The Ju/'Hoansi, also known as the !Kung San, have come to occupy a special place in the scholarly and popular imagination. As one of the most thoroughly studied foraging societies in anthropological history and as the darlings of the mass media (The Gods Must Be Crazy), it is sometimes forgotten that they — and other hunting and gathering peoples — have become increasingly drawn into the world system. Their remoteness and desert location in the Kalahari no longer protect them.

Still foragers in 1963, they are now at the end of their third decade of rapid social change. In a generation they have been transformed from a society of nomadic hunters and gatherers — some of whom herded and worked for others — to a society of small-holders, who eke out a living by herding, farming and craft production along with some hunting and gathering. Today they sit around their fires and smoke their pipes as before, but they also listen to transistor radios, cook store-bought mealie meal, brew home brew... and worry about the future.

When I first went to the area in the 1960s and lived for more than a year in the village of /Xai/xai, the people were still
living largely as they had in the past; they foraged from temporary camps for game and wild vegetable foods with no domestic animals except dogs (and some groups lacked even these). About 900 of them lived in the Nya Nya area of South West Africa (now Namibia), a former German colony administered by South Africa from 1919 to 1990. Another 500 lived in the Dobe area of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), which was administered by the British. In the Dobe area they shared their large territory with some 300 Herero and Tswana pastoralists and several thousand cattle.

Approximately three-quarters of the Ju/'hoansi in the Dobe area lived in semi-nomadic camps based primarily on hunting and gathering; the rest were attached to black cattle posts. Ironically, the pace of change began to accelerate. By the 1980s most Dobe Ju/'hoansi villages had come to look like others in Botswana. The beehive shaped grass huts were gone, replaced by semi-permanent mud-walled houses. Villages were no longer circular and tight-knit. Twenty-five people who had lived in a space with a diameter of 20 metres or so now spread themselves out in a line several hundred metres long. Instead of looking across the central space at each other, houses face the kraal where cattle and goats are kept; the pattern of settlement thus reflects a symbolic shift from reliance on each other to reliance on property in the form of herds.

As early as 1900 some Ju/'hoansi had been involved in boarding cattle in an arrangement widespread in Botswana called mafisa in which 10 to 20 head of cattle belonging to a wealthy owner are looked after by a poor man in his own area. In payment the herder receives all the milk and each year one of the calves, usually a female. By 1973 about 20 per cent of families had some involvement as mafisa herders. But by the 1980s people had become bitter about the system; they complained that they were not being paid cattle promised in payment for services rendered and without these beasts...
it was difficult to start their own herds. The biggest threat to Ju/'hoansi survival comes from Botswana’s booming cattle industry. Since 1975 when wealthy Tswana have wanted to expand cattle production they have formed syndicates to drill boreholes for water in remote areas and staked out ranches with 99-year leases that can be bought and sold. By 1987 they were approaching the Dobe area. In Namibia a non-profit development agency had helped Ju/'hoansi to obtain cattle and drill boreholes for themselves but in Botswana an internationally sponsored proposal for five to eight boreholes in the Dobe area was blocked by the government, indicating that its once liberal policies toward the San people traditionally foraging areas may be permanently cut off from them by commercial ranching.

Hunting and gathering, which provided them with 85 per cent of their food as recently as 1964, now supply perhaps 30 per cent. The rest is made up of milk and meat from domestic stock, store-bought mealie meal and vast quantities of heavily sugared tea whitened with powdered milk. Foraged foods and occasional produce from gardens augment the vegetable diet. For several years government and foreign drought relief programs provided most of the food (beans from Canada were a particular favourite).

When the government cut off general food distribution in 1987 the Dobe people, who had become dependent on the weekly handouts, at first were shocked and angry; they didn’t know where to turn. It was an open question how they would respond, but they did bounce back and in unexpected ways. By the middle of the year there was a revival of hunting encouraged by the government. After years of strict enforcement of game laws, the powerful Wildlife Department decided that the Dobe area had recovered sufficiently and the department issued liberal licences to all Ju/'hoansi who wanted them. Both women and men were issued licences so men were able to hunt their wives’ quotas as well as their own. Men who hadn’t hunted for years took it up again and younger men who had never become skilled with bow and arrow hunted from horseback with spears. Since the return of serious drought conditions to Botswana, food distribution has been resumed.

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In the longer term the Ju/'hoansi face economic uncertainty. For the large majority with little or no schooling, the job prospects are poor and a life of odd jobs combined with heavy drinking not uncommon. However some compensating developments have brightened this picture. From 1986 on a small business project, the !Kung San Works, and successor organizations have purchased increasing volumes of Dobe area crafts, primarily from Ju/'hoansi but also from Herero. This has had the effect of pumping considerable cash (up to $5,000 Canadian per month) into the economy. Unfortunately few opportunities exist for investment of the proceeds in basic items such as ploughs, bicycles, cattle or horses. Stores are distant and transportation costs prohibitive. While some livestock is purchased, a distressing amount of cash is spent on beer, brandy, home-brewed
materials, bags of candies and the ubiquitous sugar, tea and Nespray — commercial powdered milk.

When the first school opened at !Kangwa in 1973 some Ju/'hoansi parents responded quickly, registering their children and scraping together the money for fees and the obligatory school uniforms. Most ignored the school or withdrew their children when the latter objected to being forbidden to speak their own language on school grounds or to the mild corporal punishment that is standard practice in the Botswana school system. Even when their parents insisted that they stay in school, the children would run away and walk back to their home villages. Recently attempts have been made to set up a hostel near the school (the school itself has no residential facilities) where Ju/'hoansi children can have a home away from home. Absenteeism, however, remains a major problem.

In spite of the obstacles, four of the !Kangwa students did go on to secondary school in the 1980s. The road has not been easy for them. Today two hold teaching jobs in Namibia while another (the only woman), after being turned down by a number of senior secondary schools, is enrolled in a Botswana teachers college.

The second and smaller of the two schools in the area, opened at /Xai/xai in 1976, has been far more successful. A progressive Tswana headmaster wisely incorporated many elements of Ju/'hoansi culture into the curriculum and has been rewarded with strong parental and community support for the school and a low absentee rate.

In June 1986 my wife and co-researcher, Harriet Rosenberg of York University, and I were on our way to /Xai/xai on a research project supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Coming the other way was a truckload of schoolchildren singing enthusiastically in beautiful three-part harmony. They were on their way to the annual competition for traditional culture, which brings singers, musicians and performers together from all over the district. Three days later the troupe returned in triumph. They had won overall first prize against a field that included more than 20 performing groups. The people of the village were ecstatic: winning was especially sweet for
one of the smallest and most isolated villages in the district.

The next morning the villagers assembled in the schoolyard while the children, aged nine to 14, put on a special performance of their winning number, the Lion Dance. As the girls and boys made their entrance dancing out in single file we were struck by the beauty of their costumes, traditional Ju/'hoansi karosses—leather garments hand-beaded and sewn by the students' mothers from antelope hides especially hunted by fathers and older brothers. But most impressive was the fact that several members of the troupe were girls of the wealthy Herero group wearing the traditional Ju/'hoansi kaross and singing the traditional songs along with the other children. In the context of Kalahari ethnic relations this was a powerful gesture of respect to an ethnic group regarded as lower in social status.

The singing was electrifying and the choreography—an amalgam of traditional Ju/'hoansi dance forms and elements introduced by the troupe's coach, the school's music teacher—flawlessly executed. The girls sat singing and clapping in the centre while the boys danced around their circle in tight formation. One of the boys carrying a wooden gun pretended to stalk another boy whose movements and costume represented a lion. The lion pranced and threatened, the hunter bore down relentlessly. The wounding of the lion started a long death scene as the singing rose in intensity. Finally the lion sank slowly to the ground and fell dead. The crowd burst into cheers and applause. In the hubbub and congratulations that followed the performance, the Tswana headmaster, who had encouraged the dance troupe and patiently nurtured the spirit of tolerance that pervaded it, turned and shouted to no one in particular: “This will show the nation that the Bushman is a person!”

Later we learned that the children had gone to the capital where they won the national dance competition. They were a featured part of the entertainment program for the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of Botswana's independence and for several days the Botswana media were filled with stories of the champion dancers from the distant northwest.

This small example of cultural success for the Ju/'hoansi and the overcoming of intolerance on the part of the dominant Tswana constitutes one modest basis for optimism concerning the future of marginalized peoples within the nation-state.

The Ju/'hoansi persist as a people, embattled and struggling but a people nonetheless with a clear sense of themselves, facing the future with their roots in the past. As they have come to political consciousness there has been an emerging determination to take hold of their own destiny, to fight against stereotyping and discrimination, to assert their political rights and to revitalize their communities. But the road to self-reliance is not easy and there are many more battles to be won before their future is secured.

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The Kalahari Peoples Fund is a non-profit foundation dedicated to working with the Ju/'hoansi to achieve their development goals. Readers interested in learning more about the KPF and its programs may write to the author c/o Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, M5S 1A1.