Contemporary Bushman Art, Identity Politics and the Primitivism Discourse

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Abstract: In recent years artists from two San communities in Botswana and Namibia have been producing paintings and prints which have become sought after by Western collectors, as instances of African "primitive art." The art is produced in a context of intense identity politics, which in recent years have awakened the San politically and placed this hitherto passive ethnic minority on a course of political action. The art is especially relevant to the issues of identity and self-representation, and holds the potential for exposing and displacing the colonialist, and still cherished, icon of the timeless hunter-gatherer of the far-away veld. The paper will show how this potential is thwarted by the Western perspective on the art, which, blind to its decolonizing images, sees it as reinforcing, rather than challenging, primordialist stereotypes.

Keywords: Khoisan studies, art, cultural politics, Post-foraging hunter-gatherers, Post-colonialism (southern Africa)

Résumé : Ces dernières années, des artistes de communautés San au Botswana et en Namibie ont produit des tableaux et des graphismes qui sont recherchés par les collectionneurs, comme produits de «l'art primitif» africain. Cet art est produit dans un contexte d'intenses activités politiques identitaires qui ont récemment réveillé politiquement les San et ont placé cette minorité ethnique jusque-là passive sur une trajectoire d'action politique. L'art est particulièrement pertinent à la question de l'identité et de la présentation de soi et il recèle le potentiel d'exposer et de remplacer l'image colonialiste, et toujours chérie, de chasseurs-cueilleurs intemporels du veld lointain. L'article montre comment ce potentiel est ignoré par la vision occidentale de l'art qui, aveugle à ses images de décolonisation, le voit comme témoignage des stéréotypes primordialistes plutôt que le contraire.

Mots-clés : Études Khoisan, art, politiques culturelles, Chasseurs-cueilleurs post-nomades, Post-colonialisme (Afrique du sud)

> I like to paint because I like to show other people the customs and the manners of life of my own people. I like to go forward and to show other people that they [the San] might do something on their own.
>
> — Thamae Setshogo, D'Kar, fieldwork interview, June 15, 1995

> The San believe that their cultural practices form the backbone of a healthy and socially intact community. Injustices such as land and resource dispossession are so disruptive that affected communities are often unable to uphold their traditional consensual decision-making processes. But the memory of once-strong and unified communities keeps alive the longing for the revival and reconstruction of culture and identity.
>
> — Kxao Moses =Oma and Axel Thoma (2002: 39)

An exciting development on the cultural front of contemporary San[1] has been the production of a body of easel art and prints, by over a dozen artists at two centres in southern Africa. The art is of the type of non-Western, Fourth World, "tribal" art that Nelson Graburn would call "assimilated fine art,"[2] that is, its aesthetic sources, its epistemology, materials and techniques, and its intended audience are all external to the culture and community of the artists (Graburn, 1976: 8). Contemporary San art also has no connection to the rock art San in other parts of the sub-continent and from other linguistic groupings produced in the recent and remote past (from as early as 30 000 years ago, until the turn of the last century, when the art and its creators disappeared altogether). While loosely connected to such other traditional forms of decorative art as bead work and the etched or burnt patterns on ostrich eggshells and wooden objects (see note 2), the new art is sufficiently different in form and content to be considered an altogether new art form. Being essentially free of cultural precedents, the art is immensely innovative in style and content, both from artist to artist and, to varying degrees, also within the oeuvre of each individ-

ual artist. It has found much favour with Western collectors, who cherish it for its alleged primitivism and its "eery echoes" with rock art of yore, and the art has become an important source of income to the artists and their families and revenue for the Non-government Organization-operated art projects at their respective villages.

Concurrent with the appearance of the art, in 1990, was the political awakening of the San, who until very recently had been a politically passive and oppressed minority group. They are that no longer; having become embroiled in the cultural politics of the southern African region that were generated by the dismantling of Apartheid, the San, along with the other hitherto disenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispossessed non-White ethnic groups, are staking out long-denied political, civic and territorial rights and claims. The issues and buzzwords of the day, or the decade, are "ethnicity," "identity," "authenticity," "heritage" (Barnard, 1998) and it is to these issues that the images produced by the San men and women today are especially relevant.

The connection between these two recent developments in the lives of the San, politics and art, is the principal concern of this paper. A second concern is to examine the effect on this connection of the primitivism discourse that surrounds the art, from the perspective of its non-San consumers. It is a perspective that is at variance with that of the San producers and San viewers as it takes the art into primordialist channels that are detrimental to the ethnic and political goals of contemporary San.

The Setting

There are two centres in southern Africa where San produce paintings and prints, for sale to outsiders, galleries and a growing number of individual collectors. They are at the village of D'Kar, in the Ghanzi District of western Botswana, and the tent city of Schmidtsdrift, near Kimberley, in Northern Cape Province. In this paper I deal primarily with the D'Kar project, the site of my field work. D'Kar is a village of about a thousand people, two-thirds of whom are fourth- or fifth-generation farm Bushmen, primarily belonging to the Nharo (Naro) linguistic grouping. D'Kar is the site also of a large San development agency, the Kuru Development Trust,[3] as well as of a Dutch Reformed church congregation engaged in mission work among the region's San. Schmidtsdrift, consists of two communities of !Xun and Khwe Bushmen from northern Namibia, the former group having fled there from Angola in the 1970s. They had been drafted into the South African army, during the anti-guerilla wars against SWAPO in the 1970s and 1980s, when South Africa was the immoral (and arguably illegal) occupant of Namibia. When Namibia gained her independence in 1990, more than 4 000 San people, soldiers along with their dependants, received the offer from the South African military to go back "home" with them to South Africa, that they "would look after them". So, to this day they are living in a sprawling settlement of close to 2 000 large military tents, waiting for the government to place them into jobs and onto land, or to clear the way for them to go back to Namibia.[4]

These two San communities, like many others all across southern Africa, have recently begun to set up local, regional and interregional community organizations or advocacy groups, usually with expatriate involvement, through the agency of such NGOs as the Kuru Development Trust or the !Xu and Khwe Communal Property Association , at D'Kar and Schmidtsdrift, respectively (Godwin, 2001: 112-117; Hitchcock, 1996: 81-82; Lee, Hitchcock and Biesele, 2002; Robins, Madzudzo and Brenzinger, 2002: 13-25; Smith, Malherbe, Guenther and Berens, 2000: 88-89). An especially promising initiative is the Ghanzi-based Kgeikani Kweni group, or the First People of the Kalahari, which is run solely by San, without any expatriate involvement (Gall, 2001: 171-235). In 1995 these diverse groups became consolidated, forming the well organized, highly effective inter-regional organization Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA). WIMSA's expatriate and local staff are well trained and are accountable to an all-San board composed of elected representatives from a number of San villages and regions. Its aims, as that of the regional organizations, are such things as community development, mobilization and leadership, the realization of the San's minority's political rights and their informed participation in the nation's political process, and their recognition as a distinctive ethnic group with rights, especially to land (Broermann, 2002). These political stirrings and initiatives began in the late 1980s and gained much momentum in 1993 (the United Nations Year of Indigenous People, which, in 1995, was extended to the decade of Indigenous People). This momentum has been maintained to this day, all the more so as complex human rights and land issues reared their heads at numerous fronts during the century's last decade, which galvanized WIMSA, as well as other groups, into action (Gall, 2001; Godwin, 2001; Hitchcock, 1996; Lee et al., 2002: 34-55; Smith et al., 2000: chap. 9-10).

The two contemporary San art projects in southern Africa arose during the same period. Art exhibitions

were a component of a number of conferences dealing with San identity and political rights; for instance, in 1993, the afore-mentioned Year of Indigenous People, the D'Kar artists held as many as 13 exhibitions, most of them abroad, in England, Holland, Denmark, Finland and Norway. The artists were part of a number of delegations of Ghanzi San who, along with their expatriate spokespersons, went to Europe that year, on exhibition, fund-raising and networking trips (the latter with indigenous Greenlanders and with Sami). In 1997 a delegation of artists and other Kuru people went to Australia, on an exhibition and networking tour, where they met Aboriginal counterparts and compared notes on matters political.

The Artists and the Art

A total of 15 artists work, or worked at Kuru, nine of them men and six women.[5] The majority are Nharo San; one of them (Qãetcao Moses, or Olebogeng) is not a San, but a Nharo-speaking MoTswana. Prior to their artists' careers the men and women had been farm labourers and domestics for White, largely Afrikaans-speaking Boer farmers and two of the older Kuru artists (one a man, the other a woman) were trance dancers in their younger years. The artists have been with the art project for varying lengths of time, since its inception in 1990. Six women and nine men are members of the art project at Schmidtsdrift,[6] which was founded two years after the Kuru project. The joint output of paintings and prints of these thirty San artists has been vast and its exposure to the world extensive, especially that of the Kuru artists, which has been shown on four continents. Their art provides the men and women with sorely needed income, which for some may be substantial[7] and which they keep in bank accounts at Kuru, enabling them to accumulate stock animals (or, the more likely scenario, to provide for unemployed and needy kin).

Two things should be noted about the artists, both of them observations that expose Western-held, erroneous and hegemonic notions about "tribal artists" in general. One is that they are each highly individuated men and women, each with his or her own life history, temperament, artistic vision and skill. This I note in order to counter the reprehensible Western tendency, when dealing with tribal art, of obliterating the artist and treating the work as deriving from an ethnic collectivity or tribal tradition, rather than from an individual artist with his or her own creative intentions and stylistic idiosyncracies (which, in the case at hand, are exceptionally developed). The second point about the artists is that they are acculturated, Westernized, widely travelled fourth-generation erstwhile farm labourers or domestics, some of whom have attended school, speak Afrikaans and are members of the Dutch Reformed Church. About half of them are also politically alert and astute. They are decidedly modern people, as well as modern-looking ones, rather than leather loincloth-clad and semi-naked, as some Western newspaper articles on exhibitions of their work may lead one to believe. Nor are they tribal rustics unversed in Western ways, as reported in another newspaper account, of an exhibition in London in 1993, that commented on how lost the Bushman artist and her San companion were in the big city, and how cold the two African desert dwellers felt—notwithstanding London's early summer heat wave, at the time—and how it amazed them "that there were no thorns on our pavements" and how they missed their mealie porridge, yet "rather enjoyed the variety of berries at Kew Gardens" (*The Independent on Sunday*, May 1993: 23). The primordialist depiction of the artists in some of these Western newspaper reports is in line with the primitivist discourse that surrounds their art, to which I will turn below.

Of the two projects, the art at Schmidtsdrift is decidedly more political. The experience of some of the artists, as soldiers in the highly volatile region of north-eastern Namibia during the pre-independence guerilla war, has evidently left its mark on some of the pictures. Here, in a small proportion of pictures, one comes across such motifs as rifles and bayonets, army tents and trucks and depictions of soldiers. A few pictures deal quite stridently with such political, or military themes as soldiers recruiting or abducting San from their veld camp or of a soldiers' raid on a tent city. A number of the many pictures that are not explicitly political contain such Western elements as houses, kitchens, cups, bottles, chairs, jeans, radios, trucks, minibuses, numbers and letters, as well as one each of a soldier's ID card, ricksha man and a dinosaur (which the artist had seen a picture of on the back of a telephone book on a visit to Durban). These new, "foraged" motifs are juxtaposed with old ones, antelopes, veld plants, vines and trees, in compositions that balance the world of the present with that of the past.

Returning to the Kuru art, we find very few pieces that are explicitly political, that is, that deal head-on, as do the Schmidtsdrift pictures, with social and political issues faced by the San today. What their art depicts for the greatest part are nostalgic veld scenes from the past, which the older artists—such as Dada and the late Qwaa and Qgoma Ncokg'o—remember from their childhood and the middle-aged and younger ones from the

stories their parents or grandparents told them. The favourite topic of the men is large veld animals, especially antelopes, as well as the large mammals that once roamed the Ghanzi veld, elephants, rhinos, giraffes, eland, as well as lions and herds of wild dogs. (Fig. 1 provides an example.[8]) These have now all disappeared from land that has become grazing ranges for cattle. The men also like to paint mythological themes, especially Qwaa, who, as a one-time trance dancer, has had the mystical experiences of altered states of consciousness, outer body travel and encounters with spirits. These themes inform some of his art. He was wary about depicting some of them on his pictures and did so cryptically; for instance, by using the concealment technique[9] of tucking the supernatural element away in one of the nooks and crannies of busy scene showing things that were uncharged mythologically (and had "no *huwa* [story] in them," as he pointed out to me). Another mythic theme, also of Qwaa's nephew Thamae Setshogo as well as of the late Qgoma, are were-animals that conflate animal with human features, or those from other species or phyla, creating bird- or insect-headed humanoids, bird-antelopes, crocodile-hippos and like concoctions. These figures may be depictions of transformation, a mystical process of trance ritual, which appears as a motif on a few of the men's pictures.

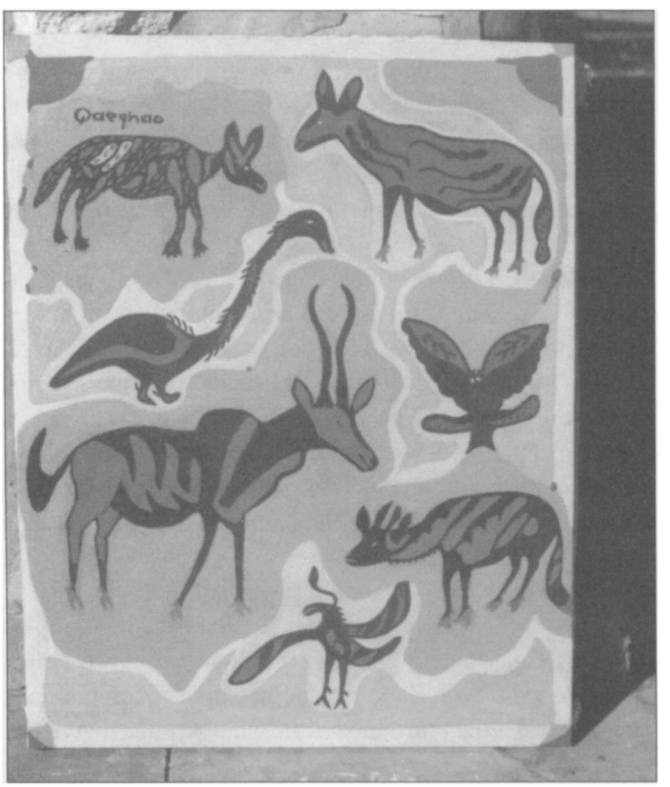

Figure 1: Untitled, oil on canvas, Qãetcao Moses, ca. 1995

Women's pictures, too, deal with *veld* scenes or with every-day domestic or ritual events. They are frequently also pictures that have explicit narrative content. The artist may reveal the latter to her children, using her picture as a visual aid to accompany a story or memorate, perhaps about a woman and a man out gathering in the veld who are happen on a leopard which chases them, or a circle of women chanting the trance dance for the dancer-men, the event interrupted by two white farmers who appear on the scene. By so drawing a picture into the expressive form of story telling, which in San culture is highly individuated (Biesele, 1993; Guenther, 1999: 126-145), the art's element of individual creativity is the more enhanced. Instead of mammals, the women's favourite motif tends to be plants, especially veld foods, each of which the artist will identify by name, as well as flowers, vines and trees. (See fig. 2 for an example.) Birds, along with insects—Ncg'abe Eland's best-liked motif—and butterflies, worms and caterpillars, scorpions, spiders and snakes, tortoises, lizards and frogs, all of them part of a traditional San woman's store of gatherable foods, likewise appear on the woman artists' canvases. So do the bags that they used and still use, as all of the woman artists still gather plants, whenever they are in season and their busy artists' schedules allow it. Other such feminine motifs are aprons, skirts and headdresses, all decorated with glass beads. Cg'oise Ntcox'o and Coex'ae Bob are especially fond of this exclusively set of female motifs (fig. 3). Another gendered aspect of the art pertains to style: the women's art tends to be more abstract than the men's art, and may be altogether non-representational, depicting geometric or fluid patterns.

It should be noted that this stylistic feature, as well as the substantive element—birds, as well as bugs and reptiles—are not the exclusive domain of the women. Very little is in San society, in which gender roles have always overlapped and gender equality prevailed (Biesele, 1993; Guenther, 1999: 146-163). Some of the men (especially Qwaa and Thamae Setshogo, as well as Qãetcao Moses) make use of these motifs. Here, one bird, the Kori Bustard, in particular stands out, perhaps because of its prominent role in San mythology (Biesele, 1983: 124-133, *passim*). Likewise, women will paint antelopes and other game animals, including domesticated ones—goats, cattle, hens—which appear on the women's canvases with somewhat greater frequency than on the men's.

Figure 2: "Veld Birds and Plants," oil on canvas, Cg'ose Ntcox'o, 1995

Figure 3: Untitled, oil on canvas, Coex'ae Bob, 1995

The last motif brings up a significant feature of the art: while the majority of pictures depict such culturally idiosyncratic themes as veld animals and old-time lifeway scenes, not all of the Kuru art bears the stamp of tradition. Some artists also depict the things that today surround and intrigue them, and that are useful to them, that derive from the modern world: items of western clothing, watches, radios, guitars, trucks, bicycles, helicopters, tables, chairs, pots and pans, cupboards and cups, Boers and Blacks, cattle and goats, horses and donkeys, mealie fields and European houses. (See fig. 4 for an example.) One can even come across angels, which the artist, Thamae Setshogo had heard about at a church service and which, unversed in Western sacred iconography, he depicted with insect-like wings, oval in shape and held at a stiff angle, like a mayfly at rest. Also in the unusual category, in content and presentation, is Dada's whimsical picture of a beauty contest. AIDS is another contemporary motif, which appears with disturbing poignancy on the canvases of a couple of the artists.

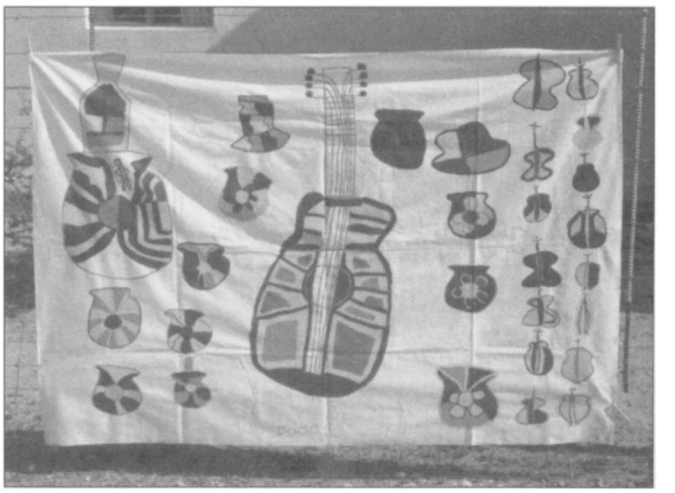

Figure 4: "Guitars and Shapes," acrylic on cloth, Coex'ae Qgam (Dada), ca. 1990

Some pictures are not just modern but post-modern, juxtaposing or conflating, sometimes with wry irony and droll or poignant incongruity, old motifs with new ones—such as pants and watches with the spirit being //Gãuwa, who points to the latter objects with insect claws and whose huge, baleful eyes recapitulate the watches' dials (fig. 5). The artist, Qwaa, was especially fond of this sort of picture, which, in addition to humour, at times also had a political edge.

One is his self-portrait, which blends his modern and traditional occupational roles, of farm labourer and trance healer. We see him wearing European work boots, socks and T-shirt, and standing in the posture of trance: erect stance, intent gaze, entoptics whirring about his head (which, he told me, enigmatically and wryly, were buttons!). As a commentary on a modern farm Bushman's experience with modernity, the picture seems to suggest that while contradictory and disjunctive, the old and the new can also somehow be cobbled together and bridged.

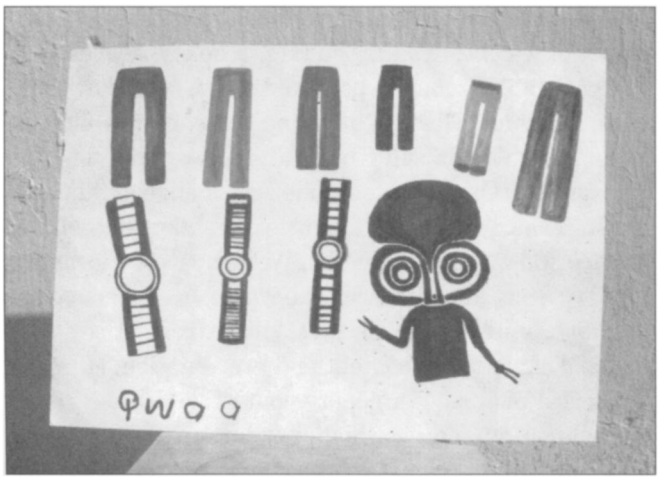

Figure 5: Untitled, acrylic on paper, Xg'oa Mangana ca. 1994

Another politically cast picture is Qwaa's painting of a Boer elephant hunt (fig. 6). When he showed me the picture, he also offered a lengthy narrative that dwelt on the serious and the hilarious elements of the portrayed scene. The first, the serious, was its depiction of a painful and signal event in the local history, that is part of people's oral tradition: the infamous slaughter, by Boer ivory hunters, of the elephants of the Ghanzi veld back in the last century, leading to their local extermination. The hilarious touch is that one of the three Boers is scared out of his wits, his legs are shaking and he is squatting down, ready to loosen his bowels!

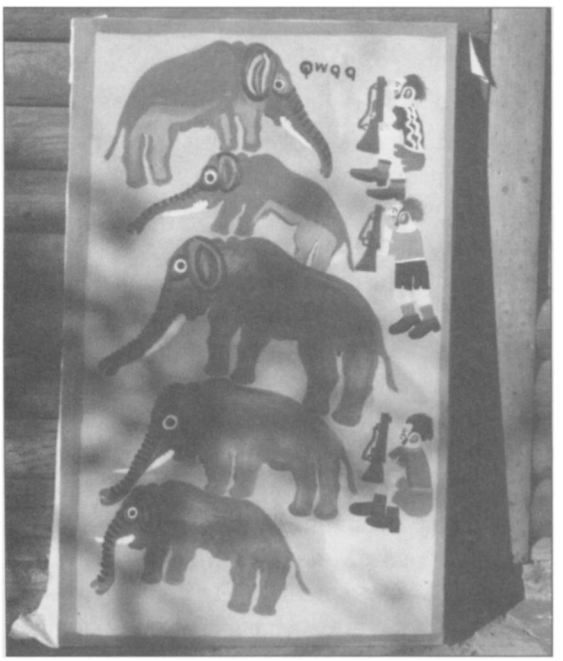

Figure 6: "Boers hunting Elephants," oil on canvas, Xg'oa Mangana (Qwaa), 1994

Qwaa was fond of lampooning the Boers, the farm San's paternalistic bosses, as in the picture of two Boers in a fist fight, with four birds looking on bemusedly. This sort of picture is an instance of the time honoured technique in traditional San politics, of bringing an uppity person in line through ridicule (Guenther, 1999: 34-37). In the context of the acculturated farm Bushmen it may perhaps be regarded as an instance of passive resistance or subversion (or the deployment of one of the "weapons of the weak," *à la* James Scott).

Another example of the same is Qwaa's picture of the helicopter game warden, hovering above and in amongst an array of animal tracks (fig. 7). He is after the mounted hunter, who has just demonstrated his outstanding skill by throwing a spear through the neck of a kori bustard. He is equally adept at evading the warden—the bane of the contemporary San hunter, now that the government has made hunting a perilous protocriminal activity—whose helicopter, on the picture, becomes just another animal track, a thing the hunter is as eminently competent to evade as to pursue.

Figure 7: Untitled, felt tip on paper, Xg'oa Mangana (Qwaa), ca 1993

Finally, we get to the picture Qwaa regarded as his masterpiece (fig. 8): on a green veld laze and graze eight elands, the San's center-fold meat (and spirit) animal (Lewis-Williams, 1981; Vinnicombe, 1976), because of its

bulk and fat (and healing potency) and its tractability as a prey animal. Each bears the artist's "brand"; he has laid claim, by means of this Western device for ownership demarcation, to the eland; they are "Bushman cattle," as he put it to me.

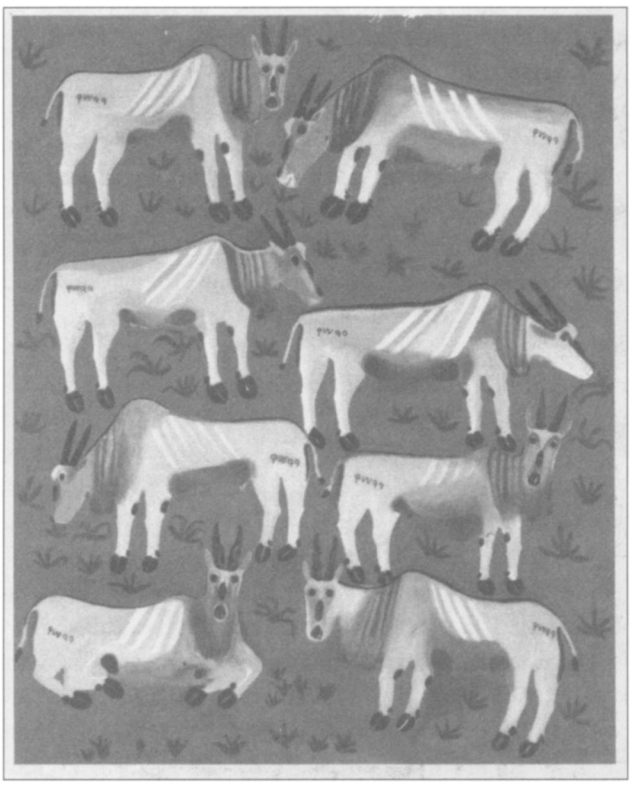

Figure 8: "Eland," oil on canvas, Xg'oa Mangana (Qwaa), 1995

The Political Dimensions of the Kuru Art

While not as explicit as in some of the Schmidtsdrift pictures, there nevertheless is a political dimension to the Kuru art. It is subtle in almost all of the Kuru works; in fact, at the face of it, the Kuru art, for the greatest part, does not strike one as being at all political. For one thing, many, at least half, the artists are themselves not all that aware, or engaged politically. For another, the preferred motifs of the artists—bucolic veld scenes—are the preferred motifs also of the Western buyers. This sort of correspondence may lead a cynic to dismiss any contention that political, rather than market-driven economic considerations are what lie behind the art.

However, there is more to it than that. Beyond an artist's personal intentions when he or she paints a picture, and transcending the same, are the group-wide issues of self-representation and self-identity. These envelop the lives of San today, including the artists and their art, both of which become drawn into a political trajectory. Pictures that are in themselves innocent of politics, but instead, depict nostalgic veld-set scenes of a somewhat other-worldly past, become political in an environment that draws such scenes into an identity discourse. Turn-of-the-century politics of the San of South and southern Africa give center-stage to the issue of identity (sharing that spot with two other issues, political rights and land). Concern over identity is evidenced, for example, in the Kuru Development Trust's Chairman's recent statement that "a nation without a culture is a lost nation" (the nation the speaker, Robert Morris, is referring to here are the *ncoa khoe*, the "red people," the Ghanzi Bushmen's term of self designation). The motto of the Kuru Cultural Center, that operates a museum and library at D'Kar and to which the Art Project is linked, is "*/au ba kg'oe dim dao me e*" (which literally translated means "the people's lives' ways is the path"). Such is the message also of the First People of the Kalahari, expressed in the group's slogan "survival through cultural revival," and its logo of a circle of dancers' feet surrounding the trance dance fire and flanked by a digging stick and an archery set.

The art and artists produce visually striking images which are displayed locally, nationally and internationally (at over 60 exhibitions, between 1990-99, in 14 countries on four continents), and which can be called up on the internet (see note 8). At times artists may accompany an exhibition, to take questions from outsiders about what the art means. Their answers are given significance to by the outsiders. These may be media persons who will report on the pictures and the artists and their deportment and comments—in edited form, as we will see below—in next day's newspaper or weekend edition's cultural supplement. In this fashion the artists are drawn into the identity discourse and, irrespective of their own intentionality, they and their art become political.

The art constructs identity in three modes, each corresponding to one of the three sets of motifs delineated in the section above. One is past and tradition-oriented, the second and third engage the present, one by depicting elements from the new economic and political reality, the other by juxtaposing these with traditional ones. Regarding the first mode, the self-identifying and self-representing functions of the pictures here could be seen as instances of "autoethnographic expression" (*á la* Mary Louise Pratt, 1992: 7); another manifestation of the same process are the half-dozen "traditional villages" and cultural performances San present to tourists at various places in the region (=Oma and Thoma, 2002; Guenther, 2002). What these "traditional"

pictures depict are veld scenes, especially animals, especially the large ones that have now vanished from the Ghanzi veld and that were around, and hunted, at a time when "Bushmen only" lived in the land. Veld plants are next, the kind that only San women know. Another highly idiosyncratic set of cultural traits that appears in a few of the pictures is drawn from the culture's inner core or sanctum: the myths and spirit beings, therianthropes and animal transformation and the ritual of the trance curing dance. To this day, the latter is practiced and stands as the most salient feature of San ethnic identity (Katz, Biesele and St. Denis, 1997), recognized and acknowledged as distinctive and significant by non-San (Lee, 2003: 201-205).

However, the pictures are not merely of an iconographic, static, "traditional" and ever more irretrievable past. Quite a few also depict those elements of the new economic and social order that are useful and desirable to contemporary San—jeans, watches, radios, pots, tables, stock animals and the like. While some pictures depict just these new things—consumer or capital goods from the Western cash economy, of which the modern San have become a part—the pictures are more than just a shopping list of coveted goods (a San Sear's catalogue, as it were). Most of the images that depict Western things or themes juxtapose the same to select elements from the past, in an exercise either of confrontation or negotiation. This enhances the artists' grasp of the modern world that has encapsulated them for over a century and which they now have begun to enter, on their own initiative. By blending, in their "hybrid"[10] pictures, old with new, the artists engage the new economic and social order, while also keeping in check its hegemonic impact. By juxtaposing elements of modernity with those of tradition they refer the former back to the latter and thereby embrace the new post-foraging order on their own terms. Counter-hegemonic brakes are placed on too rapid a process of absorption of this ethnic minority of erstwhile hunter-gatherers into the economy, society and polity of the nation state which stands at opposite ends to the nomadic, loose and egalitarian lifeways they all followed until recently.

These processes, of self-identification and self-representation, confrontation and negotiation, are happening not just at exhibitions in far-off centres. They occur also within their own community, as the production of the art, at D'Kar's little studio building or at home, in front of the artist's hut or in his or her courtyard (on the door, wall or fence of which may hang one of his canvases), is very much in the open and public and noted and watched by all. Works selected for major exhibitions may be displayed in the village prior to being shipped off; thus they, too, gain local public exposure, before being lost to far-away galleries. Some of the works may actually stay within the community, as works acquired by Kuru for D'Kar permanent collection to be displayed at the museum of the village's Cultural Centre. Copies of the annual Kuru art calendar hang on Kuru office walls and one or another separated page may also hang on the inside wall of a D'Kar resident's hut. Another type of art to be exhibited in the community are the works of children who are encouraged to draw and paint at the Kuru-run pre-school. The latter is itself a huge open-air canvas, as its four walls are decorated with close to 400 images, with veld and farm motifs of every description, the result of a day-long paint-in that involved all of the people of D'Kar, young and old, artist and non-artist. In such ways the art, even though destined for the outside world, also enters the artist's community and within it plays out its identity-constructing, modernity-engaging effects.

San Art and the Primitivism Discourse

These effects are in danger of being undermined by the outside world, however. The galleries that exhibit the art and the catalogues and media articles that report on it appear to hold their own distinctive artistic vision about "Bushman art," which is at variance, to a significant extent, with that of the artists and their cultural community.[11] The outside exhibitors, buyers and writers all are part of a distinctive and distinguished, urban and urbane "taste culture" (Lee, 1999), that has cultivated its own exclusive *connaissance,* (Price, 1989: chapter 1) and rarified *amour de l'art* (Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper, 1969), and its own exchange sphere and "discriminating classifications" on the value and worth of African art (Kopytoff, 1986: 78-79). It has its own elitist notions and preferences on "the Primitive" as it manifests itself within the connoisseurs' guarded aesthetic domain, as "Primitive Art," or, with respect to the case at hand, a sample of "African art" (which, to some collectors and art critics, is, in fact, synonymous with "primitive art" [Price, 1989: 54-55, 131]). These preferences are for the nostalgic, bucolic stuff: the *veld* scenes—of beads and bags, hunts and dances, trees and flowers, as well as for ritual and mythological scenes. More than anything, they are for the animals—to them the ideational and aesthetic core of San pictures—the bucks, as well as the birds and butterflies (but not the scorpions and spiders and centipedes—"nobody wants to hang bugs on their walls," one commercial gallery owner told me). They also do not much care for the pictures that

show modern scenes and, true to the maxim that "the essentialist discourse hates a hybrid" (Phillips, 1999: 35), they care even less for the "post-modern" pictures, that, in the spirit of pastiche, combine, conflate and juxtapose old and new and negotiate the new in terms of the old, and that are especially meaningful for some of the artists and contemporary Bushmen, as I suggested above. For the Western collectors, though, they are pieces that are largely "indigestible," "unnatural" and "inauthentic" (Clifford, 1985: 177).

What Western buyers seek are images of the Bushman of yore, and of the distant veld, which he—the Bushman, in the iconic, composite singular—shares with the animals. This was made clear to me when I went through my scrapbook of exhibition catalogues and press releases and newspaper and magazine articles about exhibitions, with a deconstructionist eye. Of the 33 pieces of writing on exhibitions in southern Africa, Europe and Australia from 1991-98, over half reveled in primitivist, primordialist rhetoric (while the rest offered more or less sober, sensitive and politically contextualized reportage). In addition to the rock art trope and its "eery echoes" discussed at the beginning, writers found resonances not only with hunter-gatherers, but also with Australian Aborigines (and generic "aboriginals" generally), with the Stone Age and other "distant ancestors." Others were struck by the art's connection to animals—the most common observation—and to nature and to the earth. The last is evidenced by the artists' alleged special affinity for "earthen colours" (which is quite an inaccurate characterization, in view of the artists' general preference for primary colours). As common as the zoomorphic trope is the element of childlike, untutored simplicity, expressed in such *bon mots* as "lack of sophistication and appealing innocence," "clumsy yet magical," "primitive charm," "innocence of vision," "unselfconscious immediacy." In the same discursive vein, "uncanny similarities" to Western art are noted, to such unlikely figures as Miró, Chagall, and the surrealist Alan Davie, as well as Cézanne and Gaugin (a case, it would seem, of the Modern in the Tribal, or Fauvism in reverse). Yet others commented sententiously on the art's "ancient power" and "dark mystery"; indeed, two articles, to underscore the darkness trope, made allusions to the "Dark Continent," using this colonialist baggage-laden sub-trope unselfconsciously, devoid even of the conventional, if not obligatory, quotation marks.

Another way of placing the contemporary art into the primitivism trope is to link it, in terms of style, content and aesthetic evocativeness, to San rock art of the past. Its echoes in the contemporary corpus are either hinted at by Western commentators, or they are explicitly drawn out by a curator, through side-by-side exhibitions of the two bodies of art. While a certain similarity in style and content can be noted in some of the paintings—in part, because some of the artists have taken Kuru-sponsored trips to far-away rock art sites that may have left an impression on some works[12]—for the most part these eery echoes collectors and viewers detect in the contemporary art are romantic ringings in their Western ears. They are transmitted through eyes that look at the pictures selectively and through glasses that have the tinge of primitivism. The rock art is altogether dissimilar: it is from a different time—centuries and millennia in the past—and a different place—the mountain regions of southern Africa, the locale for most of the sites, hundreds and thousands of kilometers from the Kalahari plains, a region quite devoid of boulders and shelters (and rock surfaces to paint on). It differs in style, content and function, primarily in that rock art was for the most part ritual, mystical and metaphorical, whereas the contemporary art is commercial and political, and largely perceptual. And such mystical and ritual motifs as we do find—the occasional portrayal of a mythological beings and mythic or ritual events, such as human-animal transformations and depictions of trance dancing—are largely narrative and symbolic (of San identity). They are not, as in rock art, central themes of a body of "shamanic art"that arguably has trance and transformation as its principal concern (Lewis-Williams, 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson, 1988; 1989). The key difference is that rock art was embedded in the San's own expressive, cosmological and ritual culture, while the contemporary art has no roots within the San artists' culture, being externally derived, through the actions of Western, NGO-funded art instructors.

Tribal, feral, childlike, primal, ancient and archaic, dark, at one with nature and kindred to animals: here we have all of the ingredients of primitivism (Price, 1989; Torgovnick, 1990), which revitalized Western art at the turn of the twentieth century (Rubin, 1984) and which was held to be especially pure and vibrant in pieces of "African art," in which these traits are held to vouchsafe the authenticity of an African art piece (Bascom, 1976). They are looked for and found, in a body of art that patently transcends the primitivist slot, in creative and subtle ways to which so many of the Western commentators have evidently chosen to blind their art critics' eyes. It should be noted that of the exhibitions here reported on in this manner about half of these actually did fall in line with the primitivist trope writers reported or projected on them. It is in evidence in the bias—in

favour of bucks, birds and beads—that guided the selection of paintings to be exhibited, the florid and romantically tribal title or sub-title for the exhibition—"Return of the Moon," "Eland and Moon," "Rise with the Sun," "Mongongo," "!Kung"—and the tenor of the galleries' press releases and exhibition catalogues announcing and reporting on the exhibitions. The fact that in a number of cases rock art was actually exhibited alongside the contemporary corpus further underscored the exhibited art works primitivist aura.

Why this almost compulsive penchant for Western collectors to place what is in many ways so patently modernist art into the primitivist slot? The reason can be found in the common tendency for non-Western, tribal or "ethnic" art to be identified not with the individual artist, who works as a creative agent in tune with his or her own personal aesthetic vision, but with the artist's ethnic provenance (Graburn, 1976: 21-23)—which, deriving, ideally, from Africa, or New Guinea, Australia or the Canadian Arctic, bears the stamp of the tribal. The maxim at work here, as noted by Sally Price (1979: 100), is that "if the artist isn't anonymous, the art isn't primitive" (also see Berlo, 1999: 183, Steiner, 1994: 92-93). The art and artist are viewed not as individual and singularized, freely expressive, idiosyncratic but as collective, traditional, culturally uniform, tribally ethnic. Mediated through art, an expressive form of culture that conveys visual images and evokes an aesthetic response, that collectivity gains special salience and potency in the Western viewer. What (s)he will look for, and find, in a body of tribal or ethnic art—and, in the case of a curator, select for public display—are those features that define the art's collective, or tribal/ethnic dimension, overriding and obliterating in the process such individually conceived, extra-ethnic, idiosyncratic or modernist elements as there may be found in the art (and in the process also putting brakes on the artist's creative agency and integrity).

We see just that process at work to a significant extent in the body of art at hand: "Bushman art," along with its valorizing rock art cousin and alleged predecessor, is seen as an exemplar of Bushman culture and ethnic identity. And the qualities ascribed to the San ethnic minority—of timeless, history-less pristineness and primordialism—are ascribed also to their art, all the more so, in view of its visual salience and its evocativeness. Bushman (rock) art becomes the embodiment of "Bushman-ness," as noted by the South African art historian Barbara Buntman (2002: 75-77), and it stands in a feedback relationship to the essentialist, primordialist discourse that surrounds this ethnic minority in the countries of southern Africa, especially South Africa, the country in which the art is most frequently exhibited. Of all such minorities, the San, notwithstanding their numerical minority, are the most visible, the most mythic and iconic, either within academe, where, at one time, they stood as the paradigmatic, anthropology textbook case of "the hunter-gatherer" (Wilmsen, 1989), or outside academe. There, in South—and southern—Africa, we find a bowdlerized variant of the academic alterity Bushman figure, in the form of a crassly, unselfconsciously profiled archaic hunter-gatherer of the distant veld, "digging roots in bleached landscapes" (Landau, 1996: 141).

This figure has been appropriated and manipulated by government and corporate agencies, to various ends. One is to promote national unity, with reference to South Africa's "First People": so cast, as a "baseline monoculture" who precede and thus transcend all of the other divided groups of the land, the Bushmen are seen, by post-Apartheid intellectuals, as having the capacity to bridge the past and the future and to bring together divided communities by symbolically decentering competing nationalisms (Blundell, 1998: 155; Douglas, 1994: 73; Lewis-Williams, 2000: 41; Masilela, 1987; Tomaselli, 1993; 1995). This idealistic notion has also been fastened on by the new nation builders, as evidenced in South Africa' s Olympic flag design depicting rock art figures, and the Republic of South Africa' new national crest, which bears a mirror-imaged human figure in the centre that is based on a San rock art painting from South Africa's Eastern Cape province, along with the motto, in the extinct /Xam language, *!Ke e:/xarra //ke*, which means "people who are different join together"(Lewis-Williams, 2000: n.p.; Smith et al., 2001). Less loftily and commendably, the purpose of the co-opting and manipulation of San cultural elements may be to advertise a company or its products, by means of a salient, iconic image, for which the Bushmen, in their splendid Otherness, provide all of the right stuff. One finds them, or elements of their culture (especially rock art), on stamps, specially minted precious-metal coins and telephone cards, or as logos for museums or Cape wine labels. A new product for the jaded Western palate is the cordial "Kalahari Thirstland Liqueur," which invites the buyer to "experience the unique Kalahari" and underscores the point with advertisements that depict pristine loin clothed Bushman hunters and generic rock art figures (which are quite out of place in the Kalahari) (Buntman, 2002: 74). Crown and private corporations use rock art or other traditional Bushmen motifs for advertising; for instance the South African Broadcasting

Corporation and the South African Railways (Spoornet), or Mazda and Lemontwist, in television commercials (Blundell, 1998; Dowson, 1996). Instead of television commercials, there may be documentaries, such as Paul Myburgh's "The People of the Great Sandface" dripping with primordialist primitivism (Gordon, 1990; Guenther, 1990; Wilmsen, 1992), or feature films, such as the bizarrely pristinist block-buster "The Gods Must be Crazy," parts I and II, which has become famous—and infamous (Lee, 1985; Volkman, 1988)—internationally.

As the most photographed human subject, since the 1880s, in the early travel and tourism literature on southern Africa and the genre's ultimate "coffee-table book people" (Landau, 1996: 141), the Bushmen are especially prominent within the tourism industry (which, as ethnotourism, has become one of the industry's most important branches during post-Apartheid times, as well as a significant element of the politics—and economics—of identity[13]). Souvenirs with San cultural and rock art motifs abound—coasters, beer mugs, T-shirts, place mats, fridge magnets, key rings, decks of playing cards and the like (Buntman, 2002: 75-77). Such motifs appear on post and greeting cards and on tourist boutique signs. The British Airways' jumbo jets taking the tourist to his South African destination may have a contemporary San art painting—which the corporation bought from one of the Kuru artists (Cg'oise)—gracing its tail, as well as the coasters, serviettes and sugar packets handed out to the passengers. The tourist heading to Sun City resort and casino near Johannesburg, will come across rows of walking rock art women and men, some with antelope heads, heading purposefully towards the washroom, directing the visitor to his or her toilet facility (Dowson, 1996; Hall, 1995). The ultimate "Bushman experience" awaits the international tourist at one of the two "cultural villages," Kagga Kamma in South Africa and IntuAfrika in Namibia (Buntman, 1996; Crowe, 1996; Guenther, 2002: 47-51; Isaacson, 2002: 78-92; Whyte, 1993), where, in the context of an up-scale and pricey safari-style lodge, with swimming pool and sun-downers, loin-clothed Bushmen take tourists on bush walks or perform dubious trance dance numbers, bare-breasted Bushwomen, squat in front of grass huts drilling and stringing ostrich eggshell beads and half-naked Bushchildren, frolic about, offering to the tourist a highly photogenic *tableau vivant*.

A number of South African cultural critics (Blundell, 1998; Buntman, 1996; 2002; Dowson, 1996; Tomaselli, 1995) have decried this process of (mis)appropriation and manipulation of San cultural elements, which has deep roots in the country's history and collective consciousness (Skotnes, 1996). They see this process to be a mechanism of increasing reification of the Bushmen ethnic minority as tribal stereotypes, as well as isolates and innocents, and as "marginalized others" excluded from "from the political, economic and cultural centres" (Buntman, 1996: 279) of the modern society and nation state. "Primordialism," notes the South African social anthropologist Stuart Douglas, "lends itself to being a function of oppressive power relations" (1994: 10), indeed, to ideologies of ethnic cleansing, as ominously hinted at by Ed Wilmsen (1995: 19). Its attributes of cultural backwardness and stasis are counterproductive to the change and betterment contemporary Bushmen are striving for.

In sum, through a barrage of crass, commercial measures of this sort, the ethnic identity of the Bushmen gets distorted and essentialized, into a primordial primitive, a hunter-gatherers *par excellence*, the agro-pastoral, urban-industrial world's quintessential tribal Other. That otherness is projected by the Western viewer also onto "Bushman art" (*via* rock art), which, through this projection, becomes replete with primitivism and primordialism. Inescapably, the latter become the aesthetic mystique of the art, through a process of stereotypical attribution of primordial ethnicity that is deeply rooted within the culture and collective mentality of the non-San consumers of the art, especially in southern and South Africa.[14]

Conclusion: Keeping Primitivism in Check

As yet, the Western aesthetic predilection for the "primitive" pieces in the contemporary San oeuvre—the bucks, birds, plants and beads motifs—has not become a canon, however, as it seems to have in other bodies of "ethnic art"[15] and as yet, it does not appear to have placed aesthetic fetters on the artists or subjected them to any form of aesthetic hegemony, as has happened elsewhere in the world.[16] At Kuru the artists are enjoined by the project supervisor to create pieces that are in accordance with their own creative dictates. The individual style, vision and talent of each artist is recognized and fostered, and in marketing the Kuru art, the fact that an individuated artist stands behind each painting and print is emphasized (for example, by applying prominent signatures to each picture and placing biographical sketches and photographs of the artists into the Kuru art brochure and annual art calendar). Presenting the art in this way to the outside world can be expected to counteract the tendency to place the art within a generic ethnic slot. Sometimes a theme might be set for the artists, such as a certain folktale or myth, or such

modern issues as building a house, keeping cattle or the problems of alcohol or AIDS. This encourages artists to turn their creative talents towards modern subjects and acts as a countermeasure to such externally derived primitivism aesthetic as may be imposed on the artists. Some artists continue to produce primarily "traditional" motifs, in part because they are most adept at this sort of picture, enjoy doing such paintings or prints the most and, in some instances, do so also because these pieces are most likely to be sold. Thus, while some artist have become and are becoming attuned to market preferences, most of them paint what they like, including pictures of bugs, of modern and post-modern scenes.

If the latter pieces should turn out not to sell as readily but, instead end up staying at D'Kar village, that is just as well. These pieces, with their wry commentary on the modern life situation of the post-foraging Bushmen, their conflation—and at times deflation—of things old and new, engage modernity and try to work out its ambiguities and contradictions, and subtly subvert its economic and hegemonic hold, through juxtapositioning, conflation, bemusement, irony. Such hybrid art is as meaningful the San artists and their community as it is "indigestible" to the outside collector.

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Acknowledgment

I gratefully acknowledge the feed-back I received on this paper from two anonymous referees, which, in the one instance, was exceptionally insightful, germane and comprehensive.

Notes

1 Breaking with previous practice (Guenther, 1986), I have in this paper adopted the term "San" as the overarching designation for the click-speaking, erstwhile hunting-gathering Khoisan people known also as "Bushmen" (along with a number of other designations; see Hitchcock and Biesele n.d.). The question—"San" or "Bushman?"—is still not entirely settled, however, neither amongst scholars, nor the people themselves, amongst whom we can find members of the same family in disagreement over the matter, one brother opting for "Bushman," the other for "San" (as was the case at a 1991 community meeting in the Nyae Nyae region of north-eastern Namibia [Hitchcock and Biesele, *op. cit.*]). Yet, it seems that amongst the people themselves, including Khoisan and Coloured of the Cape in South Africa, who lay claim to a Khoisan heritage, San is becoming the preferred term of self-appellation. It was agreed upon in 1996, by delegates from various San groups, at a meeting in Namibia, as the designation for the people as a whole, *vis à vis* the outside world. Amongst themselves, the group also decided, specific groups should be referred to by their own specific designations, maintaining thereby regional cultural diversity (one of the hallmarks of San people and culture). At the 1997 "Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage" conference in Cape Town, a land-mark event in Khoisan identity politics (Bank, 1998), that position was re-confirmed. Possibly, the reason San received endorsement from this group is its gloss as "original people" (Gordon, 1992: 5-6). The term sits well with the current claim made by or for the San of South and southern Africa as the region's or country's "First People" (Masisela, 1987; Tomaselli, 1995). Deliberations of this sort—no longer by scholars, for reasons academic, but by the people themselves, out of political considerations—reveal just how important this issue is to them, as a symbolic acknowledgment not only of their identity but of their struggle for empowerment and land.

2 This—"fine art"—and its opposite, "applied art," have not appeared in San culture as a conceptual type and pair, let alone as one whose members are unequally valued, with the "applied art" (or its cognate forms, "crafts" or "artifacts"), generally associated with women, held as the inferior form (Faris, 1988; Phillips and Steiner, 1999: 5-7). In the San case, the fine art, the easel paintings and prints, receive some of their motifs from traditional ostrich eggshell and glass bead work and the decorations that are etched or burnt onto ostrich eggshell water containers or wooden vessels or pipes or spoons. Some of the print images appear, as new "applied art," on T-shirts and greeting cards sold to tourists at the Kuru craft shop. Half of the "fine" artists are women and a number of them also make "applied" crafts. Because of such overlap between the fine and the applied art forms, the questions and issues this conceptual pair elicits in the art complex of Western and other societies are largely irrelevant in the San case.

3 As a result of a massive restructuring of the Kuru organization, the Kuru Development Trust is now called the Kuru Family of Organizations (KFO), consisting of seven smaller organizations, one of which, the D'Kar-based D'Kar Kuru Trust, administers the art project, while another, the Ghanzi-based Kalahari Crafts, markets the art works (Kuru Staff Members, 2002). What I report in this paper describes the situation as it existed during the time of fieldwork (1994-97), before KDT's restructuring.

4 In 1999 the !Xu and Khwe at Schmidtsdrift were officially awarded title deeds to three farms the South African government had purchased, on which they are to be resettled, once housing has been built at the new sites (Robins et al., 2002: 13-14). Today, the process of resettlement is expected to be complete by the end of 2002, at which time the Schmidtsdrift tents will be dismantled.

5 Their names are, for the men, Xg'oa Mangana (Qwaa, deceased), Qgoma Ncokg'o (Qmao, deceased), Thamae Setshogo, Xgaoc'o X'are, Thama Kase (Thamae Kaashe), Sobe Sobe, Qãetcao Moses (Olebogeng), Gamnqoa Kukama and Xgaiga Qhomatca and, for the women, Nxaedom Qhomatca (Ankie, deceased), Coex'ae Qgam (Dada), Cg'ose Ntcox'o (Cgoise), Ncg'abe Taase (Nxabe Eland),

Coex'ae Bob (Ennie), X'aga Tcuixgao. It should be noted that the artists's names are transcribed by means of the "official" Nharo orthography, as developed by the linguist by Hessel Visser at D'Kar. In lieu of click symbols its uses consonants, in the following manner: "c "for " /" (dental click), "tc" for = (alveolar click), "x" for "//" (lateral click) and "q" for "!" (alveo-palatal click).

6 In 1995, when I visited the community, their names were, for the men, Joao Wenne Dikuanga, Fulai (Flai) Shipipa, Carimbwe Katunga, Steffans Samcuia, Freciano Ndala, Alouis Sijaja, Monto Masako, Bernardo (Tahulu) Rumau, Manuel Masseka, and, for the women, Zurietta Dala, Madena Kasanga, Andry Kashivi, Bongi Kasiki, Donna Rumao, and Julietta Calimbwe.

7 For example, at D'Kar over 152,300 Pula (or $50 000) were earned by the artists from 1993-95. About 75% of the proceeds went to the Kuru artists, each getting different sums, proportionate to his or her sales. Incomes of this magnitude put most of the artists into the relatively affluent sector of the D'Kar village residents, the majority of whom are poor and unemployed and live in hovels (Guenther, forthcoming).

8 In its conference version (at the 2001 CASCA meetings in Montreal) this paper was a slide presentation (consisting of close to 30 pictures). Because of practical constraints, the printed version can only offer a few pictures, a regrettable circumstance, given the subject matter. Samples of the art, by artists from both communities, can be viewed on the internet (at such sites as http:/www.kalaharicraft.com/cgoise_text.htm, http://www.sanart.com/editione.htm and http://www.africaserver.nl/kuru/). The art of the !Xun and Khwe artists is showcased in a recent book by Marlene Sullivan Winberg (2001).

9 This technique is also used by Australian Aboriginal artists (Krempel 1993; Morphy, 1989).

10 Formally, these pictures very much pictures fit Bakhtin's classic definition of hybridization: "...a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor" (1981: 358).

11 Valda Blundell (1989) has described the same process—of ethnic art primordialization through media reportage—for the Canadian Inuit art scene.

12 As noted by one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper, one of the N/u men at Kagga Kamma has recently started creating rock engravings "in the spirit and form of the original rock engraving tradition." The same was reported by Rupert Isaacson–two men painting small gemsboks and hunters onto smooth slabs of rock, with a pigment of powdered red rock and animal fat mixed in a tortoise shell, all for tourist consumption (2002: 84).

13 Ethnotourism draws in a number of the country's and region's other ethnic groups, especially such photogenic groups as the Zulu, Pedi, Sotho, Ndebele or Himba (Crowe, 1996).

14 One of the anonymous referees felt that my paper presents primitivism in an "overwhelmingly bad light." As mitigating factors s/he points to such positive aspects as the San finding gainful employment through their involvement in cultural performance schemes and using these as an advocacy base for reclaiming ancestral land (as exemplified by the celebrated, successful Khomani case in South Africa's Kalahari Gemsbok National Park). The point is also made that the San themselves (for instance at Kagga Kamma) are not dupes in such schemes, that display, market and exploit their heritage, but willing and astute participants. Another point made is that the San themselves are not infrequently "dominantly conservative," in contrast to the "people researching them [who] are often more left-leaning and tend to be made uncomfortable by things that do not always cause concern to the Indigenous people themselves." Finally, the referee points out that in South Africa the Primitivism movement "found root," amongst White artists (such as Walter Battiss, Pippa Skotnes and others) who found inspiration in San art, aspects of which they incorporated into their own work. This is presented as a positive instance of cultural appropriation, because it raised the profile of the San and made Whites aware that "both 'they' and 'us' make 'art'." While I appreciate these points (to some of which I have addressed myself elsewhere [2002, forthcoming]), I remain troubled by what I see as the dark side in the primitivism trope, as applied to contemporary, "modern" San art: its penchant for reifying stereotypes and the damaging implications this has for the post-foraging San people's political struggle.

15 For instance Australia, where Judith Ryan (1993) has noted an "ochre canon" in modern Aboriginal bark paintings, which constrains the Aboriginal artists' range of artistic expression.

16 For instance, on artists amongst the Ainu (Low, 1976: 221), Australian Aboriginals (Lüthi, 1993: 26-29; Ryan, 1993: 61-63; Williams, 1976: 278), Baule (Steiner, 1994: 108) and Inuit (Berlo, 1999: 190-192; Mitchell, 1998; Seagrave, 1998).

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