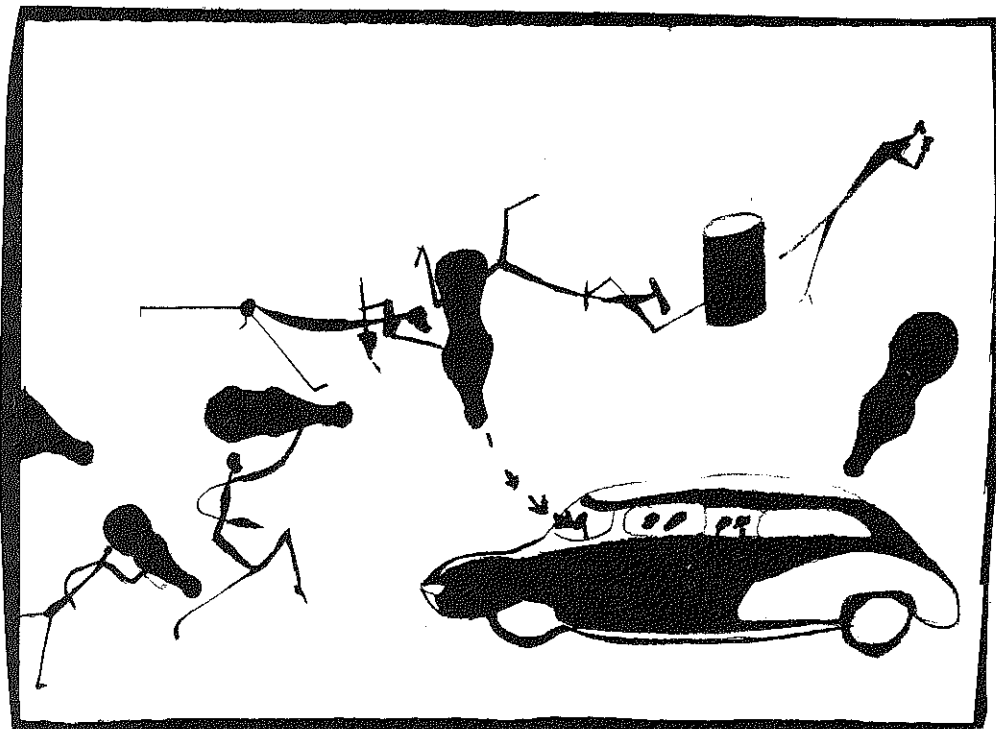




# LASTIC TONE AGE

By Rob Nixon



Illustrations: Oliver Girling

As colonial subjects in a territory occupied illegally by South Africa, Namibians can neither govern nor vote in their own country. But within the ranks of these dispossessed, one group, the Bushmen, even stands to lose access to the last of its viable lands. If a proposal by the Namibian authorities is implemented, most of the the Bushmen (or more properly speaking, the Ju/wa San) would be banished from their "homeland" while those remaining would be kept on, either as modern mercenaries in the South African armies or as "primitives" in a game reserve.

The forced removal of people "for their own good" is a routine cruelty under *apartheid*, but the plan to "relocate" the Ju/wasi is especially reprehensible, even by South African standards. Under this plan, traditional Ju/wa culture is to be safe-guarded by turning what is left of the ancestral lands into a game reserve, driving the majority out of the area but retaining a select few who, through their hunting and gathering, are to assume their "authentic" place in the region's fauna and flora. According to the Namibian administration's *Survey of the Bushmen Population of South West Africa* (Namibia), these San are to be organized into "hunting bands" at special tourist points under supervision of a game ranger, the idea being to attract a special class of tourist. As the wildlife in the area earmarked for the reserve is comparatively sparse and unvaried, the region would normally seem a poor competitor with Namibia's other, far richer game parks. What all those reserves lack, however, are real "wild" bushmen; they presumably, will be the major drawing card.

The report justifies this scheme in part by asserting that the project will safeguard "the uniqueness of the Bushmen as part of Nature." The San are thus reduced to a factor in an ecosystem -- as "part of the ecology, in their natural habitat," in the words of Polla Swart, until recently Namibia's Director of Nature Conservation. More than any African people, apart perhaps from the Masai, the San have been saddled with the stereotype of the primitive who lives so symbiotically with nature that one is hard-pressed to tell the difference. Wherever myths of noble savagery have taken root, the nobility has been serenaded by the philosophers, but the savagery has stood out for the colonists. In 1941 Colonel Deny Reitz, a South African Minister of Native Affairs and connoisseur of the San, had this to say in their favour:

"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 twenty who are just about genuine...it is our intention to leave them in the Kalahari Game 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."

While a "human" who is really a baboon may be indulged with protection in a game reserve, outside the reserve it would certainly, in terms of civil rights, be a lot safer to be mistaken for a person. To be a genuine Bushman is to be an inauthentic human.

These days people are more careful about what they say. But the line of reasoning, however covert, is often not all that different. Most outsiders have gleaned what knowledge they have (or think they have) of the San from Jamie Uys's phenomenally popular comedy *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. In that film, the white microbiologist speaks English but knows no "Bushman", while his "coloured" assistant commands both languages. One rung lower down, NIXau, the Bushman lead, is bewildered by the white man's inscrutable chattering, but when a baboon steals the film's iconic Coke bottle, NIXau lectures him at length on its evil power until the ape is persuaded to drop it. Clearly, NIXau is fluent in both 'Bushman' and Baboon.

The Namibian Administration's Report could never speak of Bushman as essence of baboon, but it does justify the envisaged reserve by appealing to the notion of the San as "children of Nature." The rhetoric of naturalness, preservation and habitats -- with its rider that the San are an "endangered species" -- and even the inordinately prominent role of the Department of Nature Conservation in determining the fate of these people, point to the dangerously blurred distinctions that mar the entire project. (In an analogous confusion of human and animal life, the French television network TF-1 once included a special feature on the San in their Sunday evening documentary series, *Wild Animals of the World*.)



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John Marshall, an activist anthropologist who lived with the Ju/wasi on and off for thirty years, has remarked that the proposed reserve is envisaged as if all San had hunting and gathering encoded in their genes. The plan is premised on an abstract, idealized notion of the hunter-gatherer culture; it is a classic instance of the power of commercial resourcefulness, in league with racism, to invent a tradition. The vast majority of the people classified as "Bushmen" in Namibia have been obstructed from hunting and gathering for three generations or more -- above all, by being ousted from their lands. The "Bushmen" who subsist purely by hunting and gathering may still roam the pages of encyclopedias, but today in Southern Africa are nowhere to be found. The Ju/wasi's formerly extensive knowledge of the veld and their acute powers of observation are waning to the point where scarcely any of those born since about 1960 know how to augment their diet by hunting and gathering. Far less can they subsist by it. Namibian Conservation Department officials acknowledge this deficiency in "experiential learning," and have recommended that San children be taught tracking as part of the school curriculum.

What of N!Xau, one might ask? Jamie Uys, in interviews, has rhapsodized about his San hero's splendid isolation, but anthropologist Toby Alice Volkman has determined that N!Xau has lived a far less secluded existence than Uys would have us believe. Years before starring in the movies he had worked as a herdboyc on a Botswana farm and was later employed as a cook in a Namibian school.

Historically, the Ju/wasi have been the most isolated group of San and the last to become acculturated. But even their hunting and gathering economy collapsed in the 1960s and became truly irretrievable in 1970, when they were dispossessed of 70% of their land, again in the name of nature conservation. From 1970 onwards, one thousand people had to survive in an area that could support at most 250 hunter-gatherers, and that only in a year of good rains. The movement towards a mixed economy and a more Western lifestyle accelerated sharply in the 1970s as the South African army entered the area and began recruiting San as mercenaries in the bush war against SWAPO guerillas. (The largest of Namibia's political organizations, SWAPO has been battling the South African Army for twenty years in a conflict that costs the South Africans about \$170 million US per annum).

If plans for the game reserve are allowed to proceed, *The Gods Must be Crazy* may well serve as a propitious, if unintended, advance advertising campaign. The plans for the reserve dovetail tidily with the myths dispensed by Uys. Key sections of the film were shot in the threatened region and at the very time when Marshall was filming a documentary broaching the problems of a San culture in transition. The society Uys witnessed was already in disrepair. Increasingly landless and dependent South African military handouts, the Ju/wasi were subject to alcoholic fits of violence and showed all the melancholy symptoms of North meeting South -- developing tastes for J&B, skin-lighteners, hair-straighteners, and infant formula. Why then, does Uys's narrator blithely inform us that the San are "the most contented people in the world," and that "nobody knows about the Bushmen, nobody goes into that deep Kalahari"? San society, he says, knows "no crime, no punishment, no violence, no laws, no rules." He might as well have added "no history." But Western incursions have proved less easy to deflect than Uys would lead us to believe.

The San have accrued a history, at least three centuries old, of dispossession and decimation. As the South African historiographer, G.M. Theal, put it at the turn of this century: "(The San) were of no benefit to any other section of the human family, they were incapable of improvement, and as it was impossible for civilized men to live on the same soil with them, it was for the world's good that they should make room for a higher race." Seventy-five years on they continue to make room. Steadily stripped of land, they have been hampered by perplexing legislation: Since 1920 bow-and-arrows have been banned, and for sixty-odd years they have fallen afoul of the territory's vagrancy statutes (a particularly tough one for nomads).

But the most decisive changes amongst San cultures have come about in the past decade through the actions of the South African Army. The South Africans, understandably, have been wary of training and arming large numbers of blacks in the war against the SWAPO guerillas: not until 1974 did the army create its first black force, the Pled Crow battalion, which significantly was comprised (officers apart) solely of San. The unit's emblem of the Pled or White-breasted Crow is a signally South African bit of iconography. Commanding Officer Botes's explication sums it up:

"The black portion of the bird represents the Bushman population while the white breast represents the white leadership element (thus they accept that whites take the lead in their development process). The crow is the first bird which was let out of Noah's Ark and did not return -- this symbolizes the fact that the Bushmen, too, will not return to their previous customs."

Four years after the founding of the Pled Crows, a second battalion was launched in Bushmanland proper, the territory of the Ju/wasi, and by 1981 the army had become the primary employer in the area.

Why did the military choose to recruit amongst the San in preference to all other black groups? In the early years, at any rate, the San's legendary tracking skills were cited in defence of this change in policy: if they could stay with the spoor of wild game, they

could do likewise with the tracks of the elusive guerillas. But that was only the beginning. Soon the army's rationalizations veered in a pseudo-scientific direction: SWAPO and the San, who historically had scarcely any contact, were made to appear *natural* adversaries. The colonizers's trusty rhetoric was trundled out again: "A Bushman's hate for SWAPO will give you the shivers... They hate SWAPO because they enslaved them and took their daughters for prostitutes." Similarly the old *apartheid* maxim -- they would sooner scrap amongst themselves than fight with us -- was invoked in tones of mock perturbation: "The only real problem lies in their (the San's) conviction that all blacks are the enemy," a statement which, if true, smacks of breakneck indoctrination.

The newly forged alliance between the South African Defence Force and the San has also been explained in patriotic terms, the San apparently relishing the chance to defend the Namibian people from "terrorists" who wished to seize their land. Yet the San are incapable of perceiving themselves as citizens of anything so grandiose as the Namibian nation-state; they do not even recognize the Namibia Administration's designation of them as "the Bushman group," and their sense of collective identity is expressed in the much smaller units of, say, the Ju/wasi as against the Vasekela San, people separated from each other by great linguistic and other cultural and geographic differences. And as for the Ju/wasi defending the piece of land they actually lived on (as opposed to a generalized nation), the game reserve proposal further testifies to the fact that the real threat of dispossession has always come from government, not "terrorist" quarters.

Flipping through back issues of the South African military's major publications, *Paratus* and *Armed Forces*, one finds the progress of San units assiduously documented. A banner headline proclaims that "36 Battalion is engaged in transforming stone-age hunter-gatherers into competent infantry-men, radio-operators and medics." The same article announces that the battalion now "boast the only Bushman Leap Into The Space Age" -- one of the first San paratroopers remarks that "falling through the air was a nice sensation." The gods, it would seem, drop not only Coke empties but the San themselves from the heavens. Elsewhere it is noted that San require more schooling in musketry than the average recruit, but that "survival training is somewhat superfluous." There is a good deal of talk along the line of "guided cultural change" and having drawn conflict to the region in the first place, the military now scripts itself as the Bushman's jealous protector: without "the Supportive Services being offered by the SADF to the community they would have fallen prey to subversive SWAPO activities." One commanding officer is even quoted as believing "the Army to have saved them as a tribe from extinction." Salvation implies sheltering the San from themselves by redeeming them from what is thought to be their perennial aimlessness, neither a surprising nor a fatal "flaw" in a residually nomadic culture.

But the army seems divided -- or confused -- about precisely where the Ju/wasi's newfound sense of purpose is leading them. On the one hand, it issues statements like: "The Defence Force does not only make war. On the contrary, the task of civilizing...is probably *greater* than the military function" (their emphasis); on the other hand, one finds Lt. Wolff insisting that: "Our aim is not to Westernize them but to make them better Bushmen." The latter assertion seems much more in keeping with the chief premise underlying the planned game reserve; namely, that it is justifiable to interfere with a culture in order to make it more like itself. One member of the top brass of the

South African Defence Force Ethnology Department struggled to define the limits of the army's efforts on the San's behalf: "Although the SADF has been concerned with the so-called upliftment action since 1974, its actions cannot really be spoken of as acculturation." We can leave such niceties to the military ethnologists.

In accordance with South African policy, every "homeland" must have its appointed chief. Bushmanland is no exception. "Chief Geelbool (Yellowboy) Kashe -- officially designated "Paramount Leader of the Bushmen" -- was for several years the main mouthpiece for South African policy towards the San. The February 1983 issue of *Paratus* flaunted a statement by Geelbool that was quickly seized upon by pro-government sectors of the South African press. "The giraffe," Geelbool declared, has his kick, the lion his teeth, the tiger his claws and the buffalo his horns to frighten off the enemy. We, the Bushmen, we have our Territory Force! The Bushman welcomes the presence of 203 Battalion in Bushmanland -- the Battalion is the Bushman's horns, teeth, claws and kick.

Geelbool is an interesting case. While holding his appointment he must certainly have been -- to use some *Paratus*-style hyperbole -- the world's one and only "hunter-gatherer" with a white Mercedes and a white chauffeur (both government-donated). The responsibilities of the chauffeur, Mr. François Stroh, were multiple: he was also known as Geelbool's "secretary" and doubled up as interpreter-cum-puppeteer. For Geelbool, the sole spokesperson for the "will of the Bushman people," conveniently knew no other language than his native Ju/wasi. As nobody apart from his almost uniquely bilingual white "secretary" had recourse to the chief's original utterances, who knows how the translations were negotiated?

Geelbool's prominence as the most-quoted Ju/wasi on the subject of the South African occupation of Bushmanland has tended to screen out other opinion radically at odds with his own. But in the prize-winning movie, *N!ai, The story of a !Kung Woman*, which documents the genesis of Battalion 36, Marshall records the outrage of one #Toma who, despite South African propaganda to the contrary,

insists that his people are happy "to share the pot with SWAPO." At the same time, he is violently opposed to the effect of the South African military on the social fabric: "I won't let my children be soldiers, the experts at anger. The soldiers will bring the killing. This I know."

The Ju/wasi's dependency on the largesse of the South African Army for employment and handouts has generated dangerous disparities in income and power among them. Historically non-hierarchical, Ju/wa society has become precipitously imbalanced, with a small core of young men earning twenty times Bushmanland's average per capita income and lording it over an ever-widening circle of medics. The introduction of wealth in such a lopsided fashion has brought with it alcoholism and violence which, together with a diet comprised disproportionately of donated white sugar and refined meal, have resulted in declining health and an increase in the mortality rate. The Ju/wasi's dependency leaves them doubly vulnerable because it is quite clear that their South African sponsors, for all their skillful stalling, cannot remain in Namibia indefinitely. It is equally apparent that SWAPO, who the Ju/wasi have been encouraged to consider their deadly enemy, will win the country's first free election. Even the South Africans concede privately that SWAPO is the territory's strongest grouping by far, but it would be bad for morale to admit as much publicly. Inevitably, the South Africans' public posture skews their interest in the future of these particular San, making them indifferent to easing the Ju/wasi's reliance on an impermanent military. Marshall puts it quite tidily: the Ju/wasi "have been recruited to fight a war they do not understand, and, when the war is over, and when the paycheques stop, they won't have the skills to support themselves...."

There is, however, a feasible scheme underway which, if given a chance, could loosen the noose of dependency. Launched by Marshall and his colleague Claire Ritchie, with the support of Ju/wa communities, it recognizes the alliance with the military as ephemeral and recommends scuttling both the plan to "relocate" the bulk of the Ju/wasi to the arid and uninhabitable western region of Bushmanland and the proposal to declare the eastern sector a game reserve. Most importantly, the Marshall-Ritchie scheme would ensure that the Ju/wasi retain the last of their uninhabitable land and would secure their autonomy during an era of somersaulting political change. This pragmatic proposal (now promoted by the !Kung San Development Foundation in Watertown, Mass.) seeks to shore up and develop existing skills, notably animal husbandry, amongst the Ju/wasi and integrate these skills into a mixed style of subsistence. So far the Marshall Cattle Fund has established four cattle posts, each supporting communities of sixty to seventy people. The activist anthropologists' alternative to the Namibian Administration's plan takes into account the composite character of the culture. To survive, they argue, the Ju/wasi need to blend different forms of subsistence: rearing cattle, planting crops, and hunting and gathering, supplemented if necessary by sporadic wetwork. Marshall and Ritchie can point to stable, productive, adequately nourished Ju/wa communities embracing just such a lifestyle in nearby Botswana. Their core conviction is that the survival of the Ju/wasi is best guaranteed not by jobs but by land.

The !Kung San Development Foundation's blueprint enjoys considerable local backing, even from Geelbool, who has recently become disaffected with the Namibian Administration. He is angered by the proposed banishment of his people from their ancestral hunting grounds and by the prospect of the only district with surface water being turned over to wild animals. Gratified by the success of the cattle posts, Geelbool is also frustrated by the Administration's insistence on blocking attempts to establish further communities along similar lines. For the Administration is resolutely opposed to this rival to their own scheme of expropriation and tourism, invoking the

anachronistic argument that animal husbandry is alien to "the Bushman way of life." It also predicted sanguinely that when Ritchie and Marshall left Bushmanland the posts would collapse. However, three to four years after the anthropologists' departure the posts remain thoroughly intact, and all the evidence points to the Ju/wasi wanting and needing more of them. The !Kung San Development Foundation has come up with the only plan to date that adequately takes into account the chequered state of Ju/wa society, admitting that if there is any future for it at all, it will entail not a choice between two ways of life but an amalgam of them. The alternative offered by the Namibian Administration would be, in Marshall's phrase, a futureless "plastic stone-age," a culture to be performed but not inhabited.

An incident at the 1984 agricultural show in Windhoek, the Namibian capital, attests to the grinding contradictions between official perceptions of the Ju/wasi. The South African Defence Force sponsored a Bushmanland stall where two Ju/wa women and a child sat for three days making beadwork and bows-and-arrows against a photographic backdrop. Lt. Dokkie Lindvelt, the army chaplain who supervised the stall, made it clear that the exhibited Ju/wa had been instructed to dress down for the occasion - to go "traditional." From the SADF's point of view the stall was a massive success. But the Ju/wasi involved felt otherwise, one of them remarking how "some people make us feel strange, like we are not people, like we are strange creatures, like animals." "There are some people in this town who just do not know anything about us, they think we are wild animals," a companion added. After being taunted and harassed by visitors for two days, the Ju/wasi abandoned the mandatory loin cloths and insisted on covering their buttocks. Despite their rebelliousness, the stall was awarded a bronze medal in the Industrial Section of the show. The South African military and Department of Nature Conservation, between them, seem liable to shred Ju/wa society by tugging it every which way. According to the one, Noah's crow, though in military colors, is flying forever free; the other

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seems persuaded that it should be summoned back to the (meanwhile remodelled) ark. While such rival arguments continue to fog the air, one thing remains clear: seldom have the rhetoric of preservation and the need for survival been so obviously at odds.

At this stage, one can only imagine the Namibian Administration's delight at the success of a movie which would persuade the world that "what distinguishes the Bushmen from all other races on earth is that they have no sense of ownership at all, because there is really nothing they can own." Hasn't that always been the colonial way? Step One, romanticize a "primitive" people as delightfully unencumbered by proprietary instincts; Step Two, with sparkling clear conscience, disencumber them of their land.

"San" is an alternative to the sometimes derogatory and genre-biased term 'Bushman'. !Kung is one of three major languages spoken in Namibia. The Ju/wasi speak a !Kung dialect and are probably by and large the least acculturated of all the San people.

The best source for information on the game reserve project and on the state of the San in general is:

The !Kung San Development Foundation  
#5A Bridge St.  
Watertown, MA  
02172

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**Rob Nixon** is completing a Ph.D in English at Columbia University and has written for *The Village Voice* and *The Nation*.

