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## Mirror Dance: Tourists, Artists, and First People Heritage in Botswana

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## Mirror Dance: Tourists, Artists, and First People Heritage in Botswana

*Jessica Stephenson*

### *Abstract*

Arts destined for the tourist market have long been devalued and set aside from serious study. They are considered mass-produced, artistically uninteresting, and inferior in quality. Recent scholarship counters these views; many forms of tourist art can be recognized as artistically inventive and conceptually complex authentic objects of significance to both client and artist. Here the paintings and prints created by artists affiliated with the Kuru Art Project in Botswana are considered as forms of autoethnography, after Mary Louis Pratt's term for indigenous autobiographies created in the context of "contact zones." Autoethnographies are received heterogeneously—in this case, as both nostalgic images of longing that drive the touristic quest in southern Africa, but also as contemporary San yearnings for the reclamation of a hunter-gatherer past in the assertion of a new First People political voice.

Some films can kill. One such film was the blockbuster *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which played to packed houses in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere. This film, with its pseudoscientific narrator describing Bushmen as living in a state of primitive affluence, without the worries of paying taxes, crime, police and other hassles of urban alienation, has had a disastrous impact on those people whom we call "Bushman."

— Robert Gordon<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, I visited D'Kar in Botswana to interview artists affiliated with the Kuru Art Project. Near the end of my visit, I purchased a souvenir, a color print by Dada Coex'ae Qgam. Fresh off the printer, Dada explained that the work depicted the edible Xoru plant and a species of Kalahari Desert bird that favors the berries of this plant (figure 5.1). She also identified a small schematic human figure at the bottom left-hand corner as a representation of herself as mother and grandmother. Below the figure are two series of short parallel lines that denote the number of children and grandchildren that Dada has nurtured. Yet this interesting autobiographical detail disappeared when the artist signed and titled the work *Xoru Plant and Birds*.



Figure 5.1. Dada Coex'ae Qgam (1934-2008), *Xoru Plant and Birds*. Silkscreen, 1997. (Photograph by Shane McDonald)

Images of grandmothers do not sell art, but references to Bushman indigenous knowledge and nature do—topics that are equally of value to the artists themselves. Dada went on to explain:

I like to depict the things that bring me joy, like the plants from the Kalahari that can fill an empty stomach when you are hungry or can satisfy your thirst when there is no water to be found. I like to show the women collecting veldfood, the houses we live in, and the children who are always present. I like to depict the simplicity of our lives and the beauty that can be found in it, even though we have so many hardships.<sup>2</sup>

These two reflections, the first by an anthropologist and the second by a contemporary Bushman artist, highlight the complex relationship that exists between the images of, and those made by, people identified as Bushmen or San, images that are more often than not produced, disseminated, and consumed through popular culture mediums such as film and tourism.<sup>3</sup> Here I consider the paintings and prints created by Dada and fellow artists affiliated with the Kuru Art Project for consumption within the southern African tourist industry. Since 1990, a small group of male and female artists have created colorful, decorative, and semiabstract images of edible wild plants and animals, folkloric activities, mythological beings, and the iconic image of the hunter. Marketed through local tourist and ethnic art galleries within Botswana and neighboring Namibia, this body of work tends to be framed as the creation of nonliterate rural visionaries engaged in unmediated, intuitive, and naïve endeavors. Popular media articles use language such as “lack of sophistication and appealing innocence,” “clumsy yet magical,” “primitive charm,” “innocence of vision,” and “unselfconscious immediacy,” which authenticates the work according to criteria often associated with folk, self-taught, or outsider artists whose art caters to touristic needs for souvenirs and mementos of southern Africa.

While contemporary art from D’Kar is often purchased as tourist art, it has been unfortunately set aside from serious study because of

this. Arts destined for the tourist market tend to be devalued because they are perceived to be mass-produced, artistically uninteresting, and inferior in quality. They are also devalued as inauthentic because the rationale for artistic creation is believed to be economically motivated and guided by the consumer's desires, rather than those of the artist.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship has countered these views; many forms of tourist art are now recognized to be artistically inventive and conceptually complex objects.<sup>5</sup> Here, I acknowledge contemporary San art's function as souvenirs for tourists and unpack how they successfully fulfill the demands of their clientele. Yet this study also stresses that, beyond their touristic appeal, the works exhibit alternative significance for the artists and their local communities. I begin by analyzing how the artworks' formal aspects and imagery read as a nostalgic language of longing, recalling Susan Stewart's concept, for tourists seeking souvenirs of a sojourn to southern Africa. Then, drawing upon bell hooks' notion of yearning, I consider this body of work as assertions of cultural reclamation and a critical voice. Toward this end, I reconstruct the contexts for the emergence of Kuru art in the Kalahari region of Botswana, a "contact zone" that fostered the distinctive social identity of various Bushman communities that by the 1990s were claiming the memory of a hunter-gatherer past to assert a new critical First People voice.

### Contemporary Art from D'Kar as Souvenir of Nostalgic Longing

In style and subject matter, Kuru Art Project arts appeal to tourist tastes. The images are naïvely rendered, brightly colored, and convey images such as African animals and scenes of scantily clad hunters and gatherers that correspond to mythic ideas about Africa (figure 5.2). As a souvenir for its buyer, Kuru artworks serve as mementos of a sojourn in southern Africa. Sidney Kasfir defines the souvenir as

“an object of memory; a token of remembrance of a person, a place, or an event—that is, an object that stands for something remembered” (1999, 69). As objects of memory, souvenirs have two functions: they are mnemonic devices and repositories for nostalgia. As mnemonic devices, souvenirs serve as a touchstone for the memory of an experience, and as a repository of nostalgia, they represent qualities that tourists long for that do not exist in their own everyday world. For Susan Stewart, the souvenir therefore generates an inward narrative suggesting the personal, internalized meanings that a souvenir may bear (1984, 135). Dean MacCannell theorizes that when life in modern society is perceived to be devoid of meaning, people embark on a journey, seeking places and cultures that fulfill their longing for spirituality and authenticity. Through an encounter with people or places that are perceived to be “pristine, primitive, natural and, as yet untouched by modernity” the traveler is himself or herself transformed (MacCannell 1976, 373-74).



Figure 5.2. Thamae Kaashe, *Giraffe, Buffalo and Other Creatures*. Color linocut. (Photograph by author)

Kuru paintings and prints depict fauna, flora, and primal Africans, scenes that a tourist might witness, hope to encounter, or only imagine. As anthropologist Kenneth Little has argued, “Tourists come to Africa with a perspective and a story in mind and they try to find scenes that resemble these prior images that evoke recognition and an easy sense of familiarity” (1977, 156). As destinations for safari and ecotourism, Botswana and Namibia where one can purchase paintings and prints from D’Kar, cater to a tourist’s nostalgic longing for difference. Before departing on vacations, tourists are likely to have engaged with representations of southern Africa through media productions on *Discovery Channel* and *National Geographic*, and national tourist ministries as well as private companies draw on the same types of tropes circulating in popular media. For example, the current website for Botswana national tourism focuses on its natural resources—the fauna and flora of the Okavango Delta and the Kalahari Desert. The only Botswanans featured are a group of leather-clad Bushmen, their backs to the viewer, heading off into the landscape, no doubt on a hunting or gathering excursion.<sup>6</sup> An unmediated encounter with both nature and primitive peoples is thus implied as achievable by the tourist.

Souvenirs tourists buy convey concepts of difference and longing (whether defined as the exotic, the foreign, the primitive, or the natural) that the tourist seeks (Jules-Rosette 1984, 18). The postcard, as the most ubiquitous souvenir, is one example of how the tourist market shapes and caters to touristic desires for the above-mentioned qualities. A preponderance of southern African regional postcards depicts individual species of fauna and flora, or scenes of the veld and sunsets: all images appealing to those tourists who invest in the idea of an Africa pristine, primitive, natural, and, as yet, untouched by modernity. The use of cropped, compressed, image-packed compositions also projects desirable qualities and ideas about Africa as

a place that teems with energy and life. Postcards often replicate the look of tourists' photographic snapshots, underscoring their function as an authentic souvenir of potential or actual experiences.

Contemporary Kuru artworks as souvenirs replicate some of the formal and iconographic elements circulating in southern African tourist media. As I found when visiting D'Kar in 1997, artists such as Sobe Sobe and Thamae Kaashe actively appropriated and reworked popular literature on southern Africa—for example, images from *National Geographic* and popular books, such as Anthony Bannister's *The Bushmen* (1987), images that are in turn replicated in tourist media that shape tourists' desires and expectations about their destinations (figure 5.2). As Kasfir has observed, souvenirs “exist as fragments of something else—they are metonymic references to a larger cultural experience that is being remembered and objectified” (1999, 68). Souvenirs are designed to evoke memories or sought-after experiences and therefore need not be realistic representations of the actual places visited by the tourist. While the subject matter seen in Kuru art resonates with tourist imagery, the styles depart from photographic realism. Kuru artists tend to favor flat, decorative, and abstract approaches to representation. Schematic representations of an African naturescape such as we see in Kuru art therefore offer a highly flexible mnemonic for an experience of Africa on a more abstract level. Like the typical southern African postcard, the image-packed, high-contrast, color-saturated scenes of nature can memorialize Africa as a vital, wild, and exotic place. Similarly, the naïve pictorial qualities and decorative two-dimensional handling of space come to signify similar qualities and ideas about Africa.

However, it is the image of the Bushman hunter-gatherer depicted and, even more importantly, the Bushman identity of the artists that make these paintings and prints particularly well-suited souvenirs of the safari experience (figure 5.3). Beginning in the 1960s, the Kalahari



Desert and its Bushman inhabitants increasingly became the place and people through which tourists sought to fulfill a yearning for those qualities cited by MacCannell. Laurens van der Post (1958, 1961), the Jungian writer and filmmaker, was the most influential figure in the creation of this practice, largely as a result of his representation of Bushmen as the consummate egalitarians, spiritualists, and naturalists. Numerous others were to follow Van der Post—for example, more recently Paul Myburgh, the filmmaker who “claims to have become Bushman in order to represent the Bushmen.”<sup>7</sup> A common feature of much popular filmography and literature on the Bushman is its narrative structure around a physical journey into the desert, where a sought-after or chance encounter with Bushmen leads to a spiritual or existential journey of self-discovery, and hence the attainment of a more essential humanity and community now lost to modern society.



Figure 5.3. Thamae Kaashe, *Eland Dance*. Color linocut. Date unknown. (Photograph by author)

It is thus not surprising to find that the Botswanan and Namibian tourist industry within which Kuru art circulates draws extensively on the trope of the Bushman in its marketing material. For example, the internationally distributed tourist guide *Insight Guide: Namibia*, published in the mid-1990s, offers the opportunity to meet “still almost thoroughly traditional Bushman family groups [that] offer an image of unspoiled human existence.” “[W]ithout class distinctions, . . . men and women know and perform their own tasks. Even today, the Bushman require[s] only a minimum of laws” (Garland and Gordon n.d., 6). Another contemporary publication, the *Spectrum Guide*, declares that Bushmen are “natural conservationists in an ever more polluted world, [who] take great care of their harsh habitat, at home in a terrain where few other human beings could survive.” The description goes on, “Those who continue the tribe’s 20,000 years of traditions even use utensils that have not noticeably altered during the past few thousand years” (Garland and Gordon n.d., 6).

An artwork created by a Bushman artist is thus a mnemonic for a set of ideas about the safari experience as nostalgic longing. Many tourists go on safari in order to get “back to nature,” but few tourists actually achieve this. A nature scene painted by a Bushman artist can therefore serve as a repository of nostalgia, if the tourist yearns for the “at-one-with-nature” lifestyle depicted in the artwork that he or she assumes is actually lived by the artist. I suggest, therefore, that souvenirs metaphorically and metonymically come to signify nostalgic longing for an always-allusive authentic experience. Stewart argues that because authentic experience is ultimately unattainable, tourists inscribe it in objects connected with fictive domains of the antique, the pastoral, and the exotic, and in the case of contemporary San art, the naïve (1984, 133). Thus, the painting of an African Eden created by a Bushman artist is the consummate souvenir by which to transport the tourist to a nostalgic domain of longing.

I now turn to consider the local significance of contemporary San paintings and prints. I contend that, even though destined for tourist consumers, Kuru paintings and prints are forms of resistance to the social realities of the day, and in order to understand how this may be, I consider the “contact zone” out of which the work emerged.

I suggest that the persistent presence of bucolic images of wild animals and plants, mythological subject matter, and the hunter serve to remedy and counter a “collective sense of loss” that transpired among San peoples over the course of the twentieth century.

In my reading of Kuru contemporary art from the perspective of the artist, I am influenced by bell hooks’ notion of “yearning” (1990, 36). Yearning can be synonymous with longing, but Stewart’s (1984) concept of “longing” functions for the consumer as a place of escape, while hooks’ “yearning” serves for the artist as a place of confrontation and encounter (1990, 4). *Yearning* is a term that refers to a depth of longing felt by those who struggle for the freedom to control destiny, not through a return to the past, but through a reclaiming of and appeal to old world values (1990, 6). Hooks observes that a sense of yearning occurs in contexts of dramatic social change and, as I will show, Kuru art emerges out of historical experiences of radical rupture leading up to the 1990s when this new art form emerged. For hooks, yearning is more than longing’s domesticated nostalgia; rather it offers a cultural space to do cultural, indeed political, critique (1990, 6).

### Tourism and Ethnic Mobilization in the Kalahari Contact Zone

The Ghanzi district in which Kuru paintings and prints of the 1990s emerged has long been and continues to be a *contact zone*. Mary Louise Pratt uses this term to describe “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically

separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (1992, 6). Contact zones are places where colonizer and the colonized, the foreigner and the indigene, the tourist and the tourist worker, the national and the international encounter, struggle with, and influence one another. Contact zone is often synonymous with *colonial frontier*, but while the latter term is grounded within a European expansionist perspective, Pratt employs “contact zone” in an attempt to involve the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctions, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term *contact*, the interactive, improvisational dimension of encounters is foregrounded. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness, but in terms of copresence, interaction, and interlocking understandings, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt 1992, 7).

People commonly identified as Bushmen entered Botswana’s colonial contact zone in one of two ways. They were sequestered in game reserves—the situation for G/wi and related groups living in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve of Botswana, where they were drawn into tourism. Alternatively, colonial rule was experienced as a process of land dispossession and incorporation into the lowest stratum of a racialized and ethnically hierarchical class system. The latter was the occurrence for Nharo and G/wi living in the Ghanzi district of Botswana where the mission station of D’Kar is situated, and where Kuru Art Project painting and prints emerged. The process of G/wi and Nharo incorporation into colonial society started a century ago when farms began to spring up in 1898 as numerous Boer families trekked northwards from the Marico area

of southern Africa, seeking fertile pastures (le Roux 2000, 22). In the well-watered grasslands of the Ghanzi region, cattle ranchers began to utilize land inhabited predominantly by bands of Nharo and G/wi. By the late nineteenth century, big-game hunters and explorers had all but decimated Ghanzi's herds of wildlife. So, with the arrival of cattle, Nharo and G/wi began to work as farm laborers. In exchange for food, shelter, and some livestock, Nharo and G/wi men performed general farm work and trekked cattle, "cowboy style," to farflung grazing grounds. Women fulfilled domestic duties in Boer homes and gathered veld foods, like the *marama* bean, to feed Boer and Bushman families (Guenther 1996, 234). Referred to as *Basarwa*, a Tswana term for "people without cattle," Ghanzi Bushmen were at the bottom of a cattle-centered economic and social landscape.

The style of dress called *tanana*, after the multicolored cattle farmed in the region, adopted by Ghanzi farm Bush(wo)men in the early twentieth century, reflects their cultural sensibilities as farm Bushman people and their sense of place within Ghanzi's hierarchical class system. This dress form, as described to me in 1997 by Tumba Bob, a young Nharo woman then working at the Kuru Art Gallery in D'Kar, is similar to, and based on, the better-known Herero "long dress." According to Tumba, the *tanana* is like this Herero long dress, only the skirt is shorter, falling to midcalf. Both the *tanana* and the longer dress are made from patchwork fabric, a product of Ghanzi farm Bushman women's work and training within Boer households. The *tanana* emerged as a distinctive Ghanzi farm Bushman dress form during the early twentieth century in a context of competition over jobs between farm Nharo and G/wi and immigrant Herero coming from neighboring southwest Africa. The name of the *Basarwa* dress also relates to Ghanzi Bushman people's ties to cattle, both as herders and as owners (actually or desirably).<sup>8</sup> These references to class through cattle ownership therefore refute the

pejorative connotations of the word *Basarwa*. The tanana can also be understood as a style of dress by which Ghanzi farm Bushmen differentiated themselves from the so-called veld Bushmen. Farm Bushmen had, by the 1950s, developed attitudes of alienation and ambivalence toward the culture of the veld Bushmen—those peoples who resided within the unfarmable central Kalahari Desert region bordering Ghanzi district, and who subsisted on a mix of tourism, and hunting and gathering (Guenther 1996, 238). However, the line between farm and veld Bushmen was in reality blurred, as the status and identity of individual Nharo and G/wi often shifted back and forth between these two categories, depending upon their access to farm labor and material goods. But here the important point is that Ghanzi Bushmen viewed the status and hunter-gatherer culture of veld Bushmen with some ambivalence, as a sign of poverty and exclusion from the broader class-based society, even though the two groups continued to share many cultural traits, such as language, religion, and the practice of veld foraging for food and medicines. This ambivalence was also likely tied to the attitudes of cultural outsiders, including Boer and Tswana farmers, who viewed veld Bushmen in negative terms as backward and primitive.

Yet after the complete loss of access to land and employment by the late 1960s, the farm Bushmen began to look to the veld Bushmen for inspiration as part of a process of cultural revitalization. During the 1950s, wealthier South Africans who utilized industrial-style farming techniques bought out Ghanzi Boer farmers; their preferred farm laborers were now Herero, Tswana, Kwena, or Kgalagadi Bantu speakers, thought to be “stronger, more reliable, better educated” (Guenther 1996, 234). Many third- and fourth-generation farm Nharo and G/wi lost their patrons and their homes. Unemployed, landless families drifted from farm to farm and flocked into the regional town of Ghanzi, where they survived on missionary and

government aid handouts. During the same time, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve was established, in part due to the work of an anthropologist and government official who lobbied to protect veld Bushman culture. Beginning in the 1960s, the Kalahari Desert and its Bushman inhabitants increasingly became the place and people through whom tourists sought to fulfill the nostalgic longings that motivate touristic travel.



Figure 5.4. Bushman love bow, souvenir of southern Africa. (Photograph by author)

Bushmen have long produced and tailored aspects of their material culture for sale to Kalahari tourists and travelers seeking souvenirs to commemorate those qualities that they deemed authentic. Objects associated with hunting and gathering, such as miniature bow-and-arrow sets and gathering bags made from leather and decorated with glass beads, proved highly appropriate for this market (figure 5.4). Through a process of miniaturization, these once functional objects were transformed into nonfunctional aesthetic objects. For tourists seeking encounters with the primitive and the natural, these particular items represented a set of ideas about a lifestyle seen to exist in opposition to modernity. The fact that they were handmade from natural materials made them valuable in an age of mechanical reproduction.

In the face of this process of total land dispossession and economic marginalization, Ghanzi's farm Bushmen utilized various cultural resources as coping mechanisms. Since the establishment of game reserves within Botswana was accompanied by an increase in tourism, farm Bushmen transformed the visual elements of the veld Bushman's hunter-gatherer lifestyle into commodities. The involvement in this trade may have been partly instrumental in their subsequent positive reevaluation of veld Bushman material culture, for tourism conferred upon it positive values. As Ruth Phillips observed among native North American groups:

The marketability of souvenirs depends on their success in conveying recognizable—and acceptable—concepts of difference. To succeed in this task, aboriginal makers had to re-imagine themselves in terms of the conventions of Indianness current among the consumer group, an exercise that profoundly destabilized indigenous concepts of identity. (1998, 9)



The production of those types of objects that I described previously, therefore represent an appropriative act of veld Bushman culture by the farm Bushmen. Over time, the new inclusive manufacture of miniature bow-and-arrow sets and gathering bags transformed what previously stood as signs and symbols of veld Bushmen into symbols of an emerging Ghanzi pan-Bushman ethnicity.

A sense of ethnic identity emerged over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, as farm Bushmen looked to the veld Bushmen with feelings of solidarity as peoples united in suffering. Attitudes toward the lifestyle of the veld Bushmen also changed among another distinct group of Bushmen—the “mission Bushmen” of D’Kar—who began to assess the old ways represented by the veld Bushmen with nostalgia and pride. These mission Bushmen constructed a nostalgic image (through the lens of Christianity?) of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle as a utopia of plenty, peace, and harmony in a world otherwise marked by inequality and conflict (Guenther 1979, 169, 172). By the 1960s, the performance of the trance dance, the Bushman’s medicine, also rose substantially in intensity and instance, as a response to an increase in physical and psychosomatic illnesses. It was transformed into a cultural event that defined the identity of all Ghanzi Bushmen within a pluralist society as Bushman healers became professionalized, working for cultural outsiders, most notably for Herero and Tswana clients but also for European farmers for whom they performed rainmaking ceremonies. The trance and the trance dancer served as a vicarious and powerful integrating force among the Ghanzi farm Bushmen and between them and the veld Bushmen (Guenther 1979, 168).

The 1980s witnessed a group of D’Kar mission Bushmen begin the process of politically consolidating all Botswana’s Bushman groups into one nation around the issue of land ownership, political representation within the nation-state, and rights to language-based

education. D'Kar Dutch Reformed Church deacon Khomtsa Khomtsa was the first to actively lobby to reclaim territory based on original ownership when in a 1986 letter to Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain he wrote:

When you [the British] came to our land you saw the eland and the gemsbok, the grasses and the trees, but you recognized only the black man. You never saw us—maybe because we are so small—but we were always there with the land and the grass and now you have given the black man our land and today we have no rights, no land. (Gall 2001, 44)

Concurrent with the emergence of this politicized group of Ghanzi Bushmen was the adoption of a new pan-ethnic form of heritage dress that Tumba Bob modeled for me in 1997. This leather hunter-gatherer-style garb is a late twentieth-century reinvention of a precolonial dress style. In the past, hunter-gatherer Nharo and G/wi women would have gone bare-chested. But, when the dress style was revived during the 1990s, Nharo and G/wi women added a leather bikini top to the ensemble. The bikini top reflects modern and Christian notions of bodily modesty while marking the costume as a new form of cultural dress. Worn at cultural festivals, the dress represents a pan-Bushman identity that unites farm, mission, and veld Bushmen as opposed to the tanana, which while retained as traditional dress, is not worn in contexts where pan-Bushman identity is articulated at national events where Bushmen present themselves to audiences of cultural outsiders.

The emergence of a politicized Ghanzi Bushman community occurred over several decades as a response to experiences of economic and social marginalization. Tourism first provided positive affirmation that veld Bushman culture was of value, in contrast to the lack of cultural recognition provided by the Botswana state. The

transformation of the Ghanzi Bushmen into First Peoples represented another stage in this process but occurred in a bigger regional and global context. It happened through contact with Namibian groups who, in collaboration with development workers and anthropologists, began in the 1980s to lobby for land rights based on indigenous identity. For example, anthropologist Megan Biesele's book *Shaken Roots* (1990), which deals with the emergence of San activism during the 1980s in Namibia in the context of donor aid and development, documents the Bushman critical voice as that of First People. One quote by Tsamkxao =Toma reads:

We are not a people who buy land. We ourselves do not buy land. Instead we are born on land. My father taught me about his father, who taught him about the foods of our land. Your father's father teaches you. People have taught each other and taught each other and taught each other. People have died but the teaching goes on. (Biesele 1990, 45)

In 1992, the first Botswanan Bushman political group, Kgeikani Kwei (First Peoples of Kalahari), was established. The Kgeikani Kwei logo illustrates the transformation of hunter-gatherer imagery into symbols of a politicized First People ethnicity (figure 5.5). The fire encircled by footprints framed by a digging stick and an arrow represents two unique aspects of Bushman culture—the trance or communal healing dance and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Here the trance dance serves as a symbol for the unity of all Bushman peoples, and the digging stick and arrow are symbols of self-sufficiency and productivity and are key to the concept of the First Peoples' strong ties to land. Rejecting the colonialist term *Bushman*, the term *San* is embraced as a pan-ethnic designator.

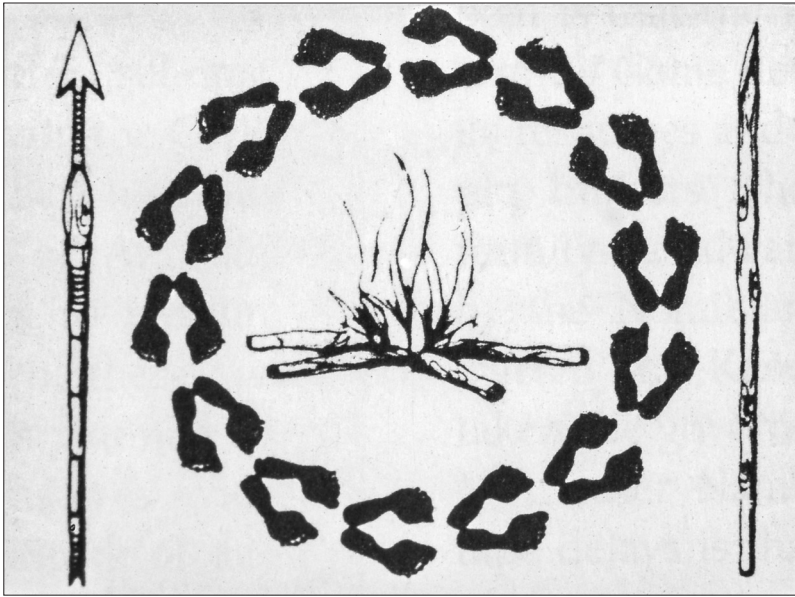


Figure 5.5. Kgeikani Kwei (First Peoples of Kalahari) logo. (Photograph by author)

Kgeikani Kwei, collaborating with other regional San political groups and international organizations such as Survival International, effectively lobbied against land dispossession and marginalization that continued through the 1990s often as a result of international mining interests, as was the experience for Q/wi residents of central Botswana, forcibly removed from their hunting territories to clear the way for exploratory forays by the diamond company De Beers. In 2001, overnight in London, activists from Survival International replaced a De Beers billboard featuring supermodel Iman decked out in diamonds with a photograph of Sana Kruiper, the wife of a well-known #Khomani leader. The De Beers slogan “Diamonds are forever” became “The Bushmen aren’t forever,” illustrating the strategic use of a stereotypical representation for political ends.

## San Contemporary Art as Yearning's Critique and Reclamation

Within the context of this nascent political movement, a new art form emerged at D'Kar in 1990. While destined for the tourist market and serving as a vehicle for income generation in a hypermarginalized rural community, the motivations shaping subject matter as well as the choice of paint on canvas and prints on paper were driven by more than economic interests. Supporters of San political and cultural rights considered the new figurative art form to be a strategy for cultural survival and self-assertion, given its potential for narrative. Contemporary San art could play a mediating role, not only between tourists and San communities but also equally in the difficult, contentious, and often threatening relationship between them, the Botswana government, and local and international business interests. Supporters within the art community considered it a modern aesthetic idiom to replace the anonymous genres of objects that had become linked to touristic trade on the one hand, and to ethnographic artifact on the other. The embrace of modern art mediums—paint and various print techniques—could provide talented members of the D'Kar community with the means to refashion themselves as innovators and singular artists with an outlet appropriate to the contemporaneity of their aesthetic and political goals.

The relationships between the producers and promoters of the Kuru Art Project are dialogic and collaborative. Although Nharo and G/wi artists created the work, many others provided incentives and pressures that helped shape it. As the product of collaborative interactions between artists, patrons, and consumers, contemporary San art exemplifies products of the contact zone. Three events paved the way for these innovations. First, in 1989 Aaron Johannes, a young politically engaged community leader, led a group from D'Kar to the Tsodilo Hills in northern Botswana. Today a UNESCO-protected

World Heritage site, scores of ephemeral paintings and engravings on rock surfaces at Tsodilo feature Kalahari region fauna including lions, elephants, rhinoceroses, elands, and various antelope. Of indeterminate age, contemporary scholars attribute such pictorial images to hunter-gatherer San artists of the precolonial and early colonial period. Johannes proposed a revival of this figurative tradition. Subsequently, the Kuru Cultural Project was launched later that same year, funded by an NGO, the Kuru Development Trust, initially staffed by missionary and international aid workers working together with the local community. The goals of the Cultural Project were to reclaim, revive, and preserve San lifeways and cultural practices, including visual art, folklore, music, dance, and foraging and hunting skills of the veld Bushmen.<sup>9</sup> The Cultural Project initiated an intervention and critical language around culture and performance that would shape the future of pictorial arts at D'Kar with their emphasis on visualizing the unique attributes of Nharo and G/wi veld culture.

The third and most significant event in the birth of contemporary art at D'Kar occurred in 1990. That year, Catharina Scheepers-Meyer, a young South African artist and high school teacher, embarked on a journey to find what she described as “a healthy place to live,” far from urban life and the tensions of late era apartheid South Africa.<sup>10</sup> She happened upon the small mission station at D'Kar where she met Qwaa Mangana, a local Q/wi musician and trance dancer of note. Both were critical of the prevailing tourist trade in standardized, anonymous, mass-produced bow-and-arrow sets, ostrich-eggshell necklaces, and leather gathering bags decorated with abstract motifs. Scheepers shared her paints, canvas, pencils, and paper with Mangana, thereby setting the stage for the realization of Aaron Johannes' call for a rebirth of San figurative imagery. Within a few years, additional artists joined Scheepers and Mangana. Many, such



Figure 5.6. Qwa Mangana (1920s-1997), *Hunter*. Drawing. 1991. (Photograph by author)

as Dada, were respected community elders and products of the early contact zone when Nharo and G/wi territory was first penetrated and settled by European and African cattle owners. They lived and worked within the hybrid borderland between San, European, and African cultures. The younger artists, by and large, as products of Botswana's assimilationist education system, were equally motivated to record and preserve local histories and traditional practices.<sup>11</sup>

I now turn to consider individual artworks in the light of bell hooks' notion of "yearning." For hooks, yearning is a springboard for resistance, for affirming the self, and it offers a critical voice. The hunter-gatherer imagery, combined with other relevant elements, signifies artistic resistance to European and African and colonial and postcolonial pressures and marginalizations. Consider a drawing by Qwaa Mangana (figure 5.6).

In this hunting-related scene, we see, front and center, a helicopter surrounded by antelope spoor and, below, a mounted San hunter. For tourists who purchase this work, the helicopter serves as evidence for their presence and experience of the Kalahari world as an exotic primitive place experienced from above. For the artist, other meanings are possible. The helicopter, circling above the mounted Bushman hunter, is either a mechanism for tourism and its related practice of trophy hunting or a vehicle of state control and restriction of local San hunting practices. Either way it represents surveillance and modernity's intervention into the Kalahari region of Botswana. Yet the way the image of this machine of power that lifts tourists and government officials up into the air appears in Qwaa's picture compositionally qualifies and diminishes it in size, thereby demystifying the power it holds. In amongst the animal tracks, the modern machine is dwarfed and contained. Here the artist returns the surveyor's gaze and in so doing challenges and suggests that such signs of authority are perhaps not as stable as they may conventionally seem.



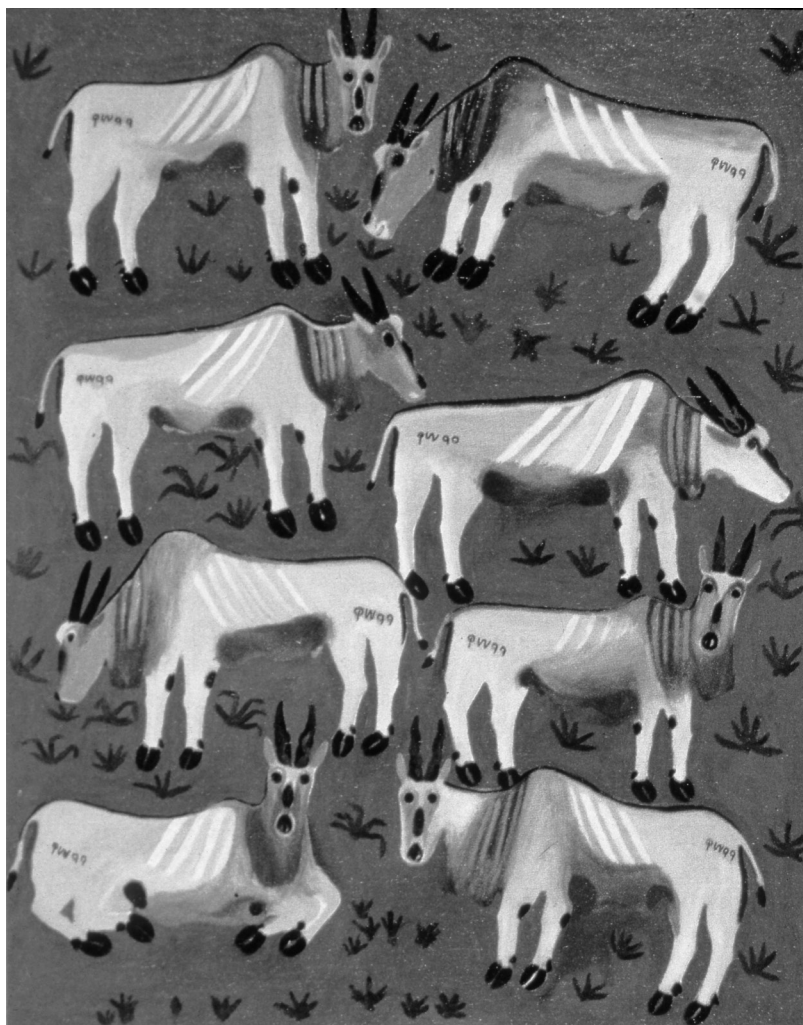


Figure 5.7. Qwaa Mangana (1920s-1997), *Eland*. Paint on canvas. 1994. (Photograph by author)

Equally fitting as a tourist souvenir is a picturesque group of eland, a large placid herbivore unique to Africa, the subject of a painting by Mangana (figure 5.7). Besides being a distinctly African animal, eland have a privileged role in San cosmology. They possess

large amounts of *n//um* or spiritual potency, said to be stored in the large fat sack of the animal's neck, which enables it to endure during lengthy droughts. In trance, San healers journey below the water to seek the Rain Animal that sometimes takes the form of their Rain Animal Eland. The healer's union with or transformation into this spiritual Rain Animal is the vehicle for enacting actions for clients, the environment, and living plants and animals upon which San communities historically subsisted. The eland is also an anomalous antelope, preferring to live a solitary existence in contrast to most African antelope species. Yet here we see a herd of grazing eland, recalling herds of British-, Boer-, and African-owned cattle that forced the San off of their lands over the course of the twentieth century. The placement of the artist's signature repeated over and over, on the flanks of each animal like a branding drives home the message: eland are San cattle, and they, like the San, are indigenous—they were there first. This work demonstrates that the creative output of contemporary San art offers space where dominant power loses authority and subordinates can instigate agency and critique.

Visual images related to folklore provided another resource to protest the marginalized position of Ghanzi San. For example, the titles of Qmao's works, such as *!Xrii*, *The Old People*, and *Jackal Ancestor*, are clues to the dominant theme of his work—namely, depictions of the First Order, the primal world of San cosmology. The First Order is a time of cosmic inversion in which //Guawa, the trickster god, transforms, distorts, and inverts things that he created. In his works, Qmao populates this primal world of ambivalence with hybrid surreal beings and plant forms. The central character in Qmao's works is usually the trickster as Jackals. According to Guenther, *Jackal-jong* (Jackal-boy), a common character in contemporary farm Bushman stories, is “as flouter and saboteur of the new rules brought into the land by the oppressive colonists who had taken this land from the

Bushmen and decimated its game and plants” (1999, 103). The trickster-as-wayward-farmhand thus became a symbol of resistance in the postcolonial context. By setting Jackal-jong, a contemporary character, within the First Order of time, Qmao draws on the transformative and subversive power of myth and religion. While his critique is oblique, it suggests that contemporary San art cannot be so easily described or dismissed as innocuous souvenir scenes.

Even the seemingly naïve and decorative images of plants offer political voice. Identified with titles such as *Qare* (edible plant) and *Wild Xgam-tsinxabo Plant*, these colorful artworks can be read in political terms as statements about San cultural knowledge, relationship to land, and consequently First People status (figure 5.1). By giving the Nharo or G/wi term for medicinal or edible plants in the title of an artwork, rather than the Western scientific name, authority over economically and politically valuable resources is asserted, astutely protecting this knowledge from pharmaceutical companies that have recently looked to San knowledge of medicinal plants in the development of new diet drugs, for example. Furthermore, vegetal imagery provides a channel for the continuing expression of indigenous values and beliefs that is more than politically strategic. Plants occupy an important place in San cosmologies, constituting cognitive categories. Plant life is a potential locus for medicinal power for healing and an integral link in the chain of life, transforming the sun’s energy into food for animals and humans. In 1995, Khomtsa Khomsta’s political group, Kgeikani Kwei (First Peoples of the Kalahari), collaborated with Dada and other Nharo women, to map the historical uses of veld foods and plants, a project that aimed to both record and preserve oral histories of medicinal plant use, location, and, consequently, land rights.

The densely packed, flat, obscure images seen in these works by artist Dada stand in marked contrast to the meticulous precision

evident in work by the artist Qwaa Mangana. Besides reflecting individual artistic preferences, style choices may be politically expedient —Dada’s images of plants are intentionally difficult to read to protect indigenous knowledge, while Qwaa’s descriptive style recalls the historical body of rock art attributed to San artists of many centuries prior to the onset of colonial rule.



Figure 5.8. Coex'ae Bob, *Skin Bags and Beads*, oil paint on canvas, date unknown. (Photograph by author)

A painting by Coex'ae Bob, or Ennie, illustrates the subtle mirror dance that is San contemporary art as a form of what Pratt calls *autoethnography*, a term for autobiographies created in the context of “contact zones.” In the colorful work in figure 5.8, Ennie carefully organizes rows of bead headbands, leather bags, and necklaces. The painting simultaneously recalls the displays of souvenirs to visiting tourists that one encounters along the road to D’Kar, yet also reads as a catalog of Nharo women’s art forms to be seen in the local community museum established by the Kuru Cultural Project. Thus, a

self-conscious awareness of identity and tradition is being articulated here, addressing both local and visiting audiences. Ennie's painting, like all contemporary art from D'Kar, is multivocal, simultaneously fulfilling the differing needs of audience and artist. For tourist and folk art collectors, the art does fulfill people's needs for a romantic "Other" that exists in a world nostalgically seen as primordial and unspoiled. This is indisputably part of what has made contemporary San art a viable financial business. But at the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that for a community of a handful of artists, these novel art forms are one mode of cultural criticism. As bell hooks has observed, "yearning" has historically functioned as a force promoting critical resistance, enabling marginalized communities to cultivate in everyday life a practice of critique and analysis that disrupts and even deconstructs cultural productions (the tourist souvenir) that promote and reinforce domination.

In conclusion, I argue that it is profitable to consider contemporary San paintings and prints as examples of "autoethnography." As proposed by Pratt, autoethnographies are works in which colonized individuals represent themselves in modes familiar to the colonizer, or in this postcolonial case, the tourist. Kuru contemporary art certainly resonates with tourist media. Yet because autoethnographies "appropriate and transform the idioms of travel and exploration writing, merged or infiltrated with indigenous modes" they are "bilingual and dialogic," being "addressed both to cultural outsiders and to sectors of the speaker's [or artist's] own social group, and bound to be received very differently by each" (1992, 7). As autoethnography, contemporary art from the Kuru Art Project reads simultaneously as souvenir of domesticated longing and nostalgia and as site for yearning and cultural resistance.

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## Notes

1. Gordon and Douglas (2000, 1).
2. Quote from <http://www.africaserver.nl/kuru/english/artists/dada.htm>, accessed June 11, 2013.
3. !Xun artist /Thaalu Bernardo Rumaο once said, "The people say they are not Bushmen anymore. They do not wear skins and they do not live in the bush. They say they are now the San." Rumaο's reading of "Bushman" as primitive and "San" as modern is one perspective on the complex meaning and use of these terms. San and Bushman remain hotly contested in political and academic circles; their meanings are not stable and their uses never neutral. Gordon and Douglas (2000) note that *Bushman* is derived from the Dutch settler word *bossiesman*, which may connote bandit or outlaw. It was coined in the former Cape Dutch colony to describe economically marginal peoples who were placed in a lumpen category because they did not easily fit a prescribed ethnic designation (Gordon and Douglas 2000, 6). By the nineteenth century, scholars began using the term to identify various groups living across southern Africa seen to share

a number of cultural and social (hunter-gathering activities), linguistic (click languages), and physical (small stature and light skin tone) traits. By the twentieth century, the term entered popular culture as a descriptor for premodern hunter-gatherers associated with desert terrains in Botswana and southwest Africa (now Namibia). While some contemporary scholars such as Mathias Guenther and Robert Gordon continue to use the term *Bushman*, others object to its pejorative connotations, and racist and sexist overtones. As a substitute, anthropologists such as Ed Wilmsen began using the term *San*. Derived from *Sonqua*, the name given by Hottentot/Khoi-Khoi/Nama pastoralists to foragers living in the Cape of Good Hope, *San* has been translated to mean original people (Wilmsen 1989). Gordon notes that the academic preference for *San* occurred after the 1950s when ethnographers became interested in hunter-gatherers as representatives of the Paleolithic, so it too promotes romantic ahistorical representations (Gordon and Douglas 2000, 5). In Botswana, groups such as the Nharo and G/wi are popularly referred to as *Basarwa*, considered by the latter peoples as a pejorative term; they favor their own self-designation of N'coakhoe or red people. More recently, both *Bushman* and *San* have been embraced as ethnic self-designations. Since the early 1990s, a southern African aboriginal or first peoples movement has emerged as a collaborative venture between community elites and cultural outsiders affiliated with NGOs. SASI, the South African San Institute, for example, embraces the word *San*, as does the Kuru Development Trust that oversees the Kuru Art Project that is discussed in this article. Here, *Bushman* will be used when discussing art from Kuru as tourist souvenir since *Bushman* is the term that dominates popular media. *San* is used when discussing the emergence of a politicized first nation ideology at D'Kar. Local self-designations such as Nharo or G/wi are used when referring to the cultural affiliations of individual Kuru artists.

4. See for example the introduction to Jules-Rosette (1984).
5. See Phillips (1998). The literature treating tourist-destined and other commodified art forms as worthy subjects of study is a rapidly growing field. See for example Phillips and Steiner (1999).
6. See <http://www.botswanaturism.co.bw/>, accessed June 11, 2013.
7. Van der Post's writings include *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958) and *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961). See also, Edwin N. Wilmsen (1995) and Alan Barnard (1989) for a discussion of the development and iconography of Bushman as Rousseauesque pre-modern innocent and more recently as Stone Age first peoples.
8. The Herero long dress is based on Victorian-era clothing introduced to the Herero by German missionaries. Today, Bushman girls in the Omaheke district of Namibia wear the Herero long dress during their initiation into womanhood. Here their passage into a higher social role is equated with upward class mobility.
9. See [http://www.kuru.co.bw/Kuru\\_Dkar.html](http://www.kuru.co.bw/Kuru_Dkar.html) for information on Kuru D'Kar Trust.
10. Catharina Scheepers-Meyer, interview with author, August 11, 2000.
11. See <http://www.kuruart.com/about.php> for further information on the art project.



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