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Discontinuities in ethnographic time: A view from Africa

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ABSTRACT

While there is evidence of discontinuities in the sequences of some archaeological sites that exhibit long-term occupation and use over time in southern Africa, there is less evidence of such discontinuity in the ethnographic record. Drawing on long-term interdisciplinary studies of southern African peoples in the Kalahari Desert, this paper examines the evidence of discontinuities in the historical and ethnographic records. Attention is focused primarily on two southern African San populations for which detailed diachronic data exist: (1) the Ju/'hoansi of northwestern Kalahari, and (2) the !Xóõ San of the southwestern Kalahari region of Botswana and Namibia. From an ethnographer's perspective it might at first appear as though there was a fair amount of continuity in the Kalahari. It is shown, however, that there have been complex changes over time in the period from 1850 to the present, which occurred as a result of a combination of factors, including short-term and long-term ecological changes, in-migration and out-migration of various groups, cycles of population growth and decline, colonization, technological shifts, and implementation of development and conservation programs. The two cases illustrate the complex ways that activities, mobility, technology, land use, and demographic patterns can change over time as a result of both internal and external forces, resulting in discontinuities in the ethnographic record.

1. Introduction

While there is evidence of discontinuity in the sequences of some archaeological sites that exhibit long-term occupation over time in southern Africa, such as Blombos, Border, Rose Cottage, and Sibudu caves (d'Errico et al., 2012; Henshilwood et al., 2009, 2011; Lombard and Wadley, 2016; Mitchell, 2012; Wadley et al., 2011), there is less documented evidence of discontinuities in the ethnographic record. It is often assumed that the peoples found in places today have lived in those areas for substantial periods and that they have undergone relatively little in the way of change. This notions of 'isolation' and cultural continuity among some southern African populations such as the Ju/'hoansi San have been the subject of considerable debate (Barnard, 2006, 2007: 97–111; Lee, 2013: 203–226; Pargeter et al., 2016a,b; Sadr, 1997, 2013a: 253–268; Smith, 1996; Solway and Lee, 1990; Wilmsen, 1989, 2003; Wilmsen and Denbow, 1990). The debate relates in part to the questions of whether the Ju/'hoansi were living autonomously, independent of other groups, the kinds of interactions that they had with other people (e.g. Herero, Mbukushu, Tswana), and the degree to which the Ju/'hoansi were oppressed or exploited or maintained symbiotic relations with other groups over the past two millennia.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the issue of continuities and discontinuities in the ethnographic and ethnohistoric records of African societies, with particular reference to the San of southern Africa. As other authors in this special issue have pointed out, change is the norm rather than the exception on the archaeological scale, so much so that it is possible to identify what might be termed punctuated changes or discontinuities. These discontinuities also exist in the ethnographic present, that is, during the time when anthropologists and ethnoarcheologists have observed contemporary societies. There are changes that occur among groups occupying specific places at various points in time; there are also technological and economic transformations that occur such as introduction of livestock and the replacement of projectile-based hunting systems with guns. Local and regional-level environmental changes also cause adaptive shifts and depopulation of some areas. When the rains return, people re-occupy places that had been abandoned during times of stress.

It is important to note that understanding continuities and discontinuities in the ethnographic record of African societies is not easy. While populations such as the Ju/'hoansi of northwestern Botswana and northeastern Namibia have been the subject of over 60 years of detailed interdisciplinary research and observation (Barnard, 2007:53–65; Lee, 1979, 2013; Marshall, 1976; Thomas, 2006), this is not the case for many peoples across the continent. The Hadza of the Lake Eyasi region of northern Tanzania have also

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been the subject of extensive anthropological investigations beginning in 1959 and lasting up to the present time (Blurton-Jones, 2016a,b; Woodburn, 1964). Among the Hadza, as Blurton-Jones (2016: 113–114) points out, in spite of the fact that there had been at least six major external attempts to get them to settle down and become farmers, Hadza foraging systems have persisted. In many ways, Hadza camps today are little different from those reported as early as 1912. Some groups continue to shift residences, hunting is still done with bows and poisoned arrows, spears, and clubs, and fire is used in foraging and managing the resources on the landscape (Blurton-Jones, 2016b; Mallol et al., 2007; Schnorr et al., 2016). All of these strategies, including innovative cooking and fire use ones, are also employed in the Kalahari today as part of mixed economies.

From an ethnographer's perspective it might appear as though there has been a fair amount of continuity in the Kalahari and the Lake Eyasi regions. In fact, the Ju/'hoansi and Hadza both experienced substantial change over time, as seen in the archaeological, historic, and ethnographic records (Ten Raa, 1974; Yellen and Brooks, 1988; Mabulla, 2007; Blurton-Jones, 2016b: 44–46). Unlike many other indigenous peoples in Africa, these groups were able to retain a portion of their original territories, albeit reduced in size. Like the Hadza, the Ju/'hoansi were also subjected to government-imposed sedentarization and agricultural development efforts. This was the case, for example, in what used to be known as Bushmanland, now the Nyae Nyae region of Namibia in the period from the late 1950s through the 1980s (Marshall and Ritchie, 1984; Marshall, 2003; Biesele and Hitchcock, 2013).

The Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae moved into a government-sponsored settlement known as Tsumkwe in 1959–1960, where some of them engaged in farming, livestock raising, and other activities (Marshall, 1976: 60–61; Thomas, 2006: 268–293). In 1982–83 Ju/'hoansi families began returning to their former territories with the assistance of anthropologists who provided them with tools, seeds, livestock, and funds for the development of water points (Marshall, 2003; Marshall and Ritchie, 1984). The decentralization trend accelerated through time to the point where today there are 36 Ju/'hoan communities residing in an area of some 8992 km^2.

The Nyae Nyae Ju/'hoansi have established their own community-based institutions and development projects, ranging from gardens and livestock programs to tourism and small-scale craft operations with varying degrees of success (Wiessner, 2003; Biesele and Hitchcock, 2013). This has not been without difficulty; the Ju/'hoansi have had to cope not only with environmental and economic challenges but also with other groups attempting to take some of their land, water, and grazing resources. Both the South West African and Namibian governments were sometimes been reluctant to back the Ju/'hoan claims to the land in Nyae Nyae. The Ju/'hoansi and their neighbors the !Xuun and Khwe were also conscripted into the military in the 1970s and 1980s, which caused enormous difficulties for them along with massive social change (Biesele and Hitchcock, 2013: 10–11, 62, 114; Lee, 2013: 190–192).

One of the questions that James Woodburn (1988) asked about African hunter-gatherer social organization was whether it was the result of 'encapsulation.' Wilmsen (1989) and Wilmsen and Denbow (1990) provide examples of what might be termed an "encapsulation" perspective. They argue that Kalahari San had, in some cases, extensive herds of livestock of their own, but fell back on hunting and gathering as a result of livestock losses at the end of the 19th century due to a combination of rinderpest and drought, which killed large numbers of cattle and wild animals in 1896–97 (Molosiwa, 2014; Passarge, 1904; Van Oselen, 1972; Wilmsen, 1997). Other serious livestock diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease (*Aphthae epizooticae*), contagious bovine pleuropneumonia (CBPP) (lungsickness), rift valley fever (RVF), and anthrax caused substantial difficulties for livestock and their owners and managers in the northern Kalahari in the 20th century and early 21st century (Campbell, 1979; Grace et al., 2015; Hitchcock, 2002; Hitchcock et al., 1996).

The Ju/'hoansi of the northern Kalahari have frequently been taken as 'model people' on which to base conclusions about patterns of hunter-gatherer behavior in the past (Mitchell, 2013: 473; Pargeter et al., 2016a,b). Part of the reason the Ju/'hoansi are so popular as models for other hunter-gatherer groups is because there has been such detailed, long-term, and high quality ethnographic work done among them. It is interesting to note that archaeologists have used the Ju/'hoansi as models although Binford (1980, 2001), Johnson (2014), Kelly (2013), Pargeter et al. (2016a, b), and Mitchell (2016), among others, have emphasized the wide range of variation that exists among hunter-gatherer societies, including those in the Kalahari. The use of the Ju/'hoansi as analog models for understanding settlement, subsistence, and technology patterns in southern Africa undoubtedly has shed important light on other areas such as the Seacow River Valley of South Africa (Sampson, 1988: 13–28).

There is a tendency on the part of some archaeologists to employ a '!Kung' model to interpret patterns that they see in their data. Wobst (1978) warns archaeologists of 'the tyranny of the ethnographic record', while Humphreys (2005) says that a 'De-!Kunging' of the Later Stone Age in southern Africa is needed. The balance of this paper considers the range of variation that exists among San peoples in the Kalahari based on an examination of the recent history and ethnography ('the ethnographic present') of the Ju/'hoansi and the !Xóõ San from approximately 1850 to the present. It emphasizes the discontinuities that occurred in ethnographic time in the northwestern and southwestern Kalahari through an examination of population shifts, social, ecological, economic, and political transformations.

2. Contextual background

2.1. The Northwestern Kalahari and the Ju/'hoansi

From a linguistic standpoint, it is possible to distinguish three major San language families which correspond roughly to geographic areas in southern Africa: (1) the Ju/'hoan-!Xuun (Northern Khoisan), (2) the Khoe-Kwadi (Central Khoisan) and (3) the Tuu (southern Khoisan) in the southern Kalahari extending from Namibia and Botswana into the Cape region of South Africa (Guldemann, 2008, 2014). The Ju/'hoansi of northwestern Botswana and northeastern Namibia are Ju/'hoan-!Xuun speakers who number between 10,000 and 11,000 of the approximately 120,000 San living in southern Africa today. There are some 6000–7000 Ju/'hoansi in Namibia (Dieckmann et al., 2014: 23) and some 3300 Ju/'hoansi in 8 communities in northwestern Botswana not including cattle posts (see Table 1). The Ju/'hoansi reside in an area that covers as much as 84,000 km^2 (Yellen, 1977: 14). It should be emphasized that the northern Kalahari differs somewhat from other parts of the Kalahari Desert region of southern Africa (Barnard, 1992: 39–61; Lee, 1979: 87–115; Smithers, 1971: 1–8; Thomas and Shaw, 2010: 94–106; Weare and Yalala, 1971; Yellen and Lee, 1976: 33–36). There are geomorphological features in the northwestern Kalahari that include linear sand dunes fixed with vegetation, fossil river valleys, and features known as pans, low-lying playa-like areas that have clay bottoms where water accumulates after rains (Goudie and Viles, 2015; Yellen and Lee, 1976; Yellen, 1977). The pans were important to the adaptations of both animal and human populations, serving as places where water, minerals, and nutrients could be obtained. Special care had to be taken, however, to ensure that the pans were utilized at times when predators were not lurking in the surrounding vegetation.

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