Dim Beginnings

Melvin Konner

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Reviewed:

The Old Way: A Story of the First People
by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas
Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 343 pp., $27.00

Since ancient times, historians and chroniclers have cited reports of travelers about people beyond the edge of civilization, usually to underscore their own superiority. But with the first colonial encounters in the New World, philosophic attempts by Europeans to find lessons in "savage" societies became more insistent. Montaigne, in 1580, held up Brazilian cannibals as a mirror to civilization and found much to admire:

> There is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate or for political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat. The very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, belittling, pardon—unheard of.

And:

> They still enjoy that natural abundance that provides them without toil and trouble...all necessary things.... They are still in that happy state of desiring only as much as their natural needs demand; anything beyond that is superfluous to them.

Even their warfare was "wholly noble and generous."[1] Although some of these claims in fact describe true features of the hunting-and-gathering way of life—magistrates and agriculture arose when they became both

possible and necessary—others (no occupations but leisure; no dissimulation or envy) are as fanciful as fairy tales.

In the middle of the next century, Thomas Hobbes, with a different philosophic aim in mind, likened the state of nature to a time of war,

> wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.[2]

Here too, we have partial truths, and some of the same ones; certainly (and impressively) hunter-gatherers had nothing to rely on but "what their own strength and their own invention" furnished them. But we now know that the last part of this quote is false. Montaigne, a critic of his own society, conceived of a superior state of nature; Hobbes, against the background of the English civil war, wanted one that justified authoritarian solutions. Both offered implausible descriptions.

They did, however, express the need for stories about human origins. Today we have a different kind of story, the one being literally pieced together by scientists who hunt fossils. Reconstructing early humans physically is harder than finding their fossil remains, and hardest of all is imagining them as living people who hunger, thirst, lust, rage, fear, and love. But for this neither Montaigne's Edenic cannibals poised to fall from grace into civilization nor Hobbes's perpetual state of war is any real help.

Cultural anthropologists of the nineteenth century thought they could shed light on origins by situating the nonindustrial cultures they studied along a historical time line, in which bands, tribes, chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires, and industrial states followed each other in more or less orderly progression. One such scheme, put forward by Marx and Engels, entailed a succession of revolutions and predicted a future that would recapture the advantages of the original bands we arose from—a quite mistaken forecast that had a part in shaping our last century.

But by the time the first Marxist society was born, social and cultural anthropologists had abandoned the quest for an evolutionary sequence of human societies. These schemes had proved far too comforting to ethnocentric European designs; worse, they obscured the fact that every culture, however simple it might seem, deserves to be understood on its own terms and as the product of many thousands of years of history. The schemes claiming to show the evolution of human societies encouraged the racism that their orderly successions implied; either the remaining primitives had to be civilized or they had to be replaced.

Against these tendencies cultural anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Franz Boas defended what was then called cultural relativism—not the same as ethical relativism, but rather the notion that we should try to comprehend people before judging them. This idea is unquestionably anthropology's greatest contribution to human discourse and anthropologists acted on it, bringing back not travelers' tales but scientific and scholarly accounts that have documented the immense and creative variety of different cultures. Their accounts have done much not only to combat ethnocentrism and its consequences but to call into question Western convictions about sex roles, the raising of children, and many other social arrangements.

Anthropologists concerned with biological evolution still had to reconstruct what early people were like physically and in much of their behavior, and in the late twentieth century two new approaches arose. One was behavioral primatology—the study of our nearest nonhuman relatives, especially in the wild. Some study monkeys and apes for their own sake, or to test broad evolutionary theories, but others have aimed in their studies of them to shed light on earlier phases of protohuman evolution. The field is thriving, and twenty-first-century studies of genomes will aid the effort greatly by comparing the genetics of brain function of human and nonhuman primates. The other approach has been to study today's hunter-gatherers in the hopes of learning something about our ancestors who were hunter-gatherers for two to four million years. This was more controversial. Some cultural anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz and Edmund Leach, saw such studies as a regression to a simplistic view of hunter-gatherer societies; late-twentieth-century notions of early social evolution could prove just as questionable as the late-nineteenth-century ones and for much the same reasons.

But a century makes a difference. First, no anthropologists were suggesting that living hunter-gatherers differed in basic biological or cognitive functioning from other human beings; they were of interest partly because they still sustained themselves in much the same way as the first modern humans had. Regarding earlier phases of human evolution, the reasons for studying them would be even more indirect, and not at all biological; rather, their relevance would come from observing certain inevitable constraints, for example the need to move with game or with the availability of water or plant foods. This in turn made it almost impossible to accumulate possessions. But any inferences from such observations of living hunter-gatherers would be informed by the constantly accumulating facts of paleontology and archaeology before a picture of the distant past could be constructed.

Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore saw the value of this approach and in the 1960s organized a conference on "Man the Hunter" that brought many archaeologists and fossil hunters into contact with cultural anthropologists who had studied hunter-gatherers. The conference, and the book by the same name that emerged from it,[3] clarified much about the hunter-gatherers' life, but also put forward what some saw as facile assumptions about male dominance. The collection called *Woman the Gatherer*,[4] one among many needed correctives, was issued by a different group some years later, but even *Man the Hunter* was clear about women's roles: these were the most egalitarian of societies, gender equality included, probably because women found and provided some 70 percent of the food.

Other correctives to stereotyped ideas of hunter-gatherers included archaeological evidence of their opportunities, in some times and places, to draw on much richer supplies of food and other resources and therefore to achieve a denser population than had been found among any recent hunter-gatherers. To take another example, it now appears that our ancestors scavenged—stole carcasses from lions, leopards, and other predators, as hyenas or vultures do—much more than we used to think. Still, the four decades since that dubiously named meeting have produced intense investigations of the last few remaining hunter-gatherer groups. The studies have tended to be more quantitative than conventional ethnographies and to use a team approach rather than the old model of a lone ethnographer with her people. Cautiously, circumspectly, with countless qualifications, these studies have indeed shed some dim light on human evolution.

But some investigators of hunter-gatherer life were there long before this new movement started. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, the author of *The Old Way*, is an exceedingly gifted writer from a family of extraordinary people. Her father Laurence was a cofounder and president of Raytheon Corporation, her mother Lorna an exacting and skilled ethnographer, and her brother John was one of the greatest ethnographic filmmakers. Lorna Marshall's two books, *!Kung of Nyae Nyae* (1976) and *Nyae Nyae !Kung: Beliefs and Rites* (1999, as she passed her one hundredth birthday), and numerous scholarly articles have permanent value to all who care about the variety of human cultures; they are clear, thorough descriptions of all aspects of a single culture, that of the !Kung or Zhun/twasi[5] of Namibia—commonly known as Bushmen. Her writings are among the classics of twentieth-century ethnography.

But she did not get there by anything like the conventional route. She was not trained in anthropology (although carefully self-taught) and began with little or no institutional connection. After Laurence retired, the couple became explorers, and in 1950 went looking for the Bushmen of what was then Southwest Africa. Fortunately for anthropology, they took their teenagers—Elizabeth, nineteen, and John, eighteen—along with them. All four displayed exceptional courage in their forays into the bush over a period of years, braving not only the elements and predators but the then-unpredictable behavior of both indigenous Africans and those who systematically abused and exploited them. They were not the first whites to explore that region, but for all the impact Western culture had made there they might as well have been. And they were almost certainly the first whites to visit the Bushmen with only good intentions.

Lorna made ethnographic studies, John made films—each a work of exceptional authenticity and clarity—and Elizabeth observed the bush world and its people with a remarkable sensibility:

> *It was very cold last night. The south wind blew from the Antarctic all night long, sweeping the haze out of the sky, leaving the brilliant, hard, white moon. We moved on shortly after dawn, through this gorgeous dry rolling veld, by little forests, over outcrops of rock. We went through valleys and burned areas, and over plains so long you could see the trees in the haze miles away, like a distant shore, until we came to a dry pan where we hoped to find people.... A little way into the veld, which here is yellow pinkish grass like old bloodstains, we found high spring bushes with karu vines on them.... And we found a tree full of weaverbirds' nests swinging in the wind but all empty, and we found a shoulder blade, all white, bleached and dry, of some large antelope. We even saw a little round mouse nest, also empty, hanging from the branch of a thornbush. We walked farther but found no signs of people....*

This excerpt from Thomas's journal shows her at her best: spare, yet dense and luminous. Thick description we might call it, free of jargon and editorializing, a pleasure to read. When they do find people, she writes well of them too. She wrote an important account of the Bushmen, *The Harmless People* (1959), which attempted to dispel myths about their violence and backwardness; and *Warrior Herdsmen* (1965), about the Dodoth people of northern Uganda. More recently, she also has written two evocative novels set in the Stone Age; *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, a 1993 best seller that influenced the way many people thought about canines; and other books about the nature of dogs and cats.

But *The Old Way*, her new book looking back on her early experiences among the Bushmen after half a century, also contains passages like this:

> Our species seems to have an atavistic urge to hunt such as is found among the carnivores. That our impulse is atavistic can be seen in the reaction shown by some of us—not all of us, surely, as we have been overfed and sedentary much too long, but some of us—when, say, we notice a deer at the roadside. *Oh wow! Look at that!* Our eyes fly open, we draw a short, sharp breath, and our bodies tense. Physically speaking, we are ready to run forward. No matter how often this happens, our reaction is always the same and does not fade with time or repetition. This means that it was put deep inside us by Gaia and is not under voluntary control.... Most of us today would reach for a camera or simply enjoy the glimpse of wildlife, but evidently Gaia would want us to give chase.

Gaia here is presumably a metaphor for evolution, but it is a questionable one, and it is jarring to encounter this bit of pop evolutionary psychology in what is otherwise a convincing argument for the importance of hunting.

The contrast between Thomas's early journal entry and this passage illuminates the dual goal of the new book. It is an attempt both to revisit the unique experiences she and her family had of a way of life that is now all but gone, and to draw lessons from it about human evolution. Some anthropologists would bristle at the ease with which Thomas passes back and forth between baboons or chimpanzees and the hunter-gatherers in our own species. Discussing the ability of bears to recognize an edible plant in any season, she writes:

> If you remember the naked stalk and come back in a few months, you'll be rewarded with berries. Chimpanzees have similar abilities. The primatologist Richard Wrangham calls chimpanzees excellent botanists.
>
> When in midlife I came to think of certain animals as botanists, I also thought of the people of the Kalahari, who had named almost every plant that grew and knew its properties, who would recognize a plant in one season and come back for it in a later season.... Surely the earliest people were no less capable than American black bears and chimpanzees—all belonged to the Old Way....

Some clearer statements about the categorically and fully human status of Bushmen would have been welcome. Still, the dual goal is legitimate.

Some of Thomas's reasoning about evolution is interesting, but she cites very little scientific research and glosses over the major claims and controversies among experts on evolution. When she says "our ancestors, the chimpanzees," it is not pedantry to object. It is not just that we are not directly descended from chimps, although humans and chimps are related species that shared a common ancestor some six million years ago. What is also troubling is that bonobos, another ape species as closely related to us as chimps, are not discussed in her book, while chimps are cited on thirteen pages. Bonobos behave very differently from chimps: the phrase "make love, not war" is often used to evoke their very different approach to sex and aggression—and it is not at all clear which of these close cousins (if either) we should use to model our common ancestor. We are more like bonobos in love and more like chimps in war. We will soon be able to describe in detail the similarities and differences in the genes; this won't settle the question, but it will help.

Conflating "the Old Way"—a name for how Bushmen lived before their collision with modern society—with our collective Old Way as a species is also a problem for Thomas. According to her:

> For fifteen hundred centuries, we kept the Old Rules, then broke them all and erased the Old Way from our lives. Among the last to lose it were the Ju/wa Bushmen in the Kalahari interior, who in the 1950s were still living entirely from the savannah, as people had done since people began, eating the wild plants and the wild animals they caught and killed, making their clothes from animal skins and their tools from stone, wood, bone, and plant fiber. They had no agriculture, no domestic animals (not even dogs), no fabric, no manufactured items....
>
> Although today a few individuals may remember the Old Way and keep some of its skills, no human population lives by it any longer. Even so, it clings to us still, in our preferences, in our thoughts and dreams, and even in some of our behavior. All over the world, many men who hunt are following the Old Way whether they know it or not, even the Americans with gun racks in their trucks.

This may be true when applied to the more general aspects of hunting and gathering. But in other respects the Bushman Old Way probably resembles just one of the environments of evolutionary adaptation. Most of our ancestors lived in richer environments; some had high enough population densities to develop some social stratification, which does not exist in Bushmen societies. Thomas makes much of the fact that Bushman arrows are light and small, relying on poison applied to the arrowhead and shaft in order to kill. But many other hunter-gatherers, such as the Hadza of Tanzania and the Agta of the Philippines, used large arrows with forceful bows, and those weapons had implications for their hunting methods, their dealings with predators, and the violent human conflicts they engaged in. The Bushmen are relevant, but they are not, as Thomas implies, the entire story of our Old Way.

There also are questions Thomas does not fully confront about how to characterize their ways of life today. For example, she grapples gamely with the question of violence. In one of her two passing references to the only author with a status comparable to her mother's in Bushman ethnography, she writes, "Richard Lee has said that the Ju/wasi had a murder rate equal to that of Detroit." But Lee doesn't just say this, he proves it through painstaking reconstruction based on interviews with many people directly involved in violence, while ignoring uncorroborated cases. Twenty-two homicides in fifty years in a very small population

does indeed produce a rate of murder close to Detroit's. Thomas cites killings she unearthed in her own interviews in the 1950s, yet still calls the Bushmen "the Harmless People"—her questionable translation of their name for themselves and the title of her first book—because (as Lorna Marshall demonstrated in a classic article on the control of conflict) they usually didn't resort to violence. But it is because, as she admits, "they had violence in them" that they worked so hard at controlling it. And about as often as we in our own cities, they failed.

The things they fought about are also of interest. Accusations of adultery and vendetta killings are prominent among them. Shortly after my late wife, Marjorie Shostak, and I first arrived in northwestern Botswana in 1969, a knockdown fight broke out between two women. Relying on an interpreter, we found out the reason. Some people had been discussing whether a certain young couple should divorce; adultery was mentioned; someone said, "That reminds me of the time so-and-so slept with so-and-so"; and two women involved in that earlier, completely separate episode started brawling.

Thomas ignores or downplays such tensions, which in our population of Zhun/twasi, on the Botswana side of the border a few miles from Thomas's group, were not uncommon. After admitting that "we learned little about the sexual behavior of the Ju/wasi," Thomas claims that "adultery...was virtually unknown and seldom necessary, as divorce and remarriage were easily achieved." Aside from missing the point about much adultery when it occurs, this simply isn't true. Superb demographic research by Nancy Howell showed that divorce was easy until a child was born, after which it was very difficult, although for some men a younger second wife served the same purpose.[6]

As for adultery, it was not common, but it was far from unknown. This is powerfully documented in Shostak's classic *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*, one of the most widely read and well regarded of modern anthropological works, and the only one in which a person from Bushman culture speaks extensively for herself.[7] As Shostak explains in detail, while Nisa was unusual, she was hardly unique, as was clearly shown by interviews with other women. Shostak became extremely adept at understanding the language women used about their emotional lives and in hundreds of tape-recorded interviews she found numerous instances of adultery. But almost more important than the actual sexual

encounters of !Kung women were the depth and richness of their fantasy lives—romantic, tender, lively, and funny—often built around intense attractions only occasionally consummated.

Thomas also says, erroneously, that homosexuality "seemed unknown" among the Bushmen—"Perhaps the Old Way, with its arduous lifestyle, does not transmit this quality"—and that "rape also was unknown." Both were known to us, on the Botswana side of the border at least, and I doubt the culture changed drastically over a few miles from west to east or from 1960 to 1970. Perhaps especially in matters of sex, absence of proof is not proof of absence, and when you admit having found out little about sexuality, you might well stop there. Instead we have Thomas's strong and unwarranted generalizations about the people and groundless speculation about evolution.

Thomas does not really romanticize the Bushmen, but sometimes her prose recalls the statement I have quoted from Montaigne. They always seem to be a little less violent, a little more loyal, a little more generous than we are. Indeed there is no significant aspect of character in which, as Thomas suggests, we might think or behave more admirably than they do, so a tone of regret for what we have lost dominates. The Bushmen may not have been more inherently generous or peaceful than we are, but they were certainly stronger, braver, and more resilient than most of us, and Thomas shows this well. In our experience, they had a biting wit and a talent for slapstick among other forms of humor. They laughed at sex, at incompetence, at themselves—which seemed part of the explanation of their success in adaptation. Broadly physical and hilarious imitations of anthropologists became a specialty.

The Old Way is at its best when read as a fluid, evocative narrative of an adventure with people whose extremely challenging way of life is now gone. The large tracts of land they once hunted and gathered on were gradually taken for agricultural use by others and the core of their territory was finally turned into a game park. When they lived by the old way, they did so with grit, grace, courage, calm, and humor. The book's descriptions of specific human encounters are particularly valuable, and the chapters on hunting, gathering, dangerous animals, and religion are vividly descriptive and ethnologically sound. Thomas's generalizations about Bushman culture and her speculations about evolution are interesting but should be read with some skepticism.

In 2005 I was able to return to northwestern Botswana after an absence of thirty years. Against my expectation, I was widely and even fondly remembered; more surprising, I was still more or less able to carry on conversation. In the company of my grown son, daughter, and son-in-law, I reminisced with the people about our common past, and especially about my late wife, who had been more intimate with them and better loved than I was. Remarkably, we found Nisa, the central subject of my wife's book. She had grown old and frail but her mind was clear and she was able to hold forth.

But compared to the way things had been, most people were not doing very well on either side of the border. On the Namibian side we had seen a school filled with bright-eyed children, but the villages on that side, as Thomas reports, are plagued by alcohol and violence. Decades of effort by the Marshall family, especially John and his then wife Claire Ritchie, and more recently by the gifted ethnologist Polly Wiessner, had begun to give people a self-sufficient life through farming their own land, but this was condemned by the well-funded, highly organized wildlife conservation movement, which convinced the Namibian government that the Bushmen were incapable of farming because they somehow were hunter-gatherers by nature. Thirty-five Bushman communities, made up of about thirty to forty people each, were farming in 1992, but the wildlife conservancy was established in 1998, and by 2002 people were very hungry.[8] Hunting and gathering were no longer desired or possible, and farming was forbidden. Disease rates were high. "Death by Myth," John Marshall called it.

On the Botswana side of the border last year, the myth being less tenacious, Bushmen were indeed farming and keeping chickens, goats, and some cattle. Many, however, were dependent on employment by the Bantu herders of sheep and cattle who had long since appropriated their ancestral lands, and were paid in food or very low cash wages. They were also suffering from alcoholism and violence, but at least they were not oppressed by conservationists; they seemed to be working and eating. We heard of a waterhole where, it was said, many of our old friends could be found. Hours of driving at slow speed in heavy sand led both to Nisa and, later, to the village, which came as a huge relief after the dismal picture we had seen on the trip until then. Thanks to the efforts of Megan Biesele, Robert Hitchcock, and other anthropologists on the Botswana

side, at least this one borehole, a source of pure water, had been sunk for the sole use of the people who not many generations ago ranged over all the land as far as the eye could see.

Remarkably, although the Zhun/ twasi here were keeping livestock—cattle and goats in separate *kraals*, or thornbush enclosures, and chickens scrambling and fighting underfoot—the village had the look of a traditional village camp of the 1960s. But now it was larger, and the small living structures, some grass-covered, some made only of sticks, were in a long oval rather than a circle. Many more possessions were hanging in the trees—clothes, plastic containers for water and milk, pots and pans, makeshift toys. And there were many more children; vaccination and clean water had dramatically improved their odds of growing up, and they were as energetic and playful as ever.

Some of the children I had studied thirty and thirty-five years earlier were now senior members of the group. One of my favorites, //Koka, a ten-year-old famously photographed by Shostak in a crown of small red flowers during a brief, lush rainy season, was now a grandmother with a lined face and the same shy but ready smile. The baby on her hip, her own, was younger than two of her grandchildren. Her father and his brother had both died, but both their wives were alive and well, as was her maternal grandmother; there were now five generations of women in this family in the village. A man I'd been fond of had lost a daughter who died giving birth; against all advice and all odds, he'd adopted her baby, and with the help of government formula and vaccines, she was thriving at the age of fifteen months.

After several days, I held a feast, paying the people for a cow, so they got cash as well as meat. Three men in their thirties—one, Kxau, had been in my infant study—had trouble roping the cow in the little *kraal* and had to chase it off into the bush, a sad comment on what was left of their hunting skills. As dusk fell, the prospect of so much meat provoked a traditional trance dance, their central religious ritual, in which women sat in a circle clapping and singing in strangely syncopated rhythms and yodeling melodies, while men danced around them, entered trances, laid on hands, and healed. But on this night, no men could enter a trance, though two women did, including //Koka, whose glazed, faraway stare into the distance kept merging for me with my memory of her young, bright eyes and stunning crown of flowers. Some things change in unexpected and not necessarily bad ways.

After the dance and the feasting, my son Adam and I sat in the dark and chatted in low tones with Kxau and two other men. Adam tried to get them to talk of their regrets for the Old Way, but they did not find the question interesting. We asked in four or five different ways whether they thought things were better before. They kept saying that the old life was no longer possible, the game had been driven out by the livestock, there was nothing to hunt anymore. Our questions didn't matter to them, and anyway there was plenty to like about the new way. Finally, talking among themselves, they found some positive things to say to us about the hunting prowess of their fathers and their wish that they had mastered those skills. But it was very clear that this carried no great weight for them. Unlike anthropologists, they were looking toward the future.

Letters:

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

'The Old Way'

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Melvin Konner

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1. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame (Stanford University Press, 1958), pp. 153, 156. ↩

2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 13, paragraph 9. ↩

3. *Man the Hunter*, edited by Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore (Aldine, 1968). ↩

4. *Woman the Gatherer*, edited by Frances Dahlberg (Yale University Press, 1981). ↩

5. Thomas renders this “Ju/wasi.” The slash represents an implosive consonant or click (dental in this case). In my spelling skipping the click yields a close to correct sounding. Thomas glosses the name as “harmless people” or “just people,” but “real people” or “true people” are at least as correct. “!Kung” appears more commonly in the literature, and can also be pronounced without the (palatal) click. ↩

6. Nancy Howell, *Demography of the Dobe !Kung* (Academic Press, 1979). ↩

7. Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Harvard University Press, 1981). See also her posthumous *Return to Nisa* (Harvard University Press, 2000). Thomas does not cite either work. ↩

8. This tragic story is fully documented by Polly Wiessner in “Owners of the Future? Calories, Cash, Casualties and Self-Sufficiency in the Nyae Nyae Area between 1998 and 2003,” *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 19 (2003), pp. 149–159: “When I left...in 2002 after conducting a month of studies on food and demography, people asked me what they would eat when I left. I spent the better part of the night pondering over veldt [i.e., foraged] foods that yielded a mere 230 kcals [i.e., calories] per hour, the failed hunting expeditions, the gardens destroyed by elephants, the unpredictable water supply, the poor market for crafts, few tourists and no employment opportunities. I could not come up with a single suggestion.” ↩