

Ross McElwee, a filmmaker best known for his autobiographical **Sherman's March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation** (1985), was one of the cameramen on John Marshall's **N!ai, Portrait of a !Kung Woman**. This is an excerpt from an interview conducted by Scott MacDonald, for **Filmmakers Quarterly**.

*How did you come to work on that remarkable film (N!ai, Portrait of a !Kung Woman)?*

There was the basic necessity to make a living. During those years (1977-1980) I didn't have any steady source of income, so I continued to take jobs as a freelance cameraman. I preferred opportunities where I could work with filmmakers I respected, such as John Marshall or D.A. Pennebaker. I'd never met John, but I'd seen his work and respected it. He had been filming a !Kung settlement for a month in Namibia and though his cameraman was scheduled to leave, John felt that he did not have his film yet. I was recommended by Mark Erder, the original cinematographer, who was also from Boston. They cabled me, and I said I'd do it.

It was a complicated situation. John has a distinctive style, and I think at first he was nervous about having me shoot. He didn't know me at all: he'd never seen any of my work. Could he edit my camera work with his and Mark's. Also, Namibia was his world, and I was coming into it cold. But it all worked out. I could tell you a hundred stories about the experience.

*Tell me one.*

Well, the day I arrived (after an exhausting 16 hour flight through Frankfurt and then south to Namibia, where we finally landed on a stretch of dirt in the middle of the Kalahari Desert), John said, "Well, let's not shoot today. Let's just show you the layout." We started walking around, and suddenly we heard a commotion. A fight had broken out between one of the !Kung men and an Ovambo worker that John had brought with him to be a cook for the camp. They were accusing the cook of having an affair with the guy's wife. There had been tension between !Kung people and the Ovambas to begin with, so this was a volatile situation. The argument exploded to include every member of the village: people were screaming and yelling and chanting and crying. We simply had to film it, and I didn't even know who John felt the principle people were at this point. John said, "Just shoot, shoot whatever is happening."

The !Kung are a very short people, and I had this odd sense of not being there, of being invisible. An angry !Kung rushed in my direction brandishing a large stick, seemingly at me, but actually in pursuit of another !Kung who happened to be next to me. But my presence was never actually acknowledged. I saw a grass hut shaking wildly, and I held the shot of it, and pretty soon the allegedly cuckolded husband's head breaks through the wall, like a chicken emerging from an egg. He was being restrained by two people on each arm—relatives who were trying to keep him from murdering the Ovambo cook. Meanwhile, his wife is being slapped by her mother. And it was all based on nothing but rumor. Nobody was seriously hurt. We filmed for something like seven straight hours—all stages of the argument, its dissipation, and the lamenting that followed it...it was an amassing experience. Some of that footage was used in **N!ai**, but edited down.

*Where were you there when **The God's Must Be Crazy** was being filmed?*

No. that was done before I arrived. It was wonderfully ironic that those two films were being made in the same place at the same time. they should be shown side by side. **The God's Must Be Crazy** had its charming moments, but it was silly and condescending about the !Kung.

MacDonald, Scott *Southern Exposure: An Interview with Ross McElwee*, **Film Quarterly** Spring 1988.