

Nisa critique

Philosophy



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Introduction:

The Kung people are a tribe of hunter-gatherers who live as bushmen in the southwestern part of Africa, in isolated areas of Botswana (where they make up only 3 percent of the population), Angola, and Namibia, deep in the Kalahari desert. After gaining fluency in the language of the ! Kung, Shostak returned to Botswana in 1975 for six months to complete the life histories of several women in the tribe.

Marjorie Shostak manages to take us into the oldest culture on earth by living with a hunter/gatherer tribe in southern Africa and manages to give us the details of their way of life through an interview with them, of course, before their way of life was further damaged by careless government administration policies. She reflexively collects interviews and anecdotes that enable her to explain their morals, architecture, tribal politics, spirituality, games, marriage rituals and subsistence lifestyle, giving us one of the best looks at how human society began all those thousands of years ago.

One of its major flaws especially for those with a strong understanding of anthropology is the fact that she concentrates her analysis from the report of one dominant character named NISA [the name is fictitious]. This results in a narrative of an idiosyncratic life, one that, as the ! Kung woman Nisa once told Shostak, " I will break open the story and tell you what is there. Then, like the others that have fallen out into the sand, I will finish with it, and the wind will take it away"; seems to imply that each woman's life is unique and may not reflect the truth about women's lives in the general community of

the ! Kung clan, even though it truly attempts to mirror the conventions and culture of the group as well.

However, from the book we are able to determine Nisa's character as a woman who is forthcoming in personality, and unabashed and expressive in her native tongue, although she also comes across as demanding and manipulative in behavior. This presented to Shostak great problems in gaining an objective analysis, a fact that generated early ambivalent feelings towards Nisa which as she reports, did not endear Nisa to her any bit. Although Shostak tried to interview more than a dozen other women of all ages; inviting recall, asking pertinent questions and seeking bio-graphical highlights she seems to finally have settled her choice on Nisa as informant because of her particularly forceful, colorful language, and generally truthful replies.

Secondly, although the justification of Nisa as informant is reliable, it only serves to foster the concept of authenticity in ethnographic representation. The importance of authenticity in ethnographic representation is still in doubt as portrayed in James Clifford's review of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Clifford asks, "Should criticism work to counter sets of culturally produced images like *Orientalism* with more "authentic" or more "human" representations?"

Or, if criticism must struggle against the procedures of representation itself, how is it to begin?' The general consensus seems to be that authenticity is itself a representation which can be misused. For example, the purpose of the poet or novelist is creative self-expression. For the creative writer, representation is the vehicle for expression; the creative writer consciously

chooses representations as representations. The writer of nonfiction, however, typically focuses on the substance of what she wishes to communicate, and often fails to realize that she uses representations when communicating her ideas hence giving rise to rhetoric. Rhetoric is the characteristic manner by which a text's language and organization convinces its readers of the truth, but is itself not truth.

Thirdly is the issue of dialogue versus monologue in ethnographic presentation. It is very apparent that Shostak's focus moves away from the central position of the ethnographer (implicit in ethnographic realism and explicit in Dumont's example of the self-reflexive approach in his book *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldworking Experience*), and brings the importance of native informants to the foreground. "The other" is given the opportunity, albeit limited, to represent herself in Shostak's text. Shostak's text is also significant because it attempts to incorporate dialogue as a structural feature. Shostak demonstrates the potential usefulness of multiple voices although her ultimate control over the text makes it a monologue.

The monological aspect is repeated within the text itself: there is no true discourse between Shostak's and Nisa's portions of the text, only alternating monologues. However, according to Stephen A. Tyler this presents a problem in ethnographic presentation, one that is solved in a different approach which he suggests when he says, "A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic

integration that will have a therapeutic effect.” Tyler's emphasizes the dialogical nature of ethnography [alternating monologues as is the case in Shostak's work], where the discourse is between reader and writer rather than between the writer and the culture he studies. Tyler maintains that the experience which matters is not the fieldwork but the writing of the ethnography; the ethnographer does not attempt to represent another culture to the reader, but rather to evoke in the reader a recollection of his own culture. Ethnography is a way to make the familiar unfamiliar and then familiar again.

Lastly is the authors choice of topics that evolve around the issue of sex and violence maybe justifiable if viewed from the perspective that narrative is highly charged with sex because sex is important in ! Kung life. From Shostak's very provocative findings, such as a much more sexually egalitarian sensibility than our own, we see that in the ! Kung culture, marriages are largely monogamous, with some sanction for a second wife; lovers are accepted for both husbands and wives, but discretion is made more important expressly because discovery can lead to mayhem and even murder. However, Shostak seems to get this information largely from Nisa's own personal account. Personal accounts are rarely written without particular motivation.

Every account has some agenda. Scholars suggest that we need to always consider why the subject feels it is important to share his or her life either privately or with an anonymous public. This is because the narrator's motivation will account for what parts of a life are discussed and what details are filtered out. What motivated the author of the personal account?

Whether written or oral, a personal account is a subjective, selective account of a life recorded for a specific purpose, ranging from personal catharsis to revisionist history. There are many motivations for the creation of personal accounts, including a focus on the self, on others, or on posterity.

In this particular account, were Shostak seems to have solicited the story, rather than finding the account, the scholar's reason for seeking the personal account will probably color the nature of the questions asked. In this case, the personal account will likely reflect the scholar's interests more than those of the subject. Hence, it can be postulated that Shostak's interests in giving Nisa's account was to highlight the issue of women and not entirely for ethnographic purposes. This can be evidenced by the fact that in her time all the way to date, women's stories in the West have been increasingly considered valid testimonies, along with accounts by people of color and those outside the highest strata of socio-political influence. Therefore, although it is impossible to view history from a wholly objective position, it is still helpful to be aware of such biases.

In conclusion, I believe that what Shostak should have done was to strive to consider other sources that could offer insight about the ! Kung people, such as official documents (marriage, divorce, and birth records, public notices), archived newspapers (human interest stories, political coverage), and glossy magazines (regional and national views reflecting social trends of the time, setting a context). Although her learning of the language is a great achievement enabling her to establish effective communication with the subject, it serves to tell us only a fragment of the whole picture. This fact takes on a deeper gravity when we consider that the question of truth may

have many answers. Nisa's portrayal of her life is indeed accurate in her own mind. Yet we know that, after all, memory is selective: people's responses to experiences vary and people's memories of experiences change with time and influence. Events that happen in a person's life between lived experiences and recording those events can shape their telling, which only confirms that truth may have many answers.

Reference:

THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

<http://home.pacbell.net/nicnic/ethnographic.html#14>

Shostak, Marjorie, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a! Kung Woman*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (1981).