KALAHARI SAN: SOMETIME HUNTER-GATHERERS

Edwin N. Wilmsen
The San peoples who live in and around the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa speak several languages belonging to a larger linguistic family called Khoisan, all of which have many click sounds among their consonants. The term *Khoisan* is composed of two words, *khoi* and *san*. The first word is derived from *khoe*, which means simply “people” in one large division of Khoisan languages, while *san* can mean either “aboriginal people” or “people poor in livestock who must forage for food” in those same languages. This distinction came to be solidified in both popular and academic thinking as marking a real difference between “Khoi” peoples (called Hottentot in the past) who were comparatively wealthy herders and “San” peoples (often called Bushmen in the past) who were hunter-gatherers. Thus, San is not like most other ethnographic terms, which are intended to name a particular group that might be thought to have a common ancestry or history. Instead, the peoples ethnographically classified as San speak at least ten mutually unintelligible languages plus a number of distinct dialects today; in addition, several other languages are no longer spoken. Although described as foragers in the ethnographic literature, these peoples have (as we shall see) engaged in a wide range of economic and social practices, the development of which can be traced through the past two thousand years. We will need to look into those years in order to place these peoples in their social and cultural context.

Some anthropologists paint a very different picture of Kalahari San than I portray here. In order not to be hopelessly confused by this, you need to be aware that a debate about the ethnographic status of these peoples (and, more generally, contemporary hunter-gatherers all over the world) is now going on in anthropology. There are two facets to this debate. One is simply about the history of these peoples and the extent to which they have been engaged with or isolated from other peoples, especially during the last couple of centuries or so. The other facet is connected to a broader concern that is also currently being discussed by anthropologists; this has to do with how we represent other peoples to a Euroamerican audience, such as students like yourself. In the specific case of the Kalahari San, this second facet includes the question of the extent to which these peoples may be represented as living examples of prehistoric hunter-gatherers on a lower, or more primary, level of cultural evolution than ourselves. Ethnographers who believe the Kalahari San are such examples argue that these peoples had remained, until as late as 1970, relatively isolated from other, non-San peoples—not totally
isolated, of course, but enough to avoid outside influences that would change their hunter-gatherer status. In effect, these ethnographers argue that these peoples had little recognizable history and thus feel justified in paying it scant attention. Other anthropologists, of whom I am one, argue to the contrary that far from having been isolated, Kalahari San were actively engaged with their neighbors throughout history and, therefore, this history has a strong bearing on the contemporary appearance of a few of these peoples as hunter-gatherers. We maintain that they are not primal hunter-gatherers at all but are very poor rural people who forage on the fringes of the Kalahari economy because through the unfolding of the social-economic history of the region they are denied access to a more comfortable place in its current social formation.

Before looking at this history, we must consider the distribution and composition of the Khoisan language family and its speakers. There may be one hundred thousand Khoisan-speakers living today; about fifty thousand are ethnographically classified as San. There are three major divisions of this language family—northern (!Kung), central (Khoe), and southern (Twi)—each with a distinct grammatical structure and vocabulary. !Kung has five dialects of which the best known is Zhu|oasi (abbreviated Zhu or Ju), which is also the name of the people made anthropologically famous by the ethnographies of Lorna Marshall and Richard Lee and by John Marshall’s film *The Hunters*. Khoe has the greatest number of speakers and the greatest number of currently spoken languages, including Nama—the language of all Khoi herders in Namibia—and Cape Khoi, once spoken by herders over all of western South Africa but now confined to a few communities near the Orange River; some Khoe languages are not mutually intelligible. Only one Twi language is still spoken, in southern Botswana; those formerly spoken in South Africa have died out.

Peoples who speak these languages are now found only in southern Angola, northern Namibia, and most of Botswana, with a handful in adjacent parts of Zambia and Zimbabwe. While this is a large area (nearly twice the size of Texas), they once occupied a much larger portion of the southern African subcontinent. In the eighteenth century, the first Europeans to enter the region found Khoisan peoples in the entire western half of southern Africa from its tip at the Cape of Good Hope almost to the mouth of the Congo River (an area not quite as large as the continental
United States). Archaeological and linguistic evidence shows that about two thousand years ago the ancestors of these peoples lived throughout the entire southern subcontinent below the Zambezi River.

**A Short Social History of Southern Africa**

An overview of the mosaic of southern African history that brought about these changes will help to locate the San peoples of the Kalahari in their contemporary political and social context. Over two thousand years ago, Khoisan peoples seem to have been the only human inhabitants of this region and had developed a variety of hunting-fishing-gathering economies adapted to its highly diverse local ecologies. Then, about or slightly before two thousand years ago, cattle and sheep were introduced from sources in the north and incorporated into local Khoisan foraging economies. Very little is known about how this took place or who was involved, but we can be confident that Khoe-speakers played an important role because the basic pastoral vocabulary of most southern African herders, including Bantu, is Khoe in origin.

Bantu peoples began moving down from central Africa shortly after this initial introduction of livestock. Small groups of families were the main, if not sole, units of movement. With them, they brought horticulture—sorghum, millet, cowpeas, and melons—and goats, as well as iron and copper metallurgy. Relations between these incoming Bantu and indigenous Khoisan must have involved considerable mutual exchange; Bantu peoples added cattle-keeping to their economies while Khoisan acquired metals, field crops, and goats (all Khoisan languages incorporate Bantu goat terms). But material items were not the sole elements of exchange. In the eastern half of the subcontinent, the Bantu-Khoisan distinction became increasingly blurred through amalgamation of the peoples themselves. We cannot pinpoint details of the means by which this took place so long ago, but we can be confident that some form of kinship extension associated with marriage between Bantu and Khoisan persons was a key factor.
Such marriages, and non-marital matings as well, must have been very common, perhaps preferred, because genetic studies have demonstrated that today people who speak the Bantu languages Kizulu, Isixhosa, and Sindebele have about equal proportions of Khoisan and Bantu ancestry; indeed, this ancestry is praised in the poems that recount the oral histories of these peoples. These languages themselves (and Sesotho to a lesser extent), while Bantu in structure and lexicon, incorporate many click consonants and a large vocabulary (especially in the domain of animal husbandry) from Khoisan sources. The fact that Bantu languages, though radically altered, continued to be spoken while Khoisan was not and Bantu social forms became the norm for all suggests that Bantu-speakers, though increasingly absorbing Khoisan persons and cultural elements into their social formation, were politically hegemonic in the eastern region and Bantu ideology was more highly valued there. Thus, in this eastern region peoples, economies, and languages had long merged to such an extent that when Europeans arrived there were no peoples or languages there that could be called Khoi or San and no economies that could be called hunter-gatherer.

The social history of the western half of the subcontinent is similar in outline, but there are important differences. Bantu peoples arrived at roughly the same time bringing essentially the same economic suite; they encountered Khoisan pastro-foragers who probably spoke !Kung languages in Angola and Khoe languages farther south in the Kalahari of Botswana-Namibia. But here similarities give way to differences, the most salient being that Khoisan-speaking peoples continued to live everywhere in this western region right up to the time Europeans arrived (and, as mentioned above, all peoples who speak Khoisan languages today still live here). Also, with the exception of G|wi and Gǁana peoples who live in the central Kalahari, peoples who speak Khoe languages in Angola, Botswana, and Namibia are genetically and physically indistinguishable from their Bantu neighbors and until recently Khoe social forms were predominant in this area. This is strong evidence that, in contrast to the east, during the early centuries of association ideological values and political power were the prerogatives of Khoe peoples and Bantu were drawn into Khoe social networks through marriage and other kinds of mating alliances (these are described in the section on kinship) rather than the reverse. Other than this, the early his-
tory of Bantu-Khoisan relations in the west is not so well known. The Bantu language, Shiyei, incorporates a large click inventory of Khoisan origin and, therefore, the Wayei people of the Okavango Delta must have a long history of intimate association with Khoisan peoples. These peoples along with speakers of the western-Bantu Herero group of languages (Otji-herero, Oshivambo, and others) are the only southern African peoples who employ Bantu pastoral terminology, which implies a different economic history in the region for them.

Part of that history seems to be linked to the establishment of Portuguese trading entrepôts on the Atlantic coast between Congo and Luanda in the sixteenth century. These ports vigorously stimulated ancient trade networks stretching into the interior by offering a wide variety of European goods (cloth, clothing, glass beads, guns, pots and pans, tobacco, sugar, coffee, and tea), which rapidly gained the status of necessities in local economies. This set off intensive activity to supply the commodities demanded by the Portuguese in return: ivory, diamonds, hides, cattle, and, later, slaves. In the process, the indigenous social landscape was disrupted and another period of population movements was set in motion; some peoples moved to escape marauders and slavers, some to take advantage of newly opened economic opportunities. Oral histories place the movement of Herero peoples from Angola into Botswana-Namibia during this time and there are suggestions that Zhu then moved down as well (I shall return to this). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, other Europeans—and Americans and Canadians—opened southern routes to trade through South Africa, and in so doing stimulated similar needs and precipitated similar upheavals.

The subsequent colonial history of the region, particularly that of South Africa and Namibia, is filled with bloody atrocities, many involving the massacre of Khoisan peoples—especially those called Bushmen. Because of this, it is often said that these peoples played no further role in the development of southern African history but instead defended an isolated independence from it. Another common belief is that Khoisan peoples were almost entirely exterminated in the colonial encounter; this is true for the mountain and high plains areas of South Africa, but happily not elsewhere. This has led to the romantic notion that, as one writer put it, only in the great wasteland of the Kalahari can a last living remnant of their authentic remains be found; people
who think this way are usually looking for what they believe to be “pure” primitive Bushman hunter-gatherers.

The chronicle of genocide, though grim, is only partly true; large numbers of Khoisan people, perhaps the majority, were incorporated into newly emerging groups. We have already seen that the people who speak Kizulu and Isixhosa as well as some others classified as Bantu have about equal proportions of Khoisan and Bantu ancestry; there are perhaps ten million of these descendants of eastern Khoisan forebears living today. More recently, at the end of the nineteenth century a group of people came to be identified as “Coloured” in South Africa; although they speak Afrikaans rather than a Khoisan language, they are descendants of mainly western Khoisan ancestors who since the seventeenth century had had intimate association with Bantu and Europeans, as well as the Malayans whom the Dutch imported into the Cape as slaves. There are four million of these people today.

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**The Kalahari in the Nineteenth Century**

We now have the necessary historical background to focus more closely on the Kalahari itself. As the nineteenth century began, Khoi-speaking peoples continued to occupy by far the largest part of the Kalahari, as they had done for millennia. But now these Khoi peoples shared most of the region with others who today are collectively known as Bakgalagadi. These peoples had come into the Kalahari at least by 1600 (this date is derived from analysis of oral histories) and most likely much earlier; since then Khoi and Kgalagadi have maintained close economic and social ties, including a considerable amount of marriage. The economy practiced by all these peoples is called pastro-foraging; in this economic system, hunting and gathering remain important but livestock are also kept, small numbers in poorly watered areas and vast herds on the better ranges. The southern African suite of crops—sorghum, millet, melons, and cowpeas—is grown. In the Okavango Delta-Lake Ngami-Botletli River belt, Khoi and Wayei
added intensive fishing and aquatic plant harvesting to this pas-
tro-foraging economy.

Around 1750, Bantu-speaking Tswana peoples began moving up from the south; at that time, these peoples were not very different in most economic and political respects from the Khoe and Kgalagadi peoples they met in the Kalahari. All were organized in small extended family groups under a local leader; groups were composed of thirty to forty households with no more than about three hundred persons in total; associations with other groups were maintained through marriage alliances; identity distinctions of the kind we call “tribal” or “ethnic” were apparently not very important, if they existed at all, judging by the many inter-group marriages recorded in genealogies collected from descendants of the people of this time. A later kgosi (chief) of Batswana said of the relations among Bantu and Khoe peoples, “There was in those times no question of overlordship of one people over another. It was simply a mutual understanding; at that time we had no strength by which we could force them to become our servants.”

This relative social equality came to an end early in the nineteenth century. European goods were then filtering up in greater quantity to the southern margins of the Kalahari from the South African trading ports, and the Kalahari had become the major source of ivory and ostrich feathers, because the animals that produced these goods had been slaughtered almost to extinction farther south in order to meet the European demand. This demand accelerated until in the 1860s and 1870s about three thousand elephants were killed every year in the Kalahari. Enormous profits were realized from the ivory produced. Ostrich feathers were even more profitable, selling in London for as much as $1,000 per pound. Batswana, whose lands straddled the area between European traders and Kalahari commodities, were ideally situated to exploit the trade. The Tswana kgosi, Khama III, had an annual income from these sources and his huge cattle herd of £3,000 in the 1870s; this would have made him a millionaire in modern terms. Khama was able to extract this large income because of the enormous growth of the Tswana merafe (polities); whereas his grandfather had been leader of about three hundred pastro-foragers who were not very different from peoples classified ethnographically as Bushmen today, Khama was head of a state with more than thirty thousand people and considered him-
self a king on a par with Queen Victoria. Khama’s cousin, Sechele, ruled an equally large Tswana morafe and controlled most of the Kalahari.

This is an astonishing social transformation to have taken place in hardly more than half a century; we must look briefly at how it happened. Doing so will help explain how some San peoples were reduced to a state of rural poverty that made them appear to ethnographers in the 1950s and 1960s to be simple hunter-gatherers.

In 1826, Kgari (a kgosi of one of the small Tswana groups described above) strengthened his position by establishing what is called the kgmelo (milk-jug) system; in essence, he decreed that half of all products produced by people under his control belonged to the kgosi—half of every jug of milk (hence the name), one tusk of every elephant, five of every ten feathers, and so on. He also assigned his dikgosana (male relatives) the task of overseeing the collection of this tribute and allowed them to keep a part for themselves; it was thus in the interests of dikgosana to collect as much tribute as possible. To do so they recruited hunters from all surrounding groups, Khoe and Kgalagadi as well as Tswana; these hunters produced almost all the ivory and feathers for the trade.

Cattle were important in this system. They were lent out by the dikgosana to the hunters under conditions of patronage called mafisa, in which the recipient becomes a client of the cattle owner and assumes not only the responsibility to manage the patron’s herd properly but also the obligation to support the patron’s wider economic and political interests. Failure on the client’s part to perform to the patron’s satisfaction results not only in the withdrawal of the mafisa cattle but also the forfeiture of the client’s animals. Failure could be simply the production of too little ivory, and as elephants became scarce, this happened frequently. This could, and often did, lead to the client’s impoverishment. Batswana elites gained thereby a degree of control over Khoe and Kgalagadi as well as poor Tswana peoples’ economic lives.

This economic control was translated into political control as the trade intensified. Dikgosana made sure that they remained the only channel through which commodities could be passed to the kgosi and on to the traders; this meant that Khoe and Kgalagadi hunters had very little direct access to traders and
soon were forced to hand over both tusks and all feathers to dikgosana, for they had no other market. But in the 1850s this was not yet the case: in a passage that reveals the nature of earlier indigenous trade, a European trader named Chapman wrote, “My Bushmen begged me to shoot an ostrich, as they were collecting black feathers to adorn the heads of Ndebele warriors”; as Chapman wanted the white feathers popular in Europe, he and his “Bushmen” struck a mutually beneficial deal. Eventually, as kgamelo strengthened elite power, European goods filtered back exclusively through the same dikgosana channels. The kgosi kept the most and best for himself, and dikgosana allowed only a few less valuable items (mainly tobacco and some glass beads) to pass further down the line. This rapidly strengthened the class structure inherent in the social division between chiefly and commoner members of a group (the word kgosi in fact is derived from the same root as the word for wealth), and by mid-nineteenth century a new class, malata (serfs), had come into being, composed almost entirely of Khoe and Kgalagadi peoples. However, by no means were all of these latter people reduced to serf status; many had previously become Tswana through marriage, concubinage, and the recruitment of whole groups to meet the growing labor needs of the expanding merafe.

Only those whose labor was not needed were not recruited. For the most part, they were in the most desert-like parts of the Kalahari farthest from developing centers. These people were usually dispossessed of cattle, both mafisa and their own, and necessarily relied more heavily on foraging than did others. This was the first step to San hunter-gatherer poverty. Until the 1870s, however, even these people retained a significant degree of economic leverage as the primary producers of the wealth that enriched their Tswana masters. Ten years after the ostrich-feather deal, one of Chapman’s companions recorded this scene of San bargaining power: “There has been a game of diplomacy between Chapman and the Batswana all the morning, the object of the latter being to persuade the Bushmen to bring the tusks of Chapman’s elephants to them, or at least within their power.”

The “Bushmen” who were negotiating terms with both Batswana and Europeans in this scene were Khoe peoples living in the Ngamiland district of northwestern Botswana (an area about the size of New Jersey). The great majority of place names in this district as well as in adjacent Namibia are, even today, Khoe.
Khoe peoples continue to live in the eastern and southern parts of Ngamiland and farther west in Namibia; but in a narrow strip along the border, most of the San inhabitants today are !Kung-speaking Zhu. A German geographer, Siegfried Passarge, who worked in this area between 1896 and 1898 and wrote the first ethnography of San peoples, thought that this indicated that Zhu were relatively recent immigrants into a country formerly occupied by Khoe; evidence is accumulating which suggests he was right. The move probably has its roots in the upheavals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that followed the establishment of Portuguese trading ports on the Congo-Luanda coast. As I have already said, the indigenous social landscape was severely disrupted by this trade, especially after the demand for slaves became great. In the scramble to supply the trade or to escape slavers, many peoples migrated. The Khoisan peoples of northern Angola, who we may be sure spoke a !Kung language, were displaced 250 miles southward into the middle of the country where they live today. Zhu lived too far south and east to be subject to heavy slaving predation, and as the Portuguese did not reach southern Angola until the late 1840s they were well placed to take advantage of economic opportunities newly opened by the trade. Archaeological evidence shows that glass beads and implements made from blast-furnace iron (made only in Europe and America at that time) were widespread in Ngamiland and northern Namibia beginning in the seventeenth century; these, along with new introductions of native pottery, mark these migrants from the north.

Then in 1795, Batswana moved into the area and within fifty years had subjugated the Khoe and Wayei who lived around the Okavango Delta; Batswana generally refer to these peoples as Makoba (note the ma prefix), which means “menial people.” Shortly after 1860, they extended their hunting and herding range westward. A Tswana man described their relations with the Zhu living there: “We just ruled them . . . it was good that they were so afraid of us, because if they had tried to fight, we would have slaughtered them.” A Zhu man portrayed the encounter this way: “They put us under the carrying yoke. We had to carry the meat that they shot…and a line of porters would carry bales of biltong (dried meat strips) back to Tsau.” Batswana also brought Zhu persons back to work on their cattle posts, and sent cattle out to the waterholes to be tended by Zhu.
The Atlantic slave trade also came into the area sometime in the early nineteenth century, although by no means as disastrously as farther north. Oral histories describe the social context in which this trade took place:

They bought Kxoé children with bundles of goods. Sometimes a grandfather-headman sold his nephews to the Mbari, sometimes the son of his older sister, sometimes of his younger sister. Also a father exchanged his son for woven cloth from Mbari men. If he had no slave available he gathered the Kxoé men; they hunted children and women and took them back to their place.26

The texts specifically include Zhu among those captured; Zhu in turn captured Kxoé children to sell to the Mbari agents of the Portuguese. We have evidence that substantiates this native oral history. In 1865, a group of European traders organized a posse to avenge the murder of one of their partners by Ovambo; among the avenging party were twenty “Bushmen (almost surely Zhu) willing enough to fight the Ovambos who make slaves of them.”27

Commodity trade, nevertheless, was far more important. Carl Hugo Hahn, one of the first Europeans in northern Namibia, gives a clear indication of the extent of Khoisan participation in this trade in 1850:

At the lowest estimate I can make, fifty to sixty tons of copper ore must go yearly to Ondonga. Bushmen are so jealous of this trade, that to this day they have not allowed strangers to see the places where they dig.... Other Bushmen prepare salt from saltpans in the form of sugarloaves and bring them to Ondonga to sell, from where they go on to other tribes.28

As in the east, ivory and ostrich feathers were the most valuable items as far as Europeans were concerned and many came to get them; about four hundred of the three thousand elephants killed annually in the Kalahari as a whole during the 1860s and 1870s came from the comparatively small area we are now discussing, most of them killed by Khoe and Zhu. Lee justly remarks that Zhu “recall the period with a great deal of affection as a time of intense social activity and economic prosperity.”29 Although the intensity diminished in the 1880s, a degree of trade continued, almost exclusively in hides and pelts. This caused a German soldier who patrolled the Namibian side of Zhu country in 1912 to
remark that on the Botswana side “modern culture is established. Our neighbors [Batswana and British] have ensconced trade relations with the Bushmen.” Zhu participated actively in this trade, as they had in previous generations; this gave them a degree of economic security no longer enjoyed by Khoe peoples.

THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Several traumatic changes coincided in the mid-1880s: elephants were wiped out in the Kalahari, so there was no more ivory; ostrich feathers went out of fashion in Europe and ostrich farms were established at the Cape, so Kalahari feathers became worthless. The economic vitality that had attracted hundreds of Euroamerican traders to the Kalahari and engaged almost every one of its inhabitants collapsed. The heyday of hunting had passed; the activity and prosperity of the previous quarter-century was over. Kalahari labor thus lost its value in the Kalahari. As a result, San—Khoe and !Kung alike—lost the little bargaining power they still retained. This was the second step to San hunter-gatherer poverty.

At the same time that hunting collapsed, however, gold and diamonds were discovered in South Africa; a modern capitalist economy was quickly established to exploit these riches and soon dominated the subcontinent. The colonies surrounding South Africa rapidly became what has been called a labor reserve, sending men as needed to work the mines. Kalahari labor found a new market. To meet these capitalist conditions, Khama abolished the kgamelo system and decreed that San were no longer serfs; dik-gosi of the other Tswana merafe quickly followed his lead. They did this in order to free San labor from attachment to any fixed place and to make it more flexibly available to Botswana. This was necessary because Tswana men of all classes were eager to reserve the money wages paid by the mines for themselves. To do so they, of course, had to leave their families and go to the mines; although this brought in money for the family (very little in actual fact), it left a labor vacuum on cattle-posts and farms. This
labor was replaced mainly by San (and some Kgalagadi) men who were not allowed to go to the mines until the 1950s. These men and their families were permitted to drink some of the milk of the cattle they tended and eat some of the grains they harvested for their employers, but they were paid very low wages, or none at all. Almost all had to supplement their diet by foraging.

Those who found cattle-post and farm employment were, however, comparatively well off. Relatively few found such employment. The reason is that it takes fewer herders to manage a hundred cattle than it takes hunters to kill one elephant. Further-more, the tusks of an elephant, when one could be found, were in the 1890s worth only about a third their value of twenty years earlier; in the world economic depression of the 1930s and the 1940s war years, they were worth nothing at all. In addition, a hunter’s family contributes nothing to commodity production, while a herder’s family—even children as young as five—make substantial contributions to cattle-post production and thus eliminate the need to hire many men. A herd owner had little incentive to accommodate more families than necessary. Most San, many Kgalagadi, and some Tswana families were now without direct means to participate in regional economies. They were relegated to the more difficult ecological zones of the Kalahari where they fell deeper and deeper into subsistence foraging, which had become a condition of poverty in the overall social-economic structure of the subcontinent. This was the final step to San hunter-gatherer poverty. It is a condition from which people constantly aspire to escape.

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**SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

**OF KALAHARI SUBSISTENCE FORAGING**

**Land Tenure**

Security of land tenure is as important for men who hunt and women who gather as it is for those who herd cattle and grow crops. For this reason, Kalahari San peoples long ago developed
ways for assuring that individual persons would acquire such security at birth and retain it throughout life. This is done through rules of kinship inheritance and extensions of these rules through marriage; thus, we will have to look at these rules in order to understand San relations to land. But first I shall outline these relations to land themselves.

All Kalahari San peoples construct very similar land tenure institutions, so all may be considered together. At birth, a San person inherits land rights from both parents; these rights will be those that each parent had in turn inherited at birth. So a San acquires the right to the land of each grandparent; and since every person has four grandparents, every San acquires rights to four areas of land—two from the father’s parents and two from the mother’s parents. These areas of land are the only ones a San person is entitled to use and to pass on to his/her children. This kind of socially sanctioned security in land is called tenure; the Zhu word for an area of land held in tenure is n!ore and the Khoe languages have words derived from the same root (for example, G|wi n!usa). A person’s primary tenure is the place where he/she was born, usually this will be the place where that person will spend most of his/her life and identify with; for example, a Zhu person born at a waterhole called CaeCae will say, “My n!ori is CaeCae.” Generational continuity is invoked to validate a claim; a Khoe man asserted, “This is my place—I was born here, and my father and my father’s father were born here.”32 Entitlements to other inherited tenures may be retained by visiting relatives in each and exchanging gifts with them; I shall return to this in a moment. Upon marriage, a San person gains rights to use the spouse’s tenures, but entitlement to this land is passed to the couple’s children only through the spouse.

It should be apparent that a San person gains entitlement to land only through a network of social relations with other persons in the same group. Land, itself, is not inherited, but rights to its use is acquired by being born into a specific social group. What Silberbauer has said of G|wi, “the link between the individual and territory is derived from the bond between community and land,”33 applies to all Kalahari San in this respect. Membership in that social group carries a set of reciprocal obligations among all the members, including the responsibility for management of the group’s land. This means no San “owns” land in the sense of being able to give or sell it to someone else. Rather,
the group is the corporate owner of its land; entitlement to use this land is vested in all members of the group. This corporate relation to land is marked in the G|wi girl’s puberty ceremony, when the young woman’s mother says to her, “this is the country of all of us, and of you; you will always find food here.” Among Zhu, members of such a group are called nlore kausi (owners of a country); these people refer to themselves as “those who have each other” while members of a Khoe group, the Naro, say they are “owned” by their grandparents.

Kinship and Marriage

Unlike land tenure institutions, Khoe and !Kung peoples have different kinship systems; the differences lie mainly in the areas of terminology (what a person calls a specific kind of relative, for example, a cousin) and the way in which kinship is extended to persons who were not born into the same group. But these different terminological systems are employed to achieve very similar sociological results with regard to land and its use. I shall only present the important points here.

All !Kung-speaking peoples separate lineal kin (those descended from the same set of great-grandparents) from collaterals (kin descended from siblings of those great-grandparents). They also use a single term for all cousins of the same sex and another term for cousins of the opposite sex. Thus, a Zhu woman calls all her female cousins !u!naa and all her male cousins txu, while a man calls his female cousins txu and his male cousins !u!naa. Notice that both use the same terms but apply them reciprocally according to the sex of individuals; because opposite sex cousins are preferred marriage partners, txu can be said to mean “marriageable person.” The term !u!naa (literally, “big name”) is also applied to same-sex grandparent (by a woman to her grandmother and by a man to his grandfather); when applied to a grandparent it means “name giver” and when to a cousin “name sharer.” This is because a Zhu person receives the name of a same-sex grandparent or someone sociologically equivalent, and the same set of names is passed through many generations of a family line; these are the people who have each other. As Lorna
Marshall was told by Zhu at NyaeNyae, “We name our children for our people. Those people [their collaterals] name their children for their own people.” Among these people, persons of the opposite sex with the same grandparents (second cousins) or same great-grandparents (third cousins) are preferred marriage partners. We shall see why in a moment.

In contrast, all Khoe peoples use one term for the children of their father’s sisters and mother’s brothers (cross cousins); they use a different term for the children of their father’s brothers and mother’s sisters (parallel cousins) and this is the same term they use for their own siblings. No distinction between the sexes is made. In the G|wi case, these terms are n||odi (cross cousin) and gjibaxu (parallel cousin/sibling). The latter term has no separate meaning, but Barnard translates n||odi-ku as “grandrelatives to each other;” people in this relationship are marriageable.

Both Zhu and G|wi—more broadly, !Kung and Khoe—kinship and marriage practices, while substantially different from each other, produce very similar local descent groups, which are able to perpetuate themselves and their associated claims to land over many generations. Within this incorporative structure of kinship the corporate unity of San land holding is handed down from one generation to the next. In response to the question, “Is it good and just to say that people live in a defined country?”, a Zhu elder replied, “If a person stays with his relatives; if a person separates from his relatives it is not right to call that place his.”

Property right transfers that occur when people marry are, accordingly, largely matters of reshuffling priorities among latent claims by members of a descent consort. This is because the new married pair will already, as children of their related parents, hold a set of entitlements in common (because they have a grandparental and/or great-grandparental sibling pair in common). Any proper marriage will unite entitlement strands through one parent of the bride and one of the groom; a more desirable marriage will unite strands through each parent of the couple. Marriage strategy is directed toward bringing about this more desirable condition, which strengthens individual security of tenure and consequently local descent group solidarity.

To the extent that the strategy is successfully employed by sibling sets from generation to generation, kinship ties are strengthened for individuals and group solidarity is passed on from grandparental through parental to current sibling sets. San
brideservice, in which the man lives with his wife’s family and contributes to its economy for a period of years, is crucial to the operation of this system; it can be seen as a form of marriage payment that mediates the conflicts over land which inevitably occur among mutually interdependent groups. Brideservice resolves the question of personal status and locates a marriage union with its offspring within the structure of relations between persons and places through the transferal of property and rights in land that takes place first between the families of bride and groom and later between their parents and their children.

Property and Exchange Networks

The transferal of property begins with negotiations and gift-giving between principals to a future marriage, primarily future coparents-in-law. This process may extend over a period of many years and begins to take more concrete form with the establishment of a new household located in association with the woman’s parents. The period of brideservice is measured in terms of offspring, its conditions being satisfied when two or more children have been born to the union. Among Zhu, children born during this period in the woman’s n!ore will have that locality as their primary country; Khoe follow a similar practice. This confers lifelong mutual obligations between persons in the woman’s family and her children, and on the descendants of those children so long as kinship obligations are met.

During the period of service in the Zhu wife’s home n!ore, rights in husband’s n!ore are kept open by visiting his primary kin who reside there and participating with them in production from their mutually possessed land. This revalidates entitlements through production relations; visitors who stay for longer than a couple of days are expected to contribute to the food supply. After the period of brideservice, if household residence changes to husband’s n!ore, rights in wife’s n!ore are kept open by visiting her kin who remain there. Such visiting is undertaken not only to enjoy each other’s company but to assure n!ore inheritance by children during the lifetime of the parents. Frequent visits are necessary because there are conflicts over rights and without par-
participation in a nlore threats to withdraw them may become serious. Thus, fights are common during visits; nearly seventy percent of all homicides occur when families are together and a high proportion of the fights and murders occurs between in-laws. These risks are counterbalanced by the need to keep options open through fulfillment of obligations to participate actively in social relations to land.

Exchange networks play important integrative roles in this social-spatial structure, but only Zhu and Naro have developed formal exchange systems, called haro and kamane respectively. In haro individuals engage in a form of linked-partner exchange; sixty-two percent of haro partners are traceable to same grandparents and eighty-two percent to same great-grandparents. Given the marriage preference, these people will be contiguous, consanguineal relatives among whom are potential as well as actual marriage partners. It is this group of people who form the stable set of descendant tenure holders; they are the nlore kausi, those who have generationally continuous, inherent entitlement of tenure in their land. A high proportion of the exchange they engage in is associated with marriage negotiations designed to insure continuity into the future. Kamane works in much the same way and appears to have been adopted by Naro, the only Khoe-speaking people who have such a system, from Zhu, who have been their neighbors and trading partners for several generations.

**THE POLITICS OF PRODUCTION**

**Sharing and Taking**

It is in the politics of implementing this strategy that relations of production are created. Negotiations for and legitimation of marriage ties are important in this creative process; they occupu much of the time and energy of descent group elders. Elders are hierarchically dominant—particularly fathers and parents-in-law—and have a defined right to an extra portion of the production of their descent group. Part of that extra portion is the right to arrange marriages, a right that carries with it increased access to material and social resources. This is the reason why Zhu par-
ents strive diligently to reserve for themselves this potentially onerous right, which leads to the fights and homicides just noted. Zhu kinship is thus the product of strategies oriented toward the satisfaction of material and symbolic interests organized by reference to a determinate set of economic and social conditions. It emerges as relationships that can be read in different ways by participants in them. Zhu relations of production are structured in the engagement of this kinship practice with the economic sphere.

No local descent group can independently reproduce itself within the parochial limits of a single n!ore. For this reason a significant number of marriage ties are negotiated with strategically placed collateral in-laws in adjacent and nearby n!oresi. Adults with mature children choose to gain strength through intensified haro and other forms of cooperation in specific n!ore areas. While finding spouses in those n!oresi for their children, the person with the broadest social influence is likely to be most effective in arranging marriages. To facilitate cooperation and strengthen influence, productive partnerships between first cousins are passed on from parents to children. Such inheritance accounts for forty-five percent of the haro links of Zhu individuals and these links are the most secure and long-lasting of all partnerships, some of them spanning many generations. Now, first cousins of one’s parents are the parents of one’s preferred marriage partner; maintaining good relations with them increases the chances of obtaining a desirable marriage partner from them. Haro exchanges between parties to these partnerships begin in childhood. They intensify in the parental generation during the period of marriage negotiations, solidify during the period of brideservice, and devolve incrementally upon the next generation. Thus, haro partnerships are inheritances that provide a person with working keys to the future.

Wealth, Status, and Leadership

The impartability of descent group land is assured by the cooperation of homesteads in the negotiation of proper marriages, that is, those marriages that protect the undivided inheritance of that
land. Marriage negotiations, therefore, are not the simple prerogatives of single families but involve numbers of senior members of an entire group. Without strong control of marriage the impartability of descent group land inheritance could not be perpetuated. Some kin units are able to retain or expand family land at the expense of politically weaker fractions of the social formation; they are able to do so because a concept of unequal possession is inherent in Zhu ideology. That contrast is expressed in the contrast between “wealthy person” (xaiha) and “poor person” (gaakhòe); xaiha is also the term for “chief” or leader of a group. Inequality between the statuses of wealthy and poor persons tends to be enhanced because those who can regularly produce a surplus have a broader sphere of haro. As we have seen, a broader sphere of exchange partners is associated with enhanced political influence, that is, of power.

The basis for wealth resides in nlore entitlements and the productive benefit that that entails; these entitlements are inherited by all members of a descent group. But it is apparent that leadership positions are passed through a smaller subset of families within the nlore entitlees. All leaders at CaeCae are descendants of several generations of the same families. Lee describes the basis of power of these leaders: “Because his kin ties to past nlore owners gave Tsau a strong claim to legitimacy, he did not elicit from his own people the same degree of hostility and criticism that other !Kung leaders suffered when they tried to deal with outsiders.” Also clearly, xaihasi are able to mobilize labor and to extract a surplus product. The CaeCae leader and his extended family were the beneficiaries of the ivory and feather trade in the nineteenth century, and it is these families who recall the prosperity of that heyday of the hunters with affection. These same families were able to appropriate for themselves the cattle-post positions that became available after hunting prosperity collapsed. This is visible today in the economy of CaeCae: although they are only forty-five percent of the population, these families own ninety percent of the cattle kept by Zhu in this place; they receive eighty-eight percent of the wages paid there; and they kill and consume sixty percent of the animals hunted in the area. Their success in hunting is due primarily to their ability to invest in horses, which allow them to range widely after the few large animals remaining from nineteenth-century depletion. Poor persons are forced to hunt small animals on foot; and people dis-
placed from other n!orisi have no rights to the land and are not allowed to hunt at all.

This has led to conflicting perceptions among Zhu over what constitutes a “proper” marriage. On the one hand are the wealthy who say that to marry properly is to marry as was proper in the past; these people have secure entitlement in place. Their strategy aims to retain the advantage accruing in entitlement; it results in protection of the undivided inheritance of descent group land. On the other are the poor who insist that one marries anyone other than kin; these people have lost entitlement to any land. Their strategy seeks to gain entrance to entitled entities; these families constantly seek alliances with a large productive group so as to acquire a stronger base for developing reciprocal obligations. These conflicting perceptions are rooted in convergent interests of persons who find themselves in contrasting circumstances and are expressions of strategy options sought to fulfill those interests. These relations have been defined in a particular history of political struggle over access to land resources and their products and to the attendant power conferred by recognized legitimate entitlement to manipulate the disposal of these products. This structure is inherent in Zhu social relations and has not been imposed by external forces in recent decades.

Present conditions of political and economic asymmetry visible at CaeCae are, of course, a result of the colonial era and its aftermath, that is, of the particular modern history of the region. But particular histories engage underlying structures to produce visible results, and these structures—while not deterministic in the sense that the conjunction of certain variable events will have a fixed outcome—do structure the outcome in terms of their own logic. For example, if Zhu ideology were in fact egalitarian, its structural logic would distribute entitlements and leadership positions among individuals on an unbiased, perhaps random, basis. Yet, the evidence demonstrates that quite the opposite is the case. Clearly, n!orekausi homesteads reproduce the conditions of their exclusive entitlements, and those families from which the leader is drawn reproduce the conditions of their dominance. These fundamental conditions of class reproduction are endemic in Zhu social relations.

If, nonetheless, to even careful observers, Zhu, along with all Kalahari San, appear superficially classless today, it is because they are incorporated as an underclass in a wider social forma-
tion that includes Tswana, Herero, and the other peoples of the region whose coordinated history in the last two millennia we have scanned. A crucial moment in this history occurred in the nineteenth century colonial encounter when dynamic interaction between the solidarities evoked by kinship and the status inequalities of political organization facilitated the slipping of collateral branches of descent lines into commoner status and of impoverished individuals and families into servitude. Thus, in the political economy of the Kalahari we cannot speak of social relations particular to San or Tswana or any other separate cultural entity; the peoples’ histories are too interlocked for that. It was precisely in form of the cattle-post system that the chiefs could extract labor from subordinates and initiate the conditions of rural poverty that prevail today.

CURRENT RURAL POVERTY

These conditions force some people into subsistence foraging. A pattern of San cattle ownership similar to that of rural Botswana as a whole has emerged—fewer than a third of the families in a language group own any cattle at all and, in 1981, cattle-owning San families had on average five head as compared to twenty for all rural Botswana. Typically less than ten percent of these families own more than half of all animals held by their group; among these, a very few have entered the middle-class ranks of rural Botswana. But for the average San cash income was $10 per adult per year in 1980; those families with a cattlepost wage earner were a bit better off with $25 per adult, which can be translated as $50 per average family of five. When income in kind is added (foraged food, clothing gifts, etc.) an adjusted income of $180 was attained. The poverty level at the time was $250 for such a family, and the average family income for the country as a whole was just over $600. Thus, most San families with wage earners—roughly fourteen percent of all families—fell within the lowest ten percent of income level and did not reach the minimum considered necessary for the bare essentials of life. And this bare existence was available only to those with cattle and/or a wage paying job. Those without such assets foraged and scavenged and
had no disposable income at all. Many of these people have left their home tenures to seek employment on the fringes of towns. Some have been successful. These inequities in the overall political economy are shared by all the rural poor of Botswana regardless of their group identification. They reproduce the structural deprivation of a rural underclass deprived of a market for its labor. These inequities are the modern legacy of the history of progressive deprivation we have witnessed, buttressed by a prejudice that assigns to San an ethnographic bewilderment when confronted by the present. In the 1990s, San peoples have begun to organize to overcome this legacy. A first step toward the realization of their aspirations leads away from a fascination with a fixed forager image, a fascination that sets the present of peoples so labeled out of focus and circumscribes any vision of their future.

NOTES

1. The term was coined in 1930 by anthropologist Isaac Schapera, in his book *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa* (London: Routledge) to distinguish these languages and their speakers from the other broad family of indigenous languages, called Bantu, spoken in southern Africa. Neither Khoisan nor Bantu refer to any specific language or people; rather, they are classifying terms useful for designating sets of languages which may sound quite different when spoken today but which can be shown to have common origins in the distant past—just as the term Indo-European links mutually unintelligible English, German, and Greek (and many more languages) to a common origin different from that of other European languages such as Basque and Finnish.

2. Richard Elphick’s *Kraal and Castle: KhoiKhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977) is the trailblazing work in modern Khoisan studies; Elphick documents the falsity of this distinction.

3. Richard Lee is the most articulate advocate of the relative isolation of Kalahari San; his book *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1984) is a readable presentation of this point of view. Very good statements of the historical integration position can be found in papers by Carmel Schrire, “Wild

4. The click consonants are written |, |, ≠, and !; the sounds these signs represent do not occur in any European language, although many of us use something like them to “talk” to our cats and horses. They are made by clicking the tongue against the teeth and palate.


7. Bantu (also an academically coined term) languages add prefixes to noun roots to modify their meanings; for example, the locative prefix, bo, designates “place of” as in Botswana (“place of Tswana people”). Here the prefixes are ki, isi, sin, and in the next sentence, se; these modify the roots zulu, xhosa, debele, and sotho (each meaning people in some sense) to mean “language of Zulu people” and so forth.

8. The prefixes shi, otji, and oshi all mean “language of” the people specified by the roots yei, herero, and ambo; wa is the plural applied to people who speak Shiyei.

"!Kung, pp. 1–2, gives it fuller expression: “The !Kung San of the Kalahari Desert, fierce and independent, unknown to the outside world until recently...[were important because] our ancestors had evolved as foragers...thus the study of the surviving foragers—[the San and others]—had much to teach us."

10. Euroamericans think of Afrikaans as the language of South African whites (those who call themselves Afrikaners or Boers). But the language actually evolved as a mixture of Dutch (mainly), French, Portuguese, Malay, and Cape Khoi spoken by many people in Cape Colony; it thus became as much the native language of blacks as of whites.

11. This is also a cover term (plural prefix ba, root kgalagadi) for a number of peoples who speak a set of closely related Bantu languages; it means simply “people of the Kalahari.”


13. The most readily available ethnographies of a Khoe people are George Silberbauer’s *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Jiro Tanaka’s *The San Hunter-Gatherers of the Kalahari: a Study in Ecological Anthropology*, David Hughes, trans. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1980). Both focus on G|wi and Gǁana peoples who conform most closely to Euroamerican Bushman stereotypes; that is, they are relatively short, have comparatively light-brown skin color, and tend to hunt and gather more than do other Khoe. Alan Barnard, in *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: a Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), provides a valuable synthesis of much of the literature on all Khoe peoples; this would be an excellent work to consult for ethnographic details.

14. Batswana are the ruling people of Botswana and so will be referred to frequently.

15. This was part of testimony given in the 1930s by Tshekedi Khama to a British commission investigating charges of Tswana enslavement of Khoisan peoples (see Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies*, p. 97).

16. The extent to which the “remote” Kalahari was a part of world trade is neatly illustrated here; ivory was wanted to make piano keys and billiard balls. Pianos and billiards were newly fashionable playthings of the European middle class, which was then
growing rapidly in numbers and wealth. Ostrich feathers were high fashion ornaments on women’s hats and bustles.

17. The Tswana word morafe (plural, merefa), is usually translated “tribe” but I prefer “polity” as a translation that avoids a connotation of primitiveness and to stress that these are as fully developed as are any other political organizations.


20. It was recruitment of all sorts of peoples, not an impossibly high birth rate, that brought about the rapid expansion of the Tswana merefa.


22. Siegfried Passarge, Die Buschmänner der Kalahari (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1907). I am currently preparing a translation, that will be published by the University of Michigan Press.

23. Zhu have a strong tradition of trading, both to maintain their social networks and for exchanging goods (see Polly Wiessner, “Hxaro: A Regional System of Reciprocity for the Reduction of Risk among the !Kung San” [Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1977]), and their language has a rich vocabulary concerned with trade.


25. Ibid., p. 78. Tsau was the Tswana capitol on the Delta.


31. It has been estimated that no more than two hundred elephants remained in all Botswana in 1900; remember that during the 1860s and 1870s about three thousand had been killed every year. The latest wildlife census indicates that there are now about sixty-eight thousand in the country.


34. Ibid., p. 151.


40. Ibid., p. 224.


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**SUGGESTED READINGS**


Pratt, Mary Louise. “Scratches on the Face of the Earth, or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,” in Henry Lewis Gates
