

ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE JU/'HOANSI BUSHMEN

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ABSTRACT The 'Great Kalahari Debate' which revolved around the degree of isolation of the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen failed to adequately interrogate the Bushmen on what they knew of their own history. A combination of interviews with respected Ju/'hoansi elders and archaeological excavation indicates that those Bushmen living in the Sandveld of north-eastern Namibia, although in contact with Kavango farmers, would use them as a convenient source of *hxaro* exchange items only when needed. This meant only a limited number of exotic pieces were found in the excavations at the *hxaro* exchange place of Cho/ana in the Kaudom Reserve, suggesting that the Bushmen retained their independence. By way of contrast, hunters living in small rock shelters on the edge of Tswana settlements around Gaborone in Botswana gradually saw their cultural material being completely replaced by exotic goods and food, indicating encapsulation by the dominant society.

Key Words: Sandveld Bushmen; Kalahari Debate; Encapsulation

INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to find archaeological and local historical information on the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen who live in the Sandveld of northern Namibia and Botswana. These people are well-known from the work of Lorna Marshall (1976) and Richard Lee (1979), among others, as well as the films by John Marshall. The Ju/'hoansi have become central to what is known as the 'Great Kalahari Debate,' which revolves around the relations between the Bushmen and the outside world (see Barnard, 1992). I'm sure most of you know about the debate, but for those unfamiliar with the controversy, let me briefly give some idea of what the sides are and how it came about. There are two visions of the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen (and it must be recognised that the debate revolves around them alone):

1. That of Richard Lee and the Harvard Kalahari Group who say the Ju/'hoansi, studied between 1950 and 1965, give an idea of independent and relatively affluent hunter/gatherers;
2. That of Ed Wilmsen and others who regard the Bushmen in general, and the Ju/'hoansi in particular, as a dispossessed proletariat marginalised by outside economic interests.

The argument started with Schrire's (1980) critique of Bushman studies, and elaborated by Wilmsen who attempted to show that the pristine vision of the Bushmen portrayed by Lee & DeVore in the first hunter-gatherer conference in 1966, and published as *Man the Hunter* in 1968, was not only misleading, but a downright manipulation of the data. Instead, argues Wilmsen in his (1989) book *Land Filled with Flies*, the evidence shows that the Bushmen were in contact with the outside world, and worked as herdsman, possibly for the last 1500 years. Lee has cogently argued that this is a cynical view of Bushman research, which had already showed contact in the initial studies (Lee, 1965; Marshall, 1976; Solway & Lee, 1990), and certainly had moved beyond any perceived pristinit paradigm by the publication of the second (1979) hunter-gatherer conference papers by Leacock and Lee in 1982, long before *Land Filled with Flies* appeared.

For myself, the debate does not stop there, as my interests are in the relations between foragers and food producers, and the problems of foragers becoming food producers. In order to resolve a number of issues in the debate our project was two-pronged:

- a) to gather information from respected Ju/'hoansi elders about what they knew of their own history;
- b) to try to push this indigenous knowledge back in time by archaeological excavation of sites known to the elders.

The hypothetical questions being asked of the data revolve around whether it is possible to recognise subjugation, encapsulation or subordination from archaeological remains. Work in the Southwestern Cape, South Africa has shown that we can separate out the economic and cultural differences between hunters and herders (Smith et al., 1991) and can recognise some materials being transferred from the food producers to the foragers. But at what point can we say that the hunters were being subjugated?

Even though we were shown sites that had been occupied by our Ju/'hoan colleagues in the past, this does not mean that we can automatically assume that the modern hunters were descended from the Later Stone Age inhabitants of the area. Marshall (1976: 53) tried to find out if her informants had any memory or stories of coming from another place. Her conclusion was that no such memory exists, and that the people believe that their ancestors lived in the area since time began. On the other hand, the Ju/'hoansi have no memory of stone having been used as a raw material to make tools. We will have to demonstrate a connection with the past by using a combination of material remains from excavation, as well as the historic record of trade and ethnohistorical information from our Ju/'hoan colleagues.

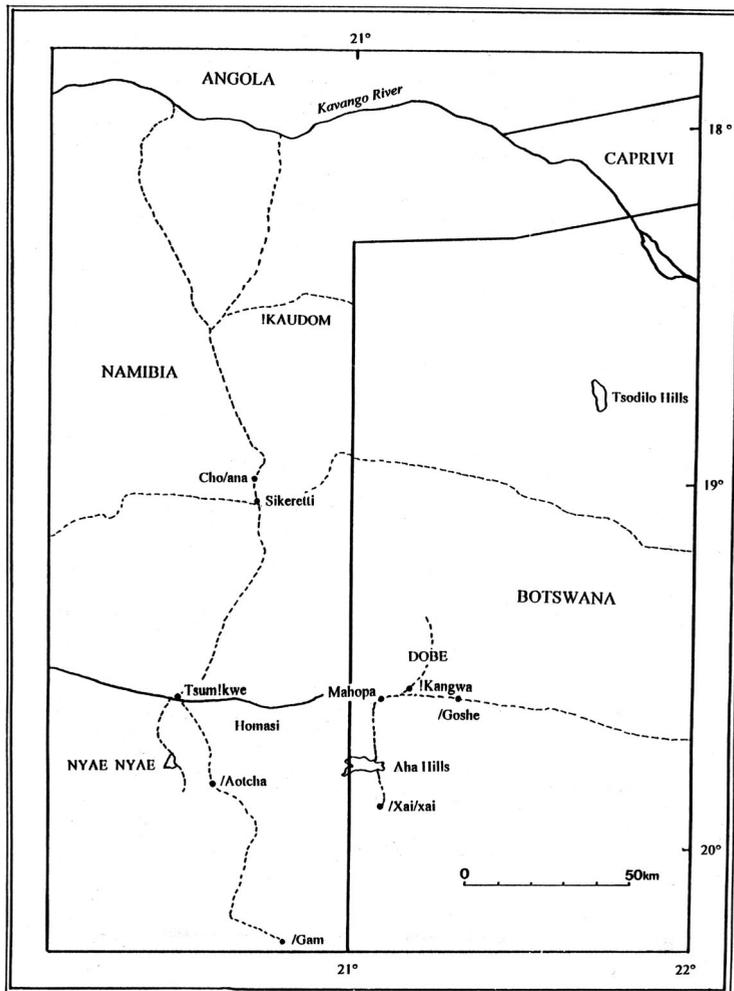


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Cho/ana in the Kaudom Reserve, northern Namibia.

EXCAVATIONS AT CHO/ANA

We chose the site of Cho/ana (Fig. 1), located on the Nhoma Omuramba (Hines, 1993), since this had been lived at by two of our Ju/'hoan friends before the Kaudom Reserve was gazetted in the 1960s, and we were told this was a major *hxaro* exchange place used by the Bushmen. In addition, Lorna Marshall had spent several months there in the 1950s when she first began her work in Bushmanland, and some collections of surface material had been made for the Peabody Museum at Harvard (Lepionka, 1973).



Fig. 2. Kunta (centre), his wife !Nai, and their teenage son, /Ui at Sigaretti Camp.

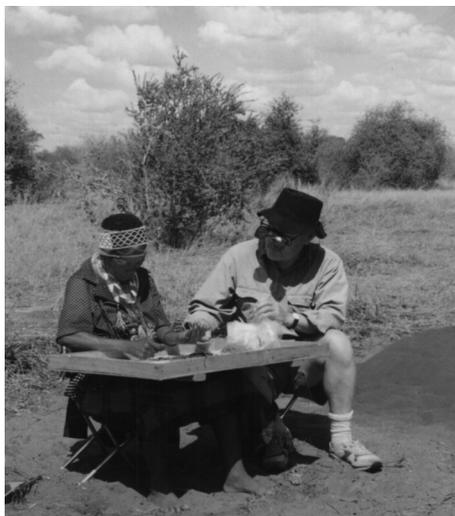


Fig. 3. Richard Lee and !Nai sorting excavated material from Cho/ana.

In 1995 several test pits were dug to find the richest area, which turned out to be on the slope break above the water hole. In our four square metre test, we took one square down to over a metre in depth, and subsequent radiocarbon dating showed that this part of the site had a time-depth of over 4000 years, and, from the bottle glass on top, had been occupied up to the 20th century. While we excavated, Richard would interview the two elders, Kunta and !Nai, from Tsumkwe (Fig. 2 & 3). Our excavation crew consisted of two young Bushmen who spoke English: /Ui and Royal (Fig 4), as well as !Nai's teenage son (Fig 5) and my nephew, Brian Rae, from Toronto. For the first time Ju/'hoansi were actively involved in both their own ethnohistory and archaeology.



Fig. 4. The writer gives a lesson in use of the dumpy level to /Ui and Royal, Cho/ana.



Fig. 5. Royal and young /Ui sieving excavated material, while !Nai sorts, Cho/ana.

In our second season in 1997 we opened up another 16 square metres to a depth of 50cm. Once more /Ui joined us, along with two of his friends, Xeri and Kau. We made an effective team, not only excavating and sorting on site, but counting back at the camp, so that I did not have to export any material from Namibia when we finished, except charcoal for dating.

The excavations produced four different periods of occupation (Table 1):

Table 1. Cho/ana cultural material

	Surface	Level Two	Level Three	Level Four
<i>European goods:</i>				
bottle glass	×	×		
metal (tin, etc)	×			
plastic	×			
rubber	×			
cloth	×			
string	×			
bullets/pellets	×	×		
<i>African trade goods:</i>				
glass beads	×	×		
copper	×	×		
iron		×	×	
potsherds	×	×	×	
<i>Local materials:</i>				
grub puppae	×			
mongongo frag	×	×	×	
calcrete chunks	×	×	×	×
ochre	×	×		
OES frags	×	×	×	×
OES beads	×			
worked bone		×	×	×
stone tools	×	×	×	×

Surface: a late occupation, that probably coincides with the period when the Department of Native Affairs had their post at Cho/ana. This was one of the overnight stops of Ovambo labour being recruited for the mines in the Transvaal by the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association in the 1950s and was the border post with Botswana at that time (Marshall, 1976: 7). The material included bottle glass (some of which might have been flaked), a lighter flint, a plastic lid, pieces of cloth, plastic, rubber, tin foil, tin, wire, string, a plastic bead, two bullets, an airgun pellet and a nail. There were other exotic, but probably African, trade goods: glass beads, a copper bead, and a number of potsherds, as well as local materials: grub puppae (for arrow poison), mongongo nuts fragments (and calcrete chunks, possibly used to crack the mongongo nuts), a melon seed, and both ochre and an ochre-stained grindstone. Ostrich eggshell fragments, beads and stone tools (some formally retouched) completed the list.

Level Two: mongongo nut fragments, calcrete chunks, ochre, ostrich eggshell fragments, a bone bead, a copper ring, metal fragments, two bottle glass fragments, one airgun pellet, Mbukushu decorated pottery and flaked stone tools.

Level Three: mongongo nut fragments, calcrete chunks, a metal fragment, two pieces of worked bone, ostrich eggshell fragments, Divuyu decorated pottery and flaked stone tools.

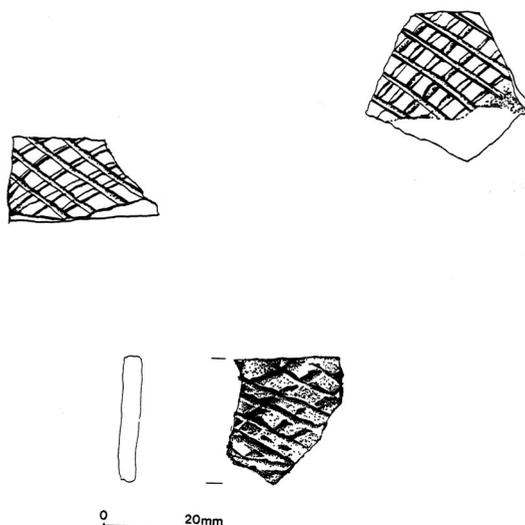


Fig. 6. Mbukushu pottery from upper levels Cho/ana.

Level Four: calcrete chunks, ostrich eggshell fragments, worked bone tools (including a bone point) and flaked stone tools.

The top two levels indicate a measure of mixture: Level One would be from the period of occupation by Bushmen, black Africans (who manned the border post), and Europeans, along with some earlier material. The flaked stone is problematic, as mentioned above, since the Bushmen today have no memory of stone having been used as tools by their ancestors, even though interviews by Yellen & Brooks (1989: 5) among the Ju/'hoansi living on the Botswana side of the border indicate a collective memory going back 150 years. So there seems to be little doubt that people in the area today are descended from the Later Stone Age hunters who occupied the sites. The pottery from Level Two (Fig. 6) shows trade with the Mbukushu along the Kavango River. The Mbukushu were late arrivals to the river (Tlou, 1985), so we can suggest an occupation within the last three hundred years, corroborated by the youngest radiocarbon date of 315 ± 20 BP we obtained. Level Three, with Divuyu pottery (Fig. 7), would indicate connections with Tsodilo Hills when they were the focus of black farming people some 1500 years ago (Denbow & Wilmsen, 1986). Two radiocarbon dates of c. 1380 B.P. support this contention. Level Four, which yielded dates of between 4000-3200 B.P. would appear to pre-date contact with food producers.

The economic data we obtained from the faunal and floral remains are somewhat limited. The bone was badly crushed, as though hyenas had been at it. From the pieces that could be identified there were no domestic animals, although there

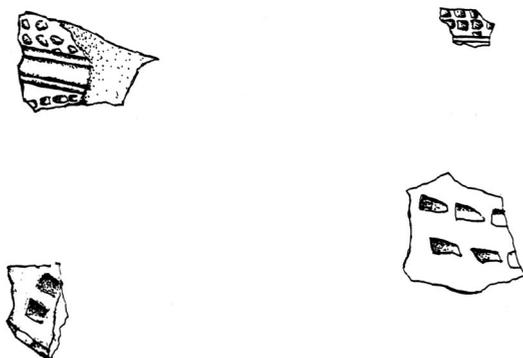


Fig. 7. Divuyu pottery from Level 3, Cho/ana.

were plenty of bovid teeth from a mix of antelope sizes. This does not preclude the possibility of domestic stock having reached the people, but, along with the mongongo nut fragments, the picture is one of hunting and foraging. We also found bones of the barbel, *Clarias gariepinus*. Since there are no fish in the Kaudom Reserve today, and unlikely in the more recent past either, we can suggest that these fishbones from the excavations may well have been part of trade with people along the Kavango River, and brought back dried along with other trade goods. Ben Beytell, Chief Control Warden for the Kaudom Reserve, informs me that when poachers have been apprehended in the reserve they invariably have dried barbel on them.

AN ATTEMPT AT RECONSTRUCTION

In our second season we were fortunate to have the help of two older men who had lived at Cho/ana before the Kaudom Reserve was set up, and they were excluded. Dam and N!ani showed us where they had camped, and surface collection and mapping of the material from their campsite proved to be very similar to the surface level of our excavations, with the exception of the stone tools and pottery. These two men told us about the trade with the Kavango River. Even though it was only 110km away, they took 8 days to get to the river, visiting their relatives en route. They gave us names of the places they camped overnight, and described how the women might go in one direction and the men in another, and later meet at their trading point on the river. The significant thing is that this trade continued up till 30 years ago, and other than the black Africans manning the post at Cho/ana, few ever ventured south of the river into the Sandveld, although the Kaudom Omurumba (between Cho/ana and the Kavango River) was known to the Mbukushu as a source of salt. As Passarge wrote in 1905 (Wilmsen, 1997: 288-9):

“The sandveld is of the least economic value. The grass of the Kqungveld is not the best, either. Indeed, sour grass predominates. Settlements do exist, but there are few, and there is less cattle raising and crop growing than hunting; collecting salt from the bed of the Kquadum, and trading with the Kung Bushmen is the main thing.”

At the river, our Ju/'hoan colleagues described how they would trade their ostrich eggshell beads and skins for pots, iron and glass beads. These trade items were then carried back to Cho/ana where they would be internally redistributed by *hxaro* among their family and friends. The picture of trade in the historic period, given by our Ju/'hoan colleagues, is one of going to the source on an infrequent basis and bringing back the goods to redistribute locally.

The archaeological manifestation would be the low numbers of potsherds found in the excavations. Of the 133 sherds excavated in 1997, 75% (100) came from the upper levels and 25% (33) from the lower. When we consider that this total came from 16 square metres excavated to an average depth of 40cm (i.e. 6.4 cubic metres = 20 sherds per metre cubed), this would be comparable to the frequencies from the hunter site of Witklip in the Cape where 10 sherds per cubic metre were retrieved. This contrasts with the herder site of Kasteelberg, with 700 sherds/cubic metre, or Karim Sadr's cave sites around Gaborone, Botswana where as yet uncounted, but large numbers of sherds were found in the top levels, after a short period with relatively few sherds. At Cho/ana there were even lower numbers of glass beads (a total of 15), as well as a few metal fragments from the upper levels. From Level 3, even though pottery fragments were even fewer than above, we might postulate that similar trade patterns were taking place 1400 years earlier, i.e. the hunters were going to the Tsodilo Hills and bringing pottery back with them.

Our Ju/'hoan friends were consistently adamant that no black people entered their part of the Sandveld until the end of the 19th century when rinderpest and German genocidal wars forced many Herero to flee eastwards as refugees.

This vision of contact is patently at odds with that offered by Wilmsen of encapsulation of the Ju/'hoansi who were totally dominated by agropastoral Iron Age farmers. No-one denies contact, but the archaeology supports the view that the Ju/'hoansi were independent of any agropastoral groups, and their social system was only marginally affected by the external world, through being a source of commodities for *hxaro*.

The opposite is true of what Karim Sadr has found around Gaborone. His shelters are occupied by hunters, and stone tools are found throughout the sequence. Small numbers of potsherds appear in the middle of the sequence, indicating initial contact with pot makers in the area, but the hunters still retain their way of life. In the top levels pottery swamps the other items, and the bones of wild animals disappear. This suggests that the hunters were now obtaining their food from non-traditional sources, and cooking it in pots. Such evidence is a strong indication of massive dislocation of a traditional economy, and may be an example of 'encapsulation' as defined by Woodburn (1988: 36) as “whole or partial enclosure or enclavement.”

The archaeological manifestation of differential contact is probably a continuum showing the degree of intrusion of exotic materials into the hunting society. Total replacement at the end of the continuum would probably not exist, since the

hunters would still retain some semblance of their traditional culture (such as hunting equipment), but increasingly large numbers of exotic materials over time could be suggested as a greater contact, that ultimately could reflect a swamping of the traditional hunting society. Sadr (1997) has attempted to show this continuum by contrasting pottery and formal stone tool frequencies. Two distinct clusters at polar ends show separate economies, with the dots in the middle indicating increasing contact with exotic goods crossing over into hunting society.

In general terms, long-standing and close proximity relationships of hunters with food producers place the hunters at the bottom of the social spectrum (Smith, 1998). This is particularly true if the more dominant society becomes the arbiter in dispute settlement among the foragers, which would be an indication that the foragers were abrogating their decision-making to the food producers, and accepting their position of low status with the dominant hierarchy. Foragers who have 'space', both physical (environmental) and psycho-social, can choose to exercise their independence by spending little time in the ambit of food producers, and thus relying on their traditional life-style for food, social needs, etc., and, indeed be capable of withstanding incursions into their territory (see Guenther, 1993/1994; 1997; Penn, 1996).

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