

Robert K. Hitchcock, Kazunobu Ikeya, Megan Bieselee and Richard B. Lee (eds).
Updating the San: Image and Reality of an African People in the 21st Century. Osaka:
National Museum of Ethnology, 2006. Pp.299, illustrs., tables, references, index. Price
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The Senri Ethnological Studies, published by the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, has become maybe the most important information source on former and contemporary hunter-gatherers. The volume addressed here is the sixth issue with this focus since the shift of the millennium.

Although the title of this volume could imply a continuation of the so-called Kalahari Debate, one of the most intense debates among social scientists in the last decades concerning the notion of hunter-gatherers, this is not at all the case. Although not stated by the editors themselves, I feel that they made a conscious choice in this case to downplay the way social scientists represent contemporary hunter-gatherers to the benefit of the lived experience of the people in question. So, instead of discussing what is in the heads of us scientists, the focus is on extracting knowledge concerning the everyday situation of the San groups of southern Africa, to aid future policies for the development and improvement of their lives.

Apart from a thorough introduction covering important general aspects of the San situation, the sixteen papers (mainly written by anthropologists) are divided into three sections: 1) Health, Body and Perception, 2) Development and Social Changes, and 3) Land, Identity and Human Rights.

The first section contains papers on the relation between AIDS and alcohol consumption (Lee and Susser), ideas of 'good health', illness and healing (Ingstad and Fugelli), effects on adult longevity with increased sedentarism and population aggregation (Draper and Howell), and navigational practices as a way of understanding the interaction between language, social organisation and culture (Takada).

In section two we find papers on the relation between alcohol and violence in the post-colonial situation in Namibia (Sylvain), how the San people should get control over their own education and language development (Bieselee), and, finally, a presentation of the San Culture and Education Centre !Khwatla (Stachelin).


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The third section deals with land and labour rights in Botswana (Campbell et al; Hitchcock), San refugees in southern Africa and the question of human rights (Hansen), and a detailed description of the thumb piano and its role for San identity (Ikeya).

One outstanding feature revealed through these papers is the close engagement by international social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular concerning the fate of the San people. At the same time, critique is directed towards other actors' involvement with the San, including tourism and development organisations and NGOs. These critical remarks seem well founded. However, nothing negative is said regarding the role of anthropologists. It would be of great interest to problematise this further, especially as most papers show a very deep and long-term involvement in San-related issues.

On the other hand, the strong link between international social scientists and the situation of the San people in southern Africa is remarkable. If I compare this with my own field of study, the hunter-gatherers of southern India, international anthropologists who have conducted major fieldwork in the region during the last decades, such as Nurit Bird David, Ulrich Demmer, Peter M. Gardner, and Brian Morris, have shown little or no interest in the situation of the people in question. The reasons for this may be complex, but our knowledge and experience has been more oriented towards academic concerns. This is in a way even more remarkable as our forerunners, like Verrier Elwin and Fürer-Haimendorf, paved the way for very close interaction between social scientists, local people and governments in India.

Finally I would like to stress the value of this kind of documentation, as one important question in regional politics is to find out whether former and contemporary hunter-gatherers needs special consideration in the ongoing politicisation of indigenous peoples, and especially so as other groups of indigenous peoples have a tendency, as in India, to dominate this political space.



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