Wilmsen, Edwin N. - *Land Filled with Flies. A Political Economy of the Kalahari*

Monsieur Ralph A. Austen

Citer ce document / Cite this document :


http://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1991_num_31_123_1585_t1_0402_0000_2

Document généré le 02/06/2016

Dans l’ensemble, ce sont donc les contributions libérées des préconceptions et des modes de l’anthropologie contemporaine qui mettent au jour les traits pertinents de ces sociétés et favorisent les distinctions, donc l’analyse. Bien que plusieurs de ces dernières contiennent les promesses d’une ethnologie renouvelée, elles sont trop minoritaires et parfois trop faibles pour dissiper l’impression d’éthnocentrisme et de confusion méthodologique et théorique qui ressort de ces deux volumes.

Claude Meillassoux


This is a very important, but also a very problematic book. Its importance derives from the author’s radical but highly learned challenge to all claims for an anthropology of Kalahari foragers. As Wilmsen states (p. 324) in his closing paragraph: “It is useless to speak about ‘Bushmen’/Basarawa/San as a separate category unless we realize that these terms are class categorizations having nothing to do with ethnic entities or persons and only occasionally relating to a particular, restricted way of life”.

The problems in Land Filled with Flies are neatly illustrated by the simultaneously obscure and polemical character of its title. Here, as throughout the book, readers may first wonder what the author is up to but they will eventually understand far too clearly why he believes that virtually all outsiders who have come to the Kalahari (including most anthropologists) “seem like metaphorical descendents of those flies sucking sustenance from rural lives” (p. xi).

Wilmsen does not reject the idea that in the distant past there were peoples in the Kalahari who lived entirely from hunting and gathering and spoke the same click languages which today distinguish the San (a designation used throughout the book along with the more locally-specific “Zhu”). However he claims that their separate way of life came to an end over a millenium ago. Since that time their descendants can only be understood as the most subordinated level of a highly integrated and hierarchical series of Southern African socio-economic orders. Thus to treat them as survivors of some earlier stage of universal human existence is both a denial of their history and a falsification of their visible ethnography.

To advance this argument, Wilmsen engages in four different exercises: first a lengthy theoretical critique of extant Kalahari studies; second an account of the historical process through which San/Zhu were brought under the control of an expanding capitalism; third a detailed study of recent Zhu kinship/territory/power relations; and finally a consideration of Tswana-San politics in contemporary Botswana.

The theoretical section of the book is the most annoying as it goes on far too long in making points which are better developed in the following substantive chapters. Wilmsen also lacks talent as an historical narrator although the second
part of his study needs to be taken seriously. Most of it is devoted to
contacts between San, Bantu-speaking African pastoral-cultivators, and Euro-
peans over the past two centuries. Here Wilmsen is not—despite consider-
able research—breaking very new ground and often loses sight of his main
theme in following the peregrinations of his white anti-heroes. However, it is
still worth reviewing these developments when considering the alleged dis-
tinctions of San culture. The author is far bolder but also less convincing
when he asserts that the kind of hegemony which the Kalahari San have
experienced more recently can be traced back to their contacts with the first
iron-age peoples to enter Southern Africa. Although he brings to this asser-
tion some credentials as an archaeologist, Wilmsen seems here to be practic-
ing precisely the kind of conjectural reconstruction of the past that he casti-
gates in those colleagues who abstract, from contemporary San life, the
elements of a purely forager prehistory. His own recourse to Wallersteinian
dependency theory, despite various disclaimers, is hardly more defensible
than their much maligned evolutionism. Based on my own studies of preco-
lonial African economic history, I find that Wilmsen ascribes far too much
political and cultural influence to the trade contacts which his evidence sug-
gests. Foraging, with some options for limited pastoralism, probably
remained the center of San life for many centuries longer than he claims.
How much of this relative and not-so-remote autonomy can still be under-
stood from studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries San culture thus
remains at least an open question to scholars of a less polemical bent than
Wilmsen.1

It is more difficult for an historian to read through, let alone evaluate, Wilm-
sen’s very detailed and extensively diagrammed account of Zhu marriage
alliances and their relationship to control of territory, cattle and labor. As an
effort to bring Marxist analysis to this field, it certainly represents a major
advance over the naive assertions of Richard Lee and the more doctrinaire
approach of Claude Meillassoux, two scholars who are particular targets of
Wilmsen’s criticisms. But Wilmsen himself admits that the hierarchical rela-
tionships which he observes within Zhu society “must be because of interactions
with pastoralists” (p. 271); this again raises the question of how intense such in-
teractions were during the period when other studies have asserted a more inde-
pendent and possibly egalitarian forager existence.

In the last section of this book, Wilmsen reveals one of the major motivations
for his passionate attack on academic interpretations of the San. These theories,
he insists, play directly into the very damaging exploitation suffered by such
Communities in the most recent history of the Botswana Kalahari (Wilmsen says
little about contemporary Namibia). Perhaps his most telling point here is the
extensive gloss of the “politically correct” term used to replace “Bushmen” or
Basarawa by the Botswana administration: “Remote Area Dwellers”. Not only
is this designation, like its US equivalent “minorities”, often empirically inaccu-
rate, but in this case it very explicitly encodes the myth of a continuing sep-

1. For an especially polemical summary of Wilmsen’s argument and responses by
various other concerned scholars, see Edwin N. Wilmsen & James R. Den-
brow, 1990: “Paradigmatic History of San Speaking Peoples and Current
Attemps at Revision”, Current Anthropology, XXXI (5): 489-524.
aration between San/Basarawa and other Botswana peoples, thus implying that the very issue of what becomes of the former is itself "remote" from other policy questions.

This understandable political concern on Wilmsen's part not only accounts for some of the excesses in his basically quite sound political economy, but also blinds him to broader issues of representational culture which, along with language, continues to give the San some degree of identity apart from the neighbors with whom they are otherwise so closely linked. As with many scholars engaged in the current struggles of southern Africa (see the current historiographic battle around the wars of the Mfecane) Wilmsen links the use of culture as a social category to apartheid and thus insists on an analysis based upon the more universalist concepts of class. Even in practical political terms such an approach has severe limits, as shown by recent efforts to understand intra-African urban violence in the Republic of South Africa. From a more scholarly perspective, it is simply indefensible (an by now, a bit quaint) to seek in theories derived (however ingeniously) from European industrialization a key to all other human experience. Indeed, Wilmsen himself is ultimately less rigid about non-existence of a separate San culture than indicated in the programmatic portions of his book. The title and the elaborate trope about flies to which it refers are, in fact, drawn from San cosmology. Wilmsen immediately provides us with a Marxist-dependency reading of the relationship between flies, divinities and human death and his book never again refers to such abstract aspects of Kalahari life. Still, the very revelation that the Zhu have a unique repertoire of symbols and narrative for interpreting the conditions of their existence suggests that something other than class conflict may be flourishing in the southern African desert. Those who continue the anthropological and historical quest across barriers of culture and time need not, therefore, abandon this terrain entirely; but after Wilmsen, they will certainly have to undertake their explorations with much greater caution.

Ralph Austen