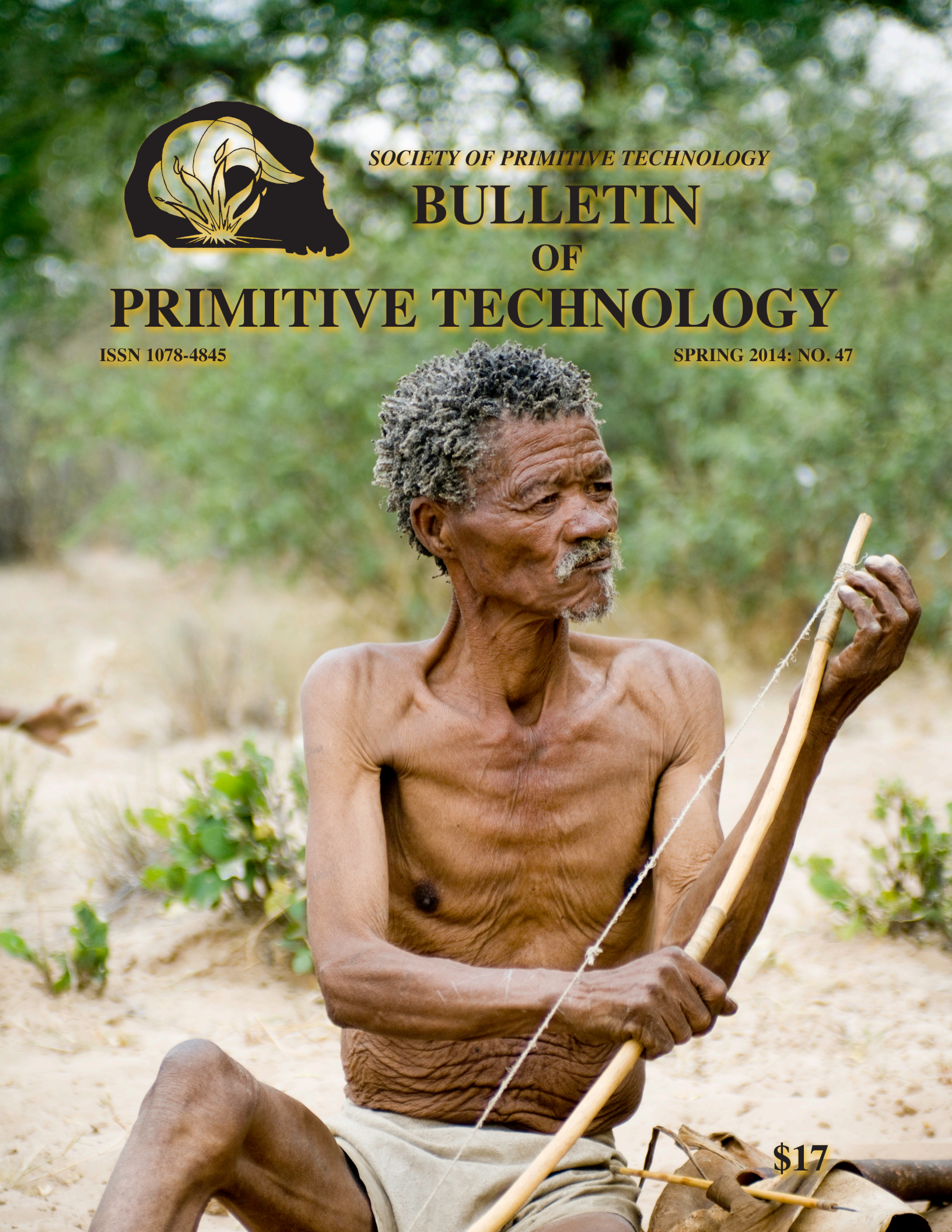

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The Kalahari San Bushmen of Botswana – Tales from a Researcher and Guide

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As I thought about what I wanted to share with you - the topic of my experiences with the Kalahari Bushmen - I was overwhelmed by the breadth of choice. I have been working in Botswana since 1995, and have just led my 6th expedition with a community of *Nharo Bushmen*. I will start with a story – a daylong account - recorded in my field notes on one of these tracking journeys I led with Jon Young, an internationally known tracker, our local guides, and expedition participants.

We conform our schedule to the Nharo's, one of the many tribes of KhoiSan Bushmen, starting our walk around 9:00AM when the day has warmed. This morning we have the following Bushmen with us: five adults, one teenager, and three young children: a married couple - *Xame* and *Kaba* (some names have been changed), their sons - *Kgum* (age 26) and *Xhamme* (age 16), a medicine woman named *Xaisa*, *Xinsa*, and three young children.

Wandering into the bush for a morning of tracking and learning, we let what we find and see dictate where we go. First we identify and follow small-spotted genet and brown hyena tracks. When we see eland tracks, Xame talks about how they use the eland's fat for lotion and the skin for blankets and shoes. We pass a wildebeest wallow and learn how the Nharo wait by the wallows to hunt. Xame and his sons, two acting as hunters and one as the wildebeest, demonstrate this hunt for us with full theatrics, including the wildebeest bellowing as it is speared. The Bushmen often act out scenarios to teach and Xame states that when he teaches children he always asks them, never tells them. This method of teaching and learning works well in this small, intimate community where practices are passed on from the elders to those younger. This process will also spark our afternoon group discussion on cultural mentoring. We continue on and learn about millipede holes, edible sap used to trap birds, why the Bushmen jump over roads (so they can't be tracked), and we taste many edible plants. Kaba digs for Devil's claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) – a cure-all plant that is very important medicinally, takes what she needs, and then replants the rest.

After passing a puff adder hidden under a bush, we ask how the women teach their children tracking. Kaba answers that they tell the children – very different than how the men teach. Xinsa chimes in that the women also show the children things – like how to gather food and build shelters. I think back to a time the past year when I saw the women playing – building small, doll-size shelters in the sand while the children brought the materials. The children watched the women build these doll-size shelters and then tried some of their own. The women didn't let the children build with them as the children must watch to get it right.

Figure 1: Sharing the Bi plant with the children to help quench thirst.

We see how the steenbok covers its dung, try the Bi plant (*Raphionacme burkei*) – a tuber used to quench thirst during a long hunt, and even see a tuber I have never seen before. It 'bleeds' red when sliced and the Bushmen drink this to clean one's blood if needed.

Now it is time for a fire while still out on our morning walk. Xame and his two sons make a fire with a hand-drill that consists of two sticks (no flat fireboard) made from the Commiphora bush, putting sand in the holes to create more friction. Gathered food suddenly appears – tsama melon, a type of fungus, coffee bean seeds, maramba beans (my favorite), and finally, emerging from deep in Xame's bag, jewel beetles in a tortoise shell that also doubles as a bowl. All this gathered silently and without our notice while we walked. As we share food around the fire, we share our lives. Although coming from such different places, we all talk about family, and some of our group practices making fire using the Nharo's hand-drills hoping for the success of Xame. We return to base camp with another walk, learning more about the language of the tracks and the birds.

Figure 2: Making a fire with a hand-drill.

Figure 3: Hand-drill.

We break for lunch and a nap in the heat of the day, then meet with our expedition participants to debrief our morning. While we talk, our Afrikaans guide who grew up with Bushmen drinks two concoctions made for him by Xaisa – blood root for his blood and devil's claw for his joint pain. After our group debriefing we have tea, and the Nharo arrive again to spend the afternoon with us.

After our greetings (a very important ritual), we head out to collect wood to make digging sticks and walking sticks. As we walk we learn about the traditions of the Bushmen, such as that you cannot eat a duiker (a dwarf antelope) until its baby is grown otherwise the baby will die. We learn more medicinal plant uses. Then we stop, build another fire, and work on our walking and digging sticks, straightening them in the fire as the children play in the sand. The women sit over to one side, the men around the fire. I have two conversations – one with the women and one with the men - that eventually blend into each other as everyone wants to chime in and give their opinion. We have a long conversation about schooling, tourism, and the changes they have seen over time. We share some of our own culture and how and why some people are trying to reconnect with nature where we live. The Bushmen men

Figure 4: Hand-drill set in action.

and women tell us to bring more people over to see how they live. They tell us that they understand that we (the visitors) are struggling with our culture and our desire to reconnect with nature and that is surely why we come to them – to have a look at what they are doing.

Our day ends with an evening again around a fire, a place designated for gathering and sharing stories about our day. There is no trancedance tonight, but tomorrow, after another full day with the Nharo, we will be blessed with this ritual.

Botswana's Bushmen

Botswana is a landlocked, semi-arid country with a population of about 1.8 million people in an area roughly the size of Texas or France. The Kalahari Desert, a semi-arid sandy desert covering two-thirds of the country, and the Kalahari Basin provides a home to many tribes of *Khoisan* people.

The Khoisan (Bushmen) are the most genetically ancient people on Earth now numbering around 90,000, but in the not distant past had a population numbering 300,000 (Sylvain, 2002). The Bushmen have been in Southern Africa for at least 40,000 years (Lee & DeVore, 1998; Tobias 1956, 1962), but there are now large gaps in generational knowledge, especially as people move into settlements and leave their traditional homelands by force or by choice. Key drivers of this knowledge loss are colonialism, globalization, modernization, assimilation, land loss, and marginalization. Younger people often move to settlements where they forget their knowledge or no longer learn from their elders. Indigenous knowledge is experiential, and the restoration of indigenous knowledge requires the paths of intergen-

Figure 5: Food around the fire: tsama melon, cucumber melon, maramba beans, and jewel beetles

erational cultural transmission to be reestablished (Florey, 2009). The Bushmen I work with hold true connection – to self, each other, and the land around them. In the modern world, where a holistic approach and sustainability are severely lacking, their culture holds hope for our future as well. It is, however, disappearing. That disappearance concerns me, but more importantly it concerns them. How they value their indigenous knowledge comes up time and time again in my research interviews, and in my many conversations I have had with individuals over the years. They do not want their culture to disappear, and it is this crisis that brought me to my research. This is the crux: They want their culture to continue.

> *During the old days…there used to be hunting with bows and arrows, and it was just so nice. But now, it is just a big matter, if they find us hunting in the bush, we are being kept by the police, and we are not allowed to hunt any more… So we are struggling and crying. So we need to be given that freedom to do what we used to do in the past.* (Nharo Elder and Healer, personal communication, 31 March, 2012).

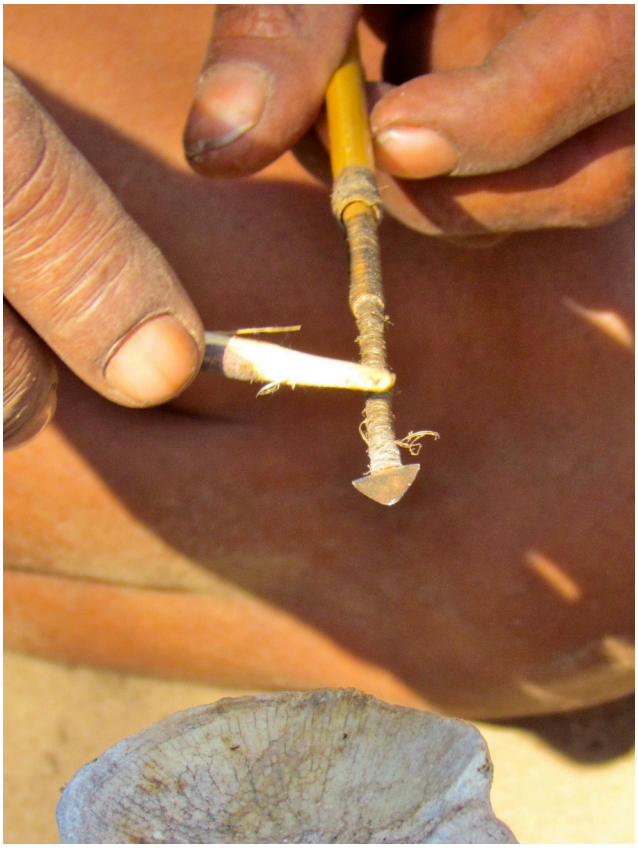

Figure 6: A Bushman spreads poison on his arrow for hunting. This poison, from the larvae and pupae of the Diamphidia beetle, has no antidote so they are very careful.

A young Nharo Bushman boy drinks from an ostrich egg dug from the ground.

Water Storage

In the rainy season, when ostriches lay their eggs, they are collected, eaten, and hollowed out with two holes drilled on the top. The Bushmen fill the eggs with water, plug the top with the Kalahari Taaibos leaf (*Rhus tenuinervis*), and bury them throughout the desert for future water points. Sticks are placed vertically around the egg and long grasses are placed on top of the bush where the egg is hidden. The grasses are easy to spot from a distance by a person in need of water. Tubers, melons, and sip wells are other sources of water during the long dry season. Broken eggshells are crafted by the women for jewelry and for adornment on skin clothing and bags.

Story of Xame, Restorative Ecotourism in Action:

As a culture, the Bushmen have always been highly dependent on access to land for their livelihoods; however, since much of their land has been re-appropriated, hunting rights have been taken away, and indigenous knowledge drained from their lineage, many Bushmen are now relying on food rations for sustenance. In the community I work with, *restorative ecotourism* has improved the life of individuals in the community as well as the community as a whole and has also restored intergenerational communication. I classify this venture as restorative ecotourism because it leads to cultural perpetuation and a decrease in marginalization.

One example of restorative ecotourism in action is the family story of Xame. When the ecotourism in his community began in 2001, none of his six children had any bush skills. His oldest son, Kgum, was 14 years old and in a formal government school. None of his boys could even make fire by friction. When asked, 'Why don't you teach the children to do it?' Xame said 'Why, they are not going to use it anymore.' This disjunction was widespread. Xame's older brother was living in a government settlement and was an alcoholic whose children were also growing up without learning their traditional knowledge.

Now, Xame's son Kgum is 26 years old, and works in the tourism industry as an indigenous guide, knows the knowledge of his elders, and is married with three children. Kgum's children are now growing up with their extended family in the bush, learning their indigenous ways as they would have in the past through community cultural mentoring. Kgum's uncle, Xame's older brother, now lives back in the bush, and is using his vast indigenous knowledge, and no longer touches alcohol. Two of his children are also now working in ecotourism, re-learning their culture from the elders there. One of his sons is even a guide-in-training, helping run an ecotourism venture. Hope, revitalization of these communities, and pride in themselves and their heritage is evident in the dramatic changes during a short period of time.

I examine indigenous-based tourism ventures with not only a fiscal eye, but with a cultural and spiritual lens. Ecotourism changed this community by filling an economic role, necessitated via a government ban on hunting, allowing for individuals to move back to the bush. These movements of individuals back to their bush communities facilitate cultural repair and revitalization, perpetuates their indigenous knowledge, and increases the intergenerational knowledge transmission between elders and younger generations. My research shows that this restorative ecotourism restores intergenerational bonds, and can be a mechanism to help close the generation gap and help younger generations realize the value of their traditional knowledge (Apelian, 2013). This knowledge, when used in conjunction with cultural tourism, provides a constant reinforcement between indigenous peoples, their land, and their identity. It also may help keep young people in touch with cultural values and empower them to be future leaders.

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Dr. Nicole Apelian is a researcher and the CEO and primary guide for her company Eco Tours International, which specializes in tracking and wildlife safaris in Southern Africa. She is also an instructor and graduate advisor for Prescott College andå holds an MS in Biology and a PhD focused in Cultural Anthropology and Sustainability Education.

Nicole's experience in scientific research is distinguished and her background in biology, anthropology, and real-world experience with global issues adds an unparalleled legitimacy to guiding and leading workshop and safari participants. She was an associate at the Okavango Lion Research Project, a 10-year study focused on ecology, reproduction, disease, and genetics of these large cats. Her doctoral research involved indigenous-based tourism and its role in maintaining intergenerational knowledge in Bushmen communities. She has worked in Botswana since 1995 as a game warden for the Department of Wildlife and National Parks and the US Peace Corps, as a lion researcher, guide, and anthropological researcher.

Nicole is currently engaged in an ethnobotanical study on how the Bushmen utilize the plants of the Kalahari Basin. She also teaches traditional skills and is using her unique cultural experiences as a leader in the field of transformative education. You can reach Nicole at *nicole.apelian@gmail.com* or visit her website at *www.ecotours-international.com* and join her in the Kalahari.

Tsama melons.