

John Marshall's Kalahari Family
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ABSTRACT Throughout his career and through his films, John Marshall has embodied many representational debates in anthropology and ethnographic media production. With *A Kalahari Family*, Marshall has provided his most reflexive film to date as well as a comprehensive visual record of 50 years of transition among the Ju/'hoansi, from lingering, hunter-gatherer subsistence to problematic and often tragic contemporary living conditions. *A Kalahari Family* bears witness to the negative effects a racist ideology and varied development agendas have had on an indigenous group of people, and the transformative effects they continue to have. In the film, the audience also witnesses the evolution of John Marshall himself, from naive, inexperienced teenager engaging an exotic other, with all the inherent cultural baggage of a Western perspective, to his eventual emergence as a filmmaker and a dedicated advocate for the people with whom he has become so involved. [Keywords: John Marshall, visual anthropology, ethnographic film, southern Africa, Namibia, San (Bushmen, Ju/'hoansi), Kalahari]

In the course of his career and through his work, John Marshall has embodied many representational debates in anthropology and ethnographic media production.¹ At different times he has been sacrificial lamb, pariah, representative of Western hegemony, and the supposed face of problematic development schemes. Simultaneously, he has been the subject of praise for his advocacy and an exemplar of ethnographic documentary film practice. His family's research and his film record are necessarily referenced in almost any type of ethnographic or applied fieldwork conducted among the Ju/'hoansi in Namibia.² His oeuvre is addressed in almost every piece of literature concerning ethnographic film³ and his activity as a filmmaker and advocate is a historical precedent to any representational media enterprise conducted among indigenous groups throughout the world. This is all despite the fact that Marshall has never claimed that his film record or his work is necessarily ethnographic in intent.

John Marshall's opus, *A Kalahari Family*, presented as a six-hour series in five parts, represents the culmination of 50-plus years of work and over 2,000,000 feet of film and video shot among the Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae. Taken in its entirety, the series stands as a visual record of the social and geographic movement of members of the Ju/'hoansi perhaps the most filmed and anthropologically dissected indigenous group in history—from lingering hunter-gatherer subsistence to problematic and dependent modernity, with all of the inherent developmental and political tragedy that accompanies this shift. This group has been in a continued tenuous state of "transition" since first meeting Marshall and his family in 1951. As Megan Biesele has described,

The Ju/'hoan Bushmen of Namibia are in transition, not in the old sense of traveling from one water source to another, but in the current exigency of changing their lifestyle in order to survive. They have lost the vast expanse of the Kalahari Desert that enabled them to live, as had the generations before them, from hunting and gathering alone. They have been reduced to the depths of poverty and degradation in rural slums. Now they are struggling to adapt their ancient ways to modern necessity, and to hold onto their remaining land. [1993b:205]

A Kalahari Family provides visual evidence of this transition through changing documentary film styles and developing modes of technology in filmmaking and videography over the last 50 years. This technological movement has enabled a shifting level of participatory engagement between Marshall and the people who have become the subjects of his life-long project. The series displays theoretical and mechanical movement as 16-millimeter nonsync film footage gives way to handheld video camera work. Marshall's technique shifts from observational distance to up-close interactions as time passes, providing a symbolic parallel for his increasing level of political involvement (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. John Marshall establishing a shot in the 1950s. (courtesy DER/Marshall family archive)

Marshall's first film, *The Hunters*, was one of the first documentaries actively engaged by anthropologists and his later films, such as *N!ai*, *The Story of a Kung Woman*, have had a vast influence in the field and in ethnographic film production. Marshall has described his filmmaking method as a combination of direct cinema and cinema verite strategies, at one point explained as "sequence" and "slot" filming (Marshall 1993). These methods were associated with the intent to develop more "objective" sequence films; the type advocated in 1970s ethnographic film theory. This reflects some of the early thoughts concerning the possible contribution of film to anthropological fieldwork and pedagogy.⁴ Marshall's historical promotion of sequence films has been frustrating when contemplating a larger contextual frame- work in which to situate his work, or when considering a more thematic or impressionistic shift in ethnographic documentary film production that is not as concerned with creating an objective scientific record. Yet Marshall's influence is evident in contemporary documentary production and even in popular culture, as seen through the observational techniques he used in *The Pittsburgh Police Series* and in camerawork for Fredrick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*.

In *A Kalahari Family*, Marshall's multiple sequence films and full-length documentaries are comprehensively placed into a coherent narrative that provides a methodical contemplation of the conditions of Ju/'hoansi in the past and present.⁵ While discussion around what constitutes the methodology and narrative content of ethnographic film continues to be debated,⁶ one gets the sense, for the first time, that in the Marshall corpus is the promise and under- lying anthropological capacity of sequence films combined with interpretive context. The narrative construction of *A Kalahari Family* relies on expository methods that update the audience, at the beginning of each installment, on the historical and contemporary condition of the Ju/'hoansi by using maps, still images, stock footage, and Marshall's voice- over. These expository breaks set the pedagogical tone and are part of the milieu of representational strategies that include observational shooting styles, participatory gestures, and

reflexive moments employed in a fluid fashion.

Throughout the series, Marshall attempts to contextualize the historical and contemporary social conditions of the Ju/'hoansi and their plight through a variety of scenes that confront the viewer with both tranquility and tragedy. Several moments of racial tension and the audience can begin to understand the foundation that secures the "Bushmen" myth, discussed by Marshall and others, that has excused and underwritten land seizure and murder.⁷ The audience is also privy to the way these sentiments are visualized in the culture that surrounds the Ju/'hoansi, as stock footage shows individuals being used as live installations in museums. Or, when footage reveals G/aq'o, the recently deceased star of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* film series, being used in a publicity campaign for the filmmaker Jamie Uys.⁸ It is perhaps these visual elements that most profoundly support the highly problematic and ongoing popular sentiment that Ju/'hoansi and other "Bushmen" represent an element of the human experience that is somehow "closer to nature," a notion that has driven much of the popular understanding about them. This idea has found its way into multiple advertising ventures throughout the world and, as depicted by Marshall, has continued to drive some contemporary development schemes that would display Ju/'hoansi and others as one more element in the "fauna fantasy" scenery of the Kalahari (Marshall 1993:2).⁹

Yet *A Kalahari Family* is laden with allegorical natural symbols that invoke a nostalgia for the past and lament the present conditions of the Ju/'hoansi. The baobab tree that serves as the background in much of the Marshall corpus at Nyae Nyae, and which was a primary character in *A Joking Relationship*, is now dead. The tree metaphorically speaks to the demise of the community. It is shown bearing fruit in the 1950s and 1998 appears again, lying wasted, while a memorial plaque is laid beneath it to Toma, Marshall's mentor. The tree is an embodiment of the tragedy Marshall is attempting to present. The initial dirt track roads that the Marshall family built during their first encounter with Toma and his family are shown as a self-deprecating symbol for the encroachment of the outside world on the Ju/'hoansi: an encroachment that was inevitable but linked to Marshall and his presence at different times. Water the ownership, negotiation, scarcity, and search for it- becomes a metaphor for the struggle for autonomy faced by new generations in Nyae Nyae. As the series progresses, alcohol slowly appears as the incarnation of negative Western influence, the fuel for domestic violence and other problems in the community.

The first several minutes of part 1, *A Far Country*, reveal the intentions of Marshall on multiple levels: as a film-maker, friend, family member, and advocate. He provides the contextual history of the early Marshall expeditions in the 1950s beginning with his arrival in Nyae Nyae and ending with his forced removal in 1958 by the South African government. One begins to understand the context of these early trips to the Kalahari and the events depicted, especially in a haunting voice-over from Lorna Marshall describing her early attempts to create an ethnographic record, while describing the job details of every other member in the family.¹⁰ It could be argued as well that the film more or less replaces *The Hunters* with new footage and a contextual discussion of the original film. This could be seen as an attempt by Marshall to move this landmark work further toward the status of historical document. As a "classic" ethnographic film, it has become the subject of countless essays in introductory anthropology courses and often enables the "fauna fantasy" myth that Marshall is attempting to contradict. In viewing *A Far Country*, one can see that Marshall is attempting to answer many of the discussions of his earlier work found in visual anthropology literature.¹¹

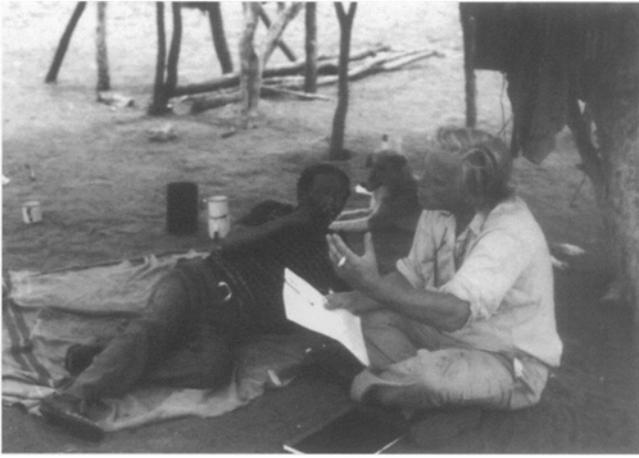


FIGURE 2. John Marshall and Homa. (courtesy DER/Marshall family archive)

Part 2, *The End of the Road*, begins with an emotional reunion between John Marshall and different members of Toma's family on his return in 1978, after 20 years of forced removal (see Figure 2). During that time, the group has abandoned even marginal hunting-and-gathering and settled at an administrative post called Tsumkwe, outside of their traditional homeland. Promised a variety of things by the government that evidently never materialized, the community has spiraled into impoverished conditions with rampant malnutrition, alcoholism, and domestic violence. As the audience is made aware of these problems, sometimes with graphic, violent detail, the beginning of Marshall's advocacy within the community takes shape. Plans are made for the resettlement of the group back in /Aotcha, amidst the conflict between the apartheid South African government and the Namibian independent SWAPO movement in the 1980s.

The End of the Road is a series of lamentations by Marshall: The old life is compared with the trials and tribulations of the new, through comparative montage and stories of strife by a number of individuals, including N!ai. Once again, Marshall invokes nostalgia for the past as N!ai recounts her life before her role as a contested star of a feature film and the target of jealousy in the community.¹² Marshall purposefully juxtaposes images of the past with current conditions so that the audience can begin to see the perilous situation that the Ju/'hoansi found themselves in during the 1980s. At one point, Toma directly implicates Marshall and his family as the instigators of this process. He tells him, "Everything came with your roads." This signals Marshall's difficult attempt to deal with the history of development efforts among the Ju/'hoansi.

A variety of development strategies and identities have impinged on the Ju/'hoansi at different points through-out the last 50 years: unwilling wards of the South African apartheid state; self-sustaining farmers and keepers of live-stock; living museum entities; active participants in proposed nature conservancies; and the stars of racist feature films and problematic documentaries that tend to demand the presence of Ju/'hoansi actors in skins rather than contemporary dress. In part 3, *Real Water*, the audience is introduced to the different players in the development strategies directed toward the Ju/'hoansi. In the power struggle occurring between different entities, Marshall represents the Ju/'hoan voice as one that is continually subsumed. Up until this moment, the audience has an idea of his intentions regarding development in Nyae Nyae, but beginning in this installment and in part 4, *Standing Tall*, he unashamedly pushes his agenda for the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation and the plan of building farms rather than game reserves. Marshall's voice becomes one of the several international entities with a myriad of self-development agendas to assist after Namibian independence. Efforts at self-sustaining development have occurred, in particular with the establishment of the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative.¹³ Members of the community have begun to travel onto white ranches and divided land, finding relatives removed by forced labor or separated when land division took place in the past.

The trip resembles a political campaign as Toma's son, Tsamko, Toma, gives stump speeches at different points along the way, either trying to explain the Ju/'hoan plight to different Herera or attempting to convince displaced members of the group to come back to /Aotcha and settle there. One of the most pivotal moments in the series occurs in this context, when John Marshall is arguing with a Herera who asks him accusingly what he is doing there. Marshall replies, "What am I doing here? I'm helping people make farms.

That's what I'm doing. I'm helping people keep their land." In this reflexive statement, cleanly edited for the audience in order to avoid any aberrant reading, Marshall states his intended purpose and reason for being in Namibia. He is no longer there solely to make films or accompany his family on an adventure. He is not trying to reflect on what is taking place. He is there as an advocate with an agenda.

In the last installment, *Death by Myth*, which will probably become the most viewed installment of this series, Marshall attempts to contextualize what has occurred since the 1980s up until the present. Namibian independence has attracted vast amounts of international donor aid and the concomitant politics that come along with it. Different organizations including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and USAID are portrayed as having competing agendas that diverge from those desired by the still struggling Ju/'hoansi themselves. *Death by Myth* is perhaps the most complex and problematic episode of *A Kalahari Family* as well. Up until this point the series deals with events that have largely occurred in the past that are perhaps easier to situate and represent in the narrative. The present circumstances that the Ju/'hoansi find themselves in are complex and involve more individuals, entities, and funders than at any time previously. The question arises whether Marshall is adequately dealing with the complex set of relations that the Ju/'hoansi now find themselves in, or is he sticking with a paradigmatic representation that continues to highlight his perspective and mission above all others?

In a recent commentary on the film series, Biesele, long-time ethnographer and activist among the Ju/'hoansi and colleague of Marshall, who has seen the contextual events at close range over the past few decades, takes issue with the lack of recognition that Marshall is giving "other voices" within the community.¹⁴ She asks whether or not Marshall is adequately addressing "power differentials between film-maker and subject" and the "evidence of important contradictory voices" that exist within the community, specifically with regards to one incident where a development worker named Axel Thoma was "chased away" by members of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy (Biesele 2004:8-9). Her commentary directly questions the possible manipulation by Marshall of the circumstances and power relationships within the Ju/'Hoansi community and asks why more disparate voices are not represented in the film.

While Marshall promotes his passionate vision for the community, Biesele's questions over the possible absence of alternative and contradictory voices bring the intent of *Death by Myth* into question. Her query also raises doubts around the categorization of the film series as a whole. Should it be placed within the historical catchall category of "ethnographic film," in which Marshall's films have always resided simply because the narrative content deals with a group that is a traditional subject of anthropology? Or, rather, should the film series be considered an advocate documentary that pushes an important, if not singular, agenda and demands the creation of other representative visual documents to stand in debate? Calls for the representation of "whole" events and the inclusion of every voice in ethnographic media reflect one of the earliest debates in ethnographic film theory.¹⁵ The question remains whether the inclusion of multiple voices can ever take place or present a holistic picture of a given situation.

These critical questions also remind us of the continued dialogue that needs to take place concerning indigenous representation and, specifically, the "critical, political, environmental, and economic issues" facing the Ju/'hoansi in the coming years (Biesele 2004). The criticism of a singular vision that cries for further contextualization should be a call to action for more representative voices within the visual medium concerning the Ju/'hoansi. Yet more representation results in a conundrum of inspiring more debate, resulting in even more representation of the most visually documented indigenous group in anthropological history. Despite the documentation that exists now or may be created in the future, Marshall does provide one representational principle that must be followed by ethnographic film-makers. In one pivotal moment in the series Tsamko Toma puts the entire representational corpus of the "Bushmen" on trial as he looks directly into the low angle camera of Marshall and says, "There are two kinds of films. Films that show us in skins are lies. Films that tell the truth show us with cattle. With farms with our own water making our own plans." Although often quoted, this statement by Tsamko Homa is a direct challenge to ethnographic documentary filmmakers and anthropology's representational domain,¹⁶ and it serves as a litmus test that the Marshall corpus and ethnographic documentary film has no choice but to be judged on. It also serves as an ongoing mantra for those who wish to "represent" any indigenous culture visually and the consequences that these projects could entail.



FIGURE 3. John Marshall in the 1990s. (courtesy DER/Marshall family archive)

In the last several years of Marshall's tenure in the Kalahari, he has portrayed the Nyae Nyae region as a play-ground for the experimentation of development agendas, sometimes operating unhampered by common sense or any understanding of what people actually need. Perhaps the most inevitable critique directed at Marshall is the possible paternalistic role he has taken toward the Ju/'hoansi by encouraging certain development strategies to the neglect of others and attempting to serve as a mouthpiece for the Ju/'hoansi plight. While this could be argued as paternalism, it can also serve as an effort toward an applied sensibility that is revealed by Marshall's long-fought and continuing efforts at building and sustaining the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation.

Marshall's applied sensibilities are apparent when he puts representatives from WWF, USAID, and the Namibian government on camera to face their policies toward the Ju/'hoansi. The question remains: Should Marshall be regarded as part of this group he has depicted as never listening to what the Ju/'hoansi need (see Figure 3)? Or should he be judged differently, because of his continuing, long-term, active involvement and his overwhelming contextual knowledge of the failures of different policy initiatives? This is the most consciously reflexive film of his career and, despite the presence of his dominant agenda, the contradictions of his involvement are borne out in front of the camera for the audience to judge, while the agendas of other development entities often go unquestioned or, perhaps, unrepresented.

The presentation of ethnographic knowledge and indigenous politics through video and film is a messy endeavor fraught with numerous pitfalls and mistakes that are not easily edited.¹⁷ While many critiques of Marshall and his work are sound and contemplative, many of them, and those of ethnographic film in general, often fail to recognize the immediacy of the medium and the dilemmas of conveying ethnographic knowledge, or even applied intentions, visually. Alongside the 50-year progression of technology, shooting style, and method evident in the series, *A Kalahari Family* bears witness to the negative effects of racist ideology and varied development agendas on an indigenous group of people, and the transformative affects they continue to have. The audience witnesses the evolution of Marshall from naive, inexperienced teenager engaging an exotic Other with all the inherent cultural baggage of a Western perspective to his eventual emergence as a filmmaker and a dedicated advocate for the people with which he has become so involved.

As a representation of 50 years of film and advocacy work, one cannot help but wonder where *A Kalahari Family* will stand 50 years from now. Will it be a representation of a people who are continuing to dwindle because of the compounding effects of state neglect, poverty, homelessness, poor nutrition, alcoholism, and a possible rapid ascent in HIV-positive infection rates that affect similar communities in the Kalahari? Or will the series be viewed in the same critical fashion that *The Hunters* is now regarded? With *A Kalahari Family*, John Marshall has fulfilled what many early advocates of visual technologies in anthropology argued for, by providing a singular and long-term filmic record of a group of indigenous

people confronting cultural change. A project deemed necessary, if not unattainable, in ethnographic film, but fundamentally problematic by definition. For how can one person visually represent the complexity of 50 years of cultural interaction and events? By attempting to do just that, John Marshall has provided a visual record of a group of people whose move from waning hunting-and-gathering subsistence to ill-fraught modernity over a 50-year period is at times more akin to active genocide than neglect.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Jay Ruby, Megan Biesele, Jake Homiak, Cynthia Close, Mick Francis, Huffa Frobes-Cross, Laura Bruni, and my students in the Visual Anthropology Seminar at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2003 for answering questions, providing comments on drafts, and for critical discussions regarding the film series.

1. See Gonzalez 1993 and Tomaselli 1999 as just two examples.
2. See Biesele 1993a, Gordon 1992, and Lee 1983.
3. A few examples are Collier 1990, Crawford 1996, Jhala 1996, Martinez 1992, and Nichols 1994.
4. Often referred to as "visual data," sequence films were advocated by Marshall and others as a way of providing a supposedly more objective film record of a singular cultural event that could be verified at a later point. The creation of sequence films was supposed to provide more "scientific" records of human behavior unconcerned with future editing or thematic structure. As Marshall and De Brigard optimistically state, "Sequence filming is an attempt to prevent the words and actions of people in a documentary film from being confused with what the audience want to see and what the filmmaker wants to say" (Marshall and De Brigard 1975:133). See 5. Sorenson 1974 and Heider 1976 for two examples that are associated with this past work.
5. It is with some trepidation that I make this statement. The conditions in which the Ju/'hoansi in Namibia and other communities in surrounding countries are living in is constantly shifting and to state that there is one "comprehensive treatment" of these problematic conditions is a little over-zealous. Yet, Marshall's film record is the most exhaustive *visual* treatment of these conditions.
6. See Banks 1992 and Ruby 2000.
7. Marshall has attempted to discuss this within his films and in writing as well (1993). Perhaps the most thorough discussion of the "Bushman Myth" is by Robert Gordon 1992.
8. See Tomaselli 1992 for a discussion of the critiques of this film.
9. The tendency to associate Ju/'hoansi and other "Bushmen" as "pristine," "primitive," or "isolated" has been critiqued by many authors. Just one example is Wilmsen and Denbow 1990.
10. See Wilmsen 1999 for a discussion of the relationship between the Marshall family corpus of work and its relationship to academia.
11. As mentioned previously, there is hardly a journal article or book about the history of ethnographic film or visual anthropology that does not mention Marshall or *The Hunters*, in particular. See Tomaselli 1999 for an example of the way critiques of Marshall and his work have almost become a field in and of itself.
12. See MacDougall 1998:117 for a brief description of the problematic role of particular interviews in ethnographic film.
13. Now known as the Nyae Nyae Conservancy.
14. See Biesele 2004.
15. See Heider 1976.
16. As explained by Biesele (Biesele and Hitchcock 1999:138), this is a "reconstructed" quote originally heard in passing by Biesele.
17. See Ginsburg 1994 for a thoughtful discussion of the moral and political issues surrounding

ethnographic representation and indigenous media in particular.

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