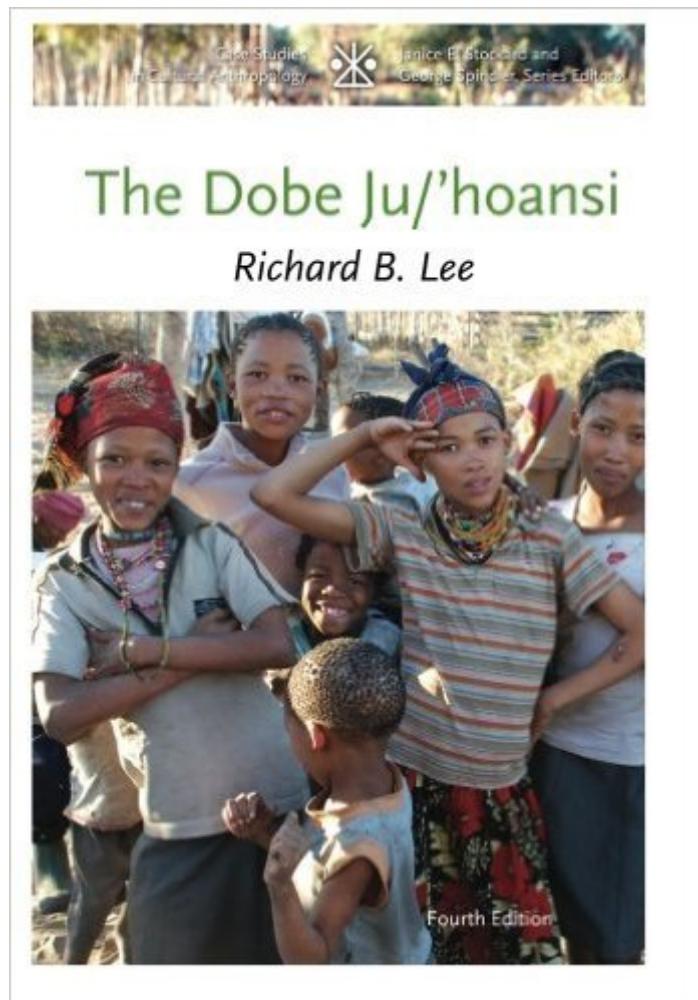


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The Dobe Ju/'Hoansi (Case Studies In Cultural Anthropology)



Synopsis

This classic, bestselling study of the !Kung San, foragers of the Dobe area of the Kalahari Desert describes a people's reactions to the forces of modernization, detailing relatively recent changes to !Kung rituals, beliefs, social structure, marriage and kinship system. It documents their determination to take hold of their own destiny, despite exploitation of their habitat and relentless development to assert their political rights and revitalize their communities. Use of the name Ju/'hoansi (meaning "real people") acknowledges their new sense of empowerment. Since the publication of the Third Edition in 2003, Richard Lee has made eight further trips to the Kalahari, the most recent in 2010 and 2011. The Dobe and Nyae Nyae Areas have continued to transform and the people have had to respond and adapt to the pressures of capitalist economics and bureaucratic governance of the Namibian and Botswana states. This Fourth Edition chronicles and bears witness to these evolving social conditions and their impacts on lives of the Ju/'hoansi.

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Customer Reviews

Richard Lee's ethnography The Dobe Ju/'hoansi is a detailed account of the culture and history of the Ju/'hoan people living in the Dobe area of southern central Africa. The book illustrates both the rich history of the Ju and how the traditions of the past are central in the present, but also the problems facing the Ju/'hoansi as they move toward the future. The first half of Lee's ethnography focuses mainly on the past and the "present", circa the 1960s, when Lee himself spent time living with the Ju/'hoansi, a practice known as participant observation. The first major element Lee

expounds upon is the harsh environment in which the Ju live. The climate consists of very warm, rainy summers (86-104 degrees Fahrenheit) contrasted against moderate, cool winters with no rainfall at all. Because the amount of precipitation can vary as much as 500 percent (Lee 29), droughts are frequent. The severe weather patterns combined with the unforgiving Kalahari Desert influence all other parts of the Ju/'hoansi way of life. The Ju people are classified by archeologists as hunters and gatherers, moving around multiple times per year instead of living in permanent settlements. Skilled adults can identify as many as 100 species of edible plants (Lee 43) and can "deduce many kinds of information about the animal he is tracking: its species and sex, its age, how fast it is traveling, etc" (Lee 50). The author discovered that the Ju only have to work about 20 hours per week to hunt or gather enough food to sustain the population (Lee 54). I was amazed at this statistic, having previously thought that hunting and gathering took up many more hours per week to feed an entire band. Lee moves on in the ethnography to discuss the intricate kinship connections the Ju share.

I read this book while taking an undergraduate sociocultural anthropology class. Several years later, it still stands out in my mind as a crisp, fair ethnography in a field full of opaque and often pejorative books. Richard B. Lee's accomplishment here is to balance a scientific and human approach. Realizing how strongly a physical environment can impact a culture, Lee smartly and dispassionately details the basic facts of the Ju/'Hoansi's past and current situation - the geography and ecology of their home in the Kalahari desert, their food supply, etc. On this canvas, he paints a picture of the culture of this people. This sweeps from the physical layout of their camps to their language (including a thorough exposition of those interesting click consonants) to their handling of mortality and sexuality to the privileges and "complaint discourse" of older members of the society. Then Lee qualifies this whole portrait by describing recent developments, including encroachment of other cultures, erosion of the traditional lifestyle, and the dispossession and advocacy that has defined the Ju's recent relationships with the Namibian and Botswanan governments. What amazed me about all this is that Lee remains tenderly human during this rich exposition. He writes of the Ju with great respect and humbly describes vignettes of his interaction with his subjects - like when he got his pet name and when he had crushes on various native women. He avoids sentimental exoticism when describing how the culture began to fall apart due to pressures on their territory from Black herders. Instead, he documents the painful transition with precision and observational detail and even finds sources of hope.

Richard Lee's case study examines the lives of the Ju/'hoansi culture by going to the people themselves, asking about their past, while simultaneously investigating their present. The Ju/'hoansi or "Ju" live around the Adobe water holes, in Botswana, which stretch 3,000 square miles. Nearby tribes included from Herero and Tswana, who were Bantu speakers. These tribes had a distinct appearance and an utterly unheard of way of life. Geographically, the Dobe region incorporated four types of habitats- dunes, flats, melapo, and hardpan & river valleys. There are five major seasons, and droughts occur quite frequently and mongongo is the major plant food in the Dobe area. The Ju people live in grass huts formulated in a circle, creating miniature villages. These villages are easy to set up and relocate because they change locations depending on the season. They are comprised of 5 rings; each ring represented a different function to the village in order to keep daily life smooth running. The first part of the novel conveys an idea, in which the Ju ancestors were hunter-gatherers, or foragers, and that the Europeans came to their land in attempt to colonize them. Along with the Europeans, the Tswana herders were among the first to penetrate the area, and it is said that the Ju incorporated their political system. Throughout the book, Lee portrays accounts referring to his personal experiences in Botswana. The story that is most prominent describes how Lee took a select few of the tribe to a mongongo grove so the people could pick nuts. And they did- they pick enough food to tame the hunger of ten people for fourteen days. This is extremely significant because the action of these individuals is the quintessence of what a hunger-gatherer really is.

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