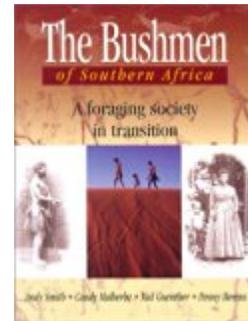


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andy Smith, Candy Malherbe, Mat Guenther, Penny Berens. *The Bushmen of Southern Africa: A Foraging Society in Transition*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. viii + 112 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1341-8.

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This book represents, like its forerunner of 1996, *The Cape Herders: A History of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa*,^[1] another commendable attempt by a team of mainly foreign-born and trained researchers to fill a long-standing gap in the production of knowledge about the region's indigenous populations in post-colonial and post-apartheid Southern Africa. *The Bushmen of Southern Africa* is a joint venture of an archaeologist, historian, social anthropologist and educator who pooled their intellectual insights and professional skills to show a broader readership how the San resisted, "at a high cost in lives," the conquest of their land, and how many of those that survived became unfree labourers, and ultimately part of the "coloured" community.

In general, the book succeeds well in spelling out for non-specialists that the "Bushmen" or San are, as Alan Barnard said about a decade ago in another scholarly work, "not the wild creatures of the veld people who know better often portray them as."^[2] In this regard, the didactical voice of the educator and the moral message of the three social scientists echo loud and clear throughout the book that the "Bushmen" can teach the world (approaching the dawn of a new century in the year of the book's publication) important social lessons. The breaking down of fixed stereotypes about the San among prospective readers seems to be a key objective of the producers of *The Bushmen of Southern Africa*. Textually, this is done professionally in a particular way.

Firstly, the four authors have combined their disciplines effectively to offer the reader a wide range of ideas and debates about the radical change San culture has undergone over the past decades. The methodological boundaries of their distinct disciplines are however

recognisable in the structure and content of the book. Nonetheless, the mode of writing reminds the reader from the first chapter, with its heading, "An introduction to the hunting people," to the last chapter, "The present and future of post-foraging Bushmen," that this book is mainly directed at the average literate Southern African interested in the history and culture of particularly the Khoisan.

Secondly, they have well structured the form and content of each chapter following the introduction. The second and third chapters introduce the reader to a specialised area of Southern African archaeology. In these two chapters on the archaeology of hunters and herders in South Africa, the emphasis is primarily on recent findings of UCT-led research projects. >From the fourth chapter, "Finding the Bushmen in what Europeans wrote," the professional knowledge of the historian and anthropologist has combined effectively with the skills of an educator to produce a most readable scholarly text. In this chapter, in particular, they seem to strike more of a balance in emphasis on co-operation than conflict between the San and Khoekhoe in historical times, which is quite different from what the reader would remember from their earlier history textbooks.

Chapters Four and Five address more or less the same broad theme of how Europeans saw the Bushmen. Whereas the former seems to be more historical in its approach, the latter gives more of an ethnographical account of the San way of life through European eyes. The sixth chapter deals with the clash of cultures with an emphasis on the mission Christian campaign of the 19th century as a strategy to change the "Bushmen" way of life and culture. The visual images presented in the chap-

ter illuminate graphically this approach of the authors to San resistance and their adaptation to a changing social environment, in respect of their ability to adapt. This chapter and to a lesser extent the following one present the reader with some striking examples of how the San were absorbed into Khoekhoe, Bantu-speaking and colonial communities. Chapter Seven attempts also in the spirit of “surviving against the odds” to transmit with carefully chosen visual images and written text the voices of San spokespersons captured in the historical record of the colonial era. The most striking example in this chapter are the voices of Wilhelm Bleek’s San prisoners of the Breakwater Prison on Cape Town’s modern-day Waterfront.

>From chapter eight to the end of the book, the voice of the social anthropologist dominates that of the other three contributors. The singular first-person mode of narrative ‘I’, with presumably reference to Mat Guenther, slips in at odd occasions in this part of the book. In his chapter on “An ethnography of modern Bushmen,” Guenther’s expert knowledge is substantially strengthened by additional information and skills clearly provided by the UCT-based archaeologist, historian and educator-writer who had also written jointly with Emile Boonzaier in *The Cape Herders*. In this latter part of the book, Guenther and his co-authors present the reader with most valuable information in a concise form about the current state of research and development policies pertaining to the San populations of Southern Africa. However, the focus on !Kung-speaking Ju/’hoansi groups of Botswana and Namibia in the eighth chapter and the “Farm Bushmen” of the Ghanzi District of Botswana in the last chapters of the book, is understandable. We know from at least the standard general work of Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa* (1992), that in terms of research projects on the San, the !Kung-speaking San are perhaps the most “colonized” by the major universities of the world.“ The penultimate chapter, on hunter-gatherers in transition, which moves the book into the political economy sphere, is by and large based on Mathias Guenther’s work of over three decades among the San of the Ghanzi District.

Chapter Ten looks at present and future survival prospects of the San. The authors slip up, however, disappointingly in this final chapter of the book on their knowledge of the true South African situation at the turn of the African century. Their representation of the Schmidtsdrift land claim dispute of the late 1990s

near Kimberley is somewhat confusing. What is not made clear is that the land restitution issue there was not so much a !Xun and Khwe “Bushmen” land question, as it was a contestation over the return to their land after apartheid between Tswana-speakers and other Khoisan claimants of Griqualand-West. In the Kalahari, the *Khomani Communal Property Association has also not been allocated 20,000 hectares as stated in the book under review. In terms of the agreement at the time of the celebrating picture on p. 92, 37,000 ha of private land and state land to the south of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (KGNP) was set aside for the Association. In addition, the *Khomani Southern San of the Association would have received 50,000 ha of land in the southern part of the KGNP, which were to be made available by the South African National Parks (SANP). About the latter part of the agreement the *Khomani San is still negotiating about the details of the contract with the Mier District Municipal Council and the SANP.

Finally, the book gives the uninitiated a brief and sound understanding of the outside pressures to which the San people had to adapt continuously from pre-colonial times to the present. Essentially it tells the story of how well they adapted to their environment over centuries and about the challenges facing them today in fitting into the modern post-colonial states of Botswana and Namibia. The stereotypical title of the book, perhaps for its commercial value outside Southern Africa, is unfortunate considering the abusive ring to the name “Boesman” in Dutch-Afrikaans, which became a hallmark of colonial and Apartheid racial attitudes until quite recently. Reference to the so-called coloured people of South Africa in respect of the international Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage Conference of 1997 could perhaps have been dealt with more sensitively. These shortcomings should, however, not deter anyone from either buying this valuable book or considering it for inclusion in reading courses on Southern Africa.

Notes

[1]. Emile Boonzaier et al., *The Cape Herders: A History of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa*. (Cape Town: D. Philip ; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1996).

[2]. Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan peoples* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 238.

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