Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

_The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass_ by Robert J. Gordon
Ivan Karp


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as Adam Kuper did in *Wives for Cattle* [Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982], a comparative study of Southern African, Bantu-speaking peoples that Barnard cites as a model for his own). This would have enabled Barnard to build on his strengths; it would have given the study greater coherence and depth and eliminated some of the overly diffuse (and, as a result, uneven) presentation of material and analysis in the book.


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Robert Gordon's historical ethnography of the political economy of Bushman interactions with white and black in colonial Namibia is a powerfully written, relentless indictment of the ways in which conventional forms of representing foraging people, in general, and Bushmen, in particular, lend themselves to appalling uses. Gordon uses the term "Bushman" advisedly, more as a term of convenience than as the appropriate name for a congeries of ethnic groups. He points out that one of the constituting features of the discourse about "Bushmen" has been the fashion in which peoples speaking different languages, exhibiting different physical features, and having rather different histories, have been assimilated to one category. Gordon rightly concludes that the "Bushman" problem will not be solved by terminological therapy. Renaming the Bushmen as San, Nama, or Khoi is an easy solution that does not show how a category has been created or how people have been, and are continuing to be, treated.

Gordon has a different solution. He situates "Bushman" history in the broader context of imperial and colonial history, examining how some of the peoples of present-day Namibia have been classified and treated. Thus, the "Bushmen" are shown to become Bushmen not because there are essential features of Bushman culture, ecology, or physique that determine a way of life, but because of the fashion in which they have been incorporated into an economy and subordinated to a polity.

Briefly, Gordon argues that Bushmen in Namibia have been turned into a rural proletariat, a mobile labor force at once despised and sentimentalized; that so-called Bushmen studies have tended to focus on those people living in reserves or pushed into marginal areas; and that Bushmen studies have generally failed to examine the processes by which a substantial portion of Bushmen have been made into virtual serfs. These processes are complex and uneven. They were affected by ways in which imperial rule and capitalist penetration were extended into Namibia. It would have been useful if Gordon had compared how these processes affected Bushman populations in the different polities of Southern Africa in which Bushmen are found. But this is a minor flaw in a major work.

Gordon describes the ways in which settler colonialism has developed in Namibia and how that has resulted in the emergence of a rural proletariat of Bushmen laborers. Although Bushmen resisted, sometimes violently, processes of incorporation, it was a one-sided battle. The primary types of evidence Gordon uses are archival and textual. Gordon examines legal cases, colonial reports, letters, and academic discourse and makes wonderful use of photographs to show that multiple images of Bushmen as wild and untamable, docile and useful, fierce or beautiful have been constructed over time to legitimize a complex set of political and economic relations. Settler interests were never far from the surface, however, and Bushmen were defined far more by economic and political interests than anything else.

Yet Gordon was able to uncover substantial evidence that contravened conventional interpretations. Early reports describe extensive copper mining and trade by Bushmen, and Gordon is able to document how Bushmen resisted genocide and encroachment through banditry and other forms of violent resistance. But the forms of terror were far more prevalent on the other side. This is a story of ethnocide and systematic despoliation of a people systematically defined as not fully human. Nor is this kind of story limited to the past. In 1991, after The Bushman Myth was written, South African newspapers reported that a former army officer whose conscience was troubled had confessed to taking part in a hunting party in Namibia some years before. When they failed to find any other game, they shot three Bushmen instead. The case is still being investigated. Although Gordon does not report this event, it creates a telling contrast with the account he gives of how Bushmen were used by the South African army in Namibia and Angola. The movement between paternalistic domestication and simple and brutal elimination, which Gordon describes so well, was not linear. Nor has it ended.

Gordon writes as an anthropologist and a citizen of Namibia. His primary concern is to correct the historical and ethnographic record. In a sense, his book is an act of ethnographical witnessing. His accounts of other anthropological work are even-handed and fair-minded. By focusing on the fate of Bushmen on the laboring side of the foraging/laboring divide, he alters our sense of the isolated lives of hunters and gatherers. This is a work that combines scholarship and moral passion. It should be required reading for any course on the peoples of Africa.


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reviews 961