



PROFILE: PAULINE WIESSNER

Anthropologist Brings Worlds Together

Polly Wiessner unites past and present, science and advocacy in her studies of traditional peoples in Africa and Papua New Guinea

SALT LAKE CITY—Late one night around 2003, University of Utah anthropologist Pauline Wiessner was awakened by a telephone call from some Kalahari Bushmen she had studied in Namibia. The Bushmen, also known as San, had managed to get hold of a satellite phone belonging to a safari company. They told her that they had just called the famous musician Yo-Yo Ma about an offer he had made when he toured the Kalahari a decade earlier: Ma had apparently agreed to buy shoes for their soccer team. Now the Bushmen wanted to draw outlines of their feet, send them to Wiessner in Salt Lake City, and have her buy the shoes and send the bill to Ma.

Wiessner didn't worry that helping her research subjects, former hunter-gatherers now coping with the modern world, would

compromise her scientific objectivity. She simply agreed, realizing that the Bushmen were using borrowed modern technology to expand their traditional social networks across the globe. And, as she had put it in a recent talk, such social networks had probably been key to the evolutionary success of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, allowing them to travel great distances and eventually "move out of Africa and colonize much of the planet."

As it happened, the Bushmen, lacking postal services, had no way to get the drawings to her, and the shoes were never purchased. But Wiessner, 62, known as Polly, sees no conflict in her dual role as both observer and participant in traditional societies. For nearly 4 decades, she has been carrying out anthropological fieldwork that links

Engaged anthropologist. Polly Wiessner with her pet cockatoo and gifts from friends in the Kalahari and Papua New Guinea.

science with advocacy and ties the present to the past. Her research on exchange networks in Africa's Kalahari Desert and in Papua New Guinea (P.N.G.) has provided anthropologists with some of their best models for the cultural evolution of prehistoric societies. It forms "the basis of a lot of people's thinking about how we became human," says anthropologist Alison Brooks of George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Adds archaeologist Clive Gamble of Royal Holloway, University of London: "Take away Polly's insights, and our view of the social world of our Paleolithic ancestors would contract back to the scale of the cave." Along the way, Wiessner has helped the traditional peoples she works with navigate the modern world. She is regarded as a leading practitioner of "engaged anthropology," in which researchers collaborate with the people they study. Although she now lives in Salt Lake City (with a pet cockatoo that drinks from her coffee cup in the morning and her margarita glass in the evening), she still works closely with African Bushmen and P.N.G.

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tribesmen and is considered a friend to both cultures. “Polly wanted to continue working with the people here,” says Akii Tumu, director of the Enga Tradition and Transition Center in Wabag, a cultural center that Wiessner helped to create and fund. Tumu, who has collaborated on Wiessner’s research for 25 years, says this makes her “outstandingly different from all other foreign people.” Wiessner’s ability to bridge the many worlds in which she works makes her one of anthropology’s “great souls,” says anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, professor emeritus at the University of California (UC), Davis. “She is the old-fashioned kind of anthropologist, ... a scholar who studies human nature in all its diversity.”

Long nights in the Kalahari

Wiessner, who has spent years living among poor people in traditional societies, was born in Vermont into a comfortable existence, the daughter of a famed mountain climber. She began climbing and skiing early on, fostering her love of the outdoors. And she says her experiences at a strict Canadian boarding school prepared her for the hardships of fieldwork.

But she was a troublemaker at school and unable to get into a good college at first. So she went to the now-defunct Bennett College in Millbrook, New York, which Wiessner says catered to wealthy young women who wanted to marry well. Wiessner thrived and soon transferred to Sarah Lawrence College. While at Sarah Lawrence, she volunteered for a summer dig at a prehistoric site in France. There she met Lewis Binford, a founder of the scientifically oriented New Archaeology movement, and later worked on his analyses of Paleolithic stone tools.

After graduating, Wiessner was introduced to the new field of ethnoarchaeology, the study of modern people to see how the archaeological record was created. She hooked up with John Yellen, now archaeology program director at the National Science Foundation, and helped him draw maps of Bushmen camps in Botswana, recording the spatial patterns of discarded animal bones.

These early experiences taught Wiessner that the present and the past were inextricably linked, a theme that would come to dominate her research career. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, she started out studying the stylistic differences among Late Stone Age stone tools called microliths

in Botswana. But after 2 weeks in the field, Wiessner says, “I realized this was probably the most boring project in the world. I was looking at variation in microliths when I should be looking at living people and the social processes that generate stylistic variation.”

Wiessner set about recording the stylistic variations among artifacts such as projectile points and beadwork that were produced by different groups of Bushmen, who in the 1970s still lived mostly by hunting and gathering. She traveled all over Botswana, usually alone. “She is a really tough cookie,” says Yellen.

Then months of heavy rains hit her field area. The rain knocked the nuts out of trees, triggered the growth of tall grasses that



Well connected. The late Chulo n!a, shown here in the 1970s, had 25 Bushmen gift-exchange partners across the Kalahari Desert.

choked off more edible plants, and dispersed the large antelopes that the Bushmen relied upon. “The people went through a period of extreme hunger,” recalls Wiessner. But the episode was a “turning point” in her research. The Bushmen were often too hungry to talk about style. So Wiessner, who by now had some competency speaking Ju/’hoansi, the Bushman language there, spent her time sitting around the camps and writing down what people were saying and doing.

She observed that the men and women were busy making objects, such as arrow-

heads, knives, beads, and clothing, and talking about loved ones far away and how much they missed them. Meanwhile, young men went off to areas up to 200 kilometers distant to see who was there and how well they were doing. Then, when the people were on the brink of starvation, they set off with their objects—which Wiessner soon realized were gifts—to visit other Bushmen camps. Thus Wiessner deciphered the gift-giving exchange that the Bushmen called *hxaro*, which ties Kalahari peoples together in far-flung social networks.

Between 1973 and 1975, Wiessner stayed in Botswana, tracking the *hxaro* networks. She found that adults had an average of about 16 stable partners in Bushmen camps near and far, some with more closely related

people such as first cousins but many with more distantly related kin. Her study formed the basis of her 1977 Ph.D. thesis, which is still widely cited for its potential insights into how prehistoric hunter-gatherers survived rapidly changing climates and environments. “The central question ... was how hunter-gatherers with no money in the bank, no grain in the larder, and no animals on the hoof deal with risk when the environment fails,” Wiessner says. Her findings had an immediate impact on anthropology, says Hrdy: “Polly showed not only how central such sharing and exchange systems were but also how strategic and innovative humans must have been in establishing and maintaining them.”

After the rains had subsided, Wiessner continued her work on style and found that the styles conveyed information about the social identities of various Bushmen groups. Archaeologists immediately leaped on her work for its potential applications in understanding stylistic variation in past cultures. “She saw the functions of style more clearly than anyone,” says archaeologist Iain Davidson of the University of New England in Armidale, Australia.

The engaged anthropologist

In 1981, Wiessner landed a job as a research associate at the Max Planck Institute for Human Ethology in Andechs, Germany, and in 1985, still on the Max Planck payroll, she moved to Enga province in the highlands of P.N.G., where her then-husband had been hired as a health administrator. Although she hadn’t planned to do research in P.N.G., Wiessner took advantage of her new circumstances to launch the next phase of her career:

a 10-year oral-history project, with P.N.G. colleagues and the elders of 110 Enga tribes, that covered seven generations of Enga history. Once again, Wiessner was engaged in a project that used past and present to inform each other. Wiessner and Tumu cross-correlated the oral histories among tribes going back hundreds of years. They were able to trace the cultural evolution of Enga exchange networks and social hierarchies as the people transitioned from hunting and gathering and subsistence agriculture to a society with agricultural surpluses. This shift was triggered about 350 years ago by the introduction of the sweet potato, which grows more easily in poor highland soils than taro, the previous staple crop. Surplus production fostered increased competition, the emergence of ceremonial exchange networks linking tens of thousands of people, and the rise of leaders who managed large amounts of wealth, including pigs, which thrived on sweet potatoes and could be given as gifts or exchanged.

The book that she and Tumu published in 1998, titled *Historical Vines*, is “one of the best case studies of cultural evolution in the literature,” says ecologist Peter Richerson of UC Davis.

In 1995, when its director retired, the Max Planck institute closed its doors.

Wiessner returned to the Kalahari, this time to Namibia, where social and political changes had forced the Bushmen into towns with few jobs and little means of livelihood. Wiessner teamed up with the late anthropologist and filmmaker John Marshall (anthropology.si.edu/johnmarshall) to both study and try to do something about the changes in land use and conservation policies that threatened the Bushmen’s survival. One result was the 2002 classic documentary film series *A Kalahari Family*, for which Wiessner, Brooks, and Yellen served as advisers. Since Marshall’s death in 2005, Wiessner has continued to advocate for the Bushmen.

“Polly made the well-being of the [Bushman] her priority as they made the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary rural workers and herders,” says anthropologist Nancy Howell of the University of Toronto in Canada. Wiessner has been “extremely generous with her time and money,” adds anthropologist Robert Hitchcock of Michigan State University in East Lansing. For example, she helped the Bushmen build protective struc-

tures for their waterholes so they wouldn’t be overrun by elephants. She also provided “connections to funding sources, technical assistance, and recommendations to the [Bushman] themselves and to the non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and international organizations working with them,” Hitchcock says.

In 1998, Wiessner returned to live in the United States for the first time in nearly 30 years, taking first a temporary and then a permanent position at the University of Utah. She continued to make regular visits to both Namibia and P.N.G. In Enga province, she turned her attention to one of the deadly consequences of social hierarchy: warfare. Tribal wars had plagued the region for hundreds of years, but when she first came to P.N.G., Wiessner says, these wars



Reparations. A Papua New Guinea clan avoids war over a recent murder with payment of cash and nearly 200 pigs.



were serious yet still largely contained. “In 1985, I would take my lunch, go up on a hillside, and watch. The wars were fought with bows and arrows and ... to reestablish power balances, not to wipe anyone out.” After two or three deaths, Wiessner says, “they would call an end to the fight and pigs would be exchanged.” That all changed when M-16s came to Enga and fell into the hands of what Wiessner calls “young Rambos” who were poor and had nothing to lose. Once guns arrived, up to 200 people could die in a war, “and you wouldn’t want to go near them.”

Wiessner began collecting data on the wars and shared it with tribal leaders and local magistrates eager to stop the escalating violence. When the Enga Tradition and Transition Center—which serves as a museum, meeting place, and repository for Enga’s cultural history—opened its doors last September, it was immediately pressed into service as a safe, neutral place where community leaders could come together. Tumu says Wiessner was the “driving force” behind the center. She personally funded

half the \$1.25 million price tag by selling land she owned in Vermont. (The Enga provincial government paid the other half.)

The latest data collected by Wiessner’s collaborators from Enga court records indicate that the total number of deaths from warfare has fallen over the past 4 years, accompanied by “a real change in attitude about how to deal with conflict,” she says.

Not all anthropologists embrace Wiessner’s highly engaged style; the field continues to debate just what the relationship between an anthropologist and his or her “subjects” should be. But Wiessner’s approach, some researchers say, fits a recent trend in anthropology. Setha Low, an anthropologist at City University of New York, says that over the past 20 years or so the field has been undergoing a transition from

a more detached to a more engaged attitude toward the peoples it studies. Low, who is coediting a special supplement of *Current Anthropology* on engaged anthropology scheduled for this fall, adds that “anthropology originally started out very engaged.” Thus early-20th-century researchers like Franz Boas and Margaret Mead were outspoken critics of racism and colonialism. But by the 1950s, a sharp increase in the number of

anthropologists based in the universities—where scientific objectivity was prized—and the rise of McCarthyism, which targeted many anthropologists considered activist and left-leaning, took a big toll on engaged anthropology. The field is now reverting to its engaged roots, Low says.

And Wiessner is confident that active collaborations with her subjects aids rather than hinders her research. “All the research I’ve done has been as part of a team. Many people feel this is something different than science. But if you are returning something to the people you work with, and working on their problems, you find out more and you go deeper.”

For many of her colleagues, Wiessner is the ideal of what an anthropologist should be. “She pioneered a new kind of collaborative research, where you don’t just use informants but you involve them in your research,” says Brooks. “She fulfills the dream of being a universal anthropologist, the kind we rarely see these days.”

—MICHAEL BALTER