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0521428653 - Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of  
the Khoisan Peoples

Alan Barnard

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## **Part I**

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### **The Khoisan peoples**

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## Introduction

### **The Khoisan peoples**

The Khoisan peoples are a large cluster of southern African nations. Some of them are pastoralists, others are hunter-gatherers or hunter-gatherer-fishermen, and virtually all today include individuals who work as herdsmen or labourers for members of other ethnic groups. Yet, in spite of differences associated with their subsistence pursuits, many otherwise diverse Khoisan peoples share a great number of common features of territorial organization, gender relations, kinship, ritual, and cosmology. These features are not randomly distributed; nor have they simply diffused from one group to another as single culture traits. They represent elements of structures held in common across economic, cultural, linguistic, and 'racial' boundaries. The focus of this book is on these structures and on the diversity which they take within Khoisan culture and society.

### **Theoretical premises**

#### ***Comparison***

Comparison is both a method and a theoretical concept (cf. Śaraṇa 1975; Holy 1987; Parkin 1987). For me, its theoretical importance increases when we compare not just two or three societies, but a range of similar societies, such as those which define a culture area. The kind of comparison I am interested in is what has been called 'controlled' (Eggan 1954) and more specifically 'intensive regional' (Schapera 1953) comparison.

This approach differs logically from large-scale cross-cultural studies where a 'global sample' is envisaged (e.g., Murdock 1949; Goody 1976; Ember and Ember 1983). Equally, it is very different from studies which define similarities, differences, or analogies between either whole cultures or isolated culture traits. In the latter case, comparison is merely illustrative. Examples of this type of study might include works as diverse as a short

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paper dealing with a single trait found in two or three societies (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown 1924) and a twelve-volume treatise on a vast array of culture traits found worldwide (e.g., Frazer 1911–15 [1890]). What is lacking in these cases are mechanisms for determining cause and effect or for defining cross-cultural variation in relational terms. Radcliffe-Brown's (1924) study of the 'mother's brother problem' posits structural relations, but only within specific societies, not cross-culturally.

In contrast, Goody's (1959) essay on the same subject focuses on two very closely related societies, in which opposite forms of behaviour between a mother's brother and his sister's son can be ascribed to differences in the rules of inheritance. Goody's study is an excellent example of controlled comparison, but it is narrow in scope. Goody sacrifices broader ethnographic coverage in order to maintain a tighter control over his comparisons. In contrast again, Nadel's (1952) 'essay in comparison' discusses witchcraft in four African societies from two different regions (two are Sudanese and two are Nigerian). Each regional pair shows both similarities of historical relationship and divergences, but comparisons between non-regional pairings also reveal features which would seem to be associated with variations in kinship, gender relations, age structures, and so on. Nadel's study is structural but only partly regional, the other part being illustrative. Nadel sacrifices an element of control in order to illustrate structural contrasts which would otherwise not be apparent.

This book is written from a specific perspective which has been labelled 'regional structural comparison' (Kuper 1979). Ideally, it entails both a structural dimension and the level of control which a regional focus can offer, though, like Goody and Nadel, one must inevitably sometimes sacrifice one in pursuit of the other. Regional structural comparison formed a major part of my Ph.D. thesis (Barnard 1976a) and parallels the development of the idea by Adam Kuper, who was my thesis supervisor. His work, exemplified by *Wives for cattle* (1982; see also Kuper 1975), has focused centrally on the politics of marriage among the Southern Bantu-speaking peoples. My own work in kinship has focused more on the relationship terminologies of the Khoisan peoples and has emphasized the notion of regionally conceived 'underlying structures', as well as historical transformations (e.g., Barnard 1987; 1988a). Indeed, the concept of a regional structure first occurred to me while I was doing fieldwork in Botswana. There I met members of various Bushman groups who described their usages of relationship terms with reference to usages in related dialects. They classify speakers of these dialects as 'kin' through the ideology I have termed 'universal kin categorization' (1978a; 1981). This

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necessitates a kind of structural ‘translation’ between the kinship systems of different peoples, and the practice in kinship is paralleled in other social spheres. My work on settlement patterns has followed a similar model, one which concerns logical possibilities of seasonal occupation, as well as ecological pressures and constraints (1979a; 1986a). Much the same is true of my work on religious ideas, where flexibility, even in individual belief, can be interpreted as operating within a great system of mythological and symbolic expression (1988b).

This book continues the approach which I used in those earlier papers. What earlier writers have described merely as cultural differences are seen here as part of the larger, regional structure of beliefs and practices – a structure of structures. To some degree, indigenous thinkers have an intuitive knowledge of this structure, as the example above shows. Just as English-speakers (even small children) know how to use nouns and verbs correctly in the English language, so too the Bushmen, Khoekhoe, and Damara know how to use, for example, religious ideas within the ‘grammar’ of the Khoisan religious system as a whole. This, of course, does not mean that they can always define explicitly the categories or formulate the rules of such a ‘grammar’; as experts in their own cultures, they do not need to. Explication of that ‘grammar’ is the task of the anthropologist.

### ***Khoisan kinship and underlying structures***

A large part of this book deals with kinship. Kinship is a focal point in Khoisan society and one which is especially significant for regional comparison. This is not so much because kinship is a ‘privileged system’ in any of the senses specified and criticized by David Schneider (1984). It is because kinship appears to be the most fundamental area of difference between Khoisan societies, while at the same time having at its core certain principles which unite Khoisan culture as a whole.

Foremost among these principles are the classification of relatives as ‘joking partners’ or ‘avoidance partners’, their classification as marriageable or unmarriageable, and for certain relatives, as ‘senior’ or ‘junior’. In the hierarchically arranged herder societies, it is through kinship that hierarchy is played out. Among the hunter-gatherers, it is through kinship, as well as through quasi-kin relationships of giving and receiving, that equality is defined and maintained. Although not quite a ‘core symbol’ in the sense of David Schneider or Roy Wagner (1986), the regional system kin classification functions as a ‘core’ underlying structure of social relations.

In studying Khoisan kinship, I have often found that the rigid application of traditional models drawn from other parts of the world or

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from anthropological, rather than indigenous discourse, obscures interesting features. An approach which takes into account similar features across societal boundaries can reveal underlying structures which add much more to our understanding of kinship than the surface structures which are the subject of conventional methods of formal analysis. Common features of kinship behaviour, for example, may be expressed terminologically in one language, but not in the language of a closely related, neighbouring group. One group may distinguish relationships by a large number of relationship terms; another may employ one term for a large number of relationships, while distinguishing jurally between different genealogical positions within the same relationship category (Barnard 1987). There have been earlier comparative studies which imply some notion of underlying structure. Radcliffe-Brown's (1913; 1930–1) comparative and theoretical studies of Australian Aboriginal social organization, Josselin de Jong's (1977 [1935]) argument for the study of the East Indies as an 'ethnographic field of study', Eggan's (1950; cf. 1955 [1937]) work on the Western Pueblos, and Goody's (1959) essay on the mother's brother in West Africa are cases in point. Yet none of these studies made explicit either the generative principles or the constraining rules which such underlying structures entail.

A few points may help to clarify my views on this subject. First, my concept of an underlying structure implies a notion of cross-cultural similarity. An underlying structure (e.g., of systems of kinship or of religious belief) is not usually unique to a people, but found in common among several peoples. It therefore differs from Kuper's (1980: 21; 1982: 155–6) notion of the underlying structure of Swazi 'symbolic dimensions', which is particular to the Swazi. Likewise, my notion of underlying structure is analogous neither to that of the 'deep structure' of a particular language, nor to that of 'universal grammar' in linguistics. An underlying social or cultural structure is neither specific to one people nor universal.

Secondly, the concept of an underlying structure is essentially an empirical one; therefore its precise extent will depend on context. One may speak of the kinship systems of the Khoe-speaking peoples as having a common underlying structure, or of those of the Khoisan peoples as a whole having a greater or more distant underlying structure. One may talk about the underlying structure of Bushman settlement patterns and exclude from this structure the settlement patterns of Khoekhoe and Damara herders, or one may wish to try to explain all these patterns within the same, larger structure. It is also possible to define underlying structures beyond a region. Variation within a given world religion (e.g., Christianity or

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Buddhism) or due to its influence (e.g., in family structures) is sometimes best explained in such terms.

Thirdly, the concept of an underlying structure presupposes the contrasting concept of a surface structure. For example, surface structures include those aspects of kinship classification which are implied directly by relationship terminologies. Each speech community has its own relationship terminology structure, and, as noted above, conventional methods of analysis deal with these, while ignoring the complexities of underlying regional or other larger structures. Similarly, typologies of relationship terminology structures ('Eskimo', 'Iroquois', etc.) or descent systems (patrilineal, cognatic, etc.) entail a notion of comparability only at a surface level and frequently fail to reveal either underlying differences within 'types' or underlying similarities across typological boundaries (cf. Barnard and Good 1984: 55–7, 59–66, 104–6).

### **Ethnographic background**

#### *Terminology: some complications*

The term 'Koisan' (later 'Khoisan') was coined by Leonhard Schultze (1928: 211) in his biometric study of 'Hottentot' and 'Bushman' populations. He intended it as a biological label. Popularized by I. Schapera (1930), 'Khoisan' has long been taken as a cultural and linguistic label as well. It reflects a traditional, if not strictly accurate, ethnological division of the groups. *Khoi* (in old Nama orthography) or *khoë* (in modern Nama orthography) means 'person'. The Nama and Korana, the two herding peoples who have survived into the present century, use the compound *Khoekhoen*, 'People of People', as their self-appellation. In fact, *Khoë* was first recorded, as *Quena* (the *-na* is a common-gender plural suffix), by Jan van Riebeeck in January 1653 (M.L. Wilson 1986a: 252) and is found as a generic term for 'people' in most Khoë languages – i.e., those of the Khoekhoe, the Damara, and certain 'Central Bushman' groups. In Nama the term requires a number-gender suffix (*khoëb*, a man; *khoës*, a woman; *khoëra*, two women; *khoëti*, three or more women; etc.). In the English compound 'Khoisan', the first syllable refers to the Nama themselves and other cattle-herding Khoekhoe or 'Hottentots'. Following established practice among linguists who specialize in Khoisan languages, I use the spelling 'Khoë' as a linguistic label or when referring to the Khoekhoe themselves, but retain the traditional spelling 'Khoi-' in the artificial compound 'Khoisan', which is distinctly a European and not a Khoisan word.

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*Sān* is the Khoekhoe word for ‘Bushmen’ or ‘foragers’. Unlike *khoe* it is grammatically complete. *Sān* is the common-gender plural form. *Sonqua* and *soaqua*, the forms most frequently used in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records, are syntactically masculine plural, although they were applied collectively to women and men alike. An interesting contrasting case is the usage *k’au khoedzi* (literally ‘male people’, but with a feminine plural suffix), which means ‘men’ in Nharo, a Khoe dialect spoken by ‘Bushmen’. The term ‘San’ is commonly employed today by anthropologists who object to ‘Bushman’ on the grounds that it is, in their view, a racist or sexist term. Yet, in my view ‘San’ is not much better; certainly it has not always had the best connotations in the language from which it comes. At times it seems to have meant ‘tramps’, ‘vagabonds’, ‘rascals’, ‘robbers’, ‘bandits’, etc. (see, e.g., Hahn 1881: 3). In Cape Khoekhoe dialects and in Nama it generally carried negative connotations and was applied both as a generic term (e.g., to refer to black, white, or Nama ‘rascals’) and as an ethnic label (to refer to Bushmen). In earlier times, it referred primarily to low-status Khoekhoe who had lost their cattle, and was only later extended to its present use (Guenther 1986a: 28–30). Nevertheless, it can be employed in Nama today as an ethnic label, in a more or less neutral sense, just as it is by English-speaking anthropologists. The problem, still, is that it is often taken as meaning non-Khoe – in spite of the fact that many foraging as well as herding populations speak Khoe and not ‘San’ (non-Khoe Khoisan) languages. Although ‘San’ is gaining wide acceptance among non-specialists, several ethnographers who formerly used it have now reverted to ‘Bushman’.

Another fashionable alternative among anthropologists is ‘Mosarwa’ (plural, ‘Basarwa’), a term borrowed from Setswana, the language of the Tswana people. Needless to say, it has some of the same problems. The usage *Basarwa* is a neologism. It has only been in existence since the 1970s. The upper-case *Ba-* prefix (that of ‘people’ and ‘tribes’) officially replaces the *ma-* (a prefix for ‘things’) of the traditional form *masarwa*, although most speakers, including Basarwa themselves when they speak Setswana, still say *masarwa*. The stem *-sa* is probably a loan word, related etymologically to the *sa-* of Nama *san*, while the *-rwa* is from a Common Bantu term frequently applied to indicate diminutiveness. Interestingly, white people are still designated *makgoa* (singular, *lekgoa*), perhaps in recognition of their lack of the unitary ‘tribal’ status which now seems to be granted, implicitly, to the scattered and diverse Basarwa peoples. The term ‘Masarwa’ (plural) has also been used incorrectly in some early twentieth-century writings, including colonial service reports, to refer to various

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specific Bushman groups (as in phrases like ‘the Masarwa tribe of Bushmen’). Although ‘Basarwa’ is now used as the plural form in both Tswana and English-language publications in Botswana, I prefer to use the English word ‘Bushman’ in an international context. There seems to me no reason to prefer a Tswana word for an English one in this context.

Recently, another term has been suggested. The Argentinian anthropologist Carlos Valiente Noailles (Valiente Noailles 1988: 26–8), noting the use of *kua* for ‘Bushman’ among some groups in the southeastern Kalahari, has employed ‘Kúa’ as a generic term. He uses it mainly for speakers of ‘Central’ Bushman languages, and more specifically for the G/wi and G//ana whom he studied. The problem here is that this term already has an even more specific usage, referring not to the G/wi and G//ana at all, but exclusively to other southeastern Kalahari groups. They use it as an ethnic self-designation. Its only advantage as a generic label seems to be that it has not yet acquired any negative connotations.

Any term which is applied to low-status individuals can acquire negative connotations. The English word ‘Bushmen’ (from the Dutch *Bosjesmans*) has much the same history as ‘San’ (cf. Guenther 1986a: 31–9). The earliest recorded usage of ‘Bosjesmans’ is 1682, although in the early decades of contact ‘Sonqua’ or ‘Soaqua’ was more common. ‘Sonqua’ was replaced by ‘Bosjesman’ in official documents around 1770 (M.L. Wilson 1986a: 256). I am happy to allow context to determine usage, but my own preference is ‘Bushman’, if only because it is in common use in my own language.

In the 1970s there was a heated debate between historians Anna Boëseken (1972–4; 1975) and Richard Elphick on this issue (1974–5), with Boëseken arguing the sanctity of historical terminology in historical context and Elphick arguing that usage by historians should reflect the current and not the past situation. While in some respects I sympathize with Boëseken’s position, in the case of ‘Hottentot’ and ‘Khoekhoe’ (or ‘Khoikhoi’) I follow Elphick in my preference for the latter. ‘Hottentot’ is a term of much etymological speculation (e.g., Nienaber 1963a; 1963b); although no one knows for certain, it was probably derived from a Cape Khoekhoe dance chant in use in the late seventeenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, writers frequently applied the term ‘Hottentot’ indiscriminately to all Khoisan peoples, a practice followed in the nineteenth century by Theophilus Hahn (1881: 2–3). The later application of ‘Hottentot’ specifically to herding peoples was apparently instigated by Lichtenstein (1811, I: 248), and is common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts. However, it has in recent decades acquired such offensive connotations that it is best to avoid it totally, especially as there exists an



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indigenous word, 'Khoekhoe', which today is invariably preferred by the people themselves.

***'Khoe' and 'San': further complications***

The problem is further complicated because the distinction between Khoe and San, or Khoekhoe and Bushman, is by no means clear. For example, the 'typical Bushman' is said to be characterized by

diminutive proportions, slight habit, light yellowish skin, steatopygia, and hair in sparse peppercorn tufts; . . . and by speaking language of an isolating, non-inflectional type, phonetically remarkable for the great prevalence of 'click' consonants; and . . . by living in small nomadic bands which lead a purely hunting and collecting existence, practising neither agriculture nor pastoralism. (Schapera 1939: 69)

But as Schapera points out (1939: 69–72), there is really no such person as a 'typical Bushman'. The usual descriptions of physical characteristics seem to apply mainly to the extinct Bushmen of the Cape Province. Such well-known groups as the !Kung, who live more than 1,500 kilometres north of Cape Town, have a very different appearance. Northern and Southern Bushmen do speak isolating languages, but the Khoe-speaking Bushmen of the central Kalahari, the Okavango delta, eastern Botswana and other areas have inflecting languages, related not to those of 'typical Bushmen', but to those of the Khoekhoe.

Only Schapera's last characterization, that of Bushmen as hunter-gatherers who live in small nomadic bands, is useful for comparative purposes. Yet even if we accept this as a basic definition, there are problems. Many Bushmen who have lived at one time by hunting and gathering have now settled permanently at waterholes, where they cultivate gardens or raise livestock. I retain the word 'Bushman' for members of such groups, although in the strictest sense the word applies to their ancient and not their present lifestyle. However, I would generally not apply the term 'Bushman' to herders who have temporarily lived as hunter-gatherers. Here I am thinking of hapless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Cape Khoekhoe who lost their cattle, and nineteenth-century Damara who fled their Nama masters and lived as foragers in the rugged hills of northeastern Namibia.

'Bushman' is much more of an odd-job word than 'Khoekhoe'. The Khoekhoe all speak closely related languages, and their culture and social organization are relatively uniform. The Bushmen, on the other hand, speak a variety of languages which are only very distantly related, or even unrelated. They are also more culturally diverse. Furthermore, 'Khoekhoe' is a word which the designants apply to themselves, whereas 'Bushman' has

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always been a collective term for peoples who generally have no equivalent in their own languages. It is not surprising that the widespread use of 'Bushman', or for that matter 'San' or 'Basarwa', has created problems, especially for historians and archaeologists (Elphick 1979: 4). Yet the concept of 'hunter-gatherers who live in small bands' is a helpful one, and it is best to keep some such term (cf. Parkington 1984a; M.L. Wilson 1986a: 261–4).

One final point is worth mentioning here: the ethnological status of the Damara. Schapera (1930: 3) notes that the inhabitants of southern Africa before 1652 'are customarily classified into four separate groups, known respectively as the Bushmen, the Hottentots, the Bergdama [Damara], and the Bantu'. Again, classification is 'on the basis of racial, linguistic and cultural distinctions' (1930: 3); apparently because of 'racial' differences, the Damara are excluded from the category Khoisan. Here Schapera is following the intent of Schultze's original usage, but I think this is a mistake. Culturally, the Damara are a Khoisan people. In Namibia they have long lived in close association with the Nama. Although some of their customs are borrowed from the Herero, a Bantu-speaking people, they speak the Nama language, and the essential features of their rituals, their mythology, and many aspects of their social organization, are easily identified as Khoisan.

The Khoisan peoples, then, include the Khoekhoe (Hottentots), the Damara, the Khoe-speaking Bushmen, and the non-Khoe-speaking Bushmen of southern Africa.

### ***Ethnic classification***

The intricacies of Khoisan ethnic classification will be dealt with in Chapter 2, but some further introductory comments may be useful here.

Khoe-speaking peoples include the Khoekhoe, the Damara, the Bushmen of the central Kalahari and Okavango, the Hai//om and other Bushmen of the Etosha area of northern Namibia, and quite possibly smaller groups in Angola. Similar relationship terminologies – a key defining feature of social structure – are found among all these peoples, and in each case the marriage rule is either to matrilineal or to bilateral cross-cousins. The Khoekhoe nations, who include the Nama, the Korana (!Ora) and others, traditionally hunted, gathered, and herded cattle and sheep. They lived in circular encampments which were made up of patrilineally related kin, in-married wives, and in-married husbands (often performing bride-service). Their tribes, clans, and lineages were hierarchically ranked and each tribe had its own independent, and often powerful, chief. The