

# Life By Myth: The Development of Ethnographic Filming in the Work of John Marshall

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For **Visual Origins Conference**, IWF, Göttingen 2001

Abstract: Beginning in 1950 with slow film and wind up cameras without reflex viewfinders, John Marshall started covering the Ju'hoasi people of Nyae Nyae in the Kalahari of what is now Namibia. Although limited by concept and equipment, the silent footage from that first expedition represents a virtual encyclopedia of Bushman subsistence. In the ensuing 50 years, Marshall has used every advance in 16mm and video production to assemble an archive of hundreds of hours about the same people in the same place. New equipment opened the possibility of new techniques, and Marshall experimented with them all. At the same time, the social depth of his coverage grew increasingly complex and the moral bond between himself and his subject eclipsed the rigors of filmmaking. Reviewing Marshall's body of work with the Ju'hoasi, one experiences the entire range of technical, conceptual and moral ideas in ethnographic media of the last half century.

“ ...In order to lie successfully you quite simply have to know what the truth is. As philosophers have persistently told us this is no easy task, and because of this, there is some reason to believe that the truly outstanding liar lies out of a strong sense of modesty.”

Vern Rutsala,  
*Lying from Little Known Sports*

Ethnographic film constitutes an epistemological endeavor, a search for truth through a medium usually reserved for fiction. On one hand it embraces whole cultures; at the same time it records minute phenomenon with high specificity. Anyone working in ethnographic media soon confronts the puzzle of finding the images, sounds, events, and narrative structure that will tell a specific story within the subject's own frame of reference, evoke the culture in which it is set, and have meaning to an international audience, at least of scholars. Three vectors shape the outcome. The first is the capability of the equipment combined with the filmmaker's technical and aesthetic ability. The second is the narrative theory informing the camera's point of view and how the story is told. And the third is the universe of moral and political obligations in which the

subject, filmmaker, and audience are enmeshed. In the half century he has engaged the Bushmen, the !Kung San, the Ju' hoaisi of Nyae Nyae, John Marshall has worked with continually improving equipment, used all the stylistic and theoretical advances in documentary film, and most importantly evolved as a moral agent with regard to his work. His oeuvre, about one people in one place, reflects all the concerns of ethnographic film.

Truth and wisdom are cumulative and changeable. What sufficed one day seems inadequate later. John Marshall is a modest man. He only does his best, fully aware of the complexities and ironies of his task and his own limitations. The demons that drive and obsess him are not those of ego and accomplishment. Though I accessioned the 1950-1978 footage for the HSFA. (and screened much of it), I did not understand what was going on with the Bushmen and the Kalahari until I actually went there and was surrounded by it. In 1989, I spent some months shooting with him for **Death by Myth**, a film series currently being completed as **A Kalahari Family**. John got it right in his films, but I didn't know how profoundly until I filmed with him.

John was 18 when his father charged him with making a film record of the Bushman. He had wind-up cameras with slow speed Kodachrome film (which still looks good), and turret lenses that had to be focused by estimating the distance to the subject and setting it on the focus ring. These cameras worked best on a tripod, being a bit heavy and awkward for handholding. Though he says he learned to shoot by following directions in a Kodak How-to booklet, he had an intuitive sense for composition and pacing.

In many ways this first coverage is the most scientific footage he shot. It has the naive quality of asking--Just show me what you do; a question that evolved into-- Just let me observe what you do. Huge numbers of short sequences, covered with different screen size and angles, constitute an encyclopedia of Kalahari gatherer-hunters' technology. The specificity of the subject matter makes it the most researchable footage in the collection. It was ideal footage for Lorna Marshall's silent lecture film<sup>1</sup> in which her commentary created a context for the images. The camera work, while beautiful, at this point was third person and abstracted.

In the first year spent in the desert, Toma, the band's leader, befriended John and through Toma, John absorbed a gestalt of *ju'hoa* values and a visceral sense of how the society worked. It was in no way a complete understanding; I doubt that John would claim that even now. But it was the sort of insight that shakes up your world view and never lets you look at anything the same again.

Around 1992, when John and I were looking at film from the 1950s in the Human Studies Film Archives, he began talking about sequences we were watching, and segued into the feeling of being there. He noted the people in the film who had died and what had become of others. I sensed what had hooked him into an association that would take such toll on his health, fortune, and happiness. In ways that he could have no way of appreciating, he had been handed his life's work, the way the classic myth hero is given a quest. He didn't ask for it, it was thrust upon him. Without negotiation, he had been made a filmmaker and given the camera (his Excalibur), thrust into the turmoil of other peoples' lives much different from his own and distant from his home, and charged with telling the *Ju'hoa* people's story. You could say it captured his imagination.

“Capturing the imagination” means something momentarily diverts our attention, overpowers our internal visualization and changes its direction. But capture also means to constrain. The Bushmen and the Kalahari captured John Marshall’s imagination a long time ago, and he has never escaped it. Part of his imaginative energy was harnessed to one place, one idea, and his most unbridled part domesticated.

As his knowledge and appreciation for the *ju’haosi* grew, he asked a different question—what story conveys that which is important. Making a rope or thatching a *skerm* contributes to the greater rhythm to Kalahari life, but their sum does not add up to the primordial issue of survival. The *Ju’haosi* represent just a specific case of the struggle of all people to live in their place of the earth. Furthermore, they exemplify gatherer-hunting, possibly the earliest form of human social organization and subsistence. In a conceptual leap that was consonant with 1950s ideas, John used a literary model to tell his epic story. He filmed an actual hunt, generalized about the society from the actual characters who participated, filled in continuity with pick up shots, and using the novel **Moby Dick** as a model, made **The Hunters**. This was an act of profound respect. He found the same nobility, the same passions, and the same issues of human survival in these new friends halfway around the world, as he did in his own New England heroes.

**The Hunters**, like many films in the grand narrative tradition, continues to be a great film today. But by modern sensibilities it is not satisfying to have the continuity, motivations, and feelings of the story communicated entirely through an off camera narrator. Fortunately, around 1982, John filmed a conversation with Toma about the hunt, asking a question that many scholars have asked—would they have hunted a big animal like a giraffe if the camera had not been there? Toma said that when he saw the giraffe, he saw meat for his people, and that the hunt and the film were a cooperative venture. He speaks of telling John where to stand to get the shots, and laughs about John being cold and sleeping too close to the fire so his jacket caught fire. It is a charming interview full of perspective and insight that greatly adds to the pleasure of watching **The Hunters**.

By the end of the 1950s, the cameras had changed. The battery powered Arriflex had a reflex viewfinder so that you framed and focused through the lens. This made it possible to move with the camera and refocus as you did so, and to use longer focal length lenses and keep subjects in focus as they moved. It presented new possibilities of how to look and expanded the universe of what fragments of reality can be made into a story. His camera came off the tripod and into the social group, taking on a second person voice and becoming part of the interaction space. The earliest sequences presented technology that was general and could be copied; these new sequences attended to social interaction which was highly specific and made sense only in the fabric of daily life .

John, who always embraced the possible in new equipment, also shot a limited amount of synchronized sound footage of storytelling, trance curing, and the songs, dances, and games that form the spine of his most poetic film, **Bitter Melons**. The equipment and set up was cumbersome, and in many ways the visual quality of that footage regresses, but when I resynched and screened it, the synergy between the picture and the soundtrack exceeded the sum of the parts many fold.

**Bitter Melons'** lyrical qualities glosses the desperate conditions of the people in the film who were dying from lack of water. It represents a moment when the Marshall expedition was both a powerful new presence in the Kalahari, and simultaneously fragile and unable to affect the marginality of life in those extreme conditions. There was a moral and political axis inextricably bound with the anthropological inquiry in the Marshall family's relation to the *ju'hoasi* and in particular Toma's band. By the time they returned in 1957, they had called attention to the Bushmen and people were using the tracks their trucks had cut as roads into this remote area. Farmers came to kidnap workers, a practice known as black birding. The Marshalls brokered the release of Bushmen they knew.

After John left in 1958, he was not allowed back into Namibia again until 1978. The official story was that he had fathered a Bushman child, which was not true. More likely the Marshall presence in the Kalahari was becoming awkward for a government that had designs on the region for mining and game hunting. He worked as a news cameraman for a while. The emerging *cinema verite* style of filmmaking fit well with John's camera skill and cinematic sensitivity. He shot **Titicut Follies** for Fred Wiseman, and made the **Pittsburgh Police** series of films, which set the aesthetic for all the subsequent real life cop series on television. This work established him as a master of the fluid hand held *verite* shooting style. Largely because of the Bushman films, John became a celebrated filmmaker and Toma's band one of the most widely known case studies in anthropology.

When he returned in 1978, John's relationship to the *Ju'hoasi* had changed, his friends were in distress and despair, and he was a player in both their history and the present moment. It placed him in the awkward position where his moral obligations overshadowed his job as a filmmaker, and he began a new engagement as a helper and advocate more than as a reporter. There are many stories in the outtakes of **!nai: The Story of a !Kung Woman** that will probably never be edited. One in particular stands out—the hours of footage that are condensed into a ten minute argument sequence in **!nai**. It was shot with two cameras, John on one and Ross McElwey on the other. Ross described the day.

*The day I arrived (after an exhausting 16 hour flight through Frankfurt and then south to Namibia, where we finally landed on a stretch of dirt in the middle of the Kalahari Desert), John said, "Well, let's not shoot today. Let's just show you the layout." We started walking around, and suddenly we heard a commotion. A fight had broken out between one of the !Kung men and an Ovambo worker that John had brought with him to be a cook for the camp. They were accusing the cook of having an affair with the guy's wife. There had been tension between !Kung people and the Ovamba's to begin with, so this was a volatile situation. The argument exploded to include every member of the village: people were screaming and yelling and chanting and crying. We simply had to film it, and I didn't even know who John felt the principle people were at this point. John said, "Just shoot, shoot whatever is happening."*

*The !Kung are a very short people, and I had this odd sense of not being there, of being invisible. An angry !Kung rushed in my direction bandying a large stick, seemingly at me, but actually in pursuit of another !Kung who happened to be next to me. But my presence was never actually acknowledged. I saw a grass hut shaking wildly, and I held the shot of it, and pretty soon the allegedly cuckolded husband's head breaks through the wall, like a chicken emerging from an egg. He was being restrained*

*by two people on each arm—relatives who were trying to keep him from murdering the Ovamba cook. Meanwhile, his wife is being slapped by her mother. And it was all based on nothing but rumor. Nobody was seriously hurt. We filmed for something like seven straight hours—all stages of the argument, its dissipation, and the lamenting that followed it...it was an amassing experience. Some of that footage was used in **N!ai**, but edited down.<sup>2</sup>*

Though painful to watch, the footage is a movie unto itself. All the tensions tearing at the *Ju'hoasi* resonate through the coverage. Watching it on two monitors, there is also a reflexive element of how the two cameramen strive to make sense from the complex moment. At one point N!ai beckons to Ross and walks off down a dirt path. Ross follows her with the camera as she goes to the film camp tent and rousts the Ovambo cook from his cot and demands he follow her back to the village and clear things up. He and Ross follow her, and as they get there, you see John Marshall filming, noticing their approach and putting down his camera to demand what the hell they were doing bringing the cook. It is a perfect moment of intersection between the observer and the observed, the observer being observed, and the disintegration of the boundary between them.

At a time when the *Ju'hoasi* had been dispossessed from their homeland, no longer able to make a living in their traditional lands, Jamie Ays was shooting **The Gods Must Be Crazy** and idealizing the image of Bushmen as they had been in the 1950s. Ironically, through John Marshall's own efforts producing a series of Bushman films, most anthropologists' view of the Bushmen was frozen in that same romantic moment.

After **N!ai**, John began going frequently to Namibia for protracted stays. He stopped shooting and hired others to do it, Cliff Bestal, then myself, and Peter Baker. John's energy went into digging wells, establishing small herds and gardens, and fighting skirmishes with local authorities. The ground was always moving beneath him. Rather than spend the money and emotional energy to make polished films, John edited two polemically powerful emergency reports on video, **Pull Ourselves Up or Die Out** (1985), and **To Hold Our Ground** (1990). These were to raise political awareness of the crisis in Nyae Nyae, and secondarily to provide an updated context for the many teachers who taught the Bushmen. As a filmmaker I hated to see the fine cinematography put out from utility grade video transfers, and subtly abandoned in the editing, but in retrospect I've come to feel that we should have been shooting small format video and putting out monthly reports and quickly and cheaply as possible.

When I went in 1989 the central filmic concern was the first Namibian election. If the establishment party (DTA) won, Bushmanland would be open to Herero herds; if SWAPO won and the *Ju'hoasi* made conventional use of their land through farming, then their right to the land would be respected. But in the sounds at night, the overlapping conversations of people, the vastness in all directions, and the intersection of ideas and development efforts with actual people, there were many other intersecting stories.

I stayed at the Ju'hoa Bushman Development Foundation<sup>3</sup> (JBDF) camp near Guatcha Pan with Peter Baker who was doing sound. John had started the JBDF with Claire Ritchie who was co-producing **Death by Myth** and ran the camp. Megan Biesele, an anthropologist, worked at coordinating the development efforts with the *Ju'hoa* social structure. It is difficult to move from an egalitarian gathering society to a stratified farming and herding society in a single generation. Fricki, a Namibian farm foreman,

kept all the trucks and machinery going and helped the Bushman build corrals and put in pumps. It was a job, but he was incredulous of the money being spent to make herders of people who didn't want to be herders. His wife Christina cooked. Patrick Dickens came to Gautcha to plant the idea of gardens in peoples minds and develop an orthography for writing the !Kung language. Derek Howard was an excellent geologist who spent his days studying aerial photographs to find fault lines, which he then surveyed. He always hit water. John Marshall came and went from Windhoek 17 hours drive away, spending about a third of his time in the field and the rest writing in the city. Things moved slowly and predictably when he was gone, and manically when he was there.

Some days we filmed long meetings of the Nyae Nyae farmers Cooperative, an organization set up oversee the cattle and gardens. They needed a charter, and a form of governance, neither of which they had ever had or needed; they worked hard for the concepts and language. It was solemn and contentious, and had the weight of a constitutional convention, which it was. The charter began, "Because our land is small..."

Other times we shot interviews, followed the campaign trucks around, or checked on Derek's drilling for bore holes around which new settlements could be formed. At one level, we only needed the glue to hold the story threads together. If SWAPO won, then the Bushmen would have Bushmanland; it was a moment in history where if everything came together, the story would be over. A surreal element dogged our best filmic efforts. Though the Kalahari was vast and empty, it resonated with intense human turmoil. One driller had brought a house trailer and five flatbed trucks of drilling equipment to a desolate clump of trees, drilled one hole, and left on a motorcycle. His camp remained untouched two years later, the coffee still in his cup. We filmed it, and the experience was simultaneously perfect and made no sense at all.

The UN election teams were all over, and the South African Army shadowed them. One day an American political operative showed up with eight well-heeled America students in tow, giving them a camp-out history-in-the-making experience. They played clapping games with Bushman children and took serious photographs while *Ju'hoa* elders argued about the Coop charter. Another day the DTA put up a circus tent and staged a big rally. John and Tsamko were the only opposing voice, and our camera crew both their props and witness.

John and I, and everyone else at the camp, talked about the Bushmen, and about the film we were making, but rarely about filmmaking. One day we went to Gam, a permanent waterhole that had been taken over by Herero herdsman. John was in despair over the wasteland their herds had made of the place, and what it foretold of the future if the Herero brought their herds to Bushmanland. He sat down with a group of Bushmen and Herero elders and they talked about the Bushmen rights to their remaining land. The Herero maintained that it was between the Bushman and Herero and that any interference amounted to apartheid between the groups. The discussion was hot. I ran out of daylight film and only had very high-speed film left which wasn't going to work in the afternoon sun. I pulled John aside and we had a brief side conversation about it. He reminisced about shooting with Robert Young in 1972 and the way Robert could take five light meter readings and calculate the precise exposure in his head, and how he wished he had learned that trick. He really wanted the conversation filmed, so I put all

the neutral density I had on the lens and shot. That was the most technical conversation in the history of our relationship.

On another occasion we had been filming a funeral, the culmination of four extremely tense days. It was hot and confusing and after hours in the sun, the grave was filled in and everyone walked away. I held a frame as they disappeared behind a row of bushes, and when I turned off the camera, said to John that it would be a good shot on which to dissolve out of the funeral. That set him off on a fifteen-minute diatribe against dissolves as weak cuts, intrusions of the filmmaker into edit. It wasn't personal, in general I agreed with him; it was just some theory that had to come out. Maybe that is what filmmaking theory is about for practitioners, something to fulminate about when the subject matter of the film becomes too weighty and intense.

SWAPO did win, but not with a decisive majority. The development effort attracted a great deal of money, which ultimately pushed John aside from the Foundation he started. Much of the promise of the 1989 election has turned to dust along with the gardens. **A Kalahari Family** will soon be released. But the truth is that the story will not be complete. Somewhere along the way John learned that action is more important than observation, that loyalty to your friends trumps research, and any story you weave gains its merit through your integrity and having lived it. Any story you tell leaves out others that you could not.

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<sup>1</sup> This film is archived at the Human Studies Film Archives, and Documentary Educational Resources has a copy. It is catalogued as **First Film**.

<sup>2</sup> Donald, Scott *Southern Exposure: An Interview with Ross McElwee*, **Film Quarterly** Spring 1988.

<sup>3</sup> The Ju'hoa Bushman Development Foundation was subsequently reconstituted as the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia.