

Speeter-Blaudszun, Sonja: Die Expeditionen der Familie Marshall. Eine Untersuchung zur ethnographischen Erforschung der Nyae Nyae !Kung. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004. 380 pp. ISBN 3-8258-7726-4. (Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrika-Forschung, 13) Preis: € 29,90

“The Expeditions of the Marshall Family” is a detailed description of the documentation work carried out by the Marshalls with Kalahari “San” or “Bushpeople” since the 1950s. Given that San ethnography continues to be a standard feature of much anthropological teaching, this study provides valuable background information. Moreover, beyond regional interests, it presents challenging problems concerning anthropological research about field researchers. It also draws attention to difficulties in the critique of ethnographic sources, not only of texts but also of photos and films. For that purpose Speeter-Blaudszun brings together published and unpublished sources, as well as interviews with members of the Marshall family and with members of their San host families. The picture that emerges is comprehensive but not free of problems.

What makes this study particularly interesting is that it allows us to overcome an entrenched totalizing view on “the Marshall expeditions,” and by implication also “the Harvard expeditions” and other such cooperative (and in some respects “corporative”) enterprises. What today, in hindsight, appears to be a solid block of more than a decade of large-scale and well-funded research expeditions reemerges in this historical perspective as a much more fragmented and fragile endeavour consisting of a diverse set of journeys undertaken by a changing set of people. In contrast to the public image, the Marshalls did not only do stationery field research in the Nyae Nyae area of Namibia (then South West Africa). In fact only one of their field trips (namely the one in 1952–53) was strictly speaking of that sort. All other expeditions covered a much wider terrain (including Angola and Botswana) and were much more exploratory and comparative, warranting the term “expedition” rather than fieldwork in the common anthropological sense. Similarly, the expeditions were not simply a family affair. Not all family members took (equal) part in all expeditions, and – more importantly – all expeditions involved a considerable number of nonfamily members. This study rightly highlights the problematic participation of government officials, of necessary go-betweens, and of academic coworkers in these expeditions and how the Marshall family dealt with administrators and fellow scientists who were part of the expeditions but with whom they often did not agree.

The dynamics of an interdisciplinary and interethnic expedition team to some extent emerge clearer in Speeter-Blaudszun’s analysis than the dynamics between the four family members of the Marshall family itself. This family constellation is no doubt a fascinating field but maybe also the most difficult aspect to do research on. To begin with, the various perspectives are not accessible in the same way. Laurence Marshall, the main initiator and manager of the expeditions, died in 1980 and left very few written documents. His wife,

Lorna, was Speeter-Blaudszun’s main informant. Her publications are numerous and well-known but for this study she has also allowed access to her unpublished field diaries. The quotes from these diaries will for many readers be the gems of this book. The Marshall children, John, who became a filmmaker, and Elizabeth, who became an author, seem to have at times conflicting memories of the expeditions but on the whole draw a similarly harmonic picture of their family relations. This poses a dilemma for Speeter-Blaudszun. Without being so close, especially to Lorna Marshall, many sources would have remained closed to her. But being so close also prevents her from discussing a number of critical questions that a more distant observer may pose. There are critical points raised in relation to the self-image of the family members but mostly one needs to read them between the lines. For instance, it is striking how the Marshalls struggled to keep control over their project, by restraining the translators, photographers, assistants, and scientists who were travelling with them but also by managing the San they took on as informants – and ultimately also by containing the present biographer of their expeditions.

Speeter-Blaudszun outlines the particular “corporate strategy” that governed the Marshall expeditions, the roles of family members and the role ascribed to non-family members. There is enough to suggest that the encounter between the Nyae Nyae people and the Marshalls was not only a general culture contact between “locals” and “outsiders” but a very specific one between individual San in particular situations and a particular corporate expedition culture with individual participants positioned in a specific constellation. The author appropriately takes issue with the claim that the Marshalls were “amateurs” and, therefore, without a theoretical background or bias. Her detailed description on how research was conducted in the composite practice of the expeditions shows that working assumptions and practices can be understood in terms of an implicit theoretical basis for the research that was conducted.

Students and colleagues working in this ethnographic region, or in the comparative field of biography and ethnographic source critique, but who do not read German will greatly regret that this book is not accessible to them. The others will certainly wish that more German publishers would do proper copyediting to avoid errors found in the bibliography, duplications of text passages, a cumbersome system of footnotes and references, the lack of an index, and other annoying things. While some may find the author’s take on the Marshall family too “tame,” I find it far more stimulating to read about the dilemmas and ambivalences of the Marshall expeditions than about other early ethnographers in this region who were much more blunt in their approach and, therefore, a much simpler target for anthropological critique.

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