



Ju/Wasi: Bushmen of the Kalahari

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Museum Exhibit and Photographic Book Reviews

Ju/Wasi: Bushmen of the Kalahari. *Irven DeVore, Barbara Isaac, Allan L. Marea, John Yellen, Susan A. M. Shumaker, and Kathleen K. Skelly*, collaborative curators. An exhibition at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Opened December 13, 1991.

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When Europeans penetrated the interior of that part of southern Africa now known as Namibia and Botswana, they encountered San-speaking peoples, some of whom made their living by hunting and gathering. Usually called by others the !Kung or Bushmen, today the Kalahari San call themselves Ju/Wasi (Zhucoasi), "the proper people" or "the complete people." Their foraging mode of subsistence and egalitarian social organization have been a touchstone of anthropology for decades, and the broad outlines of their way of life are described in nearly every introductory textbook. Most of the data upon which these accounts rest come from the Harvard Kalahari Group's 40 years of research in the region. This exhibit provides a glimpse into the way of life of the Ju/Wasi and the Peabody Museum's long association with them.

The modest display occupies an anteroom to the Hall of the North American Indian, consuming about 1,600 square feet of floor space. Although billed as temporary, the installation will remain for the foreseeable future. It shows about 270 objects and many photos drawn from the museum's own collection and archives or loaned by ethnographers who have participated in the project over the years. The visitor first encounters two cases of Ju/Wasi women's beaded ornaments in the museum foyer, and a design derived from the beadwork is repeated on the walls and lends graphic continuity to the display. Cases in the main exhibit area contain thematically arranged pieces depicting prehistory, subsistence economy, the *hraxo* system of exchange, and various aspects of Ju/Wasi daily life. Objects include men's hunting paraphernalia, women's carrying equipment, clothing, ornaments, toys, and musical instruments. Many of the objects in the cases can be recognized in the accompanying photos, some taken in the field decades ago. The centerpiece is a mar-

velous in-the-round diorama of a Ju/Wasi campsite, with food vessels, digging sticks, *kross*, and ostrich eggshells in the foreground, melding into a life-sized photomural of a Ju/Wasi woman and children cracking *mongongo* nuts around the hearth.

This exhibit will be enjoyed by professionals but will also be intelligible to students and the general public. An effort has been made to engage children (which succeeded with this adult) by posing questions, such as, "Are the *mongongo* nut and other wild bush foods as nutritious as domesticated crops?" on a small door that can be lifted to reveal the answer. (Answer: the *mongongo* nut contains 28.8% protein, compared to 8.9% for field corn and 7.5% for rice). In a small separate room, films by John Marshall of Ju/Wasi music and curing ceremony are shown, and musical instruments and dance rattles can be seen in adjoining cases. Finally, a series of four videos brings the visitor up to date and confronts him or her with the real threats and hopes of the Ju/Wasi as they enter the 21st century. These videos, made by Megan Biesele, John Marshall, Claire Ritchie, /Gunda, ≠Toma Tsamo, and N!ai, are disturbing. They depict how the impact of development and the modern economy, particularly conflict with the Botswana government over land and water rights, and recruitment by the South African army, have led to violence, alcoholism, infant mortality, and the erosion of the traditional Ju/Wasi way of life. Each time I have visited the exhibit, a number of people were clustered around the small screen. Let us hope they got the message. A reading list and brochures for the !Kung San Foundation and Cultural Survival are provided.

It is impossible to review this exhibit without mentioning the strident and bitter debate that now rages over San identity and the study of foraging peoples in general. In a recent article (*AA* 94:31-54, 1992), Richard B. Lee refers to the "crisis" in hunter-gatherer studies, and Edwin Wilmsen and James Denbow (*Current Anthropology* 31:489-524, 1990), in an extraordinarily polemical attack on the Harvard Group in general and Richard Lee and John Yellen in particular, argue for a "paradigm shift" in the study of San-speaking peoples.

At issue here are the identity and history of the Ju/Wasi, but in a larger sense the debate

can be cast as a contest between empirical and postmodern views of reality. The exhibit video, "Rights, Threats and Hopes," suggests that the Ju/Wasi "are embedded in myth like flies in amber." But whose myths? Theirs or ours? Are they pristine foragers, true survivors of a way of life now long extinct elsewhere? Or, as Carmel Schrire (*Past and Present in Hunter-Gatherer Studies*, Academic Press, 1984) suggests, have anthropologists, searching for the primitive and preoccupied with evolution, failed to situate the San in history and ignored the impact of outside forces?

It is self-evident that prior to the domestication of animals and plants, people subsisted on wild foodstuffs. How was daily life conducted in the millennia before agriculture? Traditionally, anthropologists have sought answers in those few groups who hunt and gather today, and, working within an evolutionary and ecologic framework, they have been enormously successful in describing some of the limits and possibilities of foraging life. However, tropical foragers like the Ju/Wasi have been used, explicitly and implicitly, by paleoanthropologists as models for early hominid behavior, and in this way they have been claimed as ancestors for us all. The egalitarian, food-sharing San may have made more attractive progenitors than we might find in Western bloodlines, but a quote from Tsamkxao ≠Toma, displayed above the exhibit's video terminal, clearly shows that at least some Ju/Wasi are not happy with this role: "There are two kinds of movies. One kind shows us as other people . . . and helps us. The other kind shows us as if we were animals, wearing skins, and plays right into the hands of people who want to take our land. One kind lies. The other kind tries to tell the truth."

Is the Ju/Wasi way of life a survival of the primordial human condition? Although the reconstruction of the prehistory or protohistory of specific linguistic groups is notoriously difficult, this is essentially an empirical question. Vastly different past identities are now claimed for the Ju/Wasi. On the basis of sometimes sketchy archeological evidence, Wilmsen and Denbow reconstruct a history of shifting pastoralism and involuntary client relations between the San and their Bantu neighbors, stretching back over 1,500 years. From documentary sources, Rob Gordon (in Schrire 1984) in an often-cited phrase, invokes the image of the 19th-century San as "hotshot traders" in control of valuable commodities, including ivory, ostrich feathers, skins, copper, and salt.

The Peabody exhibition suggests that hunter-gatherers essentially like the Ju/Wasi

have been present in the area for the last 25,000 years. This statement is based primarily upon the excavations in the 1970s at ≠Gi and other sites in the Dobe area by Alison Brooks and John Yellen (reported in *From Hunters to Farmers: The Causes and Consequences of Food Production in Africa*, J. D. Clark and S. A. Brandt, eds., University of California Press, 1984). The exhibit indicates that whether or not the present-day Ju/Wasi are accurate reflections of their own prehistory is missing the point. Rather, they give insight into some aspects of the way of life practiced by all human populations before domestication. The Harvard Kalahari Group have portrayed the Ju/Wasi as rather isolated survivors and cite their egalitarianism and lack of emphasis on the accumulation of property as adaptive features of a foraging way of life in an unpredictable environment. Their opponents argue that their mode of life is instead a response by the poorest of the rural poor to their marginalization in the world economic system over at least the last 500 years. Perhaps individual Ju/Wasi are or were independent survivors, victimized slaves, or hotshot capitalists. But can any of these images legitimately be applied to an entire society? When the outlines of San prehistory are better known, it may become more obvious to what degree any applies at specific points in time. This is the clearest case imaginable of the use of archeological evidence to construct and reconstruct a modern ethnic and political identity.

For some of us, for better or worse, anthropology will remain a search for ancestors. If the San themselves no longer qualify, we may satisfy our atavistic urge by contemplating the rare family heirlooms in the final case in this exhibit: the photograph of Irv DeVore, John Yellen, and Henry Harpending contemplating their defunct landrover, or that of Lorna Marshall, seated on a stool, surrounded by a ring of her informants, sitting on the ground, of course. A 1970 letter from John Yellen to Steve Williams, then director of the Peabody, accompanying a set of keys to field trunks forwarded to the museum, informs Williams that one of these contains a twelve-gauge shotgun that Yellen "forgot" to mention in an earlier letter. And those who do fieldwork in Africa today will find that the Marshall expedition's 40-year-old shopping list bears an eerie resemblance to their own.

12,000 Years in Maine: An Archaeological Exhibition. Bruce Bourque, curator. A long-term exhibition at the Maine State Museum, Augusta. Opened May 1991.

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