

# Boekbesprekings/Book Reviews

**Megan Biesele**, *Women like meat: the folklore and foraging ideology of the Kalahari Ju/hoan*. Johannesburg and Indianapolis: University of Witwatersrand Press and University of Indiana Press (1993), pp. xxi + 225, 1 map, 8 half-tones, 4 line drawings. no price given

It is good to have this long delayed book by Megan Biesele before us. Many of its readers will, I am sure, share my feeling that it would have been good to have had it when most of it was apparently first written some 15 years ago at the time when the modern Bushman canon was being institutionalised. Biesele's work would have added a much needed broadening dimension to the then prevalent view that Khoisan-speaking peoples in Botswana and Namibia - at least those living in what were thought of as the 'remote' areas of those countries - had managed to maintain an ancient, aboriginal way of life largely unaffected by outside influences. Nevertheless, *Women like meat* arrives at another opportune moment, one at which the adequacy of that Bushman canon has been effectively challenged. Biesele's work now offers substantial material with which to help fill out the emerging dynamic history of northern Khoisan peoples.

It is not that Biesele is concerned to address that history directly. Rather, it is more that the anecdotal evolutionism that was the guiding motif of the canon is not a central organising axis of her work; this is one of its major strengths. Indeed, the most obvious substantive flaws of the book occur in its first and last chapters, which are (along with a half-dozen), far the weakest of the seven chapters. These flaws stem from Biesele's uncritical acceptance of inferences made by others in the 1960s-70s on the basis of culture-stage development hypotheses that are no longer accepted. Examples are Yellen's notions that Ju/hoan (Zhu and Kung in other publications)<sup>1</sup> have lived in the same area for thousands of years, that in that area stone tools were replaced by metal only in very recent time, and that Tsodilo rock paintings all predate Bantu settlement there; Tobias's proposal that Bushmen developed tracking ability superior to that of other peoples; Marshall's conjecture that Ju/hoan do not understand fertility cycles; the widespread misconception that weather, carnivores, and in-laws are more limiting factors on the lives of foragers than on those of other peoples. All these essentialist conjectures have been rejected or cast into serious doubt by new empirical evidence, better historiography, and refined theory - sometimes by the authors cited by Biesele themselves. More surprising is Biesele's reliance on Lee's 1979 denial of the existence of structures of authority in Ju/hoan society instead of his 1986 revision of that denial - in a volume

edited by Biesele herself - to demonstrate that the authority of elders (women as well as men) permeates Ju/hoan social organization. However, the reader should keep in mind that, other than her own more recent work, her 'Bibliography' (sic) contains only two items published since 1982 - Dicken's 1991 paper on orthography and England's 1992 reworking of his 1968 PhD thesis. This highlights the unfortunate circumstance that the manuscript lay unpublished so long.

Fortunately, none of this interferes very much with the prime focus of the book, which is to trace, through two sets of interrelated mythological tales the creation of proper existential order in the world and, within this, proper human social relations. Each tale is presented in a transcribed text to which Biesele appends an explanatory analysis in the light of ethnography acquired independently by herself and others. Common themes and concepts are highlighted through symbolic associations in a variety of contexts to form a simulacrum of ... Ju/hoan mental territory'.

The first set of tales introduces the principal metaphors of transformation in Ju/hoan conceptions of the creation of the natural and social worlds and presents both male and female visions of order. In these tales a trickster and members of his family are different anthropomorphic animals who discover the necessities of life (fire, procreation, etc.) by duping each other into foolish actions and thus exposing the absurdity of inappropriate behaviour. Finally, all elements are 'finished' and from then on animals are just animals (interestingly, plants are speciated from the start), humans are fully human, and men and women are related to their proper economic and social domains. The metaphoric equation of women with prey and men with predators that pervades Ju/hoan thought was established at this moment. The second set of tales concerns womanly power and the balance of sexual power in Ju/hoan society. They concern a creator rather than a trickster and address affinal tensions embedded in bride service and marital residence, blood feuds (note this counterfoil to the romantic notion of harmless people), and - although Biesele does not mention this - individual and family entitlement to land. An important characteristic is the male/female reciprocity they enact: 'a "woman's story" is never just that', nor is a man's; both must know the other's world and how they relate to it. Equally important is the equation of kinship relations in the tales to appropriate kin behaviour in the present; the ideals of kinship reciprocity and proper marriage ties are enunciated and the consequences of good and bad choices delineated.

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Biesele has adopted Patrick Dicken's new orthography of the Zhu 'hōa language; I find this unnecessarily cumbersome, but use his spelling - Ju 'hoan - in this review to avoid confusing readers.

Biesele notes that there were significant contradictions between the two sets of tales and attributes this in part to dual facets of single allegorical-religious figure. She moves beyond this, however, drawing on the earlier work of Schapera and Marshall to suggest that both the duality and

the conceptual content of Ju/'hoan mythology represent beliefs from two different historical strata'. Subsequent work has since added considerable weight to this insightful suggestion. Indeed, a significant strength of *Women like meat* is that Biesele - despite the lapses noted - not only recognised but at the beginning of the 1980s was willing to address 'surprising similarities' among 'Bushman' throughout southern Africa as well as 'substantial contact with economies other than hunting and gathering', even in the Dobe-NyaēNyaē area thought by her Harvard colleagues to have remained relatively isolated. Biesele assumed a rather more shallow history for those contacts than is now documented and did not give adequate consideration to the possibility that the central place of cattle and iron in some of the tales parallels the known presence of these non-forager elements in archaeological sites in the Ju/'hoan area beginning about 2000 years ago. nevertheless, she concludes that '[t]hough the Ju/'hoansi seem isolated to us their culture is a complex set of influences, and of references to other times and places'. That was a noteworthy insight at a time when isolation was a watchword of 'Bushman' studies and remains a salutary recognition regarding any culture too often forgotten by anthropologists to this day.

In closing, I must point out two annoying editorial oversights. The first is the printing of = for the alveolar click ǀ, the second is the non-correspondence between chapter numbers in the text and the notes; both, especially the second, detract from the ease of reading. Beyond this, I miss the many other texts on the origin of death, the division of the social world, and other topics that are the meat of the materials collected by Biesele and look forward to their promised publication. I am sure Biesele's analysis of their contents will be as insightful as those she presents here.

Edwin N Wilmsen  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Texas