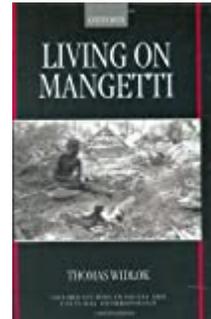




Thomas Widlok. *Living on Mangetti: 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 291 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-823389-3.



Reviewed by Dag Henrichsen (Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library in Switzerland)

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Widlok and Bushman Autonomy

This book is an important and inspiring contribution to hunter-gatherer studies in general and southern African anthropology in particular. In *Living on Mangetti*, Thomas Widlok writes about those Bushmen in northern Namibia who call themselves =Akhoe or Hai//om and how they “actually live” (p.vii). Taking the subjective daily experiences and perspectives of Hai//om seriously, the author presents what he calls a “practice-oriented ethnography” (p. 8) in order to enrich our understanding of recent social change amongst people who remain, in many ways and for reasons the author is particularly interested in, hunter-gatherers.

Many Hai//om live for a substantial period of time in Mangetti-West to the north-east of the Etosha Nature Reserve from which some of their forefathers were evicted during the course of the 20th century. The area is sandwiched between the commercial farming sector and the former homeland of “Ovamboland”. Widlok thus focuses on people who, having been transformed into a modern “Namibian underclass” (Robert Gordon), live and work on the margins of two different and yet inextricably in-

tertwined economic and social domains. The functioning of Hai//om relations and the status of Hai//om as modern hunter-gatherers is determined, on the one hand, by their ability skillfully to access social and economic resources from these domains. On the other hand, their intra- and interrelationships are powerfully determined by the dominant discourses and highly commercialized relations which are structured by representatives of these domains, notably oshiWambo-, German- und Afrikaans-speaking cattle farmers, but also governmental and non-governmental organisations. Widlok’s convincing and thoroughly detailed analysis shows how the nutritious mangetti nut, by which Hai//om of Mangetti-West subsist to some extent, today “epitomize the resilience of a sophisticated hunting and gathering way of life” (p.2) on the margins of a complex regional and national political economy.

Living on Mangetti consists of eight chapters, ranging from analyses of cultural diversity, story telling, subsistence flexibility and socio-spatial constructions among and with Hai//om, to creating name and kin relations,

rituals of immediacy and ritual cooperation. As such, the book resembles much of a classical ethnographic account and the author in fact roots himself in this classical tradition: "By presenting a monograph it rejects the call to abandon the further development of ethnographic accounts of (former) hunting and gathering people in southern Africa" (p.7).

A strength of Widlok's monographic approach derives from the numerous, often incidental case-studies taken from his field notes and cited in verbatim, paying close, if at times painstaking attention to details, whether in utterances of his informants or with regard to situational person-to-person encounters and experiences. As such, the author is indeed able to convey much of how Hai//om "actually live" and, throughout the monograph, presents a very broad 'Gesellschaftsanalyse'. The overall picture that emerges is that of a highly complex and at the same time highly flexible social setting structured by Hai//om. They do so in the absence of a strongly hierarchized and conventionalized society and with little social coercive powers and institutions. Rather, face-to-face encounters create the "common ground" in Hai//om relations, and the distinct social styles and shared identities.

Paying close attention to the "cultural sources" (p.38) which Hai//om use, Widlok is able to unravel the complexities of the strategies and material culture in north-central Namibia which few researchers so far have achieved. He is able to do so not only through his practice-orientated ethnography but also through a sophisticated comparative approach with regard to the neighbouring people whom Hai//om deal and live with. In fact, the book has much to say on the neighbours of Hai//om in Mangetti-West and in northern Namibia in general. By analysing, for example, the agricultural and liquor trading ventures of Owambo with whom Hai//om reside or for whom they work, he is able to sketch, firstly, the complex networks between both partners, and, secondly, to characterise more clearly the specificities which make out Hai//om daily life. Thus, he argues, Hai//om focus more on "accessing resources" and "facilitating access" (p. 105) "rather than on capitalizing" on resources (p. 104), despite the highly commercial framework of the transactions which benefits those who focus on long-term capitalizing efforts and obligations, such as Owambo women selling liquor. In fact, as Widlok aptly writes, Hai//om often "forage on delayed-return industries" (p.119). On another level, by analysing aspects of material culture, the author, using the comparative approach, can argue that much of Hai//om life is in fact not

"mixed" or, perhaps, hybrid, but simply "commonsensical" (38).

Most importantly, the author "rescues" Hai//om Bushmen from being just another Namibian underclass, by avoiding the danger of collapsing people without land and national political power into crude categories such as "underclass" or "rural proletariat". On the other hand, he reaffirms the status of Hai//om as being and wanting to be hunter-gatherers. Widlok gives reason to 'us' as readers why Hai//om continue to pursue their lifestyle as hunter-gatherers, by emphasising, over and over again, that "informally cultivated social practices continue without formal cultural principles". Likewise importantly, Widlok convincingly shows that Hai//om in Mangetti are not hunter-gatherers because of any ecological or otherwise "natural result" nor through any "extraordinarily large cultural knowledge" (p.89). Rather, it is the complex intertwining of a mixed economy, shared cultural resources and a constant constructing, demanding and sharing of "common ground" amongst themselves and with their neighbours which seem to enable Hai//om to live their social styles.

This sophisticated analysis raises high expectations among readers, certainly in my case. Widlok adds to that himself in a very clear manner firstly by stating - again in the classic ethnographic convention - that "this is the first monograph to be published on the Hai//om" (p.7) and, secondly, by emphasising that his account is "the first post-revisionist monograph on a 'Bushman' group" (ibid). With regard to the latter the author refers to the so-called Kalahari debate which deeply influenced hunter-gatherer studies in southern Africa and which confronted anthropologists working on the field with questions on history, class and regional formations. Widlok asserts that his study is "post-revisionist" as "it takes neither ecological evolutionism nor socio-historical geography, but practice-oriented ethnography, as its leading paradigm" (p.7f.). Whilst this position is acceptable and "legitimate", as the author himself concludes, it is interesting to realise what in fact is lost in such a paradigm. Not surprisingly, perhaps, history in many ways is lost - again, one could say and despite the Kalahari debate. (The author seems to acknowledge this by stating that more "attention is given ... to a spectrum of unfolding situational factors than to temporal depth" (p.1).) This is regrettable for the following reasons.

Firstly, it sits uneasy with the subtitle of the book: *'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence*. This subtitle evokes a time-marker and creates the expecta-

tion of reading about specific developments having taken place before and after Namibian independence for people living on/in Mangetti. I found little that explained how Bushmen in Mangetti-West either viewed or acted upon the local, regional or national developments shortly before or after independence, how they were shaped through the process of independence during this period and in how far and why social change, a central issue of concern for the author, has to be rooted in the 'phenomenon' of Namibian independence. (Some of the aspects are briefly sketched, for example on pp.32ff., 128ff., or pp.235f.) To phrase it differently: What are the specificities of Namibian independence that explain the autonomy of the post-colonial life of Hai//om in Mangetti, or their and their neighbours' specific interactions, rituals and perspectives?

Secondly, there is no coherent analysis of Bushmen farm labour, although this seems to have been a central feature of Bushman life in north-central Namibia in the (recent) past. (The author provides only hints on this, as on p. 236) If such a central historical development amongst a group of people is not explained fully, the question arises whether such experiences are no longer talked about in current narrations in Mangetti and whether they are in fact irrelevant for the recently changing contexts and strategies of Bushman life. The

recently published book by James Suzman on a similar Namibian Bushman case study: *'Things from the Bush'. A contemporary history of the Omaheke Bushmen* (Basel Namibia Study Series, P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000) suggests that such experiences and narrations are in fact highly visible and crucial for the explanation of social change and current lifestyles of Bushmen. Whilst the Mangetti case might be different, the question remains why a post-revisionist monograph on Bushmen with its inclination of sketching a broad ethnography, should continue to neglect analyses of central historical experiences in their own right, an issue so heatedly discussed during the Kalahari debate?

Thomas Widlok is able to present and explain the social complexity of north-central Namibia in a way that is hardly matched by much recent anthropological or historical studies. My critical questions are informed not least by the impressive aims the author set himself, and there is no doubt that he succeeds very well through the merit of good ethnographic work and the rigorous application of anthropological theory.

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