

**CHAPTER 24****Critical Thinking Activity****Southern Africa****Understanding the Bushmen**

Read the following excerpt from National Geographic. Then answer the questions that follow.

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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 horse men. Then there were no more.

European colonists who waded upon the shores of southern Africa 350 years ago called them simply Bushmen. Deeming them "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."

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 the Bushmen were dispossessed.

Of the 25 or so surviving groups, the closest thing left to so-called genuine Bushman society can be found in the Nyae Nyae district of northeastern

**Chapter 24, Critical Thinking Activity, continued**

Namibia. 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 Africa province. Eight years after Namibia’s independence in 1990, Nyae Nyae was declared a conservancy to be run by an elected committee of Bushmen.

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 the 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.

Hunting now provides only a small part of what the Bushmen eat. 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 in the area in a single day. 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 percents was purchased with cash from pensions, craft sales, and wages. The remainder came from gardens and foraging.

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, scattered remnants of Bushmen were located almost by accident. 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.

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1. Explain in your own words how the Bushmen survived in the past without access to surface water.

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2. Using classroom resources, define a hunter-gatherer society. What innovation brought the end to hunter-gatherers as a major cultural unit?

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