

## Culture

**Mathias G. GUENTHER, *Bushman Folktales (Studien Zur Kulturkunde, Band 93)*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH Stuttgart, 1989**



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By Megan Biesele  
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Peoples like the Bushmen of Botswana and Namibia, like other former foragers, have been highly marginalized by historical circumstance. Common phrases associated with them include "the plight of" and "a vanishing way of life." Yet in some areas of Southern Africa profound cultural revitalizations have been going on in recent years among Bushman peoples, and contemporary folklore scholarship, believe it or not, has begun playing a vital role in changing both images and self-images.

By helping these peoples to connect with a sense of their past, both their own cultural history and their place in the history of the nation states of which they have become part, promotion of understanding of their expressive forms has begun to enfranchise them as complex, discriminating cultural beings with something to say to the global society. The recreation of history in the present through oral forms will prove enormously beneficial to these peoples' efforts to claim a place of equality in postmodern societies, many of whose urban members still regard them as inferior.

Mathias Guenther's *Bushman Folktales* presents texts from the oral tradition of the extinct /Xam Bushmen of South Africa collected during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These are juxtaposed with texts Guenther himself recorded from contemporary Nharo Bushmen of Botswana in 1968-70. This striking presentation of culture history, along with Guenther's fine work in foregrounding the contemporary individuals with whom he worked, enables a vivid awareness of both the tenacity and the flexibility of tradition as it uses old materials to confront change in new and creative ways.

The format Guenther has chosen goes a long way towards both humanizing the mythologized Bushmen and situating their artistic productions in the particularities of history. Taken along with promised further volumes to come in this series of published Bushman texts, his book will help estab-

lish this oral tradition as one that is intriguing and enjoyable as well as full of commentary on historical and political circumstances.

The organization of the book is simple and strategically effective. Guenther begins with introductory chapters on both context and content of the /Xam and Nharo tale collections, in the course of which he demonstrates the utility of viewing the recorded material from a "pan-Bushman" perspective. He then goes on to present first Nharo, then /Xam texts under the broad headings "Creation", "Primal Time", "Trickster", and "Legends." Each tale is prefaced by a lengthy description of the conditions of performance as recorded by Guenther himself in the case of the Nharo, and from fieldnotes of the earlier workers (the Bleeks, Lloyd, Dornan, Knudsen, and Thomas) where available. These prefaces also comment, in a low-key and pleasantly informative way, about cultural content to which tales refer, about the sociology of knowledge among Bushman peoples, and about manners and customs regarding their communication and oral life in general, as formulated by an anthropologist who was studying many other aspects of Nharo Bushman society at the same time as he collected the tales. Though it is scholarly and full, the body of information rendered through these prefaces (over a hundred in all, to introduce as many stories and versions) remains chatty and personal in tone, making it accessible to many readers besides academic specialists. Clearly, Guenther's ability to annotate the tales calls upon an anthropological background of substantial depth, as his many other publications in the area of Bushman belief systems, such as his excellent paper "Animals in Bushman Thought, Myth and Art" (*Property, Power and Ideology in Hunting-Gathering Societies*, Woodburn, Ingold and Riches, eds., London: Berg, 1985) attest.

Despite his qualifications for writing this book, however, Guenther makes it clear that he is not a professional linguist or folklorist. Instead, he presents himself as an appreciator of tales he came to know in the course of other work, most of which had to do with the economic and social changes being experienced by the farm Nharo around Ghanzi during the 1960s and 1970s. Though one misses comparative material from other traditions in his account of Bushman folklore, details of actual life from field observation supply an equally enriching background, as in this instance, "The similarity in the social and existential conditions of the Nharo of the last decade

or two and the /Xam of the last century was graphically conveyed to me by a boxful of old photographs taken of /Xam Bushmen . . . They depict Bushmen and women who, but for differences in the style of clothing — Victorian style dresses and suspender-held breeches — could be one and the same. Like the European clothes of contemporary Nharo those of their /Xam antecedents are ragged, and, like the farm Nharo today, the /Xam subjects can be seen standing in front of dilapidated, shrub-enclosed thatch huts with chipped pails, pots and basins hanging from shrub branches" (p.19).

Another useful aspect of Guenther's presentation is the amount of attention given to the circumstances which elicited specific versions of stories. There is much detailing here of cognitive threads that refer not only to the world of the stories but to how daily social life is constructed by Bushmen. This material is extremely valuable, both for anthropologists and for others who would just like to know more about the Bushman people in general. It is the sort of commentary which rarely appears in print because it lies in the realm between scientific and novelistic description. Who was on the outing when a story came up, what was under discussion when it did, what the side comments were, and how the material may have been "edited" by the speaker according to possible interpretations of listener expectation are all items worth notice and careful presentation. Guenther is to be commended for taking the time to do this careful work of description.

Other praiseworthy features of the book include attention to the medley of voices which sometimes characterize a storytelling session: Guenther has been scrupulous in giving us multiple voices chiming in on a single performance whenever possible. One feature which seems not to work so well, though, is the problematic inclusion in the vague "Legend" category of at least one story which other Bushman traditions (such as !Kung) show to be part of a true folktale cycle. This is the story Guenther calls "The Man Who Cut Off his Mother-in-Law's Head." Though the Nharo collection apparently doesn't connect this story with other "hua" or stories of the old times, it is clearly part of the heroine G!Kun//amdima's cycle among the neighboring Ju/'hoansi or !Kung of northern Botswana. Future volumes of texts will make this sort of information more accessible. Taken together, both the similarities and the differences among texts from Bushman peoples living in different times and circumstances may help

both outsiders and Bushman peoples newly literate in their own languages to refashion a fresh image and history from a legacy of cultural oppression. In all, Guenther's anthology provides a most useful resource for new efforts to provide curriculum materials for Bushman students in the Khoisan languages themselves, such as one now shaping up in Namibia which is using Ju/'hoan folklore as the basis for new, post-independence schoolbooks. Volumes like *Bushman Folktales* are valuable contributions to the resurrection of an ancient tradition in a new form, one that is not only informative to interested outsiders but useful to Bushman people themselves as they choose what they wish to keep from the past in a creative approach to the present.

Noël DYCK, *What is the Indian 'Problem': Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration*. Social and Economic Studies No. 46, Memorial University, St. John's: Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1991, 208p.

*Par Marc-Adélar Tremblay  
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Cet ouvrage est construit sur un mode dialectique et cherche à révéler, par une analyse historique—où les événements, les situations et les dynamismes d'évolution font l'objet de minutieuses observations, abondamment documentées—les fondements comme les aboutissants de la politique indienne de l'administration fédérale vis-à-vis les populations amérindiennes comme ceux de la résistance et des autres réactions de ces dernières aux multiples mécanismes de contrôle et aux insidieuses tentatives d'assimilation que cette politique engendre. Il s'agit pour l'auteur, en somme, de documenter la nature et la portée de l'idéologie de tutelle de l'administration centrale sur les communautés amérindiennes ainsi que d'illustrer l'ingéniosité avec laquelle celles-ci affrontent et résistent aux politiques concrètes et aux pratiques administratives qui s'ensuivent pour démontrer que les représentations du "problème indien" des fonctionnaires du ministère des Affaires indiennes et du Nord canadien (le MAINC—je me sers de l'acronyme français contemporain pour signifier l'ensemble de ceux et celles qui furent au service de l'État fédéral à différentes