

The Lost World of the Kalahari

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The Bushmen may have been the original inhabitants of Africa, or at least that of Southern Africa, but were forced out to the margins by invading populations of Blacks, especially Bantu Blacks, and more or less given the *coup de grace* by the Dutch during the 19th and early 20th century. The Bushman is of small stature, typically not more than five feet or so, and not black but of a lighter yellowish hue, more like that of apricot. He is daintily built leaving small footprints along the sand, but strong and supple and capable of sustained physical ability running down his prey over extended distances. In his cleverness and marginal existence he reminds you of the Australian aborigines.

Van der Post is an Afrikaner, born in 1906 growing up in a Boer Farm on lands which originally had belonged to the Bushmen, traces of whom were still present during his childhood. Some Bushmen, or rather mixed descendants of ones were held as domestic staff, or more accurately as slaves, and he heard many stories about this fabled people stirring his imagination. Their tragic fate grips him, and he is indignant of the way they have been mistreated, even hunted down and killed like animals. Subjected to such persecution, having their livelihood taken away from them, was it not natural that they would at times strike back, steal cattle, or engage in ineffective acts of revenge. Prejudices about the Bushmen were ripe, they were dirty, they stank, they were stupid and untrustworthy. The idea of the Noble Savage is a persistent one, illusory in many ways but serving as an important anti-dote, and the author subscribes to it whole-heartedly.

After spending two chapters on the preliminaries, first on his own childhood encounters, mostly mythological, then secondly on a more factual survey, which at times reads painfully, of the fate and characteristics of the Bushman, he is ready to get down to business, meaning leading an expedition into the Kalahari desert in search of still surviving groups of original Bushmen, untainted by Western Civilization pursuing a Stone Age way of life, a truly sustainable means of subsistence, which to the great delight of anthropologists has survived in isolated pockets well into the 20th century. By this time we are talking the early fifties, van der Post now well into his middle-age has spent extended time in England and emerged unscathed from the War where he has seen action both in Africa and Indonesia and been a prisoner of war in a harsh Japanese camp. He has recently divorced his wife and remarried and is ready to fulfill a dream of his childhood, to reestablish contact with original bands of Bushmen provided they have not been exterminated in the wild. Partly to finance the venture he arranges with the BBC to film it all, but his initial choice of a camera man, a Continental named Spode, specially instructed by the BBC and coming with the most modern of equipments along with a huge stack of film, turns out to be a disaster. Initially captivating the author by his artistic sensibilities, including a flair for playing the violin, he breaks down when encountering the harsh realities of the African bush, descends into a depression and is unable to muster any energy at all to film. Eventually he pleads to be released and half-way through the expedition, van der Post is

forced to interrupt it in order to search for a replacement. He is lucky to find a Scottish camera man by name of Duncan, bristling with enthusiasm, only to find that the camera will jam, forcing a second return to civilization hunting for a repair. Eventually though much footage was filmed and provided a well-received BBC documentary.

Anyway the Bushman gets around with a minimum of possessions, while Modern man is bagged down. Van der Post finds it expedient to purchase four Landrovers, specially designed with extra fuel tanks. He invites two friends of his to join, experienced hands in the bush, finds an excellent mechanic, and a Black cook with an assistant, as well as an African guide with some experience with the Bushmen. Also for some part of the journey an African policeman joins the fry. And of course the camera crew that initially consists of the unfortunate Spode and a young assistant of his, who breaks down even before Spode, but ultimately only consists of one man. We learn that all through Southern Africa there is an extensive network organized by the mining companies to man their operations by drawing from the sources all over Southern Africa, this also involves flights almost on a regular basis from the outlying settlements into Johannesburg, a fact that will be of some support to the expedition.

The first part of the expedition concerns the swamps on the northern edge of the Kalahari, treacherous waters filled with crocodiles and hippos. In fact still in the 50's Africa teemed with wildlife, not just in reserves, and the expedition encounters herds of antelopes and elephants. The author urged by his new wife to get himself a gun, the best gun possible, proves, much to his surprise, to be an expert marksman, killing game during most unfavorable circumstances, earning the admiration of his Native assistants, while his more experienced friends come back empty-handed from their hunting excursions. No original Bushmen settlements are found, except the remnants of a band consisting only of women and children. That venture, which turns out to have been a waste of time, is abandoned. Instead they seek out some hills supposedly haunted by the Bushmen as well as their spirits. The guide tells the author that they have to approach humbly and not kill any game, lest they offend the spirits, something which van der Post is unable to enforce. As they arrive they find some spectacular Bushman paintings, but when Duncan tries to film, the camera jams repeatedly, efforts to fix the matter on the spot fails, and as noted the author needs to make a second excursion back to Johannesburg. But before doing so he is induced to write a letter of apology to the spirits that is buried on the ground. One is at a loss to whether this is a mere ruse on the part of the author to pacify the irritation of his guide, or whether he, as a modern Western man of the 20th century actually believes in its efficacy. The indications, hard to believe, points to the latter.

The climax of the expedition, and hence that of the book, is relegated to the last two chapters, when actual contact is made with a band of Bushmen. There are some technical points, on which the author does not dwell, as to the means of communication. Good interpreters are invisible, making you believe that communication has been direct, but it is hard to believe that the author has anything but a fragmentary command of the Bushman language, and to assume that those savages, ostensibly untainted by contacts with Civilization, should speak English, would detract much from the mystique. But if local guides can speak the language, it would mean that the Bushmen make up a linguistically cohesive unit, albeit fractured by dialects. One is also somewhat surprised by the lack of

reserve displayed by the Bushmen, used as they must be to the malicious intents of their neighbors. Anyway, the basic facts are the following: They encounter a small group of Bushmen, living in primitive shelters as a protection from the unrelenting sun and the oppressive heat (one should not forget that the Bushmen, unlike most Natives in Africa are fair-skinned). Three, maybe even four generations, are living together, the oldest grandparents are wrinkled and shriveled in appearance, but apparently not demented. The author is struck by the fact that there are so few babies. The Bushmen are shy of reproduction, something that can be adequately explained by the harshness of their life. If a baby is born during a drought, it is unceremoniously killed. Something that may appear cruel and callous, but does not reflect on any deviation from the human instinct of tenderness for offspring, only on the unforgiving circumstances of their lot. The Bushmen are always busy manufacturing things, including elaborate ornaments. Such things have no economic relevance, meaning as to sustaining their life, but is a testimony to the need of the human mind to be active and find outlets for creating things for their own sake. But it is in the hunt that the Bushman proves his mettle. They are unrivaled (except by the Australian Aborigines) in interpreting spoors, an in English rather rare word that the author uses repeatedly, maybe because of his Afrikaan upbringing, and have an intimate knowledge of not only practical botany, extending not just to species, but also of individual specimen thereof. Thus during a hunt, two of the Bushmen seek out a particular bush, some fifty miles from their base, extracting from the ground below some ostrich eggs they had on an earlier occasion filled with water. Water is of course crucial to the survival of the Bushmen. Obvious and superficial sources dry out when most needed. What has saved them is their discovery of so called sip-wells, subterranean sources of waters to be sucked up by lengthy narrow pipes, a process demanding strong lungs and great muscular strength, and which the author is unable to replicate when given the opportunity. They also exhibit remarkable physical stamina pursuing a prey they have previously wounded by poisonous arrows, often for twenty miles or so and at a speed that the accompanying Landrovers have trouble keeping up with charging through the bush. When they kill, they do it with spears, piercing the heart, trying to make the agony as short as possible. The Bushman does not kill for its own sake, but just to maintain his life. The killing is a necessary if deplorable act, and should be done with dignity, not least as to that of the prey. In addition to their weakness for ornaments music plays a very important role in their lives, and they are able to convey it with primitive instruments. But of painting there is none in their small community, but when shown pictures of them, they are deeply affected, and are able to read meanings and intentions in them that would be opaque to a casual observer. And then every culture has a treasure of stories, but those belong to the innermost recesses of their lives, and they are reluctant to share them with strangers. Gradually the relations between the expedition and the community become more intimate, and after they have shared a dance, even that last reserve is broken down.

What we are witness to may be an idealized presentation of what it means to be an original man, innocent of Civilization, and living in harmony with the nature in a so called sustainable way¹. Van der Post is somewhat of a mystic, as testified above (not surprisingly his personal encounter with Jung would have a decisive influence on him and among other

¹ but of course even the marginal impact that primitive people may have on their environment will

things result in a book), and looks at regret at the vanished Africa of true magic. Van der Post is not a racist, he speaks about the Bushmen with great sympathy and admiration, yet of course he speaks about primitive people, taking a certain superiority for granted². But he was a child of this times and should not be censored, after all he seems to have taken a principled stand against Apartheid, although of course it did not prevent him from residing in the country (as with other countless (white) opponents, who unlike him had no choice in the matter). And of course every anthropologist inevitably takes a certain patronizing attitude towards his objects of study, no matter how sympathetic.

What strikes the observer of Stone Age life, (and it is a true miracle that such could at the time, and to some extent still can, be observed directly, as such communities provide living fossils, although it has become harder and harder to find untainted samples), is that on an individual level the lives are more intellectually demanding, and hence rewarding, than that of the modern age consumer. They are far more self-sufficient and thus placed in a more intimate relation to the world and their own survival. On the other hand life is much less diversified in a Stone Age Community, than it would be in a Civilized society with its mass economy and various niches for specialization. It is possible that only a minority of people of our Civilization would appreciate Stone Age life, and those would be those of us that are referred to, often with some condescension, as practical people who typically like to tinker with machinery. There would be no machinery of course, but the challenges would be similar. What decides survival in a Stone Age Society is not physical strength but practical ingenuity. It is an interesting thing that in spite of such ingenuity in practical matters, and such forensic cleverness in tracing prey, one cannot expect the kind of technical civilization we have now started to take for granted, to emerge. Technical innovations admittedly build on technical innovations, but technical innovations per se are not sufficient to set the spiral of accumulation to grow, One is reminded of evolution, which not automatically leads to intelligence. Bacteria have evolved cleverly for billion of years, but no matter what there will never emerge intelligent bacteria, the invention of multi-cellular structures is necessary, and this is something that does not regularly happen. Modern Man has walked this planet for say 50'000 years. The advent of civilization and a concomitant technological explosion, may have happened 20'000 years ago, just as it might have been delayed another 20'000 years. And what evidence do we have that it was bound or would be bound to appear? In fact, although this is beside the main point of the argument, Modern man as such were close to extinction, at least once during its history, a fact reflected in the small variation of genetic material in mankind.

Van der Post was a pioneer in bringing to attention the plight of the Bushmen, especially through the BBC documentary he was eventually able to produce. And the book that would follow a few years later, and is the one under review, would turn out to be his most successful. Not surprisingly the author has come under criticism for his supposedly subjective and Western oriented view (what else could have been expected of him?), and more extensive and sustained field studies have followed. The designation 'Bushmen'

accumulate to significant ones over the millennia

² Not being a racist does not automatically mean that you consider all men to be equal. You could very well stratify people according to worth along other than racial lines, considering intelligent people to have a better founded claim to exist than stupid ones, whom you may even think ought to be eliminated

has been discredited as derogatory, and instead the name 'San' has been proposed, which however also has a pejorative origin. Genetic studies of the Bushmen, have revealed that they show remarkable genetic variations for humans, and it is hypothesized that their Y-chromosomes belong to the oldest, if not the oldest discovered, suggesting a split from the rest of humanity as far back as 70'000 years ago. Mitochondrial studies also confirm those conjectures. In recent years there has been a drive to make the traditional hunters and gatherers into agriculturalists, no doubt with mixed blessings. There has also been a tendency for the Black governments in the region to dislocate them from their areas and move them into reserves, something that has been successfully challenged in courts.

What is missing in the Penguin paper back edition I must have purchased almost forty years ago are photos, which due to the documentary, must have been available in bunk. There is a map, inadequate but of course much better than nothing.

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