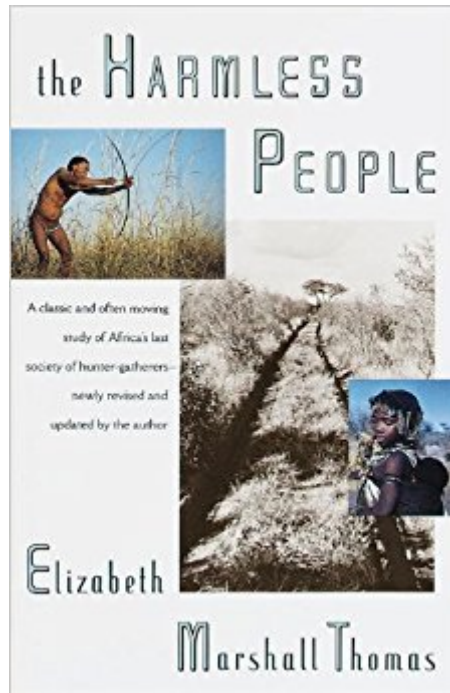




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# The Harmless People



## Synopsis

A study of primitive people which, for beauty of...style and concept, would be hard to match." -- The New York Times Book Review  
In the 1950s Elizabeth Marshall Thomas became one of the first Westerners to live with the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert in Botswana and South-West Africa. Her account of these nomadic hunter-gatherers, whose way of life had remained unchanged for thousands of years, is a ground-breaking work of anthropology, remarkable not only for its scholarship but for its novelistic grasp of character. On the basis of field trips in the 1980s, Thomas has now updated her book to show what happened to the Bushmen as the tide of industrial civilization -- with its flotsam of property rights, wage labor, and alcohol -- swept over them. The result is a powerful, elegiac look at an endangered culture as well as a provocative critique of our own. "The charm of this book is that the author can so truly convey the strangeness of the desert life in which we perceive human traits as familiar as our own...." The Harmless People is a model of exposition: the style very simple and precise, perfectly suited to the neat, even fastidious activities of a people who must make their world out of next to nothing."-- The Atlantic

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## Customer Reviews

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This is a detailed, fascinating, and even beautiful account of the author's field study of the Kung! Bushman. Along with the Australian aborigines, the Bushman of the Kalahari desert, who inhabit an arid tableland in southwest Africa, are considered one of the two most primitive cultures in existence. The Bushmen aren't native to the Kalahari but were forced there as a result of conflicts with the white man and other tribes after the 17th century. Thomas gives a detailed account of their way of life and how they are able to survive in one of the most desolate places on earth. The Bushmen are very short of stature, averaging only 4 feet, 10 inches tall, and their skin has a yellowish tinge that is different from the blacker skin of their surrounding neighbors. The Kalahari has no surface water, and the rare rainfall immediately dries up. One of the few ways they get moisture as well as food is the tsama melon, which grows underground. The tsama melons are so important that the rights to a particular locale are inherited, which is unusual among the Bushmen. To survive in this harsh environment, the Bushmen have become expert botanists and can identify over 300 different kinds of plants, and they hunt antelope with poisoned arrows. Marriage among the Bushmen can occur at a very early age, but for women it is considered inappropriate to become fully sexually active and to marry before the age of 12. After having been almost completely wiped out between the 17th and the 19th century through conflicts with other tribes and the white man, there are now about 50,000 Bushmen inhabiting the Kalahari. Years later, when I saw the movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, I recalled my first encountering the Bushmen in Thomas's wonderful little book. Several years after that, I had the opportunity to hear Jamie Uys speak, the south African director of the movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, and he also described what it was like to work with

and live in the Kalahari with the Bushmen during the making of his movie. Both he and Thomas commented that there was something very likeable about the Kalahari Bushmen, who now live very peaceably in their little arid paradise with relatively little conflict and strife. Well, paradise isn't exactly the word for the inhospitable environment where they live, but nevertheless the Bushmen came across in both Thomas's and Uys's accounts as overall quite happy and content with their life. Ever since reading this book, I have thought it ironic to consider that the more advanced cultures in other parts of the world, including those of us in the modern western countries, who are considerably more advanced, probably live no more happy and less stressful lives than the primitive Bushmen. Of course, one must be careful about the "Noble Savage" fallacy, but in the case of the Bushmen it seems to be true. This book is an updated edition of the one I read many years ago in college. Overall a classic study that takes its place alongside other great anthropological classics of Africa like Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*, about the pygmies.

Folks who spend their lives staring at computer screens in vast corporate cubicle farms have a powerful tendency to drift off into vivid daydreams of gathering nuts, roots, and melons in wild country, with their hunter-gatherer ancestors, in a world without roads, cities, or alphabets. For them, there is treasure to be found in Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' book, *The Harmless People*. It's a beautiful book. Elizabeth was 19 when she first met the Bushmen of southern Africa. Her parents led three expeditions between 1950 and 1956 to study and film these people, who were among the last surviving hunter-gatherer societies in the world. The family spent a lot of time living in Bushmen camps, learned their language, and really got to know them. Elizabeth's book is a respectful and affectionate diary of her experiences with these people, and it is easy and enjoyable to read. The first expedition searched for several months before finding Bushmen, because Bushmen disappeared whenever they saw outsiders, who were a dependable source of trouble. Black and white outsiders frequently kidnapped them, and forced them to spend the rest of their days as farm laborers. They never returned home. Police would arrest them if they killed a giraffe in the desert, because giraffes were royal animals protected by the law. Arrested hunters were hauled away, and never seen again. The Thomas expedition eventually gained their trust because they developed a reputation for being very generous with their gifts, and for being unusually decent white folks. Long ago, Bushmen lived across much of southern Africa. But black and white farmers and herders aggressively seized the best lands, forcing the Bushmen into the Kalahari Desert, an exceedingly difficult place to live. Some places were so dry that the primary sources of water were melons, roots, and killed animals. Some winter nights dipped below freezing, leading to sleepless nights for the

nearly naked people. Each group lived in a specific territory, sometimes several hundred square miles in area, which had clearly defined traditional boundaries. They intimately know every bit of their homeland, every rock, every bush, and every notable variation of the terrain. They knew exactly where different types of food could be found. They often had to move their camp every few days. Hunting was done with spears and bows and arrows. Arrows were treated with a poison made from the pupa of a beetle, which could take several days to kill the prey. After shooting, hunters waited two or three days, then tracked the wounded animal, hoping to find it dead. One unlucky hunter was fully impaled on the long horn of an angry buffalo who wasn't dead yet. Amazingly, he survived. Another time, hunters tracked a wounded wildebeest, and found it surrounded by 20 to 30 hungry lions. Amazingly, they drove away the lions, finished off the animal, and carried the meat back to camp. In the honey season, men climbed high into the trees to raid the hives, whilst being stung everywhere by a furious cloud of stingy bees. There was a long tradition of fatal falls. Hives that were frequently raided became fiercely defensive, viciously attacking all of the Bushmen on the ground, before the climbing began. Honey was definitely not a free lunch. Living in a harsh land, the Bushmen were very careful to sidestep the problems caused by overpopulation. The stability of their society was more important than the survival of every newborn, and these cultural values enabled their way of life to be sustainable. They believed that there was a period of delay between birth and becoming alive. If the newborn was crippled or deformed, it was promptly buried and forgotten. When conditions were strained, and it was not possible to feed more mouths, newborns were not kept. The Bushmen had no tools for contraception or abortion. To avoid the pain of infanticide, they frequently abstained from intercourse for long periods of time, when there was room for no more. Usually, childbirth was a joyful event, because the number of pregnancies was voluntarily limited. Thomas described the ongoing soap operas of camp life, and the inevitable friction that developed among people who lived in close contact with others all the time. Camp life was not a never-ending love fest. But great care was taken to avoid conflict, and to promptly defuse and resolve conflicts. Belongings were constantly kept in circulation via gift-giving to avoid jealousy. The fundamental keys to their success were cooperation and sharing. She presented us with a fascinating description of thriving in a challenging land. Bushmen life seemed to be far less dismal than life in corporate cubicle farms. Bushmen enjoyed healthy, satisfying, and meaningful lives, despite their lack of televisions, computers, cell phones, automobiles; despite being a cruelly persecuted minority; despite being surrounded by lions and leopards who enjoyed having children for lunch; despite the blast furnace summer days when the sand burned their feet. Life was good. They had what they needed. Thomas published her book in 1961. She returned to the region in 1986

and 1987 and discovered that the Bushmen had been blindsided by what is called sustainable development (i.e., catastrophic destruction). This inspired her to produce a revised edition, which was published in 1989, to bring us up to date. The Bushmen had been driven off their land and forced into villages, where their superiors treated them like the scum of the Earth. Their culture disintegrated into a nightmare of malnutrition, disease, alcoholism, homicide, and wage labor. People quit sharing, ate in secret, and hid purchases. Thomas summed up the new reality: "No Bushmen lack contact with the West and none is undamaged by it. And their own way of life, the old way, a way of life which preceded the human species, no longer exists but is gone from the face of the earth at enormous cost to the individuals who once lived it." Welcome to industrial civilization!

Richard Adrian Reese  
Author of What Is Sustainable

This is an old classic, probably a half century old plus. But it is still a readable and informative book about the Kalahari and the traditional bush people's lives. I doubt there are many people left living that way any longer. I first read it years ago in college and then reread it before a recent trip to the Kalahari.

For those who are still interested in the extinct way of life of one of the most fascinating of human races, this book is a great read. The author and her father, brother and mother have lived with the Kung Bushmen and know more about them than any other person on earth. The narrative describes intimately the way of life of these hunter gatherers and the painful and sad way it has all ended just in the last 20 years. Yes, there are Bushmen families living in Namibia and Botswana today but most do not know how to track game, how to find edible roots and berries to eat or protect themselves from predators and nature. They wear discarded western clothes, smoke tobacco, drink heavily and die prematurely of treatable diseases and by their own hands. These people have lived for tens of thousands of years in conditions other people cannot endure and survived but they have become unwilling victims of modern encroachment. If one wants to read more try Paul Theroux's Last Train to Zona Verde.

Very educational

Superb!! I really enjoy her writing, gives a very good glimpse of the state of mind our ancestors must have been in back, way back in ancient times. She puts the reader there, in the desert and in the daily struggles of these primitive people and the strength of their culture and it's precarious state

against European incursions. I enjoyed tremendously just as I've enjoyed all her books.

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