

The Ju/'hoan San of Nyae Nyae and Namibian Independence: development, democracy, and indigenous voices in Southern Africa by M. BIESELE and R. K. HITCHCOCK

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There are many ways in which this is an extraordinary book. Southern African San (Bushmen) and particularly the northern Kalahari Ju/'hoansi, or !Kung, as earlier anthropology knew them, are very probably the most extensively documented indigenous peoples in the world. Because of the exceptional role that the Ju/'hoansi have played in anthropology and archaeology, and the entanglement of the lives of the Ju/'hoansi with researchers, NGO's and anthropology activists since the 1950s, it is only fitting that a process of self-critical documentation carries them through recent decades of the very unromantic movement from hunter-gatherers to—to what? And that is the question which hangs over the text. The book spans the period from the mid 1980s to the present. Its focus is on the key grass-roots movements amongst the Ju/'hoansi that evolved to negotiate their integration into the new post-1990 Namibian nation. As this account ably demonstrates, the speed and scale of change asked of indigenous groups such as the Ju/'hoansi is without doubt unprecedented, and places extraordinary strains on their ways of thinking and behaving, to say nothing of persistent relationships with landscape and subsistence strategies which have become increasingly impossible to pursue over the last century.

The main theme of the book concerns an on-going struggle over loss of 'traditional' stewardship of Ju/'hoan land, and Ju/'hoan ability to satisfactorily develop multiple subsistence strategies in the face of this loss. Fortunately, as the final chapter of the book reveals, owing to the resilience, determination, creative vision and adaptability of the San and those working alongside them, some extremely impressive educational and linguistic initiatives are underway which bode well for the future.

The authors, Bieseles and Hitchcock, are highly respected anthropologists who bring decades of experience and first-hand insight to the story of the Ju/'hoansi. Bieseles' role is particularly pertinent as one of very few fluent Ju/'hoan-speaking academics and one-time project director, education consultant and director of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation. Her published writings on folklore, religion, healing and environmental relationships are cornerstones in anthropology of the San, and she is one of the founder members and current director of the Kalahari Peoples Fund. Considering her knowledge of the subject and her role in the recent history of the Ju/'hoansi as outlined in this book, what stands out is her sensitivity to what all this anthropological theory about egalitarianism and recent hunter-gatherer modes of being or thought might mean to real people now. Similarly, Hitchcock has long been a leading figure on issues of human rights and human environmental relationships amongst San and other indigenous peoples. Out of their joint experience the book reveals problems and issues which, certainly from my limited experience, are the nuts and bolts of working respectfully and ultimately successfully with San peoples.

The book begins by outlining who the Ju/'hoansi are, how their lives shifted from the 1950s with the arrival of anthropologists, the creation of an administrative centre by the government of South West Africa at Tsumkwe, the early social and economic interventions of the government, and the involvement of the Ju/'hoansi in the SWAPO/SADF war. Through ten chapters, a history of Nyae Nyae is then presented in terms of challenges and responses to the crises faced by the Ju/'hoansi. The story is essentially one of a failure of power holders to recognise the profundity and validity of Ju/'hoan relationships with land and the stewardship of their land, with themes ranging from broad government decisions, such as the attribution of only 40% of Namibia to communal land, to the Department of Nature Conservation and Safari companies wanting a game reserve and hunting controls, to incessant pressure from incoming Herero cattle herders. It is at times a gritty one, as water taps are turned off and elephants are encouraged as a deterrent to Ju/'hoan occupation of their lands. In response to these threats, voices emerged from beyond and within the community that recognised a need to participate in national and regional decision-making processes, and to develop multiple subsistence strategies as hunting and gathering in and around *n!oresi* (traditional communal lands) became increasingly inappropriate. These voices were mobilised through the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation, the Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative, and most recently the first conservancy on communal land in Namibia, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy.

Amidst an extraordinarily detailed account that clearly set out to be as inclusive and representative as possible, the book also contains empowering imagery of Ju/'hoansi, such as their discussion of the American Constitution as a model for their own development, or a wonderful Ju/'hoan attempt to reach out into the world captured in a reference to 'America – *n!ore*'. What comes through most strongly, however, is the authors' commitment to recognising the profound connection between the Ju/'hoansi and their land, and ways of thinking and acting related to their history that have been severely challenged by those who either fail to recognise a difference or choose not to listen.

This account is much more than a valuable historical documentation. It contains valuable lessons for those in anthropology, NGO's, development and advocacy, some of which were no doubt painfully learnt. Its themes resonate directly with problems facing other Khoe-San groups and indigenous peoples the world over, from land, food and water to alcohol, health and hope. Key messages to take home beyond the big issue of the meaning and role of land are the importance of communication, how access problems and other contingencies shape decision-making, how difficult it is to ever achieve a truly representative voice, and when it is time to recognise a need for new strategies, and ultimately to release the reins. That this story can be written from the inside with so much subtlety, detail and balance is a truly commendable achievement.

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