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The Past and Future of !Kung Ethnography: Critical Reflections and Symbolic Perspectives Essays in Honour of Lorna Marshall

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**ETHNOGRAPHIC ROMANTICISM
AND THE
IDEA OF HUMAN NATURE:
PARALLELS BETWEEN
SAMOA AND !KUNG SAN**

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Ideas about the flexibility of human behavior have been central to the enterprise of ethnology for most of its modern history. Anthropologists have taken justifiable pleasure in undermining the smug attitudes of Europeans and Americans whose ethnocentric blinders gave them a narrow vision of what is human, the idea of cultural relativism being probably anthropology's greatest contribution to intellectual life. Some applications of the relativistic principle, however, seem to rest on questionable foundations. For example, shocking bourgeois sensibilities seems to have been an end in itself for some enthusiasts of certain primitive customs. Other ethnologists have carried relativism into an ambiguous moral territory that makes even the least ethnocentric of us uncomfortable. Still others have used ethnological description as a sort of projective test, in which the investigator's fundamental pessimism or optimism about the human condition leads to a specific distortion of the complexities of life in a given society. Because of the power of the printed word, such phrases as "the fierce people" or "the gentle people" - like the terms "Dionysian" or "Apollonian" in an earlier era - come to stand for whole cultures, regardless of all their subtleties and multiple layers of form and meaning. These simplifications - a sort of philosophic reductionism as opposed to the more usual scientific kind - can abolish at one blow not only the creative variety of generations of a culture but also the individuality of its members. Often the original investigator is not really at fault, and the problem lies with those who repeat the findings. Most of us are responsible for simplification to some extent, since in our continual confrontations with undergraduates and other innocents we are constantly tempted to exaggerate the

distinctive features of certain societies for the sake of simplicity, rhetoric, or even entertainment.

The result of these distortions is that initial narrow accounts of a culture are likely to have wide appeal but to present puzzles that later investigators can solve only by working against them. In the ideal case this dialectic produces a synthesis close to the truth; in the worst case it produces an egregious controversy.

As we are all painfully aware, the battle over Margaret Mead's Samoa researchers has been of the latter sort. Ironically, this case is one in which the dialectic appears to have been worked out before the appearance of the most violent attack on the original conception, by an investigator who himself achieved a singular synthesis of competent scholarship and very bad manners. As is well known, Mead presented a Samoa in which levels of aggression and competition were very low, opportunities for unpunished sexual pursuits high, and adolescence in general free of the storm and stress the West witnesses - in effect a kind of utopia or Shangri-La. This characterization was enthusiastically cited and repeated by some anthropologists but viewed skeptically by others. Since the 1950s and particularly during the 1970s, a steady accumulation of published evidence has revealed a Samoa more complex and indeed more familiar, with strains of aggressive competition, sexual tension, repression, and intergenerational conflict orchestrated harmoniously or otherwise, with the themes Mead articulated. Such demurrals have come from the pens of a high proportion of Samoa ethnographers; yet they have been insufficient to completely erase the textbook notion of Samoa as Shangri-La.

We will argue, by referring primarily to the hunter-gatherers of the northwest Kalahari, the !Kung San, but also to other subjects of anthropological interest, that the history of ideas about Samoa is far from unique.

Briefly stated, the !Kung have also been called upon to remind us of Shangri-La. While they were spared the attribution of free love that came rather easily to the minds of observers in the South Seas, they have received considerable attention for other alleged characteristics that also drew attention to Samoa. These included a relative absence of violence, including both interpersonal and intergroup violence; a corresponding absence of physical punishment for children; a low level of competition in all realms of life; and a relative material abundance. In addition to these features that the !Kung and Samoan utopias seemed to have in common, the !Kung were described as having exceptional political and economic equality, particularly in relations between men and women.

We are here consciously trying to avoid the mention of anthropologists' names. Partly we are doing this because the Samoan controversy has suffered so much from the emphasis on personalities rather than on facts, and we would like to avoid a repetition of that error. We forbear, however, also because there are no key personalities in the !Kung case. Most of us have participated to one degree or another in the dissemination of utopian ideas about the culture. Members of the Marshall expeditions of the 1950s tended to emphasize the absence of violence and competition, while being more realistic about the questions of abundance and equality. Members of the Lee-DeVore expedition of the 1960s and 1970s tended to be more insistent about abundance and equality while being more forthcoming about the presence of violence. We ourselves, for at least the first year of our field work, were quite convinced that !Kung culture was superior in all these ways to many others.

Since the 1960s, the !Kung have been brought into various discussions on these anthropological issues. While special interest in Samoa derived from long-standing European wistfulness about the South Seas and from the force of Margaret Mead's writing and lecturing, special interest in the !Kung derived from their status as hunting and gathering people and their proposed role as

models for events surrounding human evolution. Marshall Sahlins used their presumed "abundance" as key support for his notion of "the original affluent society," despite their dismal health conditions and despite the depiction of them by Lorna Marshall, John Marshall, and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas as being engaged in a fairly rigorous struggle for existence. Ashley Montagu used their presumed control of violence to support his contention that "no human being has ever been born with aggressive or hostile impulses, and no one becomes aggressive or hostile without learning to do so." Montagu maintained the !Kungs' relevance to the environmentalist position on human violence in at least two books on the subject despite mounting evidence, accepted by Montagu, of their quite substantial violent capability. Also, several theoretical discussions on gender roles in human society refer to the !Kung as examples of gender equality. In addition to such professional and theoretical references, there are a number of references to the advantages of !Kung life in textbook and popular accounts.

Our own difficulties with this characterization - a characterization that, we emphasize, we initially shared - arose in the course of life history interview research conducted by one of us (Marjorie Shostak) in 1969-71 and 1975. !Kung individuals, particularly women in middle and late life, were encouraged to talk freely about their past lives. These retrospective interviews produced a picture of !Kung life at variance with our own beliefs and with many published accounts. Deprivation of material things, including food, was a general recollection, and the typical emotional tone in relation to it was one of frustration and anger. Episodes of violence, including homicide, were reported with a disturbing frequency. Often these violent acts centered on occurrences of adultery, and the details revealed a double standard of morality concerning extramarital sex. Coercion of women by men in relation to sexual acts, including what seemed to be clear instances of rape, was also reported. Finally, a number of !Kung individuals recalled having been physically punished in childhood, including some severe beatings - for example, in response to breaking ostrich eggshell water containers.

Although these distressing revelations were carefully crosschecked and corroborated, both the generalizations and the specific instances, by other subjects, they remained difficult for us to believe. During the 1970s, however, there emerged from other investigators' studies, findings that seemed to confirm what might be called the darker side of !Kung life. Although the notion of a calorically adequate and balanced diet with ample leisure time survived the test of some objective measures, other measures seemed to question the idea. Data on !Kung fertility in relation to body fat, on seasonal weight loss in some bands, and on the slowing of infant growth after the first six months of life all suggested that the previously described abundance had definite limits. Data on morbidity and mortality, though not necessarily relevant to the question of abundance, certainly made use of the term "affluent" seem inappropriate.

On the question of violence, Lee reported a homicide rate among the !Kung of the same order of magnitude as in the United States, even after adjusting the latter figure upward in ways that might be viewed as controversial. Among the typical causes for these homicides were conflicts between men over women and vendetta. Although no instances of group conflict have been observed in recent decades, older literature in English and German suggest that the !Kung were quite capable of organized violence.

On egalitarian social and economic life, the more optimistic appraisal seemed to prevail, with cooperative decision making and weak authority structures as the rule. In relation to gender equality specifically, however, there were clearly more complexities in traditional male-female relations. The behavior of men was certainly dominating and coercive to women in many instances, and the traditional system of marrying pre-pubescent girls to grown men - even men who already had one wife - made for a complex sexual politics with many familiar themes.

Finally, on the question of physical punishment of children,

little or no evidence has emerged from objective measures to support the contention made in the life histories. Our tentative interpretation is that physical punishment was traditionally rare but nevertheless played an important role in the mind of the developing child.

These parallels between changing ideas about Samoa and changing ideas about the !Kung find analogies in many other studies. The Zuni and other Pueblo Indians, who had been described as "Apollonian" because of their even-tempered, well-controlled social life, proved in subsequent studies to depart markedly from this cultural ideal. The Semai of Malaysia, a classically nonviolent society with apparently excellent cultural and social controls, became by their own description and by that of others bloodthirsty killers in the war against the communists. While the change of context in this case makes it impossible to challenge the effectiveness of Semai social controls in their original context, these events certainly call for reanalysis of the role of aggression and its control among the traditional Semai. Several such reanalyses have attempted to subsume the Semai in psychoanalytic, ethological, or sociobiological views of human nature, particularly regarding the universality of aggressiveness.

Though it is certainly of a different intellectual order, it is also interesting to contemplate in this light the work of Jane Goodall on the wild chimpanzees of the Gombe Stream Reserve in Tanzania. Goodall's initial descriptions of these animals were quite reminiscent of the romanticized descriptions of nonindustrial human societies. The chimps were described as gentle, cooperative, in harmony with nature, and exceptionally kind and nurturant toward their offspring. Clearly, from the tone of her early writings, she intended her chimps to serve not only as scientific models for human evolution but in some respects as ethical models for human action. During the last five years, however, incorporating the objective results of her own work as well as that of many of her coworkers, Goodall has reported on

individual spontaneous violence including fights between males, beating of females with infants by males, killing of infants by adult females, and intergroup homicidal conflict. She felt it necessary to describe her change of mind not only in the National Geographic magazine but on the op-ed page of the New York Times in order to redress the imbalance she herself had previously created. What is particularly interesting about this example is that the conflicting views and the chastening transformation occurred in the mind of a single investigator. This occurrence underscores our views that initial oversimplification or romanticizing is not a flaw of certain investigators but a temptation to which many of us succumb at one time or another.

In the !Kung case, as in the Samoan and others, the correct view is not one of inspiring behavior worthy of immediate emulation but rather one of inspiring human complexity worthy of ultimate comprehension. The !Kung seem to be about as violent as we are, yet they achieve relative social control without specially designated legal authority. !Kung males exhibit the general human male tendency to fight over women and to dominate them, but the high proportion of subsistence provided by !Kung women enables them to assert and defend themselves to control their own destinies, more so than women in many other societies. The !Kung economy may not provide an absolute abundance, but clearly the group is not spending its time so as to maximize either economic productivity or surplus.

All these statements are generalizations, but they are complex generalizations taking cognizance of the possible universal features of human nature expressible in any society. Furthermore, the statements are not guided by any hidden agenda - neither a moral agenda insisting that the !Kung are somehow superior or postulating that people in general are basically bad; nor a scientific agenda insisting on the fundamental flexibility or inflexibility of human behavior. They are merely initial attempts to describe a portion of the natural world. It is to be

hoped that such statements will give rise to theories, but they are not derived from them. Interestingly, they are very similar to the sorts of statements made about Samoa in recent years by Bradd Shore and others who are more concerned with the realities of Samoan - and human - life than with any preconceived theory.

In conclusion, we believe that anthropology is entering a new, mature phase in which human nature will be viewed not as a bugaboo to be attacked and torn down but as a platform on which to build a human science. We believe, too, that generalizations - laws of culture and society - are gradually emerging from the vast human complexity arrayed on the platform, and that those laws will be anthropologists' second most important contribution to intellectual life - after the concept of cultural relativism. Finally, we believe it is essential for these discussions to go forward in an atmosphere as free as possible of rancor and **ad hominem** assault. Such behavior is as detrimental to our enterprise as is the tendency to characterize other cultures as typical expressions of human evil or to see the human world through rose-colored glasses. We need to suppress all these tendencies as we try to give an account of the ethological universe that is as intricate and instructive as that universe itself.