PITY SOUTHERN AFRICA'S FIRST PEOPLE. Pity the people with no name. For when you are the only ones, you have no need to distinguish your kind from others. Pity those whose exclusive domain once stretched from the Zambezi to the Cape of Good Hope, from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans. Their Tswana neighbors in the Kalahari, who arrived here 1,200 years ago, call them the Basarwa, the "people who have nothing." Their pastoralist cousins, the Khoi, call them San, outsiders or vagabonds. They are a people with an ancient past but almost no recorded history, save for one glorious exception, rock paintings of antelope and elephants, dancers and hunters, some of which remain startlingly vivid despite being lashed by wind and rain and baked by sun for 3,000 years. The most recent paintings show sailing ships and mounted horsemen. Then there were no more.

European colonists who waded upon the shores of southern Africa 350 years ago called them simply Bushmen. Deeming there "untamable" and a threat to livestock, settlers treated the Bushmen as vermin, killing them in great numbers. In a 19th-century anthropological survey titled “Researches Into the Physical History of Mankind,” J. C. Prichard summed up the Bushmen's lot: "Human nature is nowhere seen in a more destitute and miserable condition."

Advertised as "the dwarf earthmen of Africa," small bands Of Bushmen were paraded around Britain in popular Victorian freak shows. Early anthropologists saw them as "living fossils," the missing link in man's evolution, not entirely human. And the extraordinary Bushman languages, with their tonal clicks, were regarded by another anthropologist as animal sounds rather than human speech', "like the clucking of. hens, or gabbling of turkeys."

The Bushmen soon languished on the outer edges of society, in the basement of southern Africa's brutal caste system. Many became virtual slaves of the cattle-owning Bantu people, and others worked for occasional handouts on white farms.

There are about 85,000 Bushmen alive today, teetering on the cusp of cultural extinction; mostly in the remoter reaches of the Kalahari Desert, in Botswana, Namibia, Angola, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. They are among the most intensively studied aboriginal people on Earth. This interest is stoked by the idea that the Bushman is one of our last connections with a hunter-gatherer existence, a way of life that was a human universal until some 10,000 years ago, in a time before man domesticated animals or grew crops. A time when man depended directly on nature for survival.

Bushmen have not been living in splendid isolation as hunter-gatherers for some time now. Some anthropologists believe that the final transformation of the Kalahari Bushmen accompanied the widespread introduction in the 1950s of water wells known locally as boreholes. One of the Bushmen's main advantages over other societies had been their ability to survive without surface water. Their arcane knowledge of where to find liquid-bearing melons and tubers and. their system of burying sealed ostrich eggs filled with water during the wet season and recovering them during the dry allowed Bushmen to live where others could not. Now that talent has lost its point. Boreholes opened up the land to pastoralists, and Bushmen were dispossessed.
Of the 25 or so surviving groups, the closest thing left to so-called genuine Bushman society—the conservation icons, living in perfect harmony with nature and romanticized in the movie The Gods Must Be Crazy—can be found in the Nyae Nyae district of northeastern Namibia. The Bushmen there call themselves the Ju/'hoansi, which means “real people,” and they number about 1,600. (The slash after “Ju” is one of four marks—/\,兰州，and --commonly used as notation for different click sounds in Bushman languages.)

Nyae Nyae is a flat, dry territory on the border with Botswana. It used to be an apartheid-style "homeland" when Namibia was in effect a South African province. Eight years after Namibia's independence in 1990, Nyae Nyae was declared a conservancy to be run by an elected committee of Bushmen. The Ju/'hoansi are fortunate to live upon their own ancestral land, or at least part of it.

Den/ui village is one of several dozen that make up Nyae Nyae. It lies at the bottom of a rough dirt road in scrubby Kalahari bushveld. The grass shelters in which the Bushmen live are little changed from those their forefathers inhabited, designed to give only rudimentary shelter for what was, after all, a nomadic lifestyle, with the family groups constantly moving to different hunting and gathering grounds. But today the village is a permanent one, served by a molded fiberglass elementary school and an artesian borehole that gurgles with fresh water.

WE SET UP CAMP IN A CLEARING in the bush close to the village, and that night I lie awake listening to the hawking of phlegm-filled chests, the hacking of tubercular coughs, and the wavering wails of the babies, which compete with the yelps of patrolling jackals to fill the dome of stars above us. It is winter in the Kalahari and bone-achingly cold when the cocks begin to crow a few minutes before four. As I emerge from my tent, "dawn's heart," as Bushmen traditionally call Jupiter, is burning brightly on the horizon. The water in my billycan is frozen solid.

When we enter the village, the families are huddled around their tiny fires; some of the children are shirtless, and the adults have, at most, a single threadbare blanket clasped around each pair of bony shoulders and each toast rack of prominent ribs. They are breakfasting meagerly on berries and weak tea.

N!amce, a Den/ui leader, sits on a log making arrows. He rolls the yellow reed shaft in the ashes, then squints down its barrel and straightens it. He smears bitumen from an old car battery onto the end of the shaft, heats it again, and binds twine made of kudu sinew around it. He cuts a notch at the back end for the bow string to slot into, and on the other end he inserts a spike of giraffe bone, which connects to another little cylinder of reed into which the arrowhead, a length of gauge wire whose end has been hammered into a triangle, is forced. He gingerly coats the four inches of the wire shaft behind the arrow tip with poison stored in a steenbok horn.

Bushman poison is legendary. Some hunters are said to use a mix of snake venom and cactus juice; some prefer the essence of crushed scorpion and trapdoor spiders. Here in the northern Kalahari they use the most lethal of all Bushman poisons, the grubs of the Diamphidia and Polyclada beetles, mixed with tree gum. The poison kills by entering the bloodstream and
causing paralysis. A small antelope, cleanly hit, will take perhaps 24 hours to die. A bigger one, several days. And there is no certain antidote.

It was the Bushmen's possession of poisoned arrows that terrified early settlers so. John Campbell, a missionary, described what happened to a companion hit in the shoulder by a Bushman arrow in the early 1800s: "His appearance alarmed us, being greatly swelled, particularly about the head and throat. He said that he felt the poison gradually work downwards to his very toes, and then ascend in the same manner. His countenance was frightful, being so disfigured by the swelling." The man died the next evening.

After the intense concentration of handling the poison, N'amce takes a smoke break. He stuffs the end of his metal pipe with a filter of fibrous bark, scoops up a handful of hyrax droppings and loads them into the pipe. He sucks up the acrid smoke, exhales contentedly, and passes the pipe to N-aisa, an elderly women whose forehead is fringed with beads from which a metal triangle hangs down, swinging below her nose. She also sports a paper-clip earring. When the pipe reaches me, I pass it on.

Armed with quivers of poisoned arrows, a party of men sets off on a hunt. The men walk fast, glancing down from time to time but barely breaking stride to observe the ground for tracks. My Bushman translator, who tells me to call him /Ai!ae/Aice, explains how they read the ground--"the same way you people read a book; the bush is our book." They can determine the age and sex of animals by reading the signs they leave behind. One young hunter drops to his heels and examines the droppings of a hartebeest; the more roughage, the less efficient its digestion and the older the animal. A male springbok, explains /Ai!ae/Aice, will often bring up the rear of the herd, and a male gemsbok will butt tree trunks with its horns to scent its territory.

Bushman can measure the age of tracks by the time it takes termites to rebuild a nest that's been trampled on, or a blade of grass to spring back to its usual position, or a spider to repair its cobweb. When Bushmen hit an animal with an arrow, they don't immediately sprint after it; they go to where it was standing and memorize its particular spoor. Only then will they begin to patiently track it until it falls.

It is this skill at tracking, more than any other single talent, that over the years has made Bushmen sought after by armies and hunters and farmers to pursue guerrillas, game, and poachers.

TODAY THE HUNTERS return empty-handed. Game in Nyae Nyae has been decimated. In 1877 Hendrik van Zyl, an Afrikaans hunter, and his team of Bushman "shootboys" dispatched more than a hundred elephants here in a single day. Bantu-speaking herders of the Herero people, and white farmers too, culled antelope, which competed with their cattle for grazing. Hunting now provides only a small part of what Bushmen eat. Diet varies widely with conditions, but in a recent survey conducted in one Nyae Nyae village, game accounted for less than 20 percent of weekly nutrition. Government drought relief provided nearly 40 percent, and 35 percent was purchased with cash from pensions, craft sales, and wages. The remainder came from gardens and foraging.
A few days later, as the sun thaws the icy morning, I join a foraging expedition made up of the village women, who are going to gather mangetti nuts, which are about the size of hazelnuts and are a rich source of protein. The women wrap themselves in their hartebeest-skin cloaks, embroidered with bright bead circles, sling their babies on their backs, and set off through the bush at a deceptively fast loping stride. Some wear rough sandals made from car tires, but most are barefoot. Many of them have intricate tattoos on their faces: blue notches radiating out from each eye. They wade through the waving sea of grass, which is soft and blond in the low morning light. Soon they are rummaging in the foliage and poking in the earth with their digging sticks. As N-aisa fills up her burlap side bag, she explains the uses of the various flora and fauna she is collecting. The root of one tree is good for curing you if you are coughing up blood. Another cures fever or flu. "And this," she says, tugging up another weed, "is called the lucky plant. You burn it and put the ash on your face, and then every man will love you."

Acacia beetles taken from branches have their legs plucked and are popped in the bag too. She reaches for the dappled shell of a tiny leopard tortoise that hangs from a bead belt around her waist, and, uncorking its hole, she empties a little snuff in the callused palm of her hand and takes a whiff.

We finally reach the mangetti grove. A small herd of elephants has recently been through, with all the destruction of a tornado, uprooting and pulverizing the trees. Still, by the time the women turn for home almost eight hours later, their collecting pouches are bulging. They adjust the babies strapped to their backs and head off, away from the setting sun, toward the distant thin smoke plumes of the village.

Once home the women tear the wings off the beetles and roast them in the coals of a small open fire for a few seconds each. I am presented with a handful, and I put one in my mouth and crunch down apprehensively. The beetle's warm internal fluids flood my tongue, and I swallow hastily.

At night in the village there is often dancing around the fire, and sometimes this develops into a trance dance, one of the principal elements of Bushman spirituality. Over the years missionaries have converted some Bushmen to Christianity but not those at Den/ü village. "We are traditionalists here," the village leader explains. "We are not Christians. But we can talk to whoever the Christians talk to. It is all the same God; there are just different ways of talking to him."

As the women and children sit around the fire clapping, the men shuffle around the blaze, pounding their feet into the dust, their flanks trembling under leather chaps. Little by little the rhythm of the clapping and the wordless chanting picks up. The ceremony, called the giraffe dance, is led by an old man, the resident shaman, an ostrich plume in his beaded headband and an ochre leather pouch flapping over his crotch. As he circles the fire, he eventually falls into a trance. Within this altered state of consciousness, the Bushmen believe, they can cure the sick and communicate with dead or absent relatives.

The mother of a sick village girl has asked the shaman to find out why she is ill/Ai!ae/Aice tells me. The shaman holds the mother's shoulders and presses his forehead to hers to pull in her
thoughts. Other villagers rub san, a perfume made out of the roots of reeds, over the shaman's body and throw handfuls of it into the fire, where it bursts into showers of tiny stars.

Suddenly the shaman leaves the flickering circle of fire and, elderly though he may be, leaps up into a nearby tree, where he squats, cackling and roaring at the crowd. He drops to the ground a few minutes later, his face cut and bleeding from the thorny branches, and continues dancing at a frenzied pace, shouting all the while up at the big cold sky.

"The problem," announces the shaman, on behalf of a dead ancestor, "all began with the gemsbok. The one found dead near the village. You ate the meat, but you threw away the intestines and the stomach and the hooves. This was wasteful, and it angered the spirit, so now he will kill the girl. Everything, everything should be eaten up!" Trance dances often ease tensions and renew solidarity, but this warning that waste is bad is unusual--spirit conversations seldom spell out morals. The shaman assures the irate spirit that this mistake will not be made again. And with that the shaman collapses onto the chill red dust, his limbs twitching and palsied. The leader and others stroke his body until the trembling subsides.

BUSHMAN CULTURE has attracted an increase not only in anthropological attention but also in ethnotourism, which some advocates believe might represent the best chance of preserving some remnants of Bushman cultural continuity. Organizations like WIMSA, Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa, have been trying to negotiate deals between Bushmen and tourist operators to prevent Bushmen from being exploited, as they have been in the past. Nyae Nyae is launching the beginnings of such an ethnotourism project. But existing ventures such as Intu Afrika, a white-owned commercial game reserve in southeastern Namibia that features a Bushman community, offer little hope of preserving the traditional ways, although they do keep alive a pride in Bushman cultural inheritance.

In this scenic corner of the desert, even after the rains, the russet earth shows through the threadbare web of grass and lilac cattails. And cutting across the landscape, the long, narrow dunes rise up like great ripples in the sea of sand, guardians of the western edge of the Kalahari. Tourists arrive at Intu Afrika by the vanload to be entertained by a band of some 40 resident !Xoo Bushmen.

This morning one of them, Alex, demonstrates how to set an ostrich trap. Though the tourists are swathed in jerseys against the winter chill, Alex wears only a buckskin cloak and a loincloth. Bushmen have a flair for mimicking wild animals, and Alex perfectly imitates the ostrich coming up to the bait and getting its head caught in the noose, desperately trying to wrench free, and finally succeeding, but only by decapitating itself.

The truth is that Alex and his colleagues no longer feed themselves by trapping ostriches. Instead they live on salaries and tips and by selling souvenirs. Every few weeks a game ranger shoots an antelope for them. I join Klein ("little" in Afrikaans) David and a group of four other Bushmen the next day to track gemsbok. Hilton Holm, the lodge manager, follows us in a Land Rover with his rifle. As the Bushmen jog up and down dune after dune, Klein David tells me their story. Most of these Bushmen come from Corridor 17, a small margin of land along the Botswana
border that has become a dumping ground for Bushmen working on the surrounding white and Herero farms.

"There is no wildlife left there," Klein David complains, "even the hares are hunted out. There used to be much game there, when my grandfather was a boy. But the farmers who live nearby have fenced the land so we are caged in. If you move through someone else's land, they can arrest you and throw you in jail. Our old life is gone now, and we can never see it returning.

"Klein David is not my real name you know," he says wistfully. "My Bushman name is Tchi!xo. It means 'unlucky.' They called me that because my father was a bad marksman; he kept missing with his arrows. But these days we don't use our real names anymore. Missionaries came, and they gave us new names, names they could say easily. We didn't use to have surnames either, but now we must have those too, to fill in forms. So my surname is Xamseb. It means 'lion' in the language of the Khoi: Tchi!xo Xamseb. Unlucky Lion."

During his study of the 10,000 or so Bushmen who work on and off at the farms around Corridor 17, James Suzman, an anthropologist, torpedoed the belief that Bushmen ranged over great distances and simply moved to more remote areas when their lands were taken over. He found instead that wherever possible they stayed within areas they knew well, often no bigger than 10 or 20 square miles. "Even today," he says, "they will stay on a white or Herero farm, whether employed there or not, however badly they're treated, because it is their original territory and they have nowhere else to go."

Unlike Corridor 17, Intu Afrika has been well stocked with game, and it's not long before Holm brings down a gemsbok, a sleek black-and-white buck with V-shaped rapier-like horns. The Bushmen efficiently butcher it and pack it into sacks made of the intestines. They smear themselves with its blood--"to honor the spirit of the gemsbok," says Klein David.

I return with him across a shimmering salt pan to the Bushmen's quarters, far from the prying eyes of the Intu Afrika tourists. Here, in a village named Twilight after the white farm on which it stands, Klein David and the others live in a cluster of dilapidated brick houses, in a yard festooned with garbage and old wheel rims and the carcasses of ruined bicycles. "The houses were perfectly good when we built them," says Holm. "But they've run the place down. They're not used. to living in brick houses."

FROM INTU AFRIKA I CROSS the border into Botswana, home to the largest surviving population of Bushmen, about 47,500. Most earn a living of sorts as ranch hands, but a few have managed to stay on their ancestral territory in what is now the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, Africa's third largest game park. It is a barren, foreboding place with no surface water for most of the year. In 1961, when the reserve was first established, George B. Silberbauer, a colonial Bushman officer, concluded that it could have a dual purpose: protecting indigenous Bushmen as well as wildlife, as long as the Bushmen hunted only by traditional methods. But since then the Botswana government has determined that the two mandates increasingly clash and has pursued a controversial policy' of encouraging Bushmen to leave, although in the face of adverse international publicity, this is now under review.
Molapo, one of the last Bushman settlements within the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, is home to a dwindling number of //Gana Bushmen, about 150 now. Some have migrated to the government settlement of New Xade outside the park, lured by the promise of schools, clinics, fresh water, and a resettlement bonus of 5 cows or 15 goats each. To my surprise, I discover I'm not the only foreigner here. There is a Japanese researcher from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Kazunobu Ikeya has been studying this Bushman community periodically for more than ten years. As I arrive, he is making a video of a Bushman hacking with an ax at virtually the only tree in the area taller than head height. The rest have already been flattened for firewood.

"He is cutting a piece of wood with which to make a thumb piano," guesses Ikeya, zooming in on the wood. A thumb piano consists of flattened metal strips of different lengths--the keys--attached to a wooden base. He points to an old scar on the trunk, evidence, he says, of the last thumb piano wood that was carved from the tree. It's a good example of how the Bushmen carry out natural conservation, keeping this tree alive to use it again. But now the Bushman's vigorous ax strokes are getting perilously close to felling the music tree, and indeed barely has Ikeya spoken than it comes crashing down. It seems the present need for firewood is more pressing than future desire for thumb pianos.

Although the people of Molapo are living on their ancestral land, they are no longer living the life of the legendary desert-adapted Bushmen of old. Their water comes not from tubers in the ground but mainly from a large plastic water tank on an elevated platform. It is topped up monthly by a government water bowser that chugs in from Mothomelo. They have herds of goats here too, and donkeys. They hunt on horseback with spears and packs of dogs instead of on foot with bows and arrows. Deliveries of government food bolster their diet.

In the absence of Roy Sesana, a village resident and the president of First People of the Kalahari, a lobbying group that campaigns for Bushman rights to the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, Kobou, an old Bushman with a deeply lined face, speaks for the settlement. Kobou sits with the others, wearing a thick woolly ski cap and laceless army boots.

"The government comes many times to persuade us to move to New Xade," he says. "We refused, because this is our home, and we didn't want the money." Kobou says they have never been threatened, but he admits that if the government ceased water deliveries, "we would have to move or die. We could survive on wild melons and roots and natural pools but only for three months of the year during the wet season."

IT WAS IN SOUTH AFRICA that settlers, aided over the years by various epidemics, carried out the most complete reduction of Bushmen. By the 1980s it was widely believed there were no surviving Bushman groups in the country. But then, following the collapse of apartheid, the scattered remnants of the Khomani Bushmen, about 250 of them, were located almost by accident on farms and in squatter camps around Rietfontein.

Roger Chennells, a lawyer for the South African San Institute (SASI), established in 1996, is mining the new South African constitution to reclaim a large tract of land in Northern Cape Province for the Khomani, a tract that includes the former Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, now
absorbed into the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. I accompanied him to the red dunes and camel thorn trees of the southern Kalahari, to the settlement of Welkom, where many of the Khomani Bushmen had gathered at Chennells' request to choose community leaders. It was a noisy affair conducted entirely in Afrikaans, as Chennells patiently outlined the alien concept of voting to the high-spirited group.

Petrus Vaalbooi, who was elected a leader, asked his audience, "If a lioness gives birth, will you help me to steal the cub? It was his way of warning them that they faced big problems ahead.

A few months later, in early 2000, the South African government officially turned over a parcel of land to them just south of the reserve. They still face immense challenges in developing it, either for tourism or farming, but the experience of these South African San has revitalized the struggle all Bushmen confront for community recognition and land rights.

Although South Africa has only this tiny band of indigenous Bushmen, it is still home to the largest Bushman settlement on Earth, and perhaps the most distressing, at a place called Schmidtsdrift. More than 4,300 Bushmen originally from Angola and Namibia are now marooned at Schmidtsdrift, an hour's drive west of Kimberley, the provincial capital of the Northern Cape. It is a cheerless spot that smells of desolation. Lines of military tents, about 1,900 in all, stand on an open, windswept, stony slope that leads down to the bank of the Vaal River, carefully segregated between two Bushman groups, the !Xu and the Khwe, who dislike each other intensely. Since 1990 this has been the temporary home of a Bushman battalion of the South African Army. The battalion itself was disbanded in 1994 after the end of apartheid, but the Bushmen simply refused to leave: They had nowhere to go.

Ironically Schmidtsdrift is probably the Bushmen's most affluent community. Many of the former soldiers continue to draw pensions, and there is both an elementary and a high school, as well as a fully staffed health clinic. But the rampant use of alcohol and marijuana is a sign of the dislocation and loss in Schmidtsdrift, palliatives against a world that has overwhelmed these people. In the camp store the first section you come to through the turnstile is the liquor department. It is starkly utilitarian, carrying only bottom-of-the-line, top-of-the-alcohol content brands, such as Diamond Fields Late Harvest, a white wine that comes in a silver foil bag, stripped even of the nicety of a bottle.

At the clinic the army doctor tells me that children as young as 12 are addicted to alcohol. The doctor goes on to say that TB has long been the number one killer. Bushmen still resort to traditional medicine when they fall ill, and only when that fails do they come to the clinic. Often it's too late by then. Bushmen are deeply suspicious of Western medicine, and the doctor admits he cannot cross the cultural barrier.

A wailing siren marks lunchtime at the camp school, and more than 1,600 children line up for their meal--a thick soup ladled into bowls, and a chunk of bread. This is the only daily sustenance for many of them, and it ensures that they continue to attend classes. No classes, no soup.
The leader of the !Xu Traditional Council at Schmidtsdrift is Staff Sgt. Mario Mahongo, a !Xu Bushman. He is chairman of the !Xu & Khwe Communal Property Association, a consultative group that represents the interests of both the !Xu and the Khwe. The association is planning to move the whole community to a nearby farm, where there would be permanent housing, provided by the government and private foundations, and more opportunities, such as making and selling traditional craft items.

Mahongo is a small man with a mustache, tortoiseshell sunglasses, camouflage fatigues, and brown army boots. He sits in a mobile home that serves as his office in the middle of the camp. Behind him the wall is lined with inspirational posters. Like many of the men here he began his military career in the war for Angolan independence, fighting on the side of the Portuguese colonials. "Between us and the blacks there was always a lot of conflict," Mahongo says. "They used my people as slaves. The Portuguese saw this, and when they started having their own conflict with the blacks, they approached us and said, 'Let's get together, with a common goal.'"

After the Portuguese left Angola in 1975, South Africa recruited the Bushmen to fight pro-independence guerrillas in Namibia. When history repeated itself and Namibia also became independent, the Bushmen feared reprisals and fled again, to South Africa.

"We would like to go back to a time when there were no borders, no fences," says Mahongo. "But here in South Africa you can forget about that. Everything here is parceled up and fenced. At least in Angola there are still some wild areas, even in Namibia too. But not here. My heart is still in Angola—but that country is now a foreign place to my children. My home area is still gripped by war, even after all these years.

"A lot of our culture," he says, "is lost. in our lives--the old stories that were told by mothers and fathers who would go into the bush and then return to tell the others what they had seen. The problem now is that no one goes out and does anything, so we have no stories to tell our children. We have nothing to pass on. In the old days we had to make a musical instrument and sing along to it. Now we just go to town and buy a tape and listen to that."

BATISDA SALVADORE, LIAISON OFFICER for the !Xu & Khwe association, takes me on a tour of the camp. He is the son of a Portuguese father and a !Xu mother. "The government thought a Bushman is a Bushman, so they put us all together," he says. "But there are two different tribes here, and we don't get along. The problem is that the Khwe eat more than the !Xu, and they pursue our wives. Some of us think they are not real. Bushmen at all."

Indeed the Khwe do look Bantu. They are taller and blacker, and they lack the slightly Asian look of the !Xu that conforms with the Western stereotype of the Bushmen.

I stroll down to the Vaal River with Salvadore. On the other side it is a different world, a world of white-owned farms, intensively tended, with green alfalfa fields under irrigation. Some of the !Xu Bushmen have moved down here to the riverside, where they live in small lean-to shelters. They swim naked in the shallows using mosquito nets and perforated shade cloth to trap catfish.
"Why did you move from the main camp?" I ask one family who are regarding us suspiciously. "We hated the noise and the drunks," says Kanguia Mundinda, a wizened middle-aged woman. "We must keep moving--it is our way."

As I leave Schmidtsdrift, Mahongo comes over to say good-bye. "Pity us poor Bushmen," he entreats me. "Pity us who have so many problems facing us in this world down here, We Bushmen, we were the first people here, so how come we are the last in line to get anything? When people see we are a gentle people, they just walk on us. We have to find the strength to make a place for ourselves in this world. Otherwise there will soon be no more of us. We will all be gone. And so will our memories. Only our paintings will remain behind to remind you of us."

But as the traditional lifestyle of the Bushmen of southern Africa retreats behind the glass of the museum diorama, Mahongo's entreaty already sounds like a plea from the past. As the remaining Bushmen struggle to adapt to the changes around them, perhaps the most that can be saved is the legacy of their cultural memory, in particular their extraordinary intimacy with nature.

MAP: Continent of Africa

MAP: Kalahari Desert/Bushman Area

PHOTO (COLOR): Born into poverty, a Bushmen herder on a Namibian farm has little to show for his labors beyond the clothes he wears. Reduced to servitude in the land that was once their ancestor's domain, southern Africa's 85,000 indigenous Bushmen fight to win back a foothold along with their pride.

PHOTO (COLOR): A Bushman smears his legs with antelope blood in a rite witnessed by visitors to Namibia's Intu Afrika, a commercial game reserve. As land where Bushmen can hunt dwindles, many court tourism to survive. "Mythology is one of their few assets," says anthropologist James Suzman.

PHOTO (COLOR): Mountain tracker: Buks Kruiper leads a scientist to lions in the area from which his Bushman group was evicted in 1973. Until South Africa allowed them back in 1999, Kruiper drove a road grader, danced for tourists, and took to drinking. He missed the land, he says—it is in his heart.

PHOTO (COLOR): A squatter's camp in South Africa is a barren playground for children. Over centuries, migrations south by Bantu herders and farmers encroached on southern Africa's hunter-gatherers. Then European colonists pushed most Bushmen into a few Kalahari Desert enclaves.

PHOTO (COLOR): Figures in a mirage, Bushmen wearing skins and carrying bows and arrows cross a salt pan in Namibia's Nyae Nyae Conservancy. Use of guns, dogs, and horses is restricted, so they hunt the traditional way. They live in a village built to lure tourists, and most days they wear Western clothes.
PHOTO (COLOR): Women farmworkers near Chanzi, Botswana, still go into the bush to gossip and snack on wild plants. Gathering once provided 70 percent of the Bushman diet, but ancient scrubland has been converted to cattle ranches. Now government relief provides the bulk of the people's food.

PHOTO (COLOR): Trading on the past, Bushmen erected a traditional village near the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, moved into grass huts, and received visitors from a local resort. In a good month tourists bring the village $200-and the occasional soccer ball. The Bushmen had hoped for more.

PHOTO (COLOR): Empowered by a trance, an old man lays hands on a girl to draw out what he sees as a spiritual sickness that drove her to hoard meat. Attended by tourists who pay to watch such ceremonies, this ritual helps sustain Bushman communities, bringing both money and healing.

PHOTO (COLOR): Losing the peace as well as the war, veterans who fought with the South African Army against Namibian independence languish in "a place of stones and thorns," a tent city in Schimdtshirts. Originally from Angola and Namibia, the veterans hope for homes on a nearby farm.

PHOTO (COLOR): At the camp clinic a girl bundles a child sick with TB against the cold.

PHOTO (COLOR): Gone up in smoke, a squatter exhales marijuana on the edge of a South African town. Bushmen call such settlements "places of death" and not without reason. Those forced off the land and into the modern world face drug and alcohol abuse, malnutrition, and killing disease.

PHOTO (COLOR): Imitation rock art and souvenir bows are sold at South Africa's Kagga Kamma resort. The seller makes about $30 a month, far more than most Bushmen.

PHOTO (COLOR): In neighboring Namibia, a woman from the Herero ethnic group relaxes while her Bushman servant irons. For such domestic work the servant will receive food, shelter, clothes, and pocket money.

PHOTO (COLOR): A barbed clothesline frames a new settlement on land South Africa granted to a Bushman group in the Kalahari. Soon after arriving in 1999, the Bushmen hunted out much of the game, but they now conserve what remains in hopes tourists will stop by their way to a nearby game park.

PHOTO (COLOR): Shadow of a people: A boy's silhouette darkens a wall in Welkom, South Africa, where his band squatted for 16 years. Only now are governments hearing the plea of a Bushman half a century ago: "Listen to...a race which is very tired of running away...Give us a piece of land of our own."