The Gods Must Be Crazy

BY RICHARD B. LEE

The film opens with a highly romanticized ethnography of the primitive Bushmen in their remote home in "Botswana". (Actually the film was shot in Namibia). The voice-over extols the virtues of their simple life. Into this idyllic scene comes a Coke bottle thrown from a passing plane. Discord erupts among the happy folk as they strive to possess the bottle. Clearly heaven has made a mistake (hence the film's title) and N!au, the Bushman hero resolves to remove the offending item by carrying it to the ends of the earth. On his journey he encounters a white game biologist (the klutz) and his coloured sidekick, a beautiful white school teacher and a band of Keystone Cops Marxist revolutionaries on the run from a botched coup in an unspecified African country to the north (Angola?). In the end the Bushman foils the baddies, the biologist wins the school teacher and the Bushman disposes of the bottle, and returns to his people. Happiness reigns once again in Apartheid/and.

Both viewers and reviewers are taken in by the charm and innocence of the Gods... especially the sympathetic portrayal of the non-whites. The clever sight gags evoke laughter that ignores political ideologies. But there is more to this film than meets the eye... a great deal more.

First, there is the incredibly patronizing attitude towards the Bushmen, or San as I prefer to call them. The Bushman as Noble Savage is a peculiar piece of white South African racial mythology. In the popular press the Bushmen are a favorite weekend magazine topic. Their remarkable skills as trackers, their oneness with the wild, and their cooperative and sharing way of life are lauded, in contrast to the anxieties of urban life, and in unstated but pointed contrast to the grasping, ungrateful and dangerous black majority the whites regularly come in contact with. The San represent the land as it once was and the good native as he once was. The message is clear. Left to their own devices the unspoilt natives are good. Only when they are exposed to civilization do they then become bad, ie. communist.

These sympathetic attitudes of contemporary whites contrast with those of the past. In the 18th and 19th centuries the Afrikaners of the frontier invaded the lands of the San and hunted them for sport and bounty. The Cape Archives document a century of systematic extermination. The San were hounded to virtual extinction by the whites within South Africa by 1880.

Compelled by complex motives of romanticism, the conservation ethic, and liberal guilt, 20th Century white south Africans have...
rehabilitated the San and given them a place as the virtual mascots of the Apartheid world-view. The books of Lauren Van der Post and the film of Jamie Uys both spring from this vision. Beyond this vague liberalism, in Uys’ case there isn’t a trace of opposition to apartheid.

In addition to the film’s patronizing attitude I was appalled by its bald-faced misrepresentation of the contemporary San. To say that there are San today who are untouched by civilization is a cruel joke. The !Kung San of Namibia where the film was made, have been subject to 25 years of forced acculturation and 10 years of wholesale recruitment into the South African army (see article on Namibia elsewhere in this issue). The modern !Kung in order to appear in the film had to hide their denims, transistor radios and canned beer, and reach into their trunks for clothing, long since abandoned, sewn from the skins of game animals. All of the actors in the film had themselves spent time or had relatives on South African army bases.

A recent letter to the New York Times by anthropologist Toby Volkman sheds more light on Jamie Uys’ misuse of the Bushman.

The illusion of the ”innocent charm” of Bushman life in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa may explain the immense international popularity of The Gods Must Be Crazy (Arts and Leisure, April 28) but that should not make you uncritical of everything the film’s director, Jamie Uys, says of the Bushman’s lot.

N!Xau, the leading Bushman in the film - who has never seen such a thing before as the Coca-Cola bottle dropped from a plane that begins the action - had certainly seen more than one white man before he encountered Mr. Uys in the late 1970’s. White administrators had been in the Kalahari for decades. So had white schoolteachers, anthropologists, writers, film makers and, since 1978, the South African Defense Force. N!Xau grew up as a herdboy on a Herero farm in Botswana and moved in 1976 to Bushmanland (Namibia) to take a job as a cook in the local school...