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Review Article

The Demise and Rise of the Coy San

Robert J. Gordon

De Jongh, Michael (2012), *Roots and Routes: Karretjie People of the Great Karoo: The Marginalisation of a South African First People*, Pretoria: UNISA Press, ISBN 978-1-86888-665-4, 220 pp.

Glyn, Patricia (2013), *What Dawid Knew: A Journey with the Kruipers*, Johannesburg: Picador, ISBN 978-1-77010-304-7, 256 pp.

Myburgh, Paul John (2013), *The Bushman Winter Has Come: The True Story of the Last Band of /Gwikwe Bushmen on the Great Sand Face*, Johannesburg: Penguin, ISBN 978-0-14-353066-4, 234 pp.

Taylor, Julie J. (2012), *Naming the Land: San Identity and Community Conservation in Namibia's West Caprivi*, Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, ISBN 978-3-905758-25-2, 280 pp.

Zips-Mairitsch, Manuela (2013), *Lost Lands? (Land) Rights of the San in Botswana and the Legal Concept of Indigeneity in Africa*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, ISBN 978-3-643-90244-3, 430 pp.

Keywords: Southern Africa, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, indigenous peoples, San, Khoikhoi, anthropology

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Coy: "Not demonstrative; shyly reserved or retiring. Displaying modest backwardness or shyness; not responding readily to familiar advances" (Oxford English Dictionary).

Strange things happen on the South African Platteland. In November 2013, Shell spin doctors addressed a public meeting audience in Graaff-Reinet to explain fracking. It was a meeting with a difference.

> For a start, there was the unusual sight of a man in animal skins crouched by the door, wielding a set of kudu horns with a metal attachment from which wisps of buchu smoke emerged.
>
> Inside, there were other Khoi people in full regalia, sitting among the farmers and members of the anti-fracking organization, Treasure the Karoo Action Group …

Later,

> Daantjie Japhta, former mayor of Graaff-Reinet, present head of the Khoi's Inqua clan and vice-chairman of treasure at the Karoo Action Group, stood up in full regalia and gave the Shell people hell.
>
> "We as Khoi are the first people of this land, and in June this year we took the decision that there would be no fracking here. You will get a big 'no' from us as Khoi people to fracking. You never even consulted us. We will organise and mobilise. We will ask to go before the United Nations, because this oil and gas business means we will never see our land again."
>
> He received a huge round of applause from the crowd. (du Toit 2013)

The press release concerning the establishment of the new Sol Plaatje University at Kimberley also announced that in addition to its emphasis on heritage studies, students can study for a doctorate in "Khoisan" Studies. Clearly something significant is happening concerning those people identified as Khoi or San. So what does this spate of recent books tell us about the situation? All the authors are in some way concerned about the future of those termed variously San, Bushmen, Khoi or Khoisan or those who are styled "First People" or "Indigenes". Such concerns among the white middle class have a long history, dating back at least to Thomas Pringle's (1786–1834) poems on the plight of the Bushmen, a concern that extended to the Dutch-speaking populace as well as in Neser's 1896 poem *Di Klaaglied fan di laaste Boesman* and the reactionary rejoinder by du Toit, *Antwoord fan di Duusman an di Boesman*. There was a

proposal in the 1930s to erect a monument to the Bushmen in Bloemfontein, leading Tommy Hardbattle of Ghanzi to write that the money would be better spent on providing windmills for Bushmen.

In the new rush, the visual is clearly important. Patricia Glyn, a former radio and television presenter who bills herself as an eco-adventurer, went to the southern Kalahari, accompanied by a professional documentary film-maker, Richard Wicksteed. Zips-Mairitsch claims to be a keen film-maker and de Jongh's photography is of such quality as to merit public exhibitions. Apart from selectively illuminating what the authors feels are important, such photographs enhance their claim to authenticity. In South African law, visual evidence is given greater credence than verbal. In addition, it establishes the claim to credibility: Here is proof that "I've been there".

Now we have two "popular" books published by highly respectable publishers that are solidly in this tradition and, like van der Post before them, profusely illustrated with photographs. Indeed, the same applies to the more scholarly books under review. Myburgh, who claims to be an anthropologist and to have spent seven years living with the Gwikwe, is also a film-maker who made *People of the Great Sandface* (1986), a documentary that has been acclaimed as ground-breaking in South Africa. As far as I can ascertain, Myburgh's claim to be an anthropologist is limited to undergraduate anthropology through UNISA (University of South Africa) and, while education and attendant credentials do not make for good ethnography, it appears that he is certainly not a member of any professional anthropological organisation. Nor does his book refer to, or engage with, the anthropological literature, being more of a "spiritual guru" nature. There is no map and the experience is presented in a timeless present. Whether it is the "true story of the last band of Gwikwe Bushmen" is certainly debatable, but it makes the author the possessor of the last "true" knowledge that no one will be able to check, which enhances its value. Of course, Myburgh has a flexible approach to the "truth". For example, was the seven years that he claims to have spent among the Bushmen continuous, or did it add up to seven years, or were his visits intermittent over seven years? Was he the sole white person there or did he have company? True to the trope, Myburgh is philosophical about the future of the people he engaged with. It is not an outsider's task to help them, which he rather strangely defines as "preserving culture" since their way of life has "lived its own time and served its own purpose in the grand picture of human evolution. The greatest sadness … is our failure to remember" (225-226). There is certainly no mention of the issues that Zips-Mairitsch is concerned with.

Glyn is also concerned with remembrance, but has a scoop: knowledge of a dark event – mass rape and massacre by German troops of Nama and San at the turn of the twentieth century at Grootkolk – which was told exclusively to her by Dawid Kruiper, a leader of the !Komani just before Kruiper died. Glyn managed to compile this account, despite spending less than two months in the southern Kalahari and not speaking Afrikaans. The racy and attention holding narrative is not related to the extensive bibliography and Glyn does not let facts stand in the way of a good story. For example, she claims, probably on the basis of some Lawrence Green tavern-tale, that Namibian farmers could take out Bushman hunting licenses until 1937. She emailed me about this and I assured her that there was no evidence, archival or otherwise, to support this assertion, but she appears to have overlooked this inconvenient fact in favour of her narrative. Nonetheless, Glyn's reportage on the disintegration of the Kruiper clan is wrenching. But this (self-) destruction by alcoholism and drug addiction is not because the people have been recently marginalised and impoverished. As Daniel Defoe put it in his eighteenth century poem "The True-born Englishman":

> The lab'ring poor, in spite of double pay
> Are saucy, mutinous and beggarly
> So lavish of their money and their time
> That want of forecast is the nation's crime
> Good drunken company is their delight
> And what they get by day, they spend by night.

This is the perspective taken by UNISA's Emeritus Professor Mike de Jongh regarding his long-term project that examined the marginalisation of a South African First People, a process largely facilitated through dispossession of land. His book examines what became of some of the South African San in the arid Karoo region and parts of the northern Cape adjoining the area that Glyn wrote about. These people survive largely as peripatetic sheep shearers, an occupation fraught with the vagaries of the global wool market and the threat of increased mechanisation. Compared to Glyn, de Jongh's work is brutally empirical, with a full description of fieldwork, kinship diagrams and incredible photographs and numerous small case studies used, as Malinowski famously put it, for "apt illustration" of what it is like to be a rural underclass, a concept which is not discussed, except to imply that it has something to do with invisibility. Most of the chapters had been previously published, which results in some irritating repetition, but this is more than offset by the stunning photos. The study could have been enriched by more material

on the cultural life of these people; for example, how do they see the world and what (hi)stories do they tell each other?

Manuela Zips-Mairitsch, a lecturer in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna, has written a comprehensive, if not quite definitive, account of the land rights of the San in Botswana. There is a certain poetic justice in this as her university once boasted that it housed the world's largest collection of Bushman skulls.

The first striking feature of Zips-Mairitsch's book are the beautiful pictures of "pristine" San and the blurb on the back, which reads: "Images can be deceiving … Now that the San communities have joined forces in the international arena of indigenous rights struggles … In many ways the legal dispute over [land] rights in the Kalahari epitomizes this global justice movement." Originally published in German in 2009, *Stolen Lands* has been slightly updated for the new English edition and is published jointly with IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs), a leading indigenous rights non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The book itself, which is clearly based on Zips-Mairitsch's dissertation (and it does read in part like one), is divided into seven parts that succinctly discuss the evolving status of indigenous peoples in international law, and then narrows its focus to Africa, particularly some important South African precedents such as the Richtersveld case concerning Aboriginal Title. After briefly summarising the legal status of the various San communities in southern Africa, Zips-Mairitsch turns to the meaty part: An excellent discussion of the "Lost Lands" or the epic court case involving the forced relocation of San from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) and the role of international donors like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and how they influenced the debate and, more importantly, policy. The role of USAID and its promotion of CBNRM (Community-Based Natural Resource Management) in Botswana and in neighbouring countries like Namibia (the focus of the excellent dissertation by Julie Taylor) and further afield in Zambia, is surely a topic that requires closer and more critical examination.

Zips-Mairitsch encountered the CKGR case while on a tour with a group of students from Vienna studying "Living Museums". She has since returned on numerous short visits. Fieldwork was clearly difficult, given the Botswana government's increased reluctance to give research visas to scholars to work on the San. It is difficult to get a feel for how deeply she was immersed in local life or how the local people felt. She only mentions local individuals when citing secondary sources. Given that we are not informed about her linguistic skills, I assume that the medium of com-

munication was English, which would exclude the vast majority of non-English speakers and make her reliant on a few gatekeepers, meaning that a sense of everyday collaboration and resistance is missing. One especially valuable part is her discussion on why San are particularly vulnerable as court witnesses. The epilogue, written by the author's partner, Werner Zips, is appropriately titled "The Return of the Outlaws". It summarises the implications of how the debate on how that flexible – and almost Teflon-coated term – "indigeneity" is encouraging an emergent legal relationship in which once marginalised people are getting a voice that is being heard in a range of relevant decision-making bodies. What makes this label for the epilogue even more appropriate is that one of the original glosses for the term "bosjesman" is "bandit" or "outlaw", a label they were given precisely because they refused to kowtow to the colonial state.

To this non-lawyer, the discussion and reportage on the issue of indigeneity is thorough and insightful. As an anthropologist, however, I fail to see what makes it anthropology. There is very little discussion in Zips-Mairitsch's book about what meanings the local people attach to concepts like indigeneity, or effort to see the inter-relationships between those people labelled "indigenous" and their neighbours and how ordinary people see the situation comparable to the work of Sylvain (2005, 2011, 2014). Others have also worked on these issues. Surprisingly, there is no mention of Wilmsen's work (1989) on land tenure in the Kalahari – could this be the result of ignorance, irrelevance or simply that some of Wilmsen's ideas, like interpenetrating systems of land tenure, run counter to the argument Zips-Mairitsch is trying to fashion?

If de Jongh's work of a rural proletariat suggests one scenario for the people of the CKGR, Julie Taylor's meticulous analysis of the Western Caprivi in neighbouring Namibia suggests another. The indigenous inhabitants of this area, the Khwe San, are also in a recently declared Game Reserve. In 2006, however, in an unusual move for Africa, the government granted conditional rights to an officially recognised CBNRM institution that seeks to empower the Khwe. Taylor's nine-month study uses the lens of identity politics to focus on how Khwe contested authority over natural resources with the neighbouring Blacks, the state and the NGO. Unlike Zips-Mairitsch, Taylor provides a detailed description of how she conducted her research. Her fieldwork stretched over a few years, first as an intern at the NGO concerned with promoting CBNRM, and later as a full-time researcher. She traces the history of the CBNRM movement in southern Africa and how it has changed, with its current emphasis on geographic information systems and "counter-mapping", in which local communities are given the power to name their own areas. She also ex-

amines the role of the state in differentiating "Bantu" from "Bushmen", the use of Khwe in the South African Defence Force and, more recently, the Namibian state's suppression of the "secessionist" movement and how the Khwe have mobilised identity as a means to construct and contest authority. Taylor is well aware of the context in which she is conducting research and writing and, apart from insightful chapters on State-Khwe relations, her description of the rise of the CBNRM movement is particularly important.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter is the one on the micro-politics that CBNRM stimulates; this chapter demonstrates how hard it is for marginalised and internally divided "communities" to successfully manage the benefits – principally the tourism, crafts and hunting that emerge from CBNRM. The chapter throws light on the complex dynamics between NGOs and the different branches of government (which are often at cross-purposes) and how discourses of subversion are like a thermostat for the "heat" of these relationships. For anyone interested in a case study of CBNRM, this book should be required reading.

Taylor is also the only author of the books under review to bring the issue of identity politics strongly to the fore and to avoid the essentialising tendencies that are implicit and often explicit in most current books about the people labelled "Bushmen" or "San". These essentialising tendencies underlie the strength of the image of "San" to evoke middle-class fantasies, not only of those conventionally ascribed as "White" or European. It is no surprise that one of the best-selling books on the Namibian tourist circuit is one by Peter Stark entitled *The White Bushman* (German edition 2003; Afrikaans edition 2008; English edition 2011), in which Myburgh claimed to have "gone Bushman" to such an extent that when he visited London he had to walk barefoot. All the authors of the books under review come from the same sympathetic middle-class social formation and are, dare we say it, white. So, of course, one might well ask what impels them? The recent popular romanticisation of "Bushmen" in South Africa dates back to the early 1950s and especially the efforts of Sir Laurens van der Post and later *The Gods Must Be Crazy* film series and the numerous high-tech sites celebrating Bushman art. It is still a popular trope, a siren call, drawing the white imagination in, despite the trenchant scholarly critiques. Discovering something of "the last wild Bushmen" has become something of a (white) South African tradition. Could it have something to do, at least for some whites, with defining their "whiteness" in the postmodern Apartheid situation? Is it a search for identity in the rapidly changing and unpredictable world of southern Africa? Why do many black colleagues

look upon such efforts with a distinct lack of interest, if not downright suspicion since the narrative implies that these "original people" were dispossessed by blacks more than by whites and therefore contains some sort of moral absolution for European colonialism.

This phenomenon is itself worthy of discussion as is the newfound appropriation of that new hybrid imagined "Khoisan" culture referred to at the beginning of this review essay. People in South Africa (but not in Namibia) who were previously labelled "Coloured" are actively reclaiming their "Khoisan heritage", not only in the Platteland but in the urban areas of the Cape where learning Nama is attracting enthusiastic learners. As Chief Hennie van Wyk of the "Gorachou Qua tribe" recently commented:

> We will enlighten generations to come about their identity as Khoi or Bushmen and not coloured. By teaching our children this language, it will also bring them closer to their ancestors and release them from the traumatisation of our people that has taken place. It is a positive reinforcement for our people, to find ourselves. (online: <www.groundup.org.za/content/you-too-can-learn-khoikhoi-language> [29 May 2014])

In this recreation of past customs and languages, the problem is that a major source are precisely those middle-class whites who have essentialised the San. But even this movement needs to be problematised and placed within a global movement towards indigenous rights and the changing global division of labour. As Zygmunt Baumann has pointed out, this movement has created two types of mobility: Tourists who can afford to travel by choice, and "vagabonds" – people who travel because they have no choice.

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