

Reflection Paper 2:

Problems in Kalahari: Historical Ethnography and the Tolerance of Error

Richard B. Lee

University of Toronto

Mathias Guenther

Wilfrid Laurier University

The premise of the Research

The !Kung San of Namibia and Botswana are among the most widely researched and documented hunting and gathering societies in the area of African Anthropology. From the research conducted in the past, two radically opposing viewpoints about the people have emerged. One, “sees the !Kung as hunters and gatherers living under changed circumstances and maintaining an old but adaptable way of life: the characteristic features associated with the hunter-gatherer subsistence or foraging mode of production. The other sees these same !Kung as products of a very different history, a history of long association with Bantu-speaking overlords, followed by intense involvement with merchant capital” (Lee and Guenther, 1993, p.185).

The authors of the study argue that the second viewpoint seeks to negate the autonomous growth pattern of the !Kung people by stating that “the experience of domination and incorporation[...]shaped their economy and social life [; that] their well-documented

egalitarian politics and gender relations are thus a product not of their own history, but of their history of shared poverty” (185). Given this dichotomy, the researchers’ goals is to establish the extent of foreign influences on the !Kung people. IN the process of doing to they also seek to establish Edwin Wilmsen’s landmark study “The Land Filled with Flies”, which too adopts the same revisionist position as stated above, as being uncritical and essentially erroneous. Keeping this is mind, the researchers lists the following research questions for this historical ethnography.

Research Questions

- When did the first Europeans enter the Nyae Naye and Dobe (NND) and what did they do to the !Kung?
- Did they kill or subjugate them, settle and missionize them, or did they hunt, trade, and leave?
- How many came, how often, and how long did they stay?
- Was the NND truly the trading entrepôt portrayed by Wilmsen?
- What did the Europeans find when they penetrated the !Kung interior?
- Did they find colonies of non-!Kung occupying the area?
- If not, what evidence for subjugation of the !Kung was there?
- How did we assess the reliability and veracity of the historical sources?
- Is there information corroborated by others?
- Do they introduce distortion and, if, so, of what kinds?
- How do we assess the social impact of these presences (or absences)?

- What evidence is there for Maori social or economic life to support either the revisionist or the alternative positions?

Commenting on the Purpose of this Research

There is a very obvious reason why I chose to critique this particular article. The first “obvious” reason being that the goal of the study is to put the actual condition of the “native” in perspective with reality; the second, establish the truth through analysis of historical documents, accounts, travelogues, and past research; third, establish the veracity of past research by re-examining the data and sources used in that research. All the three reasons resonate with my what I intend to do in my study and therefore, this article proves to be a perfect starting point in an attempt to understand what can or cannot work in my study. In addition, examining this study will enable me to identify the pitfalls and limitations that I may perhaps face when presenting my findings.

Addressing the Condition of the Native

Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her article “On Tricky Ground: Researching the Native in the Age of Uncertainty” notes that “[t]he category of the native Other is one that Fanon (qtd. in Smith, 1961/1936) and Memmi (qtd. in Smith, 1957/1967) have argued is implicated in the same category as the settler and the colonizer. As opposing identities, they constitute each other as much as they constitute themselves. Rey Chow (qtd. in Smith, 1993) reminds us, however, that the native did exist before the “gaze” of the settler and before the image of “native” came to be constituted by imperialism and that the native does have an existence outside and predating the settler/native identity” (115). Lee and Guesther’s study is based fairly and squarely on this every premise. That the identity of the “Native”, in this case the

!Kong people long before the Europeans settled, was well entrenched in the geography, the society, the politics, and culture of the indigenous; that the entire state of the native is cannot be summed by simply studying a few select, more current historical, documentation. A culture of people cannot be defined in exclusive non-fluid, constant demarcations—and if such a definition is offered, it is inaccurate and not at all reflective of the true identity of the people.

Having the discussion on what defining the identity of the native leads me to ask another question---who or what gives me the authority and/or the right to go about prying and investigating a group of people in order to locate their identity? In doing so, whose identity am I really illustrating? The identity of the native according to the native or the identity of the native according my own perception of what their realities are? This is tough questions to answer and similar issues regarding the ethical side to ethnographic research have been raised by various scholars (Denzin & Lincoln (2008); Christians (2008); Foley & Valenzuela (2008); Whitaker (1996). The questions that I have reaised regarding the identiy of the native and the process of identifying the native from an outsiders point of view are all issues that I find myself grappling with.

Research Methods in the Current Study

Data in the form of historical maps and trade routes etc have been used to provide and triangulate answers to their research questions; however, the one source of data that has been used extensively are the arguments offered in Edwin Wilmsen's study. The researchers quote heavily from the the Wilmsen's study and then categorically go about refuting, by using other axuallary data sources to disprove what Wilmsen says in his study.

Question is—how much of this is actually an ethnographic study? The basic premise of this study is present, 1) Wilmsen's claims; 2) Find historical evidence to counter Wilmsen's claims; 3) Refute Wilmsen's claim. Needless to say this quite an interesting approach. As far as ethnographic studies is concerned, the researchers, in a traditional ethnography would be physically immersed in the culture. In this study, the researchers use historical evidence in the form to document to refute claims presented in documents.

I am actually quite excited that I found this study and would like to explore this study a little more; perhaps even look for studies that have emulated this very method. Interesting!

References

- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-44). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Anderson, G. L. (1989). Critical ethnography in education: Origins, current status, and new direction. *Review of Educational Research*, 59(3), 249-270.
- Angus, L. B. (1986). Developments in Ethnographic Research in Education: From Interpretive to Critical Ethnography. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 20(1), 60-67.
- Barab, S. A., Thomas, M. K., Dodge, T., Squire, K., & Newell, M. (2004). Critical Design Ethnography: Designing for Change. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 35(2), 254-268. doi: 10.2307/3651405.
- Bishop, R. (2008). Freeing ourselves from the neocolonial domination in research: A kaupapa maori approach to creating knowledge. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (pp. 145-184). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Christians, C. G. (2008). Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (pp. 185-220). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Foley, D., & Valenzuela, A. (2008). Critical ethnography: The politics of collaboration. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (pp. 287-310). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Lee, R. B., & Guenther, M. (1993). Problems in Kalahari historical ethnography and the tolerance of error. *History in Africa*, 20, 185-235.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1981). School Ethnography: A Multilevel Approach. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 12(1), 3-29.
- Reason, P. (2004). Critical Design Ethnography as Action Research. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 35(2), 269-276.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2004). "Tristes Paysans": Bourdieu's Early Ethnography in Béarn and Kabylia. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 77(1), 87-106.
- Smith, L.T. (2008). On tricky ground: Researching the native in the age of uncertainty. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (pp. 113-144). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Taylor, J. S. (2003). The Story Catches You and You Fall down: Tragedy, Ethnography, and "Cultural Competence". *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, 17(2), 159-181.

Vidich, A., & Lyman, S. (2003). Qualitative methods: Their history in sociology and anthropology. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (2nd ed., pp. 55-129). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Whitaker, M. P. (1996). Ethnography as learning: A wittgensteinian approach to writing ethnographic accounts. *Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research*, 69(1), 1-13.