

### Land Filled with Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari

Edwin N. Wilmsen

Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1989. xviii + 402 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper)

Reviewer: Peter Carstens

University of Toronto

When Sir James Frazer was appointed to the first acknowledged professorship in social anthropology in 1908, he defined the discipline as that branch of sociology that deals with primitive man. Such a designation would be unacceptable today for many reasons including the offensive nature of the phrase "primitive man," the trend towards anthropological studies of peasant and urban communities, the belated discovery that each society, culture and group is involved both directly and indirectly in a complex arrangement of socio-economic relations with the wider world, and so on.

Having said that, might one not ask why so many contemporary anthropologists have continued to be preoccupied with so-called simple foraging societies? The San (Bushman), for example, are probably the most studied people in the world, a reality that is reflected in Dr. Wilmsen's book. Why this obsessive interest in the *San* exists is never really answered, largely, one suspects, because the author is an authority on Kalahari foragers himself.

The central theme of this work is that the people variously dubbed San, Bushmen, Bossiesmans, Basarwa, etc. should never have been studied as primitive isolates, because for centuries they have been involved in the political economy of the Kalahari and southern Africa in general. Wilmsen's argument may be summarized as follows: Nearly everything written about the San for the past 150 years is largely unsatisfactory, not necessarily because the published facts are wrong but because various authors (e.g., Richard Lee and Lorna Marshall) have not contextualized their research in space and time. Often inappropriate paradigms have been used, and generally the spirit of the writing is unsatisfactory. The unpardonable sin of most authors is their use of a closed-system, colonial, functionalist model. Had they been more observant, taken the trouble to read the frontier literature and archival treasures, talked with archaeologists and contextualized their fieldwork, they would have avoided their egregious misinterpretations. Wilmsen writes:

It is abundantly clear that Basarwa/"Bushmen"/San, no matter how distant in space, have never been historically remote from economic and social processes operating in the larger political entities of southern Africa but have functioned intimately within these processes. It is their relative position in a colonial hierarchical system—not their geographic or evolutionary distance—that makes them "remote" today (p. 315).

History makes it abundantly clear that San society and culture has never been static. Wilmsen, for example, draws our attention to the recent archaeological findings which suggest that the San were once linked with the ceramic-making pastoralists. He thus re-establishes the San with the Khoi in much the same way that other writers have already done. But why, we should ask, do so few San own cattle today? The answer may be found in the socio-economic history of the region, notably in the hegemony of Botswana, and the low position occupied by the San in the region's complex system of ethnic stratification. Many San *were* able to retain significant autonomy during the

first half of the 19th century, resisting serfdom by maintaining voluntary clientship with Bantu-speakers as happened in other parts of Africa. But it was their weak social position in the whole region that prevented the San from gaining access to new instruments of power (e.g., guns and horses) introduced in the 19th century through the European trade routes.

Wilmsen concludes that the San, a people studied so extravagantly by so many anthropologists, only became subsistence foragers in recent times. The process began in pre-colonial times, continued into the colonial era and into the present.

This is an important book which has already sparked both controversy and ire amongst anthropologists. Wilmsen is at his best when he focusses on his central theme: the political economy of the Kalahari and the place of San-speakers in the system. His flirtations with Tylor, Durkheim, Tönnies, Marx and their critics adds little to this long overdue book.

### **Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy**

Sarah Carter

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. ix + 323 pp. \$34.95 (cloth)

*Reviewer:* Peggy Brezinski

Office of the Treaty Commissioner, Saskatchewan

“Prairie Indians were never farmers, only hunters and warriors. Why should they get land for farming now? They . . . will only waste good farmland.”

Paraphrased, these are the types of questions and comments which sometimes come to the Office of the Treaty Commissioner from farmers and other members of the public. We are in the process of assisting in the settlement of outstanding treaty land entitlements in Saskatchewan, and are doing ongoing land entitlement research with many of the bands mentioned in Sarah Carter's *Lost Harvests*. The 27 entitlement bands may soon be selecting land to expand their reserve holdings for economic development, and some provincial residents question why this is happening. *Lost Harvests* has assisted us in understanding the historical context of treaties for our own research, and it has helped us respond to public concerns about the process.

Carter covers primarily the period from the 1870s to World War I. Using the Treaty Four bands of what is now southern Saskatchewan as a focus, she explores the question of whether the failure, as it were, of Indians to become productive farmers during this period was because of cultural reluctance, as many have argued, or due to government policy. Carter begins by debating the dualism theory of labour economies, which espouses a distinction between traditional/resource or peasant economies and modern, industrialized capitalist ones. Dualism supposes that the two economies, one underdeveloped and one developed, are independent of each other. A dualist assumption, found in once-“standard” academic sources such as George Stanley's vision (*The Birth of Western Canada* [University of Toronto, 1936]) and the Hawthorn report (*A Survey of Contemporary Indians of Canada* [Ottawa, 1966]) is that the underdeveloped economy stays that way by preference or inclination: indigenes and peasants prefer family-based labour patterns which are “unproductive” in a capitalist economy.