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'Revised Bushman history, but not the last word in the ethnological dialogue'

Not all second editions deserve being reviewed, but this one does. In terms of quantity only little was added to this second edition of The Bushman Myth, Robert Gordon’s 1992 history of “Bushmen” or “San” people in southern Africa, with special reference to Namibia.[1] However, the changes in the revised parts do deserve attention and even specialists in the field who know the previous edition may find it worthwhile to consult the second edition which sheds new light on the ongoing dialogue between southern African “Bushmen” and people who write about them as well as on the relation between history and anthropology.

The differences between the first and the second edition of the *Bushman Myth* are only indirectly related to the fact that the book now has a second author, namely Stuart Sholto Douglas. To begin with, it is not always possible to distinguish who contributed which part of those bits that were not contained in the first edition. It is clear that Douglas contributed the larger part of chapter 20, which was much extended since the first edition. The subject matter of this chapter is the situation of “San” ex-servicemen of the South African Defence Force, many of whom were resettled with their families at Schmidtsdrift in the Republic of South Africa when Namibia became independent in 1990. Here new data was added to the volume which relies on Douglas’s field research in Schmidtsdrift. One could argue that apart from this chapter, plus a new preface, and a new section in the concluding chapter, the book has not changed substantially. While this is true in terms of volume it is not altogether true in terms of the overall approach taken. The additions that have been made, on the situation of ex-soldiers at Schmidtsdrift but also on the working of WIMSA (the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa) in recent years are in themselves very welcome and important pieces, but they also add a new quality to the book as a whole.

I think that it is commendable that Gordon has placed his junior co-author at an equal footing with himself, but for putting the changes between editions into perspective, I will now refer primarily to Gordon’s position because the book is originally his work and because the changes are best outlined in the context of Gordon’s earlier writings. It should be noted, though, that some of these changes have been “prodded” by Douglas (p. xiii). With this revised edition Gordon proves to be a revisionist in a very specific positive sense in that he seems genuinely capable and interested to review his own position in the light of new evidence. This is not to be taken for granted given that some of the best known “revisionists” of the so-called recent Kalahari Debate seem to be determined not to revise anything, no matter what new evidence, criticism or debates suggest, but rather to establish a new orthodoxy.

Gordon, by contrast, is both professional and reflective in his approach and states that “ethnology is a di-
The Bushman Myth collected praise when (and even before) it first got published and I think that part of the success story of this book is that at least in its title it allows the author (and the readers) to eat the cake and to have it. Like Gordon’s other recent book Picturing Bushmen it uses the evocative term “Bushmen”, which still attracts wide attention and readership in southern Africa as well as abroad, together with what one might call the immediate disclaimers “myth” and “picturing”. Gordon has always emphasized that he does not consider himself a “Bushman ethnographer” or a scholar of comparative hunter-gatherer research but rather that it is “settler fantasies” which interest him. The task that he has set himself is not only the debunking of myths but also to explain historically under what circumstances these myths have emerged and have been altered in the course of political struggles over decades and centuries. In order to achieve this task he has repeated and re-presented these “myths” with the unwanted side-effect that there is a danger of re-invigorating the representations that he criticizes. The opening reference to the film “The Gods Must Be Crazy” is a point in question.[4] I know that many of my colleagues, mostly among those who live outside South Africa and the United States, had not seen that film before it became a standard target for anthropological attack. Certainly, I would have never sought to see it if it hadn’t been for the repeated reference in anthropology books. It is a matter of debate to what extent the film has informed either academic writing or ethnic relations on the ground, but surely reflections (by Gordon and others) about the film have by now informed both, reality and the writings about it. The critique of the cliche about the “Bushmen” conveyed in that film has become a cliche itself. Gordon and Douglas recognize this in the preface of the second edition of the Bushman Myth and now state that the “inauthenticity” as embodied by the above mentioned film is “the basis of social life and therefore unavoidable” (p. xiii).

Gordon and Douglas also recognize that images of the “Bushmen” are much more diffuse than previously thought so that “the world is not as simple as this book first imagined it” (p. xv). It would therefore be more appropriate to talk about “myths” in the plural. More importantly the forces that create stereotypes can no longer be relegated to a single source. Gordon now realizes (and Douglas probably came to realize this doing his ethnographic work) that “one should not see Bushmen as passive victims of oppression” (p. xv) since at times they have actively influenced the process of making the myths. Moreover, these myths have “not always and everywhere enjoyed dominance and hegemony” (p. xv). The added ethnographic material on the “Bushmen” of Schmidtsdrift and on “Bushman” political networking through WIMSA, an NGO supporting “San” representation in the region and beyond, exemplify the active involvement of Bushmen in the manipulation of ethnic images. But furthermore I take this to mean that references to the dominant discourse cannot explain everything that “Bushmen” did or do.

This second edition repeats the aim of the first edition, namely to write “a history of Bushmen” (p. xviii). Judging by comments made by historians it seems that Gordon has done a good job using the available records to write a history, proving that anthropologists can do “proper” history if they decide to do so. The other aim that the authors emphasize for this second edition is “the situating of representational practices” (p. xviii) more generally. In other words, it is not a debate about historical sources that has made Gordon reconsider some of his earlier statements about the “Bushman myth” but it is a new involvement with ethnography. As I have pointed out in more detail elsewhere reassessing and reconsidering his position was not prompted by a new reading of the historical evidence.[5] That evidence in itself was skewed because it played down any active involvement of “Bushmen” and did not allow to reconstruct their part in the process. Rather, the reassessment was possible because results of fieldwork are now included. Gordon and Douglas recognize this themselves in that they see the inclusion of some contemporary ethnography to be more than just an update. The ethnography clearly puts the collected historical material, presented in the first edition, into a different perspective.

Thus, by comparing the two editions readers are put into a better position to begin to situate the representational practices surrounding the “Bushman myth”, firstly
situating them with regard to the changes that have occurred since Namibian independence and since the end of apartheid and secondly situating them with reference to what we know ethnographically about the social practice and agency of “Bushmen” or “San” today.

On the first point, Gordon and Douglas point out that “the world has changed dramatically during the 1990s” (p. xv). It is likely that with an increasing inclusion of contemporary ethnography we may have to realize that the implications of the cultural difference discourse has also changed dramatically. The Namibian government has since independence resisted to recognize the need for any particular affirmative action on behalf of “San” people. We may soon reach the point where dis-emphasizing cultural difference may be subject to political abuse at a large scale just like emphasizing difference used to be abused by segregationist policies.

On the second point, it seems likely that following Gordon and Douglas’ acknowledgement of “Bushman” input in the manipulation of representations, an increasing attention towards ethnography would also lead to a better recognition of “Bushman” input in interethic relations in terms of other, non-discursive social practices. In other words, just as “Bushmen” are now seen to have an influence in the way in which ethnic labels are being used, they may also become more visible in their ways of influencing other fields of social interaction such as exchange and trade, settlement patterns, ritual, the forging of kin ties and name relations.[6] Practices and social institutions that are usually discussed under the label “hunter-gatherer” may then no longer be so easily subsumable as mere products of external structures of ethnization, domination and exploitation.

In the first edition Gordon already recognized the danger of complying to a restrictive socialization for instance by denouncing the term “Bushman” instead of making the way of life that it denotes respectable again.[7] In this context it seems that the ethnography of researchers working in and on Namibia involves some interesting dynamics which also touches on the relation between history and anthropology. The field is currently still dominated by historically-oriented researchers, inside the country as well as in powerful institutions in Europe. Many of the current generation of researchers were trained during the years of pre-independence struggle and like Gordon have personally experienced southern Africa during apartheid. Their way of dealing with ethnic identity, or matters of cultural identity and cultural difference more generally, seems strongly informed by this experience. Since the post-independence experience is likely to be captured first in ethnography and then later on in historical work, it will be of interest to observe to what extent researchers are capable of producing revised editions, understood as reassessments of their work, in ways similar to that of Gordon and Douglas.

NOTES


REFERENCES


