seven

Solitude or Servitude?

Ju/'hoansi Images of the Colonial Encounter

Richard B. Lee  2002

What is at stake in the so-called Kalahari Debate? It is the question of who the San peoples are historically: foragers or serfs. The "revisionists" argue that the Nyae Nyae and Dobe area Ju/'hoansi have been bound into regional trade networks and dominated by distant power holders for centuries. They were not even hunters in the past but cattle keepers, or servants of cattle people, raising the possibility that the unique Ju/'hoansi cultural features of sharing and egalitarianism come not from their hunting and gathering traditions, but rather from being outcasts, at the bottom of a social hierarchy.

Letting the subaltern speak is ostensibly the prime directive of the postmodern rhetoric driving the revisionist agenda. Curiously, until recently, neither the revisionists nor their interlocutors had bothered to systematically ask the Ju people themselves for their views of their own history. How do the Ju/'hoansi interpret their past and how does that picture square with the evidence from archaeology and history?

Beginning in 1986–87 when the revisionist debate began to heat up I started to ask Botswana Ju elders focused questions about the time they refer to as n//a k'aishe or
Table 7.1
Oral History Informants 1986–97

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Decade of Birth</th>
<th>Location/Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. /Tilkai-tsau</td>
<td>1910s</td>
<td>!Goshe 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. /Tilkai nla</td>
<td>1900s</td>
<td>!Goshe 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kumsa N/i</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>!Goshe 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Kumsa-nwhin</td>
<td>1910s</td>
<td>Dobe 1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. /Tontah Boo</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Cho/ana 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dam</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Cho/ana 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. N!ani</td>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Cho/ana 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. /Gau N!a</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Tsaman 1997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"first time" (Lee 1997). The goal was to elicit collective memories of their precolonial past, a time we could date historically to before 1870. Subsequently I returned for two more periods of interviewing, in 1995 and 1997, with informants from the Nyae Nyae and Cho/ana areas of Namibia. Now there are five major areas of Ju/'hoansi settlement represented in the oral history accounts.

There is a growing critical literature on the uses of oral histories and oral narratives generally. Historical memory can be selective and self-serving and the oral history cannot be read as a direct unmediated chronicle of the past. However by adapting methodology from cognate disciplines, anthropologists can evaluate their materials critically and make them more useful as historical documents. Oral histories by themselves are cultural constructions but they gain strength when compared with other sources of data such as archaeology and historiography and with the histories of neighboring ethnic groups such as the Herero, Tswana, and Goba.

BACKGROUND TO THE REVISIONIST DEBATE

Forty years ago the study of nonliterate, non-state-organized societies was the central subject matter of social and cultural anthropology. Few anthropologists doubted that identifiable and (relatively) autonomous cultural groupings existed "out there" beyond the reach of capitalism, and that anthropology had the analytical tools to make sense of them.

In the 1980s and 90s these assumptions have been thrown into question by a
powerful argument about anthropological approaches to the world's nonhierarchical societies. Inspired by the work of Eric Wolf (1982), some political economists challenged the view that prior to this century nonstate societies have been autonomous entities at all. They argued that deep historical links of trade and tribute have bound unit societies to larger polities, creating conditions of dependency. Where earlier ethnographers saw bands, tribes, and chiefdoms, revisionists saw only peasants and proletarians enmeshed in the coils of merchant capital, or dominated by regional markets and states. Throughout these discussions the "myth of the primitive isolate" became a prime target.

No one would deny the globalization of economies and the decentering of cultures in the late twentieth century; what is in dispute is the projection of these conditions onto all societies in all periods of history. In the current conjuncture it is highly unfashionable for anthropologists to argue the case for autonomous "others"; yet members of innumerable societies around the world firmly believed in their own autonomy in the recent past and articulated a sense of their own distinctive collective cultural experiences. It is this disjuncture between current anthropological discourse and their subjects' articulated histories that provides the rationale for the present paper.

I will address these issues in the context of the San peoples of southern Africa, drawing upon three bodies of evidence on the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area Ju/'hoansi: oral history, archaeology, and ethnohistory. I collected a substantial body of Ju/'hoansi oral histories in Botswana between 1963 and 1969, and augmented these with oral histories collected in Botswana in 1986–87 and from Namibian Ju/'hoansi in 1995 and 1997. As Jan Vansina famously observed (1985) oral histories can serve as historical documents but these must necessarily be of a less reliable nature in the absence of written or other documents capable of providing corroboration. However, during the 1990s Mathias Guenther and I worked through all the available ethnohistoric accounts of the Ju/'hoansi from the period 1870–1920 (Lee and Guenther 1991, 1993). Although sparse, these accounts do provide an opportunity for testing the degree to which the Ju/'hoansi oral accounts can be read as reliable. The two bodies of evidence, taken together, document insider and outsider views of Ju/'hoansi history and provide a basis for evaluating whether the Ju/'hoansi assertions of autonomy and relative freedom of action correspond to colonial constructions of them. Archaeology provides a third body of evidence against which both insider and outsider accounts can be assessed. Andrew Smith and I excavated a Later Stone Age site at Cho/ana in 1995 and 1997 (Smith and Lee 1997).

Throughout this paper the term Ju/'hoansi is used to refer to the people known in the literature as the !Kung San; it is their term of self-apellation and it is the term the people of the Nyae Nyae area would like to be known by. The terms San and Bushman are retained as the generic terms for southern African hunters and gatherers.
AUTONOMY PROBLEMATIZED

Throughout the recent Kalahari debates there has been a remarkable lack of attention to the question of meaning of terms. Just what is meant by "autonomy," "authenticity," "dependency," "independence," "domination," "integration," "incorporation," is rarely made clear. What constitutes autonomy or dependency of local cultures in an era of global systems? And how does the current conjuncture shape our perceptions of these concepts and our views of the past? The dictionary defines autonomy as "the fact or condition of being autonomous; self government; independence." Autonomous refers to "functioning independently without control by others" (Webster 1976:95).

"Autonomy" has a wide range of usages and nuances at the group and individual levels in the human sciences in a variety of fields including anthropology, politics, economics, feminism, and psychotherapy. I will focus on economic autonomy since much of the current debate in hunter-gatherer studies revolves around this issue.

First of all, economic autonomy must not be equated with isolation. I take it as given that all societies are involved in economic exchanges and political relations with their neighbors. The first general point to be made then is that trade and exchange should not simply be equated with domination and loss of autonomy. Exchange is a fundamental part of human life and appears in all cultural settings (Mauss 1954; Levi-Strauss 1949). Many gatherer-hunter peoples have maintained exchange relations with farming and market societies for hundreds of years (India, Southeast Asia, East Africa) while still maintaining a foraging mode of production.

Autonomy as an economic concept refers to ideas of economic self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency in turn hinges, not on the existence of trade—since all societies trade—but whether that trade is indispensable for the society's reproduction and survival. To demonstrate autonomy one must be able to demonstrate self-reproduction. Dependency therefore may be defined as the inability of a society to reproduce itself without the agency of another society.

At any given moment a society may exhibit greater or lesser "autonomy" in its productive relationships, and it should be possible to make assessments of this degree through empirical investigation.

POLITICAL AUTONOMY

Political autonomy raises interesting problems of its own hinging, not on a society's capacity to reproduce itself—it may do that very well—but on the willingness of other (dominating) societies to let it remain autonomous. To put it another way political autonomy is about another society's ability and desire to impose its will, and the core society's ability to resist that imposition. On this score Dobe could not be
said to be politically autonomous in the 1960s to 1990s. However it is the situation in the 1860s to 1890s that interests us here.

Another dimension is the question of whether political autonomy is imposed or asserted. In the former case the economic autonomy of a subject group may serve the interests of a dominant group. Therefore the subordinates are encouraged to pursue their habitual round of activities at their own pace while providing goods or services—often at equitable terms—to the dominant group. In the latter case the autonomous group asserts its claims to autonomy through its own strength and political will and these claims are not contested by their neighbors. In practice these two forms may be difficult to distinguish, and the interpretation of which form is present will rely heavily on subjective judgments both by the peoples involved and particularly by the observers. Thus the Ituri Forest Mbuti Pygmies observed by Turnbull (1965) appeared to be entirely subservient to their black neighbors while they were in their villages, but quite autonomous when they were on their own in the forest.

Obviously a great deal more could be said on the question of autonomy, especially when bringing in cultural and political, as well as subjective and objective dimensions. When discussions of the presence or absence are spelled out, it becomes apparent that even the simplest historical statements will involve a whole series of mediating judgments concerning economy, polity, voluntarism, and coercion. Prudence is advised when making such judgments. Automatically classifying San societies in the past as dependent, incorporated, or “peasant-like” seems no more legitimate than to classify these same societies as “primitive isolates.”

**ORAL HISTORIES**

During my fieldwork in the Dobe area starting in the 1960s, the Ju/'hoansi shared their water holes with several hundred pastoralists; they were acutely aware that they were living under the gaze and control of the Tswana chiefdom and, beyond it, the British colonial authority. However in speaking of the area’s past, Ju/'hoansi informants spoke of their own autonomy in the nineteenth century as a given: they were foragers who lived entirely on their own without agriculture or domesticated animals. Such statements did not arise from some yearning and nostalgia for a bygone era. Many of the people liked the present-day access to cattle and milk better than the days of strict dependence on foraging. Rather the tone of these statements was matter-of-fact, and Ju/'hoansi autonomy in the nineteenth century was corroborated by Tswana-speaking informants of the present ruling stratum.

The existence of many Later Stone Age archaeological sites in the Dobe area with thousands of stone tools supports this view. But left unexplained is the presence on these same sites of small quantities of pottery and iron, indicating Iron Age
presence or contact with Iron Age cultures. The Ju/'hoansi themselves explain the presence of these goods in terms of their long-standing trade relations with riverine peoples. On the other hand, Kalahari revisionists have argued that these archaeological traces are proof positive of domination of the Dobe area by Iron Age peoples and the incorporation of the Ju/'hoansi into a regional polity (Wilmsen 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990). Wilmsen has further argued that people labeled Bushmen had raised cattle in centuries past: "in this century . . . an overwhelming majority of peoples so labelled have pursued a substantially pastoral way of life in symbiosis with, employed by, or enserfed to Bantu-speaking cattle owners . . . this is equally true of earlier centuries" (Wilmsen 1989:1). Despite the methodological problems of defining terms such as "enserfed" or "symbiosis" raised above, the revisionist thesis has been influential in anthropology. And in the case of the Dobe area the evidence for precolonial cattle has been hotly contested. Remarkably, in all the voluminous writings on the "Kalahari Debate" (Barnard 1992b), neither side had systematically investigated how the Ju/'hoansi themselves articulate their own history. It was this lacuna that prompted me to undertake an additional series of interviews with Ju/'hoansi elders in 1986–87 and in 1995–97.

AN INTERVIEW WITH KUMSA NWBIN

This text was recorded in March 1987 from Kumsa nwhin, a 70-year-old Dobe man, former tribal policeman and famous healer. Kumsa was recommended by several thoughtful Ju as a knowledgeable and respected source on oral history. I introduced the interview by asking him if we could discuss the period Ju/'hoansi refer to as kurika ("long ago"), or n//a k"aishe ("first time"). I began by asking Kumsa if long ago his ancestors had lived with cattle.

“No,” he replied. “My father’s father saw them for the first time. My father’s father’s father did not know them. The first non-San to come to the region were Europeans, not Blacks. We worked for them, got money and obtained our first cattle from the Tswana with that money. The whites first came to !Kubi, killed elephants and pulled their teeth [i.e., ivory]. In the old days the Ju/'hoansi also killed elephants with spears for the meat. At least fifteen men were required for a hunt. They dumped the tusks [they didn’t have a use for them].”

“The whites came by dwa-/twe [lit. giraffe-horse (camels)]. The whites had no cattle, they had horses and camels. ’Janny’ came from the south. Another one made a well at !Kangwa. My father said ‘Oh, can water come out of there?’ They used metal tools but not engines. This well is not used today. They spoke Burusi [Afrikaans].”

Having learned from him about the prior appearance of Europeans I then asked Kumsa, “Which Tswana came first?”

He misunderstood my question and replied “None. The whites were first.”
Reframing I asked, "Before the whites came did you know 'Jusajo' [black people] here?"

Again his response was unequivocal "No. We only knew ourselves. Ju/'hoansi exclusively."

"But when the blacks did come, who was first?"

"The first black was Mutibele, a Tswana, and his older brother, Mokgomphata. They came from the east following the paths made by the whites going in the opposite direction. They were shown the water holes by Ju/'hoansi including my father /Twí. They were shown the killing sites of the elephants, where the bones lay, the sites where whites killed. And they said 'Oh, the whites have already got the n!ore [territory] from us.' Then [Mutibele's] father claimed the land and all the Ju/'hoansi on it, but he deceived us."

"How did he deceive you? When the Tswana claims he is master of you all, do you agree?"

"If he was the master, he didn't give us anything, neither clothes nor pots, or even one calf. The Europeans had given the Ju/'hoansi guns. When the Tswana saw this they decided to give guns to other Ju/'hoansi, including N//au!gusi, the father of /Titkai-tsau, so that they could hunt eland and giraffe."12

Later in the conversation I explored the nature of San-black interactions in the precolonial period. Some years earlier I had asked /Twí, a Ju elder, "What did you Ju/'hoansi cook with in the old days before you had iron trade pots?" and received this memorable deadpan answer: "Everyone knows that you can't live without iron cooking pots so we must have died!"

I asked the same question of Kumsa, who answered in a more serious vein. "When I was young," Kumsa replied "we had no iron pots. We used the clay pots of the Goba." We couldn't make them ourselves."

"Then how do you account for the fact that there are many potsherds on old Ju/'hoansi sites around here?"

"Our fathers' fathers and their fathers' fathers got them from the Gobas. They would trade for them with skins. The Gobas didn't come up here. They stayed where they were [on the rivers] and we went to them. This went on for a very long time [so that is why there are so many potsherds]."

"We [always] got two things from them: iron and pots.14 If you go to Danega today you will find the right earth. But the Gobas didn't come here. We always went to them."

Several comments are in order. First, Kumsa's insistence that the Europeans came to the Dobe area before blacks was a statement that I had recorded from a number of informants in the 1960s but was one that for a long time I had been unwilling to accept. It seemed counterintuitive that whites could have entered the area before
blacks, yet this was the position Kumsa and others insisted upon. Others had also made the point that a long-standing trade existed with riverine peoples in which the Ju/'hoansi did the traveling.

Both statements are congruent with a model of autonomy. It would be hard to argue that the blacks could dominate the Dobe area without any physical presence, but I suppose it is not impossible. The trading trips made by the Ju to the east and elsewhere would certainly account for the presence of Iron Age materials on the Dobe area sites. In fact Polly Wiessner has argued that the levels of iron and pottery found on Dobe area Late Stone Age (LSA) sites can be accounted for by hxaro, a traditional form of delayed exchange still practiced by the Ju/'hoansi, which historically has been a vehicle for long-distance trade (1990a; 1993).

What is left unanswered is whether the trade goods obtained through hxaro (or by other means) were essential for Ju/'hoansi reproduction. One suggestive point was Kumsa’s intriguing statement that the precolonial Ju hunted elephant but discarded the tusks, because it indicates that the Dobe Ju/'hoansi were hunting elephant for subsistence and were not part of a mercantile or a tributary network, since in either case elephant ivory would have been a prime valuable.

Also interesting is Kumsa’s rather dismissive view of the Tswana as overlords. For Kumsa the criterion for being a chief [lit. wealth-person] is giving away, in this context, not exercising power per se. The Europeans were chiefs because they gave guns, the Tswana were ‘deceivers’ because in K(umsa’s terms) they claimed chiefly status but gave nothing (see below for contemporaneous European views of the encounter).

A !Goshe Commentary on the Early Days of Contact

Kumsa’s remarks, about the absence of outsiders before the Europeans and about the arrival of the Europeans prior to the Tswana are corroborated and amplified in another account recorded in July 1986 at the opposite end of the !Kangwa Valley settlements in the village of !Goshe, 36 km east of Dobe.

/Ti!kai-n!a, then age 80, and /Ti!kai-tsau (“tooth”), age 63, were two of the leading men of !Goshe, the easternmost and most economically “progressive” of the Dobe area villages. !Goshe is the jumping-off point for travel to the east, and the village has boarded Tswana cattle in mafisa (a loan-cattle arrangement) since the 1910s. It is the village with the most kinship links to Ju/'hoansi in the east and north, areas of historic black settlement. Therefore !Goshe people, by reason of both history and geography, are the most attuned to links to “Iron Age” peoples.

Though younger than /Ti!kai-n!a, /Ti!kai-tsau is more knowledgeable since he is the son of N//au!gusi, mentioned above, a leading figure from the early years of the century in obtaining mafisa cattle and guns. The younger man was also a leading
spokesperson for the rights of Dobe area Ju/'hoansi in the 1980s. When I had announced my intention of interviewing on Ju history, many Ju recommended /Ti!kai-tsau as a knowledgeable source. The two /Ti!kais were joined by Kumsa, age 60, a relative from N/ausha, 70 km northwest of !Goshe. I introduced the topic by asking them if we could talk about the n//a k'aishe (“first time”).

“Certain Europeans in Gaborone,” I began, “argue that long ago you Ju/'hoansi [that is] your fathers’ fathers’ fathers’ fathers had cattle. Do you agree?”

“No! Not a bit!” was the younger /Ti!kai’s emphatic answer. “Long ago our fathers’ fathers’ fathers’ fathers, the only meat they had was what they could shoot with arrows. We only got cows from the Tswana.”

I persisted. “But when you dig holes deep down beneath where you live you find pieces of pottery. Where did they come from?”

“Oh, those pots were our own work!” replied /Ti!kai. “Our ancestors made them. They would put them on the fire and cook with them. But since we got iron pots from you Europeans we lost the knowledge of pottery making.”

Shifting topic, I asked, “What about iron?”

“We got that from the Mbulkushu,” said /Ti!kai. “But we learned how to work it ourselves. You see !Xoma’s father Karambuka, he knows how to work it. You stick it in the fire, heat it up, and hammer it. . . . We did it ourselves. We saw how the Gobas did it and we learned from them.”

“Where did you get the iron itself from?”

Their answer surprised me. “The Europeans,” said /Ti!kai. “The Tswana and Gobas didn’t have it. They also got it from the Europeans.”

I had to disagree. “But,” I said, “in the oldest abandoned villages of the Gobas, iron is there. Long before the Europeans came.”

At this point the older /Ti!kai intervened. “Yes! /Tontah is right. Long ago the Mbulkushu had the pieces of iron that they worked.”

The younger /Ti!kai turned to the older and asked, incredulously, “Well, where did they get the iron from?”

Matter of factly, the older man replied, “From the earth.”

Much discussion followed on this point. The younger men were unconvinced that the Gobas had iron before the Europeans, but old /Ti!kai stuck to his story.

Shifting topic again I asked, “Long long ago, did your fathers’ fathers’ fathers’ fathers practice //hara [farming]?”

There was no disagreement on this point. “No, we didn’t. We just ate the food that we collected from the bush.”

The older /Ti!kai added, “When I was a boy we had learned about //hara from the Tswanas. They showed us how [to do it].”

The !Goshe interviews corroborate the account of Kumsa above on the absence of cattle and agriculture before the twentieth-century arrival of the Tswana. They
add detail on Ju/'hoansi understandings of the history of pottery and iron use. In the first case they spoke of Ju manufacture of pottery whereas other informants spoke of it as only imported. In the second case there was an intriguing difference of opinion. While there was agreement that iron was imported from the Gobas but only in the recent past, some believed that iron was so recent that the Gobas only obtained iron after the arrival of the Europeans, a view that we were to encounter elsewhere.

N!ae and /Kunta at Cho/ana

Directly west across the border from Dobe is the Nyae Nyae area of Namibia, the site of the Marshall family’s renowned studies (L. Marshall 1976, 1999; J. Marshall 1957, 1980). Another round of oral history interviews took place in 1995 at Cho/ana, a former Ju/'hoansi water hole now located in Namibia’s Kaokoveld Game Reserve. Though remote today—the most remote of Namibia’s national parks—Cho/ana has long been known to historians as a meeting point for Ju/'hoansi from several regions of occupation. Lying midway between the !Kaudom Valley to the north and the Nyae Nyae to the south, as well as between the Okavango swamps to the east and the southwest African highlands to the west, it was a convenient entrepôt for Ju/'hoansi parties engaged in hxaro trade to meet.

Despite Cho/ana’s role as a node in the network of hxaro trade (Lee 1979), no one had excavated there or had been to the site in the company of knowledgeable Ju/'hoansi elders. /Kunta Bo and N!ae Kommsa were the Ju elders from the Nyae Nyae area water hole, /Aotcha, who accompanied us to Cho/ana in May 1995. The name Cho/ana, according to /Kunta, means medicine (ch’o) from the Acacia giraffae or camelthorn tree (/ana).

In tracing the earliest history of the place, /Kunta saw the original owners as Ju/'hoansi, not blacks or any other ethnic group. In the beginning, asserted /Kunta, only Ju/'hoansi lived here; there were no Gobas. Ju people would come from Nyae Nyae and from the north, to do hxaro here. It was a water hole that always held water. People from the South (Nyae Nyae) would bring /do (ostrich eggshell beads, OESB). People from the North brought /an (glass beads). In /Kunta’s words “Hxaro brought them together.”

A point of emphasis in our interviews was the question of whether the Gobas made trips to the interior to trade or to make their presence felt. /Kunta was emphatic: “No, [they didn’t come to us] we went to them. We saw pots on their fires and wanted them, so they gave us some.”

“And what did you give them in return?”

“We gave Gobas /do [OESB] in exchange for pots.”

The interior Ju/'hoansi’s proximity to Iron Age peoples on their periphery and
the use of iron as a marker of Iron Age overlordship has been a particular point of emphasis for the revisionists. I was anxious to hear /Kunta and N!ae’s views of the precolonial use of iron and its source.

"Did your ancestors have !ga (iron)?"

"Are you joking? We didn’t know !ga. If we needed arrows we used #dwa ("giraffe") or n!n ("elant") bones."

"Who gave Ju/'hoansi the iron?"

"We visited north and east and saw this wonderful stuff for arrows and knives; we asked Gobas for it and got some. It was very valuable; when others saw it their hearts were sad because they didn’t have it; they wanted it so badly they would even fight other Ju for it. Parties went north to seek it; Gobas gave it to them in exchange for steenbok/duiker skins and other things."

"Which came first, pottery or iron?"

"Pottery came first, iron later, because when iron came Europeans were near."

"Where did Goba get iron from?"

Without hesitation /Kunta replied, "From the European."

"Are you saying that before Europeans came Gobas had no iron?"

"Yes, they had no iron."

It is interesting that informants see iron coming ultimately from Europeans; they saw the appearance of iron in their areas as so close in time to the appearance of Europeans that iron was associated with Europeans. While it is true that the amount of iron on Dobe-Nyae Nyae LSA sites is miniscule, it is striking that the long history of Iron Age occupation in their periphery, for example at the Tsodilo Hills with radiocarbon dates as early as 500 A.D., doesn’t have much resonance with the Ju/'hoansi informants. When they did obtain iron from the Gobas, it was clearly an item of trade and not a marker of overlordship. In any event the very recency of the trade in iron (post-European) challenges the revisionist view of a deep antiquity of Ju/'hoansi subservience.

This ironless interpretation of their history provided one of the most intriguing examples of selective memory and historical myopia by the Ju/'hoansi informants: Although iron was rare precolonially, stone artifacts are plentiful on all LSA sites in the region, yet most Ju stated confidently that their ancestors did not make stone tools! This implied a rather glaring gap in their sense of their ancestors’ technical apparatus. And this led to some interesting exchanges with the Cho/ana informants.

N!ani and Dam at Cho/ana

In June-July 1997 Andrew Smith and I returned to Cho/ana for further research. N!ae and /Kunta had been frequent visitors to Cho/ana but not residents there.
Table 7.2
Did Your Ancestors Know Cattle Precolonially?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Year of Interview)</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. /Ti!kai-tsau (1986)</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. /Ti!kai n!a (1986)</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. /Kunta Bo (1995)</td>
<td>No, we lived without stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. N!ae Kumsa (1995)</td>
<td>No, we lived without stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dam (1997)</td>
<td>No cattle, we just had the meat of the wild ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. N!ani (1997)</td>
<td>No cattle, we just had the meat of the wild ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. /Gau N!a (1997)</td>
<td>No cattle at all</td>
</tr>
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This time we approached elders who were former residents. N!ani and Dam were knowledgeable men in their late sixties, born and raised at Cho/ana and who only left the area when it was gazetted a Game Reserve in 1975. Today they live in the village of //A//oba, 30 km south of the park boundary.

Much of their testimony corroborated that of earlier informants on the absence of blacks or cattle in the interior before the twentieth century (see Table 7.2). In fact in the Cho/ana area they dated the arrival of blacks as a phenomenon of the post-World War II period, a date corroborated by historical records. But in speaking of their ancestors’ material culture, N!ani volunteered this interesting perspective:

N!ani said, “We recent people know how to make things, but those old, old people didn’t know how to make things. They could make [tools] with bone only. We have iron nowadays.”

I asked, “But didn’t they make things with stone tools?”

N!ani was emphatic. “No, they didn’t make things with stone. Stones for cracking nuts was the only thing they knew.”

We had been working on the archaeological site for several days, yielding several thousand LSA worked stone fragments, so I asked N!ani, “but how do you account for all the worked stone on the site currently being dug up?”

“That is only strike-a-light,” he replied, referring to the flint chips widely used to make fire in the Kalahari before matches became readily available. The problem was that a single flint chip in a flint-and-steel fire-making kit could last for months and stone tools on the site represented points, scrapers, knives, and the whole range of the LSA tool kit.
I was intrigued by this turn in the conversations so I took up another tack: "You say they worked bone. What did they work bone with?"

N!ani pondered this and replied, "They worked it with iron, iron implements obtained from the Goba."

"And did the Goba have iron long ago?"

N!ani was emphatic on this. "We already told you that the early Goba had no iron. They just got it from Moruti [missionaries] and Porto [Portuguese]."

"But if earlier Gobas had no iron and earlier Ju/'hoansi had no iron, then how could the Ju/'hoansi of old days have lived?"

N!ani saw the logical inconsistency and was candid in his reply. "We were wondering that ourselves. How could they have gotten skins to clothe themselves? But we now know that the Gobas must have had iron even before the Portuguese arrived. After all they had axes and hoes of iron."

Seeing closure, I pushed the point. "So then if the Gobas did have iron before the Portos came, then where did they get the iron from?"

But N!ani was not to be deterred. "We know that the early Gobas had no iron, so somehow, they must have gotten the iron from the Portos even before the Portos themselves came!"

The Portuguese iron-origin theory proved to be remarkably persistent. Another 1997 informant, when repeatedly pushed to account for the Gobas' pre-European use of iron, could only say that it came from wrecked vehicles of the Portuguese. In fact only one of the ten elders interviewed (//Tiikay N!a of !Goshe) was ready to acknowledge that Gobas indeed had iron long before the arrival of the Europeans.

Discussion

In all interviews there was repeated insistence that no Gobas or any other black occupied their area or even visited prior to the late nineteenth century; several spoke of the Gobas' preference for staying on the river and avoiding the dry interior. We know that the Tswana did set up cattle posts in the interior by the turn of the twentieth century (Müller 1912) and a few Herero sojourned there in 1897–98 and in 1904–05 (Passarge 1904; Drechsler 1985). However the first Goba occupation of the interior was not until the 1930s or 1940s and then at the behest of the South African colonial government. The late occupation dates for Cho/ana and other northern points are confirmed both by historical documents and by oral histories collected from a "Goba" oral history informant in Rundu in July 1997 (Alfons Siyehe, personal communication 1997).

All these accounts illuminate the pragmatic and matter-of-fact approach of Dobe and Nyae Nyae area people to questions of history. These, after all, are questions of the most general nature and the accounts agree closely, not only about the auton-
omy of the area from outside domination but also about the absence of cattle (see Table 7.2) and agriculture in precolonial times (though not of pottery and iron). There are interesting divergences of opinion on whether pottery was imported or locally made, and on whether the Gobas had iron before the Europeans. Taken together these accounts along with others (e.g., Lee 1979:76–78; Marshall 1976:52–58) constitute a fair representation of mid- and late-twentieth-century Ju/'hoansi views of their forbears' nineteenth-century history of autonomy.

One other indication of the Ju sense of their history is the by-and-large positive self-evaluation of the Ju/'hoansi about the past. They saw themselves as actors, not victims, and this contrasts with the negative self-imagery expressed in Hai/'om or Nharo views of their present and past (Widlock 1999; Guenther 1986c:13–15; 232–33). The contrast is heightened by the observation of Dorothea Bleek (1928b), corroborated by others, that the Nharo themselves viewed the Ju/'hoansi, their immediate neighbors to the north, with a great deal of respect.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TIE-INS

Both in 1995 and 1997 the oral history interviews accompanied archaeological excavation, designed to link archaeology with the knowledge that was part of the living tradition of the Ju/'hoansi. Andrew Smith started excavating a rich Later Stone Age archaeological site at Choana, which provided a continual stimulus for oral history as new and interesting materials came to light in the excavations. The Ju informants' comments provided a valuable adjunct to the archaeological work (and vice versa). They identified plant remains, made tentative suggestions regarding fragmentary bone materials, and provided a social context in which the material could be interpreted. For example, the elders described a kind of white glass bead as one of the earliest of the European trade goods obtained through intermediaries to the north. A few days after the interview precisely such a bead was found in a sealed level in association with an LSA industry.

But the most stunning confirmation of the direct late-nineteenth-century encounter between people with advanced stone-working skills and colonialists was a piece of bottle glass (mouth and neck) showing signs of delicate microretouching that the South African LSA is famous for. This gave a further indication of the persistence of LSA stone-working techniques into the colonial contact period.

The oral history's insistence on the absence of cattle and blacks in the interior was confirmed by the complete lack in the archaeological record of the presence of domesticated animals or of non-Ju/'hoansi people in the area prior to the latter part of the nineteenth century. The results obtained demonstrated the efficacy of this kind of collaborative research. The archaeological evidence is set out in more detail in Smith and Lee 1997.
COLONIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE JU/'HOANSI

Turning to the third body of evidence, what light do ethnohistoric documents shed on these Ju accounts of their own past? Do they support or contradict Ju accounts of relative autonomy? Despite the assertions of the "revisionists," the colonial frontier reached the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area no earlier than the 1870s (Barry Morton, personal communication, November 1994), as European ivory hunters and trekkers began to hunt and pass through the area. Firsthand accounts of the Ju/'hoansi interior however are few and far between. For a group supposedly enmeshed in the coils of merchant capital, the Dobe and Nyae Nyae Ju/'hoansi are remarkably unchronicled by nineteenth-century observers. In fact it is this very scarcity of colonial era accounts that has allowed the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area to be treated as a relative tabula rasa, allowing latitude for all sorts of implausible scenarios to be projected upon it.

I will briefly touch on three accounts: Schinz's, who passed through the area in 1886, Passarge's reconnaissance in 1897, and Müller's in 1911. These form a representative cross-section of the available accounts. Guenther and I have analyzed a fuller range of the travel literature in detail elsewhere (Lee and Guenther 1993).19

Hans Schinz

Soon after the territory of South-West Africa was awarded to Germany at the Conference of Berlin, the botanist Hans Schinz went through the Nyae Nyae area in 1886 to explore the economic potential of the colony's more remote regions. Yet Schinz's testimony offers little or no support for the revisionist view of Nyae Nyae-Dobe area centrality in the trade. Schinz's account (1891b) offers no ethnographic information about the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area proper. In fact there is little information of any kind on the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area. However Schinz did make some observations on the San people he met in the Omaramba Omatako, a dry river course about 200 km west of the Nyae Nyae. It is worth noting that these San were living astride what was considered a "major" trade route, although "major" in this context might mean one ox wagon every three months.20 Schinz wrote

The area seemed to be very thinly settled. Nevertheless from time to time we did meet scattered Bushmen hordes. . . . The people who visited us at this occasion called themselves the !Kun San, and were evidently from another tribe than those we had met further up the Omaramba. . . . The entire dress of these poor root diggers consists of nothing more than two small furs to cover their private parts and buttocks, and instead of ostrich eggshell beads their arms and legs are adorned with grass ornaments.

The weapons consisted of a hefty throwing stick, [and] a medium-sized bow with arrows made of thin phragmites reed, the poisoned tips of which were made not of iron,
but of carefully worked bone splinters, which in this part of South West Africa was frequently made of eland antelope. (Schinz 1891:357)\textsuperscript{31}

The picture conveyed here, fragmentary as it is, can be interpreted in several ways: the “!Kun San” could be seen as representatives of hunter-gatherers, not particularly involved in trade (witness the absence of metal arrows) and wary of strangers, or they could be viewed as impoverished hunters and “root-diggers,” reduced to penury by the demands of mercantile trade or its passing.\textsuperscript{22} Whatever the interpretation, the people described were not Ju/'hoansi from the study area (see also Szalay 1979).

Siegfried Passarge

Passarge, a German geographer, made a transect of the interior in 1897. His detailed account of day-to-day travels (1904), as distinguished from his better-known ethnography of the Bushmen (1907, 1997), offers few ethnographic details per se, but does establish that the interior was entirely occupied by Ju/'hoansi, with the exception of a few small and temporary cattle camps of Herero who had arrived only the year before to escape the rinderpest epidemic, a disease that decimated cattle herds throughout southern Africa in the period 1896–99.

In his 1907 monograph (translation 1997), Passarge concentrates largely on the San of the Ghanzi area some 250 km south of Dobe, with a few passing references to the more remote Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae. The importance the revisionists have attached to Passarge’s “valuable insights” is curious because, far from portraying the San in the “land filled with flies” as pastoralists and tribute-paying subjects, Passarge insisted that the “Buschmännreich” of mid-nineteenth-century Ghanzi was an independent polity based entirely on hunting. He wrote, “They were a hunting people par excellence. All social and political relations, all rights and laws, their entire political organization was based on the hunt” (1907:19). “The honour of the chief was hereditary in those days and the Bushmen were totally independent. The Batuana did not dare set foot into their region and the Hottentots only entered it on raids” (1907:115).\textsuperscript{23}

It should be added that by the time Passarge went through the Ghanzi area the “Buschmännreich” had been destroyed and the Bushmen reduced to vassals of Tswana and European hunter-traders. There is nothing in Passarge however that indicates that the Ju/'hoansi of the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area had lost their independent status.

Hauptman Müller

This view is strongly reinforced by our third colonial account. The German officer Hauptman Müller traveled through the Nyae Nyae area in 1911, and offers some
unusually detailed observations on the situation of the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area Ju/'hoansi 14 years after Passarge and some 30 years after colonial trade had been established. In Müller's account (1912) the area remained remote and inaccessible. As an indication of how remote the area was, his visit was the first in five years from the German colony to the west.

Most telling is Müller's ethnographic description of the Bushman inhabitants of this stretch of land he calls "virginal" [fungfräulich] (1912:536–41). He depicts their state as noch überuhrnt von aller Zivilisation, in alter Ursprunglichkeit ["still untouched by all civilization in their old pristine state"], in contrast to the Bushmen further to the west, near the location of Schinz's people. He reports with amusement how European objects such as matches and mirrors were unknown to them, as well as the camels of his troopers, which startled them and caused the women to grab their children and scatter into the bush (1912:533). However he did find them using such things as wooden bowls, glass and iron beads, copper rings, and "Ovambo knives," all obtained through trade with black neighbors.

Of particular interest are Müller's descriptions of the Bushmen themselves. In his account they were well-nourished and relatively tall, thanks to an ample diet of meat (hunted with bone-tipped arrows) and a wide variety of wild plants. There is no mention in Müller's account of any resident cattle or Bantu-speaking overlords, though Batswana were visiting the area during his stay. For Müller the association of the Nyae Nyae Bushmen with the Batswana was not primordial; it was of recent date and was based on trade and assistance rendered at the latter's hunting expeditions. The Bushmen were rewarded with gifts for their services and the relationship with the hunter/herders is described as equitable and friendly:

"The Bushmen seem, however, to be good friends with the Batswanas. When I asked a Bushman if it didn't bother him that the Batswanas were killing off so much game every year he said 'Yes, but we are getting presents!'" (Müller 1912:535).24

Müller's is one of the earliest accounts to be based on actual reports of what he observed, as distinguished from second-hand accounts at a distance. And the above short quote is among the very first to cite the actual words of a Ju/'hoansi person.

To sum up this section, both German and Ju/'hoansi testimony are consistent and mutually supportive. The detail presented by Müller and the others attests to five propositions that accord closely with statements made by the Ju/'hoansi themselves:

1. the relative isolation of the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area from the German colony to the west and the low volume of European traffic, 1880–1911,
2. the absence of cattle in precolonial Ju/'hoansi subsistence (Table 7.2),
3. the absence of Bantu overlords or tributary relations,
4. the relatively favorable terms of trade between blacks and San,
5. the relatively good foraging subsistence base and nutritional status of the San.
These lines of evidence argue the case that the views of the Ju/'hoansi about their historical autonomy are not sharply at odds with the ethnohistoric sources.

**HUNTER-GATHERER DISCOURSE AND AGRARIAN DISCOURSE**

Both the Ju/'hoansi oral histories and the German historical texts are cultural constructions, and yet, how are we to account for the correspondences between these two bodies of evidence? Why do they corroborate one another? To argue that both are careful fabrications still leaves open the question of why they agree so closely. One would have to invoke conspiracy or coincidence: in either case a tough sell. Surely it would be more reasonable to assume that they agree because they are describing the same reality. If Kumsa’s, the two /Ti’kais, N!ae and /Kunta’s, and N!ani and Dam’s collective accounts of the Ju/'hoansi autonomous past gibe so closely with those of eyewitneses such as Schinz, Passarge, and Müller, then on what grounds rests the view of the historic Ju/'hoansi as enserfed pastoralists? And why has this view gained such currency in anthropological circles?

A more fruitful approach to understanding the recent debates is to attempt to place them in the context of the intellectual currents of the late twentieth century. How does the current conjuncture shape our perceptions of the situation of indigenous “others?”

Obviously by the 1990s, the processes the Dobe Ju/'hoansi had undergone have brought them now to becoming clients, laborers and rural proletarians, subject to and dependent upon local, national, and world economies. Their current predicament is well understood by recourse to theories arising from political economy, dependency theory, or colonial discourse. Current theorizing is much weaker however, in understanding the antecedent conditions. Part of the inability of contemporary theory to encompass hunters and gatherers as historical subjects is the lack of attention to the differences between discourses about hunters and gatherers versus the discourses concerning agrarian societies and the emerging world system.

In agrarian discourse the presence of structures of domination is taken as given; it is the forms of domination and the modes of exploitation and surplus extraction that are problematic (Amin 1972; Cliffe 1982; Hindess and Hirst 1975; Shanin 1987; etc.). In the literature on the agrarian societies of the Third World, stratification, class and class struggle, patriarchy, accumulation, and immiseration constitute the basic descriptive and analytical vocabulary.

In hunter-gatherer discourse it is not the forms and modes of domination that are at issue, rather the prior question to be asked is whether domination is present. I have been struck by the eagerness of otherwise competent analysts to gloss over, sidestep, or ignore this question.
There is no great mystery about what separates hunter-gatherer from agrarian societies. The former usually live lightly on the land at low densities; they can move and still survive, an escape route not available to sedentary farmers. The latter with high densities and fixed assets can no longer reproduce themselves outside the system, and are rendered far more vulnerable to domination (Lee 1979:ch. 15).

In the recent debate some analysts seem to have taken the world systems/political economy position so literally that every culture is seen as nothing more than the sum total of its external relations. But surely there is more to a culture than its links of trade, tribute, domination, and subordination. There is the internal dynamic of the means by which a social group reproduces itself ecologically, socially, and in terms of its collective consciousness (a point taken up by Sahlins in several recent writings; e.g., 1994).

Not all groups have had the same tumultuous history of war, displacement, and destruction as, for example, the nineteenth-century Bushman “raiders” of the Drakensburg chronicled by John Wright (1971). In each case the externalities have to be carefully specified and not glossed over. But we have to strike a balance between the world systems type of analysis and consideration of the crucial ways in which cultures reproduce themselves. For the latter, the ethnographic method is uniquely qualified to explore. If Khoisan studies are to benefit from the current debate then it is important for ethnography and political economy to talk to each other and to try to find a common language for airing (and hopefully resolving) differences. (Sue Kent has drawn together recent work emphasizing the diversity of African hunter-gatherers; 1996 and chapters in this volume.)

An historically informed ethnography can offer an alternative to the totalizing discourses of world systems theory. The unselfconscious sense of their own nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century autonomy expressed by Ju/hoansi hunter-gatherers and its corroboration by contemporaneous colonial observers is one example of how these powerful assumptions can be challenged. They bear testimony that in the not very distant past other ways of being were possible.

That said, autonomy should not be taken as an article of faith, nor is it an all-or-nothing proposition. It is, or should be an empirical question, and each society may exhibit a complex array of more or less autonomy at stages in its history. Even in agrarian societies spaces are opened up, however small, for the expression of autonomous thought and behavior. Thus it need not be the exclusive preserve of nonhierarchical or noncolonized societies (cf. Beinart 1987).

With reference to the latter though, a final point: what is desperately needed is to theorize the communal mode of production and its accompanying worldview. Without it there is a theoretical vacuum filled far too facilely by imputing capitalist relations of production, bourgeois subjectivity, or “culture of poverty” frameworks to hunter-gatherer peoples.
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NOTES

1. The study of nonclass societies becomes a kind of victimology, a recitation of the travails of these people and injuries of class and capitalism.


3. Or conversely whether the articulated history serves to conceal an on-the-ground history of domination and dependency at the hands of non-San: Africans or Europeans.

4. Even with "hunters in a world of hunters" exchange relations were part of ongoing social life, a central point of theory in social anthropology, and richly documented ethnographically, for example, by Donald Thomson (1949) and archaeologically by a number of studies (e.g., Earle and Ericson 1977).

5. The subjectivity involved in determining whether a given autonomy is asserted or imposed has been a major problem in articulation theory, regarding the question of whether a given "tribal" communal social formation was preserved because its maintenance was "functional" for capitalism, or whether it was preserved because the people wanted it that way (Foster-Carter 1978).

6. All interviews were conducted directly in Ju/'hoansi without the aid of interpreters, to lessen the biases that may be introduced when testimony is filtered through the cultural lens of non-Ju/'hoansi interpreters. Some of these latter—Herero and Tswana—hold definite views on precolonial history, particularly on land issues, that may be sharply at odds with those of the Ju/'hoansi themselves.

7. Parenthetically, Kumsa happens to be the absent father of Nlai of John Marshall's 1980 film "Nlai: The Story of a Kung Woman" and another of my elder informants (see infra).
8. This is curious since the main form of European travel in the interior in the nineteenth century was by ox-wagon. Kumsa may be conflating this early European presence with later trips involving camels by German police patrols (see Müller 1912).


10. That they spoke Afrikaans, not English is significant. It corroborates all the historical sources and contradicts Wilmsen who has claimed that the Englishman Robert Lewis was the first white in the Dobe area (Wilmsen 1989:120; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990:519; Lee and Guenther 1993:201-202).

11. A generic Ju term for all non-San and non-Khoe Africans.

12. By the twentieth century trade rivalries pitting European traders against one another and sometimes Europeans against Africans had reached the Dobe area. It was a common practice to outfit African hunters with rifles and ammunition to produce furs and ivory for themerchant-traders. N/augusi, the recipient of a gun, figures in the next account as the father of the principal informant, /Tilikaisau.

13. The term ‘Goba’ here refers to the riverine agriculturalists such as the Bayei who live 100-200 km east of the Dobe area on the western edge of the Okavango Delta.

14. Other informants also mentioned tobacco as a third item of trade in the last century.

15. The guns the Tswana did supply were loaned not given, and the meat produced was theirs not the Ju’s.

16. They have been largely settled (voluntarily) in a line village of mud huts on the !Goseh sand ridge overlooking the !Kangwa Valley since at least 1960. Most of the other Dobe villages didn’t build semipermanent mud huts until the 1970s.

17. Referring to a very skilful Ju craftsperson, expert in several media especially iron-working and wood carving.

18. The paucity of iron on archaeological sites and the accounts of bone arrows in use in the 1880s up to the 1900s suggest that, to the Ju, the appearance of Europeans and plentiful supplies of iron might have been perceived as coeval. However, small quantities of iron on Dobe and Cho/ana area archaeological sites antedate European colonial presence by up to a millennium.

19. There we discuss the travel accounts of Andersson, Lewis, Eriksson, the Dorsland Trekkers, Franz Müller, Galton, Baines, Chapman, Hahn, Rath, McKiernan, and Van Zyl, as well as Schinz and Passarge. Nothing in the accounts of these key figures contradicts the position articulated by the Ju/’hoansi themselves: that their nineteenth-century ancestors lived on their own in the Nyae Nyae-Dobe area as foragers without cattle.

20. See Lee and Guenther (1993:190-195) for details on trade routes from 1850 to 1880.

halmen, deren vergiftete Spitzen aber nicht aus Eisen, sondern aus sorgfältig bearbeiten Knochensplittern der in diesem Teile Südwestafrikas häufigen Elanantilopen verfertigt waren." (All English translations by Mathias Guenther.)

Schinz's collection for the Zurich Museum has been curated (Szalay 1979), with good-quality photos of the bone arrowheads mentioned in the text. Much of the collection of bone points looked stylistical identical to bone arrowhead collections made in the Dobe area by Lee and others in the 1960s.

22. Or with a modicum of ingenuity one could argue that these !Kung were in fact something else again, astute traders, only appearing to be poor and concealing their metal weapons and ostrich eggshell ornaments until the basis for profitable trade could be established.


"Die Würde eines Oberhäuptlings war damals erblich und die Buschmänner völlig unabhängig. Die Batuana wagten sich nicht in ihr Gebiet hinein, die Hottentotten nur auf Raubzügen" (1907:115).

24. "Die Buschleute scheinen aber gut Freund mit den Betschuanen zu sein. Als ich einen Buschmann fragte ob es ihm denn nicht unangenehm sei dass die Betschuanen jährlich so viel Wild abschiessen sagte er: 'Ja, wir bekommen aber Präsent!'"