

Africa's Oldest Survivors

The continent's newest nation is home to its oldest indigenous culture—which was on the brink of extinction after 40,000 years. How did the Bushmen of Namibia win a rare second chance to survive?

By David Goodman

T

he long flat dusty road, known locally as “the white road,” becomes a luminescent ribbon weaving through the gray landscape in the late afternoon light. • I take in the endless expanse of sand and gnarled brush. No other vehicles pass me during several hours and more than a hundred miles on my way to the edge of the Kalahari Desert in eastern Namibia. • I am traveling to meet Namibia’s only famous Bushman

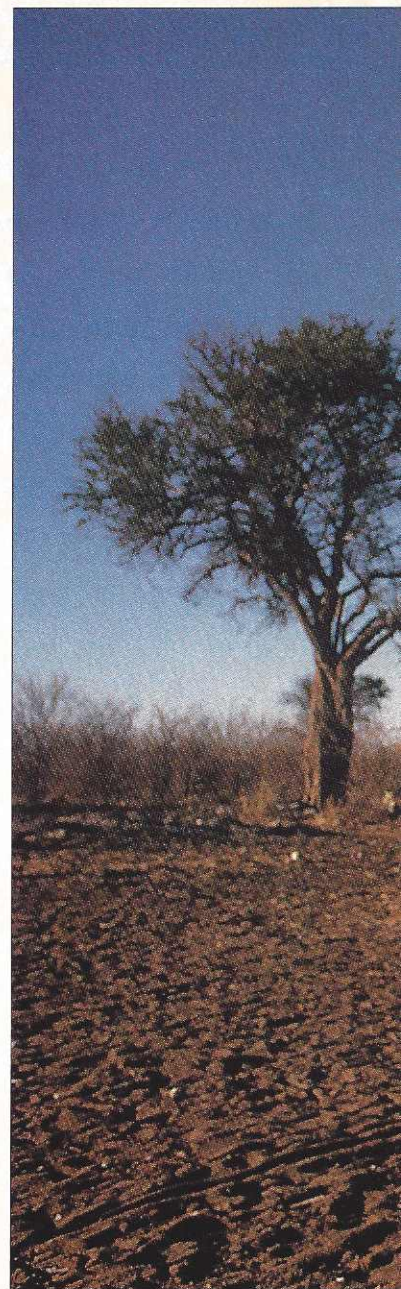
—and to spend several weeks moving around his far-flung community. Twelve years ago he starred in the hit comedy “The Gods Must Be Crazy.” The movie grossed \$65 million; its Bushman star returned to the desert with \$1,300. Ironically, just as the film was presenting an idyllic image of Bushmen and their farcical encounter with modern civilization, the real Namibian Bushmen were losing a deadly battle for survival. Only recently—owing partly to the changing whims of international politics—has the tide of that battle been turning.

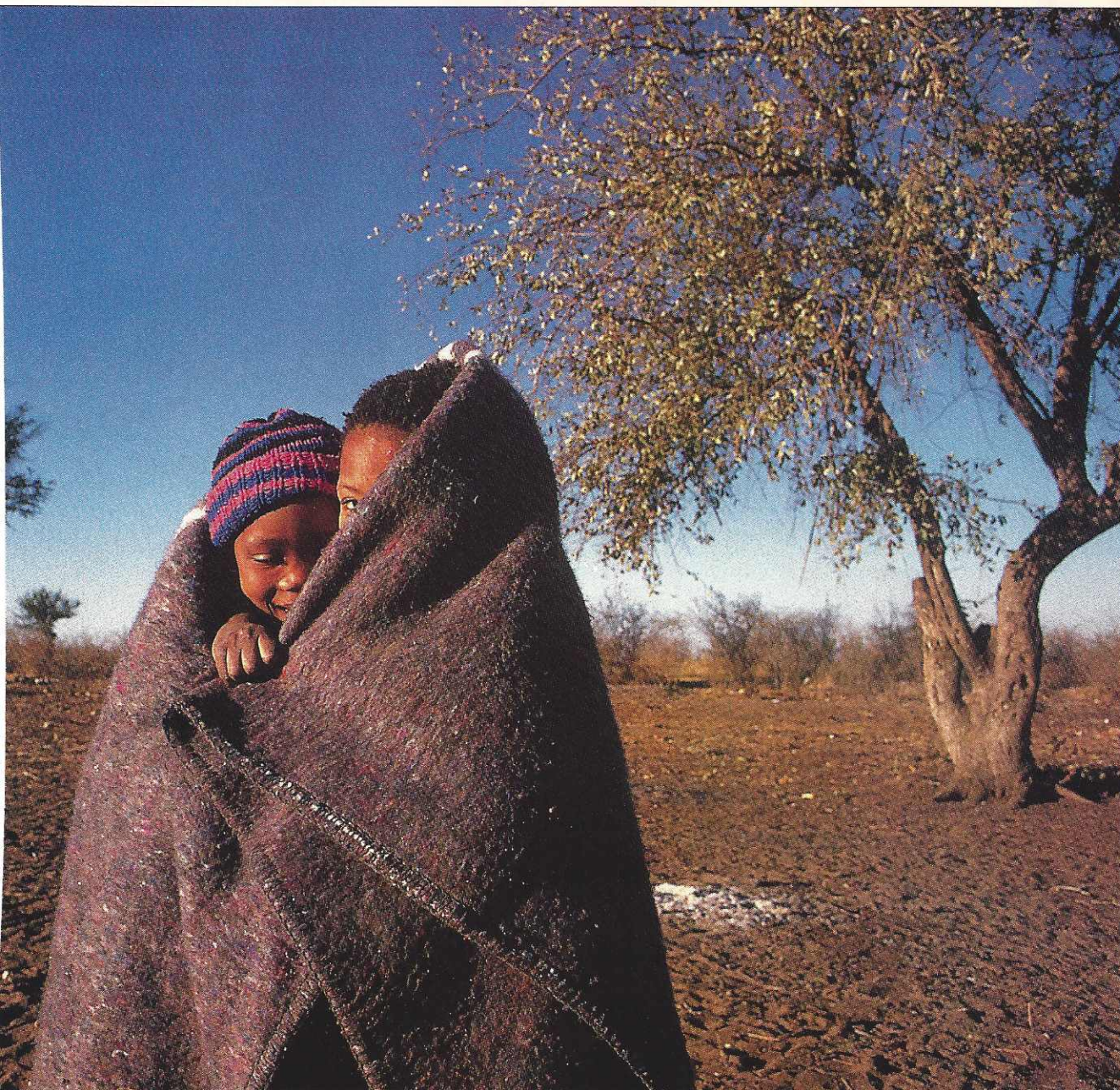
As I continue driving, slowly I see that the inhospitable terrain is abounding with

life. The gemsbok dart in and out along the edges of the road. The brilliant plumage of lilac-breasted rollers, starlings, and black-and-white hornbills splashes color across a vast palette of earth tones.

This wildlife is the first clue to what sustained the Bushmen—said to be Africa’s first inhabitants and last hunter-gatherers—for some 40,000 years. Their decline, and potential restoration, provide a remarkable model for the UN’s current International Year for the World’s Indigenous People (“Return of the Natives,” WM, March).

The road winds on to what was officially called Bushmanland, one of 11 apartheid





CHILDREN OF HOPE:

New laws would protect Bushmen such as these children in what was officially called Bushmanland—where, after arrival of white settlers in 1600s, Bushmen were allowed to continue their ancient way of life.

homelands created in Namibia in the early 1970s. The homeland system was the brainchild of the South African authorities who ruled this sparsely populated southwest African nation from just after World War I until Namibian independence in 1990. The creation of Bushmanland resulted in the loss of 90% of the Bushmen's traditional lands. Their celebrated survival skills began to fade into myth and they quickly became the poorest stratum of Namibian society. Anthropologists warned that the continent's oldest culture might vanish within a generation.

"Bushman" is the familiar—some say pejorative or colonial—name still widely

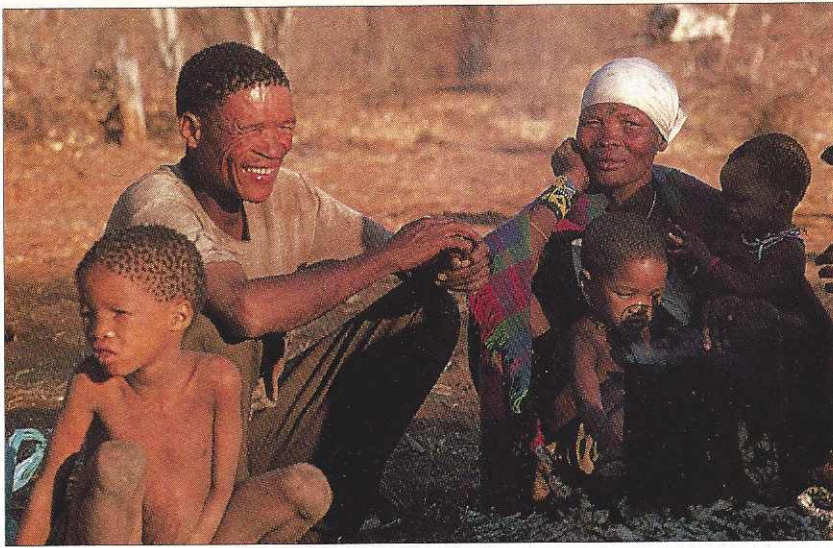
accepted among anthropologists and the people themselves. Namibia is home to four distinct language groupings of Bushmen. The Kalahari Bushmen are the Ju/'hoansi, which translates as "the correct, or proper, people"; they are also known as the Kung or San. "Ju/'hoansi" is the plural of "Ju/'hoan" (pronounced "zhu-twa"). Their language is full of clicks and pops, indicated in transliteration by, for example, slashes and exclamation marks.

The Bushmen's plight poses a dilemma for Africa's newest nation: how to integrate this struggling ancient culture into the

nascent economic and political order? The unpredicted twist is that Bushmen, who had been politically invisible, seized the political opportunity offered by Namibia's independence. They are now organizing and fighting for a last chance at survival. In

response, the Namibian government has shown unexpected interest in raising their economic and social status. It is providing development assistance and, most important, negotiating with the Bushmen over legal recognition of their land rights.

After about 130 miles, the road I am traveling ends abruptly in Tjum!kui, the



drab administrative center of Bushmanland. Cement shacks with metal roofs stand at the edge of town. They were built to house the Ju/'hoansi after they were kicked off their land in the early 1970s. They are still crowded with families living on government food handouts and welfare. Young children dressed in tattered Western clothing run about, while adults stare lazily as I pass through. Liquor bottles litter the sand between the shacks. I understand better why older Ju/'hoansi dubbed Tjum!kui "the place of death."

Tjum!kui today resembles a ghost town from the North American West. The nearest telephone and post office are almost 200 miles away. The gas station occasionally has gas. There is a school, a police station, and a medical clinic that sees few patients. At the end of the town's lone dirt

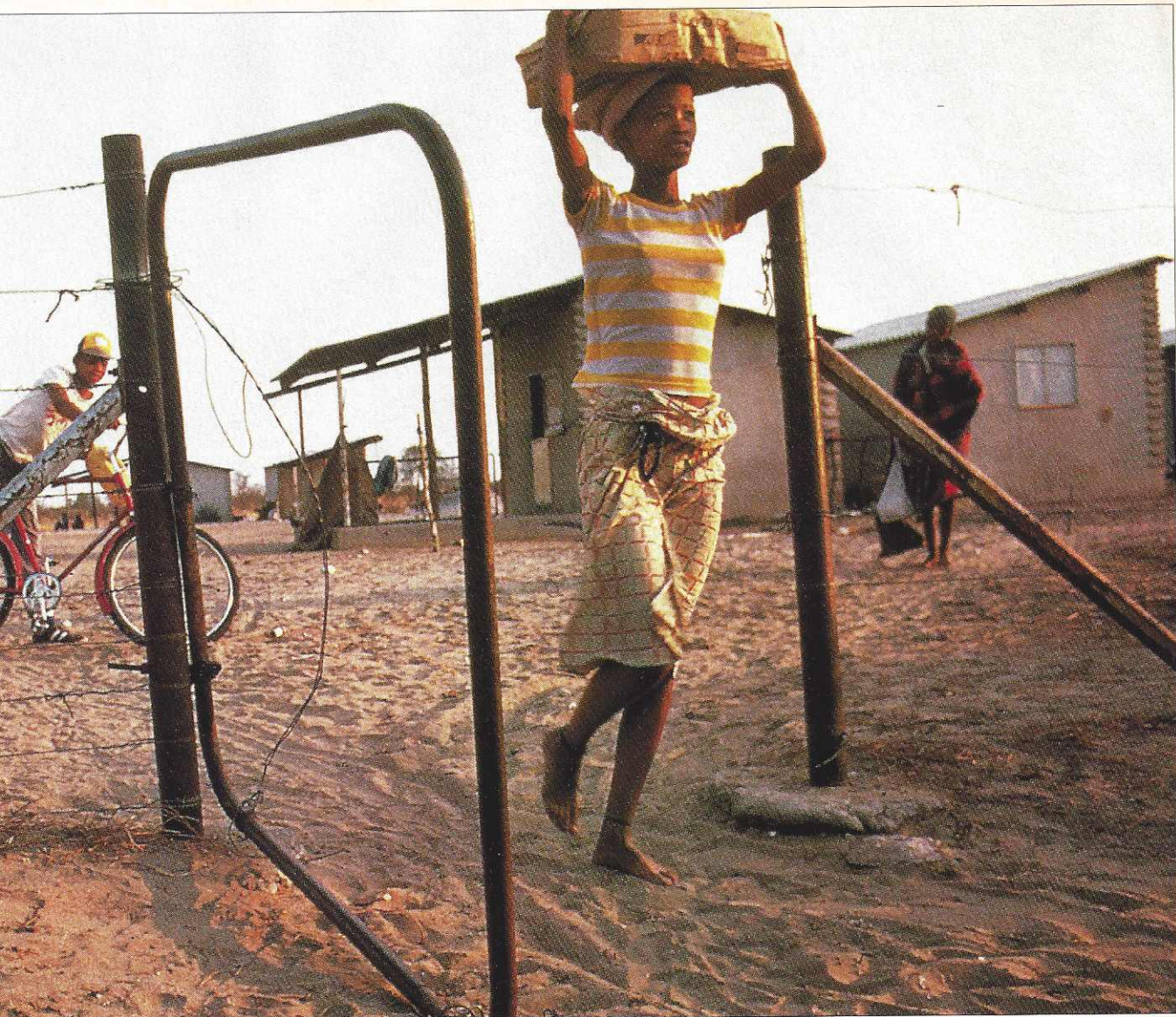
road, a small jail sits vacant.

Repression of Bushmen began long before apartheid. Early German and South African settlers viewed Bushmen as little more than vermin, and they were hunted, hanged, and shot for sport at the turn of the century. The result was their extermination in South Africa proper, where as late as 1941 a minister of native affairs told parliament, "We look upon them as part of the fauna of the country."

By the time of "The Gods Must Be Crazy" many younger Bushmen had grown up in settlements such as Tjum!kui, and they

had few or no traditional hunting skills. Yet in 1978 the South African Defense Force (SADF) set up two "Bushman Battalions" consisting of about 1,000 troops, supposedly utilizing skills Bushmen had honed in the bush—only this time they were tracking down Namibian guerrillas of the South-West Africa People's Organization. Dispossessed Bushmen became easy targets for recruitment. By the time of Namibian independence, 9,000 Bushmen—over a quarter of the Bushman population in Namibia—were dependent on SADF salaries. When the South Africans left Nami-

DAVID GOODMAN ("The Long Walk Home," WM, September 1991) is a freelance journalist who has written widely on southern Africa. Among other publications, his work has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *Village Voice*, and *The Nation*.



bia, so too did the only paying jobs many Bushmen had ever known.

Today Namibia has about 33,000 Bushmen out of a total 87,000 who live in Namibia, Botswana, and Angola. Most of those in Namibia work as migrant laborers on white-owned commercial farms, or simply live in poverty as wards of the state. Only the 2,000 Ju/'hoan Bushmen who live in the former Bushmanland have retained access to some of their ancestral hunting grounds and water holes.

I drive 17 miles past Tjum!kui on a dirt track to a newly settled Bushman village. A dozen grass huts are clustered around a tall baobab tree in the sand. Cattle huddle in a kraal, a frail defense against prowling lions. A young man sits beneath a tree playing a plaintive melody on a guitar made from a metal can and a piece of wood. A

woman intently puts together a necklace from ostrich eggshells. Some people sleep in the hot midday sun. A few are munching marula nuts foraged in the wild. I wait for something to happen; nothing does. The changing intensity of the sun seems the main determinant of the activity level.

How did these isolated people become so well known in the West? For one thing, they are among the world's most intensively studied ethnic groups—especially by American anthropologists. Scientists have long had keen interest in their ability to subsist peacefully for thousands of years in the harsh desert environment.

But there is another reason why the Bushmen have become well known. It is

CIVILIZATION IN TRANSIT: "Gods Must Be Crazy" star G/aqo /'hana and family (opposite, top) cook the old way. Musician (opposite, bottom) plays traditional instrument, harp-like *g/loaci*—this one made with an oil can. Shacks in Tjum!kui (above) were built by former white rulers to replace Bushmen's *n!ores* (home places).

the small, muscular man whose graceful movements barely disturb the sand as he strides through the village to greet me. His skin is tan and weathered, his high cheekbones accentuated by the gold evening light. He carries a bow and arrows, having just returned from hunting. The middle-aged man introduces himself through an interpreter as G/aqo /'hana (pronounced roughly "gow kana").

G/aqo /'hana is barefoot and wearing a ripped T-shirt and patched pants. He does not look the part of an international movie star. But then "The Gods Must Be Crazy" did not resemble the real life of G/aqo /'hana either.

He left his job as a janitor in a local



SAVING THE PAST:
Trance dance in village
of /Aotcha (above)
depicts spiritual
travel. Members listen
at Nyae Nyae Farmers'
Cooperative meeting
(opposite) in //Auru
—representing step
forward for the
fewer than 10% of
Bushmen who
still live off land.

school to play the lead part of a “primitive Bushman” in the 1979 hit film. He returned to the bush afterwards and has lived there ever since. He flashes his trademark broad smile when I ask how his hunt went. He spotted a porcupine but was unable to catch it, he says in the flurry of clicks that characterize his language: “There were more fruits and animals when I was younger.”

G/aqo /hana continues, “For the past years the life for the Ju/'hoansi was very low.” He cites his experience with “The Gods Must Be Crazy.” He says he was paid about \$1,300 for the first film and \$2,100 for the sequel by the films’ South African director, Jamie Uys. “I spent the money to feed my family and buy some

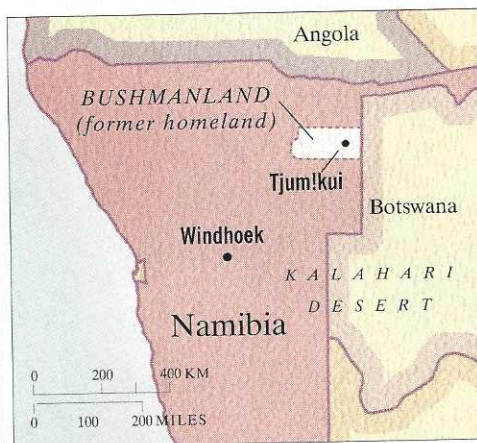
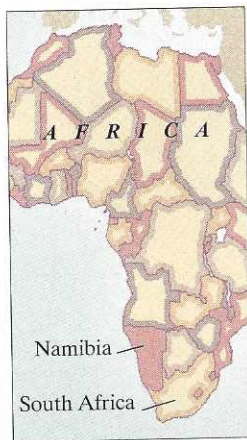
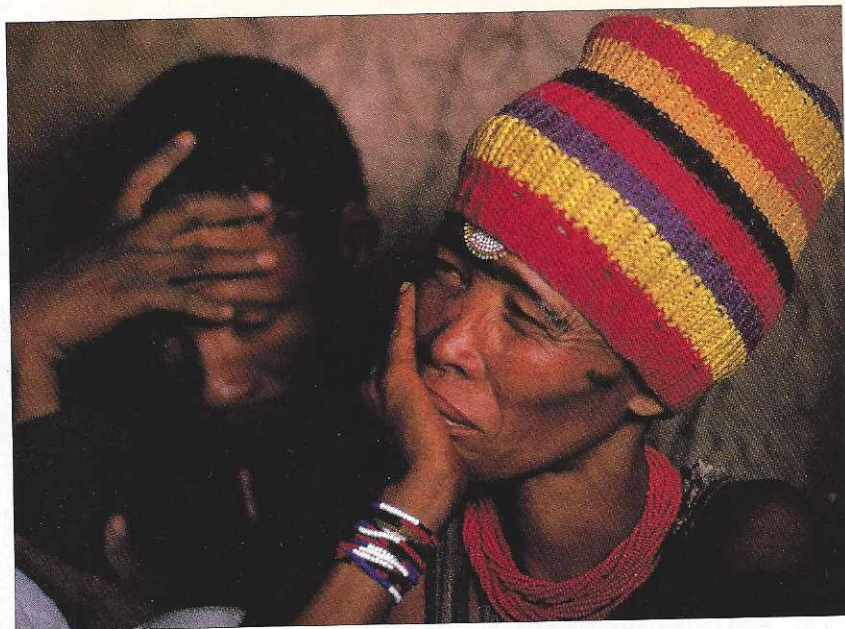
cows. Now there is nothing left.”

American documentary filmmaker John Marshall, who first met and filmed the Bushmen in the 1950s, returned to Bushmanland in the late '70s and was shocked by the social decay he witnessed. He wrote: “For Ju/'hoansi the lessons...[are] simple and grim: No land means no subsistence; no subsistence means no mixed economy; no mixed economy means dependence on the lowest paying jobs, or mealie-meal welfare, or on begging and prostitution. Extreme or abject poverty means illness, despair, and a high death rate.”

By the early '70s the death rate among Bushmen exceeded the birthrate. Marshall decided that the only hope for the

Ju/'hoansi was to reclaim their traditional lands in the Nyae Nyae region on the Namibia-Botswana border. He formed what is now called the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation to help Ju/'hoansi create a mixed economy of hunting and gathering, small farming, and livestock raising. The idea was for Bushmen to return to a place where they could break free of the spiraling cycle of dependency.

In 1981 three Bushman families went back to their *n!ore*—literally “the place to which you belong” (rhymes with “story”)—where natural water sources support life in the harsh veld. Since then the back-to-the-land movement has grown steadily. By Namibian independence, nearly 2,000 Ju/'hoansi had resettled more than 25 *n!ores*; today some 30 *n!ores* have been resettled.



The Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative—formed in 1986 with the help of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation—filled a political vacuum and has emerged as the collective voice for Bushmen. They are now negotiating with the government for their place in the new Namibia. Their central demand is that they be granted title to their ancestral lands. If this happened, it would be the first time since white men came to southern Africa that Bushman land rights in Namibia would be ensured by law.

Namibian President Sam Nujoma has visited Bushmanland three times since taking office in March 1990, the first top official of any government to meet with Namibia's Bushmen. The cordial working relationship that has evolved is especially surprising in the light of history: Many of

today's elected leaders were guerrillas who were recently stalked by Bushman soldiers whom the government is now helping.

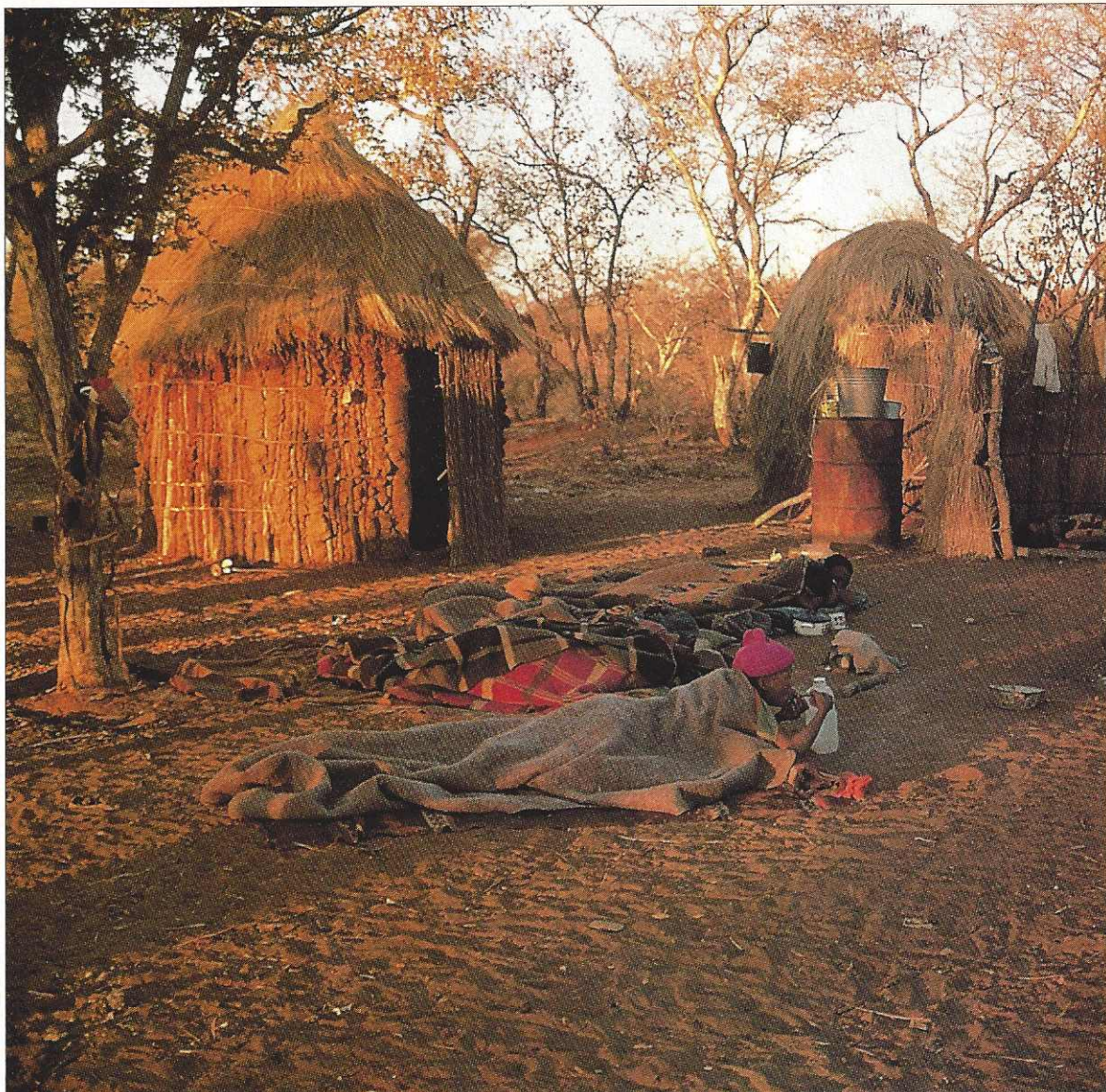
Granting special privileges to ensure land rights presents a thorny dilemma for Namibia. "Namibia has emerged from an apartheid history which has systematically Balkanized the entire country into ethnic homelands," said Wolfgang Werner, a top official in Namibia's Ministry of Lands, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation who oversees land policy. "On the political level there is considerable resistance against this concept of enshrining certain exclusive rights in law based on ethnicity." Werner is opposed to "reintroducing a different version of apartheid."

It now appears that Namibian leaders will honor the spirit, if not the letter, of the Bushmen's demands. At a 1991 govern-

ment conference on land reform an ambiguous resolution was adopted to provide "special protection" to Bushmen in recognition of their long history of exploitation. President Nujoma endorsed the resolution and indicated what this protection would mean when he backed the recent removal of neighboring Herero cattle herders who had encroached on Bushman lands.

A national land reform program has yet to be implemented in Namibia. Werner expects land policies to be introduced this year. Until then, and perhaps even after, Bushmen will have to rely on the good will of government leaders as they continue resettling their old *n!ores*.

"Guaranteed land rights is the critical issue facing Ju/'hoansi in independent Namibia," says Namibian-born anthropologist Robert Gordon of University of Vermont.



LEADERLESS ON PURPOSE: Sleepers wake in G/aqo /'hana's home village, N//oaq!'ose, Bushmanland, where people choose not to be or have leaders—typically defined as those without shame and harmful to group life.

“That means having land which they call their own, [on which they] do their own thing—be it cattle farming or whatever—and not having bloody outsiders imposing their will on them.”

But land will not solve all the Bushmen's problems. The Ju/'hoansi of Bushmanland comprise only 2,000 of Namibia's total Bushman population, and they've been the focus of an extraordinary development program. The plight of some 30,000 other Namibian Bushmen gets little attention. Also, the Ju/'hoansi's effort to develop a mixed economy has met with limited success. Hungry Bushmen have sometimes slaughtered their own dairy cattle for food, and other livestock have been killed by lions.

Dependency and poverty, the legacies

of dispossession, have become entrenched in Bushman culture. I saw it often in my travels. Long lines of people formed for government food handouts in Tjum!kui. People routinely asked me for food and goods, and the co-op must continually decline demands by Bushmen for handouts.

Professor Gordon cautions that “even well-intentioned development work runs a similar risk of fostering dependency.”

Despite the complex problems and lingering questions, many anthropologists take heart in the gains the Bushmen have made. “I would say that the situation of the Namibian Kung is a sign of hope in a worldwide situation for indigenous peoples that is otherwise very bleak,” says Richard Lee, a University of Toronto an-

thropologist and former co-leader of the Harvard Kalahari Research Group.

I left Bushmanland on the lone road that links it with the rest of Namibia. The determination of many Bushmen to forge a place for their people was inspiring. But the harshness of their isolation, poverty, and cultural wounds inflicted over the past 40 years makes their battle for a secure place in Africa's newest nation daunting.

Bushman leaders are prepared for their struggle back from the brink to be a long one. As former co-op leader Tsamkxao ≠Oma told anthropologist Megan Biesele: “We who are representatives of the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative are like people planting a tree. We should realize that we are not just one small thing but are starting something big. The work will go on, even beyond our deaths.” WM