi game reserve, clustered around the military bases of Omega and Bagani. (More accurate estimates place this figure as high as 10,000, consisting largely of Angolan immigrants.) The only Bushman people who still retain some of their ancestral lands are Ju/wasi who live in Bushmanland, in northeastern Namibia. The government report lists 2,245 Bushman people in Bushmanland; of these, most are not Ju/wasi but are in-migrants settled or recruited by the South African army since 1978. The prevailing pattern is clear: Most



Government housing and army tents replace the Bushman peoples' traditional grass shelters.

© Claire Ritchie for The 'Kung San Foundation

Bushman people in Namibia are without land, subsistence or community, and must depend entirely on wages and rations of menial or military employment.

Hunter-Gatherer Label a Misnomer

In spite of social, linguistic, economic and historical differences the authors of the report combine all Bushman peoples — who speak three different languages and 11 dialects — into a "hunter-gatherer" category. The description of "hunter-gatherer culture" is based on a misreading of the literature about the only group of people in southern Africa, the Ju/wasi of the Nyae Nyae region who, in the 1950s, still supported themselves by hunting and gathering. The Ju/wasi, who speak the central dialect of the 'Kung language and numbered about 1,000 persons in the 1950s, were made famous in that period by anthropologists, writers and filmmakers. The modern misreading of the earlier literature occurs on two levels: one, the "hunter-gatherer" label is applied not just to the Ju/wasi but without distinction to over 29,000 people, most of whom have long practiced mixed economies, not foraging; and two, it is a

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Cover Photo:

Katherine Smith, an elder who lives at Big Mountain, Arizona, one of the most traditional Navajo communities which Congress has scheduled for relocation, fired "her old gun" to warn the fencing crew that her community disapproves of relocation. Not long after, fencing at Big Mountain was suspended. 'Dan Budnik/Woodfin Camp Associates.

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