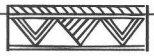
NISA



The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman

Marjorie Shostak

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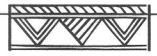
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Introduction

I lay there and felt the pains as they came, over and over again. Then I felt something wet, the beginning of the childbirth. I thought, "Eh hey, maybe it is the child." I got up, took a blanket and covered Tashay with it; he was still sleeping. Then I took another blanket and my smaller duiker skin covering and I left. Was I not the only one? The only other woman was Tashay's grandmother, and she was asleep in her hut. So, just as I was, I left.

I walked a short distance from the village and sat down beside a tree. I sat there and waited; she wasn't ready to be born. I lay down, but she still didn't come out. I sat up again. I leaned against the tree and began to feel the labor. The pains came over and over, again and again. It felt as though the baby was trying to jump right out! Then the pains stopped. I said, "Why doesn't it hurry up and come out? Why doesn't it come out so I can rest? What does it want inside me that it just stays in there? Won't God help me to have it come out quickly?"

As I said that, the baby started to be born. I thought, "I won't cry out. I'll just sit here. Look, it's already being born and I'll be fine." But it really hurt! I cried out, but only to myself. I thought, "Oh, I almost cried out in my in-laws' village." Then I thought, "Has my child already been born?" Because I wasn't really sure; I thought I might only have been sick. That's why I hadn't told anyone when I left the village.

After she was born, I sat there; I didn't know what to do. I had no sense. She lay there, moving her arms about, trying to suck on her fingers. She started to cry. I just sat there, looking at her. I thought, "Is this my child? Who gave birth to this child?" Then I thought, "A big thing like that? How could it possibly have come out from my genitals?" I sat there and looked at her, looked and looked and looked.

The cold started to grab me. I covered her with my duiker skin that had been covering my stomach and pulled the larger kaross over myself. Soon, the afterbirth came down and I buried it. I started to shiver. I just sat there, trembling with the cold. I still hadn't tied the umbilical cord. I looked at her and thought, "She's no longer crying. I'll leave her here and go to the village to bring back some coals for a fire."

I left her, covered with leather skins. (What did I know about how to do things?) I took a small skin covering, tied it around my stomach, and went back to the village. While I was on the way, she started to cry, then she stopped. I was rushing and was out of breath. Wasn't my genital area hurting? I told myself to run, but my judgment was gone; my senses had left me.

My heart was pounding and throbbing when I arrived. I sat down by the fire outside my hut to rest and to warm myself. Tashay woke up. He saw me with my little stomach, and he saw the blood on my legs. He asked how I was. I told him everything was all right. He asked, "Where is that which I thought I heard crying?" I told him the baby was lying covered where I had given birth. He asked if it was a boy. I said she was a girl. He said, "Oh! Does a little girl like you give birth to a baby all alone? There wasn't even another woman to help!"

He called to his grandmother, still asleep, and yelled, "What happened to you that you, a woman, stayed here while a little girl went out by herself to give birth? What if the childbirth had killed her? Would you have just left her there for her mother to help, her mother who isn't even here? You don't know that the pain of childbirth is fire and that a child's birth is like an anger so great that it sometimes kills? Yet, you didn't help! She's just a little girl. She could have been so afraid that the childbirth might have killed her or the child. You, an adult, what were you asking of her?"

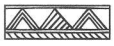
Just then, the baby started to cry. I was afraid that maybe a jackal had come and hurt her. I grabbed some burning wood and ran back to her. I made a fire and sat. Tashay continued to yell, "Find her. Go over there and cut the baby's umbilical cord. What happened to you that you let my wife give birth by herself?"

His grandmother got up and followed Tashay to where I was sitting with the baby. She arrived and called out softly to me, "My daughter-in-law . . . my daughter-in-law . . ." She talked to the infant and greeted her with lovely names. She cut her umbilical cord, picked her

up, and carried her as we all walked back to the village. Then they laid me down inside the hut.

The next day, my husband went gathering and came back with sha roots and mongongo nuts, which he cracked for me to eat. But my insides were still sore and I was in pain. He went out again and killed a springhare. When he came back, he cooked it and I drank the gravy. That was supposed to help the milk come into my breasts, but my milk didn't come down.

We lived in the bush and there was no one else to help feed her. She just lay there and didn't eat for three nights. Then milk started to fill one breast, and the same night the other one filled. I spilled out the colostrum, the bad thing, and when my chest filled with good milk, she nursed and nursed and nursed. When she was full, she went to sleep.



This story was told to me in the !Kung language by Nisa, an African woman of about fifty years of age, living in a remote corner of Botswana, on the northern fringe of the Kalahari desert. It was March 1971, the last month of my twenty-month field stay among the !Kung San, a people who had recently started to leave their traditional means of subsistence—gathering and hunting. But Nisa, her family, and the people she knew had spent most of their lives as their ancestors had before them—gathering wild plant foods and hunting wild animals in their semi-arid savannah environment.[1]

Gathering and hunting as a way of life has now almost disappeared, but it was the way people lived for nearly 90 percent of the estimated one hundred thousand years of human existence. Adding to this the evolutionary history of our prehuman ancestors would give a period of nearly three million years and a figure closer to 99 percent. Thus this form of human society has been a much more universal human experience than agriculture, which has been practiced for only about ten thousand years, or industrial manufacture, which has existed for only about two hundred years. The uniqueness of the human species was patterned—and the human personality was formed—in a gathering and hunting setting.

This should in no way suggest that the !Kung San or other contem-

porary gatherer-hunters are less modern as human beings than anyone else. People everywhere are, in a biological sense, fundamentally similar, and have been so for tens of thousands of years. Gatherer-hunters today exhibit the same range of emotional and intellectual potential as can be found in other human societies. What they represent is a way of life that succeeded; in terms of duration, at least, it is the most successful adaptation people have yet made to their environment.

Nisa is a member of one of the last remaining traditional gatherer-hunter societies, a group calling themselves the Zhun/twasi, "the real people," who currently live in isolated areas of Botswana, Angola, and Namibia. Referred to in the past as the Sonquas and in Botswana as the Basarwa, they are also known as the !Kung Bushmen, the !Kung San, or simply the !Kung. They are short—averaging about five feet in height—lean, muscular, and, for Africa, light-skinned. They have high cheekbones and rather Oriental-looking eyes. Along with their pastoral neighbors, the Khoi-Khoi, they are distinguished in these and other physical details from the Black African peoples immediately surrounding them, and are considered by population biologists to be part of a separate racial group called Khoisan. (It is from this term that the words currently used to refer to them are derived: "Khoi" for Hottentots; "San" for Bushmen. The terms "Hottentot" and "Bushmen," used for more than three hundred years, although more familiar, are also more derogatory.)

In 1963, Irven DeVore and Richard Lee, anthropologists from Harvard University, first made contact with Nisa's people, a traditional group of !Kung San in the Dobe area of northwestern Botswana.[2] They had in mind a long-term research expedition in which scientists representing a wide range of disciplines would carry out specialized studies of !Kung life. A composite picture would result, including information on health and nutrition, demography, archaeology, infant growth and development, childrearing practices, population genetics, the ritual healing ceremonies, folklore, and women's life cycles. In 1969, six years after the project began and very close to its end, my husband and I joined it and went to live and work with the !Kung.

Some of the findings from this expedition were available to me before I left for Africa. I welcomed the perspective they gave me on the !Kung and their way of life. But when I asked questions about what they were like as people and how they felt about their lives, I received answers so varied that they seemed to reflect as much the personalities

of the individual anthropologists as anything they had learned about the !Kung. No matter whom I talked to or what I read, I did not come away with a sense that I knew the !Kung: How did they feel about themselves, their childhoods, their parents? Did spouses love one another; did they feel jealousy; did love survive marriage? What were their dreams like and what did they make of them? Were they afraid of growing old? Of death? Most of all, I was interested in !Kung women's lives. What was it like being a woman in a culture so outwardly different from my own? What were the universals, if any, and how much would I be able to identify with?

My initial field trip took place at a time when traditional values concerning marriage and sexuality were being questioned in my own culture. The Women's Movement had just begun to gain momentum, urging re-examination of the roles Western women had traditionally assumed. I hoped the field trip might help me to clarify some of the issues the Movement had raised. !Kung women might be able to offer some answers; after all, they provided most of their families' food, yet cared for their children and were lifelong wives as well. Furthermore, their culture, unlike ours, was not being continuously disrupted by social and political factions telling them first that women were one way, then another. Although the !Kung were experiencing cultural change, it was still quite recent and subtle and had thus far left their traditional value system mostly intact. A study revealing what !Kung women's lives were like today might reflect what their lives had been like for generations, possibly even for thousands of years.

Upon arriving in the field, I did everything I could to understand !Kung life: I learned the language, went on gathering expeditions, followed along on hunts, ate bush foods exclusively for days at a time, lived in grass huts in !Kung villages, and sat around their fires listening to discussions, arguments, and stories. I gained an invaluable perspective, participating and watching. I was struck by their broad, subtle knowledge of their environment, by their skill in deciphering animal and human tracks in the sand and in detecting, among mats of dry, tangled vines, the ones that signaled water-storing roots below the ground. I observed their sharing of vegetable foods, meat, and material goods so that no one had substantially more than anyone else. I saw how disputes were defused by discussions that went on for hours, long into the night, in which all points of view were expressed until a consensus was reached. I listened to hunters recount the events of successful hunts, to

musicians sing and play their own and other people's compositions, and to storytellers cause body-shaking laughter in their hearers. I noticed in each presentation a modesty akin almost to bashfulness, and I learned that it was considered bad manners to brag or to act in an arrogant way. I sat at their medicine ceremonies and saw the community bound together in a powerful, moving ritual.

I was thrilled to have seen this much in only a few months in the field. Still, I did not feel I knew, except in the most general terms, what these events really meant to the !Kung. I could see, for example, how much they relied on one another and how closely they usually sat together, but I did not understand how they felt about their relationships and their lives. I needed information that could not be observed; I needed the !Kung to start speaking for themselves.

Talking to people and asking questions that encouraged them to talk openly to me became the focus of my fieldwork. Because my own inclination was toward learning about women's lives and because I generally found it easier to talk with them than with men, my work centered almost exclusively on women. I presented myself to them pretty much as I saw myself at the time: a girl-woman, recently married, struggling with the issues of love, marriage, sexuality, work, and identity—basically, with what womanhood meant to me. I asked the !Kung women what being a woman meant to them and what events had been important in their lives.

One woman—Nisa—impressed me more than the others with her ability to describe her experiences. I was struck by her gifts as a storyteller; she chose her words carefully, infused her stories with drama, and covered a wide range of experience. My hundreds of interviews with the !Kung had shown me that much of human emotional life was universal. Nisa's narrative, despite its foreignness, brought that knowledge deeper.

Walking into a traditional !Kung village, a visitor would be struck by how fragile it seemed beneath the expanse of sky and how unobtrusively it stood amid the tall grass and sparse tree growth of the surrounding bush. Glancing at the six or seven small grass huts, the visitor might notice how low they were, how closely one was set beside another, and the more or less circular space they described. The center, where children often play, would be clear of grass and shrubs, making it easier to notice snakes or snake tracks.

A visitor who arrived in the middle of the cold season—June and July—and just at sunrise would see mounds of blankets and animal skins in front of the huts, covering people still asleep beside their fires. Those who had already awakened would be stoking the coals, rebuilding the fire, and warming themselves in the chilly morning air. The morning would start slowly for most of them, a luxury made possible by the cool of the winter season. A visitor on another morning, in the hot, dry months of October and November, would find people moving about, even at dawn, up early to do a few hours of gathering or hunting before the midday heat would force them to rest in the thickest shade.

The Dobe area, on the edge of the Kalahari desert, falls into an ecosystem classified as semi-arid. The land, covered with grass, thorn and scrub brush, and spindly trees, has a flat appearance that disguises a variety of low hills, dunes, flats, and river beds. The rivers are active only about twice a decade. The mean elevation is about 3,300 feet above sea level, and temperatures vary from below freezing in winter to above 100°F in summer. The wet season lasts four to six months; annual rainfall varies from five to forty inches. Then comes a brief autumn (April and May), followed by a three-to-four-month winter with about six weeks of freezing and near-freezing night-time temperatures. Spring begins late in August and turns quickly into a hot dry summer in which temperatures hovering above 110°F are not uncommon.

The area was long sheltered from more than intermittent settlement by outsiders, Europeans and Bantu-speakers alike, by its lack of dependable sources of water, by a vast waterless zone between it and the nearest large population center, and by the general harshness of its environment. This environment must have supported gathering and hunting, however; archaeological excavations demonstrate the continuous occupation of the Dobe area by gathering and hunting people for more than eleven thousand years.

The !Kung are masters of survival in this environment, capable of responding to its ever-changing and often extreme demands. Adaptability is the key to their success. People live in semi-permanent villages, or camps, numbering from about ten to thirty individuals. Personal property must be minimal (the total weight of an average person's belongings is less than twenty-five pounds), because everything has to be carried when the band moves. The technology involved in the manufacture of tools and implements is relatively simple, and each household provides them for itself.

Whatever possessions do exist are owned exclusively by individuals, who are free to dispose of them as they wish. Most items are eventually given away and become part of a network of goods that are frequently exchanged. All !Kung participate in this reciprocal giving of gifts, but each person gives to and receives from only a few partners. Gift-giving is a fairly formal affair, and people remember clearly who gave what to whom and when. These exchange relationships, which may last a lifetime and may even be passed on to one's children, help to even out wealth differentials. An approximation of equality is thus achieved, aided by the daily sharing of food and meat. Generosity also ensures the reciprocal help of others in times of sickness or need.

Both family and village life take place out of doors. Huts are too small to contain much more human activity than sleeping. They are set only a few feet apart. A fire burns outside each doorway, in front of the hut, and the area around it is the effective living space for the hut's occupants—the nuclear family—and their visitors. All doors face inward toward a large communal space. The intensity of social life that this fosters seems deliberate, as space is abundant and privacy could easily be arranged. Except for an occasional tryst in the bush, however, privacy is not something most !Kung deem very important. Companionship is cherished and sought at most times.

Residence in a camp is fluid and subject to frequent change, from day to day and from month to month. At its center, however, each camp has a stable core of closely related older people who have proved successful in living and working together. This core may spend years, perhaps the majority of their adult lives, with one another. They share food and material goods, and they travel together while foraging over an area they have access to by tradition. Spacious, yet essentially circumscribed, this region of approximately 250 square miles is generally acknowledged as being "owned" by some male or female descendant of the people who have lived longest in an area, although this association rarely goes back much further than a few generations. Access to land is collective and nonexclusive and, like so much else in !Kung life, flexible: most people live as visitors or residents in a number of different areas during their lives, and establishing short-term residence at one water hole does not jeopardize one's claim to residence at another. Visitors—perhaps from an area with a temporary food shortage—are expected to ask permission of the "owners" before making use of an area's water, game, and

vegetable foods. Accepting this favor, however, brings with it an obligation to reciprocate if the occasion arises.

Little in the way of special privilege is gained by ownership, because virtually all members in a band are directly or indirectly related to a core member and thus have free access to the area's resources. A senior descendant coming from a long line of owners may assume a position of dominance, but only if he or she also shows personal leadership qualities. In general the !Kung do not have status hierarchies or legitimized authorities, such as chiefs or headmen. Group decisions are reached through consensus. Although a small number of men and women do function as leaders, their influence is derived primarily from having earned the respect of others, and is essentially informal.

Traditional !Kung groups are economically self-sufficient (except for iron, which is acquired by trade). Children, adolescents under fifteen, and adults over sixty contribute little to the quest for food, and others gather or hunt only about two or three days a week. Additional time is spent in housework, cooking and serving food, child care, and the making and repairing of tools, clothing, and huts. But this still leaves substantial time for leisure activities, including singing and composing songs, playing musical instruments, sewing intricate bead designs, telling stories, playing games, visiting, or just lying around and resting.

The central ritual event in traditional !Kung life is the medicinal trance dance, in which all members of a band participate. Healers enter trance and ritually draw illness out of a sick person's body. Other group members support their efforts with singing, clapping, and dancing. The dance takes place anywhere from a few times a month to several times a week and is grounded in a very old tradition—so old that its origins are beyond speculation, even among the oldest living !Kung. Its long history is confirmed by scenes depicted in rock paintings, by dance circles etched in rock, by archaeological findings, and by the occurrence of dances similar in form, content, and musical style in San groups that speak languages other than !Kung and live several hundred miles away.

Travel—whether in search of food or to visit relatives in distant villages—is usually concentrated during or just after the rainy season, when water is widely available throughout the savannah and food resources are varied and abundant. Travel ceases by nightfall, when living areas are hastily cleared of shrubs and grass, minimal shelters are erected, and huge fires are stoked to establish dominion over the bush

and the night. If the group plans to stay, the grass shelters may be made more substantial, especially if the downpours and lightning storms of the rainy season are expected. After a few weeks in one place, however, the group will have depleted the major food resources in the area and will move on. Only if a large animal has been shot will they stay longer, and even then they will move to the site of the kill.

As temporary pools and semipermanent springs dry up, people start moving back toward permanent water, to build new camps for their winter residence. For a while, water trapped in the recesses of large trees may make bush travel possible, but as the temperature and the humidity fall—a signal that winter has arrived and the rains are long over—the only available water may be that squeezed from heavy water roots dug from deep within the sand, or from melons distributed throughout the area. When the nights become bitterly cold and the days cloudless and windy, most bands will settle in for a three-to-five-month stay around one of the permanent springs. The large aggregations of people that result—sometimes more than two hundred—intensify the ritual life of the community as well as the social life of individuals. Trance dances occur more frequently (up to two or three times a week), initiation ceremonies requiring a large number of boys of similar age are performed, gifts are given and reciprocated, and marriages are arranged.

With so many people depending on one set of concentrated resources, tension is inevitable, especially as the distances required to find food increase and the approaching hot, dry season makes travel difficult and unpleasant. Add to this the conflicts that always increase when large numbers of people gather in a small area, and the result is that a greater number of fights occur in these camps. Passionate and explosive, most are resolved quickly and without serious incident. (Before 1948, however, when a Bantu headman was officially appointed to administer Tswana customary law in the Dobe area, significant numbers of fights led to death from poisoned arrows.) By the time the rains finally come, scattering the dry landscape with temporary oases again, the composition of the small groups that leave to forage on their own may have changed, as some members may have left and others joined.

The day-to-day organization of subsistence is as complex as the seasonal round. !Kung women contribute the majority (from 60 to 80 percent by weight) of the total food consumed. Averaging little more than two days a week in the quest for food, they gather from among 105

species of wild plant foods, including nuts, beans, bulbs and roots, leafy greens, tree resin, berries, and an assortment of other vegetables and fruits. They also collect honey from beehives, and occasionally small mammals, tortoises, snakes, caterpillars, insects, and birds' eggs. Intact ostrich eggs are sought both for their nutritional value—equivalent to about two dozen hens' eggs—and for their shells. After the egg is extracted through a hole bored in one end, the shell makes an excellent container for carrying or storing water. Broken eggshells found at old nesting sites are fashioned into beads, to be strung or sewn into necklaces, headbands, and aprons.

The staple of !Kung nutrition is the abundant mongongo (or mangetti) nut, which constitutes more than half of the vegetable diet. It is prized both for its inner kernel and for its sweet outer fruit. Other important plant foods are baobab fruits, marula nuts, sour plums, tsama melons, tsin beans, water roots, and a variety of berries. Most women share what they bring home, but there are no formal rules for distribution of gathered foods and those with large families may have little left over to give others.

Although food resources are located at variable distances from the villages, they are fairly reliable. Groups of about three to five women leave, usually early in the morning, and head for an agreed-upon area. They proceed at a leisurely pace, filling their karosses with a variety of foods as they travel, and return to camp by mid-to-late afternoon. After a brief rest, they sort their piles of food, setting some aside to be given as gifts. Most of the food is distributed and consumed within forty-eight hours.

!Kung women also care for children and perform a variety of daily domestic chores. They average close to four hours a day in maintaining their subsistence tools and in housework: fetching water, collecting firewood, maintaining fires, making huts (frame and thatching), arranging bedding, and preparing and serving food (including cracking nuts for themselves and their young children). Men average three hours a day in making and repairing tools and in domestic work: they chop trees for fires and for building huts, help collect firewood, and butcher, prepare, and serve meat. Devoted and loving fathers, they also participate in child care, though their contribution, in terms of time spent, is minor.

Women's status in the community is high and their influence considerable. They are often prominent in major family and band decisions,

such as where and when to move and whom their children will marry. Many also share core leadership in a band and ownership of water holes and foraging areas. Just how influential they really are and how their status compares with that of men is a complicated question: women may, in fact, be nearly equal to men, but the culture seems to *define* them as less powerful. In other words, their influence may be greater than the !Kung—of either sex—like to admit.

Men's principal food contribution is hunted meat, which is very highly valued—perhaps because it is so unpredictable—and which, when brought into the village, is often the cause of great excitement, even dancing. Men average slightly less than three days a week in hunting. They, too, leave early in the morning, alone or in pairs, and usually return by sunset, although overnight stays are possible. Although accomplished hunters, they only succeed about one day in every four that they hunt. Game is sparsely distributed in the northern Kalahari—a marked contrast to the herds of thousands of animals in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve farther south—and has become scarcer over the last fifty years.

Bows, arrows, and spears of minimal size and weight make up the basic hunting kit, along with a variety of bags and implements. But the hunters depend most on a lethal poison extracted from beetle larvae. It is so potent that an antelope, or even a giraffe, is likely to die within a day of being struck with a well-placed arrow. Harmless to people ingesting the meat, the poison works on the animal's central nervous system; it becomes harmful only when it enters an animal's—or a person's—bloodstream. In the village, poisoned arrows are stored in closed quivers hung out of the way of adults and the reach of children. For additional safety, poison is applied only to the shaft, not to the sharp arrow point, to avoid poisoning from accidental cuts. The arrows are periodically checked and fresh poison applied.

Unlike women, who maintain a fairly constant gathering routine, men rarely adhere to strict hunting schedules. They often hunt intensively for a few weeks, then follow with a period of inactivity. Because success in the hunt is so variable, meat accounts for only 20 to 40 percent of the !Kung diet, depending on the time of year and the number of hunters residing in a camp.

Men are as knowledgeable as women in plant lore, but they collect plants only infrequently and account for about 20 percent of all food gathered. Their primary contribution to subsistence is in the animals

they hunt. Most prominent are the large game animals (kudu, wildebeest, gemsbok, eland, roan antelope, hartebeest, and giraffe) and the smaller ones (warthog, steenbok, duiker, and hares). Men also collect reptiles (snakes and tortoises), amphibians, and insects, trap hole-dwelling animals (porcupine, antbear, springhare, and anteater), and snare birds (guinea fowl, francolin, kori and korhaan bustards, sandgrouse, and doves). Honey, a great favorite, is extracted from beehives, often with the help of women. Distribution of all but the smallest game is tied to more formal rules than is the case for gathered foods, but the result is similar.

Perhaps because of the limitations of their hunting methods, the !Kung kill only what they need and use every part of the animal. Bones and hooves are cracked for marrow; skins are either eaten or tanned for blankets; sinew is made into thread or strung on a hunting bow. Even the tails of some animals are used: the hair may become the strings of a musical instrument or be braided into a bracelet, or the entire tail may be carried as a spiritual object in a medicinal trance dance.

Food is rarely stored for any length of time. The environment can be depended on to act as a kind of natural storehouse, with food being gathered only when needed. There are occasional scarcities in some of the important wild vegetable foods, but rarely has there been a shortage in the mongongo nut, which is so well adapted to the Dobe area that even in most years of drought hundreds of thousands of nuts are left on the ground to rot.

Dietary quality is excellent. Richard Lee studied the !Kung diet in 1968 and found their average intake of calories and protein to exceed the United Nations recommendations for people of their size and stature. Their diet is extremely low in salt, saturated fats, and carbohydrates, particularly sugar, and high in polyunsaturated oils, roughage, and vitamins and minerals. In fact, it conforms to most contemporary ideas of good nutrition. The dry season of 1968 was one of the most severe droughts in southern Africa in recent history; thus it is likely that the !Kung diet is even better in normal years. (More recent studies have indicated that during the dry season many !Kung lose weight, suggesting an insufficient calorie intake. They usually regain the weight, however, when the dry season is over. Whatever the actual deficit during this period, the diet remains wide-ranging and high in nutrients.)

Their diet, along with their relaxed pace of life, seems to have protected the !Kung from some of the diseases common in our society: they

do not suffer from high blood pressure, hypertensive heart disease or atherosclerosis, hearing loss or senility, varicose veins, or stress-related diseases such as ulcers or colitis.

This does not mean that !Kung health is, in general, good. It is not: nearly 50 percent of children die before the age of fifteen; 20 percent die in their first year, mostly from gastrointestinal infections. Life expectancy at birth is only thirty years, while the average life expectancy at age fifteen is fifty-five. One reason that the illnesses we associate with aging seem to have little impact on them is that only 10 percent of the population is over sixty years old—the age at which they would begin to be more vulnerable to such illnesses. Respiratory infections and malaria are major killers of adults. !Kung health nevertheless compares favorably with that of many nonindustrial societies, and of our own society before the advent of modern public health and medicines.

Given the circumstances the !Kung face, they have been remarkably successful. They survive—even thrive—in an environment that is hospitable only to those who know it intimately. Their traditions, distilled from thousands of years of experience, have been passed on through hundreds of generations. There is neither memory nor legend regarding a time when, for example, the poison they use on their arrows, or their trance ritual, did not exist. They know nearly five hundred species of plants and animals: which are edible, and which have medicinal, toxic, cosmetic, or various other uses. Their skill in exploiting their environment allows them free time in which to concentrate on family ties, social life, and spiritual development. Their life is rich in human warmth and aesthetic experience and offers an enviable balance of work and love, ritual and play.

The !Kung are not exceptional among gathering and hunting peoples. According to scientists who have compared the social and economic organization in different groups of contemporary gatherer-hunters, these societies have more in common with each other than with their agricultural, pastoral, and industrial neighbors. Wherever it is practiced, whatever the climate, whatever the terrain, there is an undeniable "master plan" in contemporary gatherer-hunter life. The best explanation for the similarities among these groups is that within the gathering and hunting mode, there is a limited set of alternatives to choose from. Any group of people who had to live off the land would face similar ecological problems and would probably invent a roughly similar system. It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that this pattern—

or more properly, this range of patterns—prevailed in most human societies before the agricultural revolution and during much of the course of human evolution.

But what relevance does all this have for us? What do we gain from knowing about our gathering and hunting past? Most important, perhaps, is the knowledge that the gatherer-hunter legacy is a rich one. Life for our prehistoric ancestors was not characterized by constant deprivation, but rather by usually adequate food and nutrition, modest work effort, fair amounts of leisure, and sharing of resources, with both women and men contributing substantially to the family, the economy, and the social world. Today, gatherers and hunters, the !Kung included, live in the most marginal areas, whereas prehistoric gatherers and hunters occupied areas abundant with water, plant food, and game. If there is any bias in the data from modern-day gatherer-hunters, therefore, it probably leads to an underestimate of the quality of life of their—and our—predecessors.

My first months in the field were spent adjusting to Kalahari life, trying to fit in with three other anthropologists living there, and studying the !Kung language. Books of !Kung grammar and vocabulary did not exist, nor did the people themselves read or write. At the outset, I received help from the anthropologists, who described the basics of the language. There were four different click sounds and two throat sounds, all fairly easy to master with practice. But many words that sounded the same to our Western ears were actually distinguished by the use of four or more different tones—a dimension of speech that was difficult to hear, let alone to master. I learned two important phrases: "What is the name for that?" and "When I do this, what is it called?" Using these two questions, combined with some obvious gestures, I was able to elicit a large vocabulary in a few weeks. But the other anthropologists were scheduled to leave shortly and were busily completing their research. They generously answered my questions, but I was uncomfortable taking up their time and tried, as much as I could, to proceed on my own.

Within the first month I hired two !Kung men to sit with me while I pointed, pantomimed, and repeatedly asked my two questions: "What is the name for that?" and "When I do this, what is it called?" I struggled to write down the answers, which bore no relation to any sounds I had ever heard before. I adopted the standard orthography for writing

the clicks: / = dental (the sound that is written in English as "tsk, tsk"); ≠ = alveolar (the clicking sound we sometimes make while tasting something); ! = alveolar-palatal (a pop of the tip of the tongue off the roof of the mouth); and // = lateral (like the click made after saying "giddyap" to a horse). The rest of the vowels and consonants I approximated using the English alphabet.

By the time three months had passed, the !Kung sounds had become a little less strange, the clicks, glottal stops, and fricatives a little more manageable, and I could finally hear the tones (although it took close to twenty months before I started using them correctly). Polite formalities could now be exchanged: "How are you this morning, my niece?" "Why I'm fine, my uncle."

But more was required than finding the !Kung equivalents for English words; it was, of course, necessary to say them correctly, at the appropriate times, and in the culturally accepted manner. My first attempts were awkward and embarrassing. By the time I had lived there six months, however, I was more at ease with the language and occasionally succeeded in asking questions that elicited personal responses. At that point, I started to "interview" anyone who was friendly and willing, trying various ways to ask them about the things they perceived as important in their lives. I questioned them about marriage in general and their marriages in particular. I talked with pregnant women about their pregnancies and their thoughts about having children. I asked women in polygamous marriages how it felt to share a husband with another woman. These talks pointed me in the right direction, but they did not prove as successful as I had hoped. I still needed too many repetitions, and my vocabulary was still too limited to circumvent impersonal, generalized answers. My project demanded a richer and more subtle mastery of the language.

I kept talking, and my language ability steadily improved. During my tenth month there, I had a breakthrough: after weeks of friendly, informal talks with a woman named Bau, she started to confide in me. She told me about things other people had only hinted at, and she told me about her own life. Sexual play was common, she said, even among young children. She told me which children in the village were "coupled" and the kind of sex play they probably engaged in. She said that many people had extramarital affairs, and she told me which men and women in her village were involved with each other. She said that in the past a woman with an unwanted pregnancy would drink herbal

medicines that made her menstrual flow return, that "ruined her insides," producing an abortion without affecting her ability to conceive again. She also said that women of her grandmother's generation had occasionally practiced infanticide, but that it was no longer done: the Tswana government prohibited it and there would be severe punishment if it were discovered.

Miraculously, it seemed, Bau talked freely about things I had wanted to hear, but hadn't, until then. We talked seven times over a period of two weeks; I took notes on all that I understood. She explained how children eventually became aware of their parents' sexual intercourse—conducted discreetly at night in the same one-room hut. That was how children got their ideas for sexual play. At first they played that way with friends and sometimes even with their brothers or sisters. As they grew older, they stopped playing with their siblings and played only with children of the opposite sex. She herself had played "house" when she was a child, and she remembered a time when two playmates had been discovered having "sex" under the blankets.

Becoming even more personal, she told about a recent dream in which she and another woman yelled insults at each other. They started to fight and bit and scratched each other's faces. Other women pulled them apart. The woman in the dream reminded Bau of someone her husband had once had an affair with. He had told Bau about it—a grave insult: "Men don't tell their wives about affairs, they just have them." Later she had had a romance of her own. Once she spent a few nights in the mongongo nut groves with her lover while her husband was away. Someone saw them leave and told her husband, who later beat her until "I was almost dead." She stopped seeing her lover after that, and since then had been afraid to have affairs.

Winning Bau's trust had been the first step; trying to understand what her confidences meant came next. I knew enough not to assume that what she told me was necessarily true. Informants often told anthropologists what they thought they wanted to hear. Some even told outright lies—for concealment, from indifference, or just for amusement. It was also possible that the way Bau talked was governed by cultural forms that I didn't know, but which she assumed I understood. Perhaps in interpreting it all literally I was missing the real meaning of her words.

Not knowing the answers, I only hoped that Bau hadn't been lying. I tried to assess how likely that was, considering all I knew about her.

She was quiet and reserved and did not constantly seek me out. Only after weeks of talking together had she started to confide in me. She was fair to the people she talked about. She didn't gossip unnecessarily. When she said "Some women have lovers," she mentioned the names of hers and the complications that followed. All in all, I felt quite certain that she had told me what she believed to be true. If so, then, whatever her personal biases, I now had a base from which to explore further. Naturally, I would ask other people similar questions in order to determine the overall validity of Bau's confidences, but she had given me something to go on.

From then until I left the field ten months later, I proceeded in just that way: interviewing people and asking them about their lives. After some trial and error, I settled on a standard approach that was an outgrowth of my talks with Bau. The main difference was that I was now more certain of what I was after and more confident that it would be possible to get.

My technique was straightforward: I would ask someone to "enter work" with me (a !Kung expression), and over the course of about two weeks we would sit together and talk for an hour or more a day. The conversations were taped; recordings could capture the kinds of subtle details invariably missed by note-taking, and would reveal how stories were developed and expressed.

I did not select my subjects completely objectively—that is, by random or strictly representative selection. After interviewing two men, I saw that I could not achieve nearly the same degree of intimacy with them as I could with women. The women I chose were those with whom I felt I could establish good rapport, and who represented a wide range in !Kung conditions of life. I interviewed eight women in addition to Nisa, ranging in age from fourteen to seventy. The fourteen-year-old was unmarried, premenstrual, and living with her parents. The seventy-year-old was the mother of a large extended family and an "owner" of a resource area; she lived with her husband and her sister who, when widowed a few years earlier, had been taken on as a co-wife. The others were a dynamic twenty-two-year-old mother of a little girl, who had married for love; a gifted, barren woman in her early thirties who was married to a Tswana man and having serious marital difficulties; a recent widow in her late thirties, a trance healer, who lived alone with her five-year-old son and near her married daughter; two

other women in their thirties—in some sense the ideal !Kung women—who were in stable marriages with several children each; and a reserved, barren woman in her forties, married to a respected healer. These women were fairly representative of the range of life circumstances of !Kung women in the Dobe area in the 1960s and 1970s.

All the women I approached were eager to participate, partly for the payment I offered and partly, it seemed, for the opportunity to talk about themselves. At the outset, I told each woman that I wanted to spend a number of days talking with her about her life. I explained that I wanted to learn what it meant to be a woman in their culture so I could better understand what it meant in my own. With older women, I went further, presenting myself as a child in need of help in preparing for what life might yet have to offer. In all cases, the women were talking specifically to me, as a person and as a woman.

I also mentioned some of the topics I hoped to cover: memories of childhood; feelings about parents, siblings, relatives, and friends; adolescence and experiences with other children; dreams; marriage; the birth of children; childhood sex and adult sex; relationships with husbands and lovers; feelings about death; thoughts about the future; and anything else they felt was important in their lives. I made it clear that everything would be confidential as long as I was there and if and when I returned to the region. I told them I would, however, share the material with people in my own country, so that they could learn about !Kung women's lives.

I encouraged the women to initiate conversations, since the way one memory led to another seemed to be of potential importance. I interrupted as little as possible, primarily to ask for clarifications. I also asked for expansion of topics that seemed to have been covered too briefly. If a woman found it difficult to sustain a topic or to start a new one, I suggested alternatives. With some women I had to direct each interview, while others, once they understood the process, needed little assistance.

The women often expressed their pleasure in working with me. They were proud that they had been chosen to teach me about things that were obvious to them yet were so fascinating to me. These things, they said, would never have been discussed with a man, because "men have their talk and women theirs." They became silent whenever a man walked near the hut we were working in. It would be in a low and ex-

cited voice that a woman first mentioned a lover's name, or discussed an early sexual experience, or talked of the time she went from the village, alone, to give birth to her child.

Talking about experiences and telling stories is a main source of aesthetic pleasure for the !Kung. With no written expression, people sit together and talk, often for hours. While hunts or gathering expeditions are being recounted, speakers may gesture broadly, suddenly raise or lower their voices, or imitate the sounds or physical movements of animals, birds, or insects. Elements of the best stories are repeated again and again, with frequent exaggeration and hyperbole. The drama and excitement accompanying the telling of stories elicit almost continual comments from the audience as everyone is drawn into the experience. As with any skill, some people are more proficient at such narration than others. Among the women I interviewed, Nisa stood out. She had an exceptional ability to tell a story in a way that was generous, vibrant, and moving. Her sensitivity and skill made her stories larger and more important than the details they comprised. Sometimes they captured the most subtle and profound experiences in human life; sometimes they revealed a confused human entanglement that was all too recognizable. This was the value that her narrative had for me, and the reason it became so compelling.

I don't remember the first time I met Nisa. Perhaps she had stopped at our camp to ask for tobacco—just one of many who came, each with a special request. But the first time she made an impression on me was two weeks after my talks with Bau ended, the halfway mark in my twenty-month field stay. My husband and I had set up camp for a week near Gausha, an area where a number of !Kung and other villages were situated, and where Nisa lived.

By the time we arrived at Gausha, from Goshi, where we had our main camp, it had long since been dark. We drove the Land Rover past one !Kung village and stopped at a deserted village site farther down the road. The full moon, high in the sky, appeared small and gave off a cold light. Shadows extended from the shrubs and dried thorn bushes momentarily caught in the truck's beams; then the lights of the Land Rover were turned off.

Kxoma and Tuma, two !Kung men traveling with us, suggested we make our camp at this site where Richard Lee and Nancy Howell, other anthropologists, had set their camp four years earlier. Living

where someone had lived before was right, they said; it connected you to the past. The slender stick shell of Richard and Nancy's hut was still there. It stood out in the moonlight, a bizarre skeleton set apart from the surrounding bush. Long branches, taken from nearby trees, described a six-foot circle at the base; at the top they were bent toward the middle and tied with strips from the leaf of a fibrous plant: a traditional !Kung frame. The grass had long since been taken and used in Nisa's village. As it stood, the hut offered no protection from the weather, nor any privacy.

Tuma started a fire with dead wood he found nearby. From one of the five-gallon gerry cans we always carried in the Land Rover, he poured water into a kettle and put it on the fire. We didn't expect anyone from the villages. The people must have heard the truck as we passed by and the sudden quiet when the engine sounds stopped. But it was too late for visiting. They knew us by then: we would still be there in the morning. Then they would find out what we planned to do and how long we would stay. The !Kung would ask for medicine and tobacco, and their cattle-herding neighbors, the Herero, would be by with their requests.

The four of us worked slowly taking the blankets and tents from the truck. Kxoma and Tuma set up their tent beneath a small shade tree; my husband hung our own tent over the frame of Richard and Nancy's hut. I untied the bedding, and shook the sand from the blankets before laying them down. I thought of the time Nancy had found a puff adder in her sleeping bag. I lay down on the newly made bed, slid my hands over the blankets to feel for thorn branches and dried cow dung under the canvas, and then removed them. We had been determined to travel light this time, like the !Kung, and were without our mattresses and pillows.

I joined the men by the fire and drank the freshly brewed, chicory-flavored coffee. I was always amazed how quickly a new place felt less strange: a fire, blankets, and coffee seemed enough. Tired, I sat enjoying the moments of quiet, unpressured time, which had become surprisingly rare. People's voices rose from the nearby villages, laughing or shouting; it was comforting to know they were there. I felt pleasantly drowsy and lay down on my jacket, lulled by the voices and by the fire.

Moving was always exhausting. There were so many things to organize before we even began to pack the truck: gasoline, water and food, notebooks, observation sheets, cameras, tape recorders, lanterns, tents,

blankets, clothing, and more. Tension built up and everyone felt it—the people working for us, my husband, myself, and the people whose village we had left that day. It invariably was like that—the longer we stayed in one place, the more people began to depend on us: for tobacco, for medicine, for trade, or just for the interest we created wherever we went—and the more we became a reason for people to stay around, sometimes longer than they would otherwise have done. When we did leave, it was disrupting to their lives, especially at Goshi where we spent much of our time. That day it was very late when we finally left.

Our coffee almost finished, we talked about going to bed. Then we heard people coming. They were only two: Nisa and her husband, Bo. Nisa wore an old blanket loosely draped over the remnants of a faded, flower-print dress, sizes too big; Bo was wearing a pair of shorts, even the patches of which were worn through in places. They greeted us and sat down by the fire, where I could see them better. Both were close to fifty years old. Bo moved slowly, spoke softly and deliberately, with energy and intelligence emanating from his eyes. Nisa was all activity: constantly in motion, her face expressive, she spoke fast and was at once strong and surprisingly coquettish.

No sooner had they settled than Bo, using my husband's !Kung name, said, "Hey, Tashay, give me some tobacco. Tobacco hunger has killed me! Don't you see I'm already dead because of it?" I thought he was about to answer, "Wait until morning. This is our time now. Asking-for-things has killed *us* today." But he didn't. It was too late to argue, and there were only the two of them. Sometimes we found it easier to give whatever was asked for, until the constant demands became too much. Then we fought back and argued, knowing it might be easier if we didn't. It was fine if we argued in the same spirit they did—half-seriously, half just as a way of making contact. But sometimes we couldn't, and the insults thrown at us hurt: "You're rich but stingy"; "You could help, but you refuse."

My husband got up, opened the rear door of the Land Rover, and came back with some crushed-leaf tobacco. He gave it to Bo and Nisa, saying he would give them more in the morning. That was when we would give it to the rest of the !Kung with whom we planned to work. My husband was studying mother-infant relationships and infant mental and physical growth, and I was hoping to find women who would

talk to me about the properties of medicinal roots. Bau had discussed several that supposedly affected fertility, abortion, and miscarriage.

Bo filled an old wooden pipe, one he must have received in trade, with only the bowl section intact. (The mouthpiece is rarely used, even on new pipes.) He opened a small, worn, cloth pouch where he had put the tobacco and filled the bowl. He lit the pipe and inhaled deeply four or five times, trying to hold as much smoke as he could, puffing his cheeks and holding his breath with each inhalation. With the exhalation, he turned, spat in the sand, and handed the pipe to Nisa. She smoked the same way and gave it to Kxoma and Tuma, who each did the same. Kxoma passed what was left of his sweet coffee to Nisa and Bo and together they finished it.

The four of them were talking, exchanging news of their villages. Our presence seemed to have become a matter of indifference to them, and I stopped straining to understand their words. I felt sleepy; the sound of their voices gradually became a meaningless but pleasant hum. Then I became aware that Nisa was calling my !Kung name, talking to me: "Hwantla . . . Hwantla . . . what news is there of my wonderful friends Richard and Nancy? I really liked them! They liked us, too—they gave us beautiful presents and took us everywhere with them. Bo and I worked hard for them, because we are not afraid of work. That's how it was with the four of us. Yes, Nancy and Richard . . . Oh! How I wish they were here!"

She continued to talk about events of four years before, when Richard and Nancy had periodically lived at Gausha. As Nisa spoke I thought, as I did quite often, about some of the difficulties we had had adjusting over the last ten months. We had come near the end of a long line of anthropologists working in these remote villages. Richard had been followed by six others, each of whom had lived there for about two years.

Coming at the end gave us certain advantages. We were taken to Goshi by a colleague we had previously met, and the !Kung were prepared for our arrival. Information collected by our predecessors was available to us, including identifications of the people, their family histories, and records of births, deaths, and marriages spanning the time the others had been there. With so much known before we arrived, we were able to direct our energies to the aspects of !Kung life that most interested us.

But as time passed we became aware that we had also inherited serious problems. The !Kung had been observing anthropologists for almost six years and had learned quite a bit about them. Precedents had been set that the !Kung expected us to follow. That was difficult, because we were critical of much that we saw: a separate elaborate anthropologists' camp, tobacco handouts, payment for labor and crafts in money, and occasional excursions by truck to the nut groves. Determined to do things our own way, we packed away our inherited tent and moved into a !Kung-style grass hut in a !Kung village.

Once we were on our own, our romanticism was attacked by the !Kung themselves. They wanted us to give them jobs as the others had; they wanted money; they wanted to stop relying on their traditional way of life, which was becoming impossible to sustain.

With money, they said, they could buy goats, clothing, and blankets. They wanted seed to plant crops, to have fields just as the Herero and Tswana had. And they wanted tobacco: "Without tobacco, you wake up and walk around all day with only half your heart and don't know when the sun rises or sets." They didn't care, or even believe us, when we said that tobacco was bad for their health. They argued that without our help they would have to beg it from their Herero neighbors and would feel demeaned. They argued further that we should give them something that made life more enjoyable. After all, they cooperated with us, letting us intrude into their lives; we, in turn, should give them something that we could easily get and they badly wanted.[3]

We weren't convinced, at least not yet. We did not feel justified in yielding to the pressure to give out tobacco or in paying cash or having people work for us. There were too many unanswered questions. Money had no place in their traditional economy and had only come to the area recently; what would be the long-range effects of giving it to some individuals but not to all? If we hired men and women to work for us, how would this affect the amount of hunting and gathering they did, or the attitudes of their sons and daughters toward the skills of the bush? If we encouraged the planting of crops, what would happen when limited rainfall resulted in no harvest?

Perhaps the most important consideration was that after our work was completed we would leave, like the other anthropologists before us. Then what? Would the people be willing to accept the low-paid work offered by the cattle-herders? If not, would they return to full-time hunting and gathering? If they did, could they still make it work?



The influx of the Bantu-speakers, bringing both herds of animals and awareness of the outside world, made change inevitable. But how could we as anthropologists justify a short-term input of goods and money? If we yielded to the pressure wouldn't we be behaving irresponsibly?

A confrontation seemed inevitable, and when it came it focused on tobacco. We had begun refusing it to anyone living outside the villages in which we lived or worked at any given time. We hoped eventually to stop supplying it altogether. One morning when my husband drove the truck, loaded with empty water drums, five miles to the permanent well where we drew water, he found a mound of thorn branches barring his passage. The people from a nearby village soon appeared: "Do you expect to draw water where you refuse people tobacco?" They eventually let him through (it was illegal to stop someone from using a well for drinking water), but we realized that we could not ignore such strong protests. The !Kung demanded a relationship on their terms, not ours. Eventually we accepted those terms, as our colleagues had urged us to do months before. Our tobacco handouts became more generous, and we no longer refused tobacco to visitors in the village where we were working.

Later we also acknowledged the responsibility we would continue to have after we left, a responsibility to work with the San in their struggle to determine their future. But as we sat around the fire with Nisa and Bo we had no sense of how we would carry out our obligation. At that time we were still grappling with the question of whether we should practice strict noninterference in the !Kung way of life.

Nisa's praise of Richard and Nancy reminded me of these painful adjustments. Had they really managed better? Had their relationship with Bo and Nisa been as easy as Nisa described it? Nisa's talk whetted my curiosity. Fully awake now, I asked her to tell me more.

"Nancy and Richard? They were the best! Nancy, I greet you! Nancy, hello! Why, she and Richard gave us whatever we wanted: clothes, food and money, all sorts of things. They never refused us anything! Nancy, how I loved her! She was the best white person here. Write and tell her I said so. Ask her for some cloth and money, too. Everyone was stingy compared to her. She was different. She wasn't a European, she was a !Kung! Oh, I would like her to be here right now. She really looked after me."

I felt a familiar despair. What had I expected her to tell me? About the conflicts? About the numerous requests Richard and Nancy had re-

fused? About the times Nancy had told Nisa to come back later? No, I knew what it had been like; I didn't have to ask. The !Kung had treated Nancy and Richard the same way they treated us.

As Nisa continued to talk, her voice began to strike me as unpleasant. I hoped that if I didn't say anything more she would stop, and soon she did. She turned to Kxoma, Tuma, and her husband and rejoined their conversation. It was very late by now. Nisa and Bo had smoked, had drunk the sugar-saturated coffee, and had exchanged news. It was time for them to go. As they walked away, I felt relieved.

We stayed at Gausha a week that time. Every day Nisa visited our camp, and every day she reminded me how much Nancy and Richard had done for her. She arrived in the morning, sat around, watched the confusion our presence always generated, and talked to the people who waited for medicine or tobacco. Her three-year-old niece was always with her, and they would play and laugh together. After the first day, I started to dread these times. Her voice was loud, sharp, somewhat frantic, and constantly seeking attention, and it seemed never to stop. Whenever she had my attention (and often even when she didn't), she talked about Nancy and Richard. My dread soon turned to dislike, first mild, then stronger. I tried to escape to my tent and close the flaps, but summer was approaching and the days were already warm; I couldn't stay there long. I spent time in the !Kung villages, interviewing women, but Nisa was often there when I came back. Her voice persisted. I couldn't ignore it, with its barrage of thinly veiled criticisms. I felt I needed a place to go where I could close my ears and eyes, where I could stop hearing and stop responding. I had to do something.

Finally I decided that since I had to listen to her anyway, I might as well get her to talk about something I wanted to hear. I had asked other women at Gausha about the drug properties of various roots and plants, but these interviews had not been very satisfying. The women seemed evasive, or perhaps they did not know enough about what I was asking. None of them spoke clearly on which specific roots had which specific effects. They said I should ask an older woman, perhaps someone who actually helped others when they had problems. They didn't give me any names. How could I have known one would be Nisa?

At last I approached her: "I have some questions I want to ask you. Would you like to work with me?" She broke from her conversation and smiled broadly. Catching my eye, she said "Aiye!" which means,

literally, "Mother!"—but this time it also meant "Of course I will, I'd love to."

It now seems a strange way to have begun a relationship that was to become so important to me, but it was only after I had approached her in this way that her attitude toward me changed. She had been trying to talk to me all along, but it was only on the subject of Nancy and Richard that she felt we had common ground. Now I had asked her to start something new. It was as though she had been waiting for me to see that she had something to offer.

Our first talk lasted an hour. She concentrated on my questions and answered them thoughtfully. She named four medicinal plants and described each one clearly—one, she said, prevented miscarriage, one brought on the menstrual flow, and two produced sterility. She told me about her sister-in-law whose "heart had been ruined by children"; she had given birth to ten, but only four were still alive. After the youngest died, she drank the medicine that makes a woman sterile; their deaths had caused her too much pain and she didn't want to have to go through it again. Throughout our talk, Nisa was considerate and helpful. She repeated things in different ways so as to be sure I understood. Most surprising, perhaps, was that she seemed to be enjoying herself. By the end of the hour, I had to admit that the interview had gone exceptionally well.

In our second talk, I asked her about children—what they did and how they played. She confirmed much of what Bau had told me about children's sexual play. She even described an incident she had seen a few days earlier: a boy, about six, and his sister were standing against the wall of their hut, the boy behind his sister, rubbing their bottoms together. And that wasn't the first time; she had seen them under a blanket once before. Both times she scolded them, telling the little girl that her vagina would become irritated and smell bad if she kept playing like that. But their parents didn't see them, and Nisa didn't tell. Children that age have no sense, she said; and anyway, their mother would have hit them. Nisa, somewhat amused, added that if a girl grows up without learning to enjoy sex, her mind doesn't develop normally and she goes around eating grass, like a crazy Herero woman who lived in the area. Grown women, too, need sex. If a woman doesn't have sex, Nisa claimed, her thoughts get ruined and she is always angry.

Nisa and I talked again the next day, the next, and the next. She be-

gan telling me about her own childhood: her homosexual loves, her initial refusal of sex with boys, the boyfriend she loved who taught her to play "house," and her eventual enjoyment of sex. I was entranced by then—the interviews were beautiful. But during our last meeting she told me something I found so puzzling that I began to doubt not only it but much of what she had told me before.

I had asked about her earliest childhood memories. She explained that a child, when very young, isn't aware of anything except nursing and sleeping. Once she walks and later talks, she starts to remember things. Nisa's earliest memories were of nursing, which she had loved. But when her mother became pregnant with her younger brother, Kumsa, Nisa was weaned. This caused her tremendous unhappiness. It happened when she was too young, she said. That was why she was so much smaller than her two brothers. When she wanted her mother's breasts, she found them covered with a bitter paste. She cried and screamed until it was washed off. But her mother said the milk in her breasts belonged to the baby growing inside her. If Nisa continued to nurse, she would get sick and might even die. Her father yelled at her, too. Nisa threw tantrums and was punished for her constant attempts to nurse; she was very unhappy.

So far this made sense. Other women had recounted similar experiences, and my husband had observed young children in the village undergoing intense emotional upsets during weaning.

But there was more. Nisa described a day when she went with her mother to gather food. Not far from the village, her mother sat down in the shade of a tree and gave birth to her brother Kumsa. When the baby was born, her mother told Nisa to get the digging stick so she could bury him. Her mother was worried that Nisa had been weaned too early. If there weren't another baby, Nisa could nurse again. But Nisa cried and told her mother she didn't want to nurse any more; she wanted her baby brother to live. They argued and her mother finally agreed; they would keep the baby and he would nurse, not Nisa. Nisa believed that it was only through her own efforts that her younger brother had lived.

Could I have misunderstood? Infanticide is said to have existed at the time she spoke of, but a little girl would surely not have been involved, especially just after witnessing the birth. "Tell me again," I said, "more slowly this time, what happened when your brother was born." The retelling was essentially the same. Did she remember seeing all she had

described, or was it what others had told her? She said, "I remember seeing it with my own eyes."

I didn't know what to make of it. It seemed too strange to be a lie. Perhaps it had to be interpreted another way? As one of her earliest "memories," maybe it was a fantasy she had created when her brother was born, to help her deal with the anger and jealousy she felt toward him. Or perhaps Nisa's mother, never seriously entertaining the idea, actually suggested killing the baby, knowing that Nisa would say no. She might have hoped to make Nisa feel protective toward her brother. Or, more likely, the threat might have been a guilt-inducing weapon to make Nisa stop complaining about weaning. Other explanations also came to mind. What was clear, however, was that Nisa believed the story as she told it.

Still, I began to doubt her again. We were planning to leave Gausha the next day. We could have stayed on, but with my renewed ambivalence about Nisa I felt relieved to be going. Days later I found myself dismissing her and denying the uniqueness of our contact. But I did acknowledge that talking with her had been good for me. Building on my talks with Bau, my discussions with Nisa gave me increased confidence. I was now determined to question other women, in ever-greater depth and intimacy, about their lives.

I interviewed seven women during the next ten months, and for the most part, the interviews were very successful. What Bau and Nisa had told me, the others confirmed and expanded on. By the end I had a reasonable understanding of the subtleties of !Kung women's inner feelings, and of their attitudes toward their lives. That was what I had hoped for initially, and I was pleased to have accomplished it. On another level, however, I was dissatisfied. I had wanted the women to give more than they had. I had hoped that at least a few of the women would become deeply involved in describing their experiences. I had also hoped that close friendships might develop during the course of our work.

In retrospect I could think of many possible reasons why none of this had happened. The interview situation was based, after all, on a business exchange: I paid for each set of interviews with money or gifts. Or perhaps my wealth, status, and foreignness kept the women from trusting me. Or it might have been more subtle, perhaps involving the type of woman I chose—one who had, after all, made sure that I would notice her. Whatever the underlying causes, it took me a long time to real-

ize that neither close friendship nor a really spontaneous, open approach to the interviews would be forthcoming.

The signs had been there from the beginning. Long before I had spoken to Bau or had started the formal interviews, I had developed what seemed to be the beginnings of a pleasant friendship with a woman at Goshi. When I left Goshi, she would tell me how much she was going to miss me, and when I returned, she would be sure to greet me. I occasionally gave her small presents (such as bottles, oil, and beads) she had asked for—things of little monetary value, but highly coveted by the !Kung. I saw these gifts as expressions of my appreciation for her friendship. Over the course of several weeks, however, I noticed that she never gave me anything. Of course, being wealthier, I expected very little in return, but gifts, even those of minimal material value, are one way the !Kung show friendship. (Months later, modest presents from other !Kung confirmed that my expectations of her had been reasonable.) Following the !Kung custom, I approached her directly and said it was time I received a present: roots, berries, nuts, or any small thing would do. She protested my accusation of stinginess (again, according to custom), but ultimately agreed that she should be more generous. I waited, not giving anything more for a while, but she never came. The next time I left Goshi she failed to tell me how much she would miss me; later still, we spoke only in greeting.

My early encounter with Hwantla was another instance. Beautiful, creative, and charismatic, Hwantla enchanted me perhaps more than any other !Kung woman. On our first day at Goshi, a dispute arose over what my !Kung name was going to be, with Hwantla and an older woman each urging me to accept her name. By taking a !Kung woman's name I would become identified as my namesake's genealogical twin and be incorporated into her social networks, based on kinship and name-sharing. (The !Kung have fewer than thirty-five names for each gender. People with the same name are linked in a special relationship—the name relationship—which can substitute for close kinship ties and which connects them to each other's lives in a way that would be impossible if social relations were based solely on biological kinship.)

I favored Hwantla from the outset, but I didn't want to alienate anyone during my first few days. Still, when she handed me a present, it was easy to accept—and I did, immediately. That day I wrote in my journal:

> Hwantla stormed into my tent today after participating in a long, noisy discussion with the people who have been sitting around our camp since we arrived. She not only asked me, again, to take her name, but she came forth with a present—a beaded leather apron. The other women who approached me only talked about how much they expected me—their "little-name"—to give them once I accepted. But Hwantla actually gave me something. She didn't even say I'd have to reciprocate, although we both know that I will.
>
> As soon as I understood what was happening—which took quite some time—I told her, with whatever sign language I could invent, that I was happy to accept her offer. I've been practicing calling myself Hwantla all afternoon, and I like the sound of it.

I had hoped our common name would favor a connection between Hwantla and me, perhaps even a meaningful friendship. I was completely taken with her and thrilled to have a pretext for staying near her. She sang, danced, and played her own musical compositions with talent and energy; she also seemed extremely intelligent and witty. I didn't expect much in the beginning, given the language barrier and my frequent trips elsewhere, and for the entire first year, nothing much developed between us.

After the initial interviews with Bau and Nisa were behind me and I had a greater command of the language and customs of !Kung women, I made my first serious effort to establish a closer relationship with Hwantla: I suggested that we work together. She was enthusiastic about the interviews and was responsive throughout, but the connection I had hoped for never materialized. It wasn't that she didn't trust me—once she even precipitated an argument with her husband in front of me. Yet most of the time she seemed reluctant to invest much of herself in our work, even less in her relationship with me. She was preoccupied with her own problems: she was barren, and her Tswana husband was spending more and more time with his mistress, with whom he had recently had a child. After the paid interviews were over, we rarely talked personally and she usually came to my camp only to ask for tobacco.

I wasn't as deeply involved with the next two women I interviewed. Nai, a fourteen-year-old girl on the verge of womanhood, and Nukha, twenty years old and already a mother, were both helpful informants, but neither had the spark, charm, or intelligence of Hwantla, or the

clear-headed maturity of Bau. I had hoped to learn how Nai felt about growing up and her hopes and fears for the future. But she was in almost as much conflict about me as she was about her changing self, and she tried to avoid talking about most of the issues raised. With Nukha, it was quite possible to talk about her struggles with her husband and her occasional intimacies with other men, but she did not seem able or willing to articulate her deeper feelings.

The next two women, Naukha and Kxaru, were more problematic. Naukha, about thirty-five years old, a mother of three children, and (by her own account) happily married, told me essentially the same story over and over again. It took me days to realize it, because the names and places always differed. I sometimes wondered if she was simply (and deliberately) juggling the names of all the people, places, and foods she knew, fitting them into a standard pattern, and creating new "memories." It was her mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, or uncle who, to the north, south, east, or west, once refused to give her a certain root, berry, nut, or kind of meat. The next day, week, or month when she had some root, berry, and so on of her own, and her father, mother, and so on asked for it, it was her chance to refuse, *and she did!* With this formula she could apparently have gone on indefinitely, and that seemed to me to be her intention. I did not see much humor in this, and at the time I could not easily respect her right to be so evasive. I had not pressured her into working with me, nor was I insisting that she continue. I finally confronted her, saying that she had talked enough about stinginess and now we had to start talking about other things. But the interviews never did go anywhere.

There was a different problem with Kxaru. Kxaru, about the same age as Naukha, was kind, good-natured, and gentle, and she loved working with me. But she had grown up much farther south and had enough unfamiliar words in her vocabulary that following her required tremendous effort and concentration. Too often, the continuous effort of piecing together her words became so tedious that I stopped reviewing as we went along. Later I would realize that I had not understood much of what she had said.

By the time I worked with Naukha and Kxaru, I had lived in the field for more than nineteen months, and frustration, rather than reasoned patience, characterized a good proportion of my reactions. The strain of having been away from home so long, the continual pressure of adapting to other people's ways, the hard work of collecting reliable

information about their lives, and the demands of the physical environment had exhausted me. I wanted to be finished. Had I had more energy, perhaps I would have found a way to reassure Naukha, to encourage her to talk more freely. Had I allowed the interviews with Kxaru to take three times as long as the other women's did, while things were clarified, she would have been willing. But I was not; worn down and impatient, I was no longer as sensitive an interviewer as I might otherwise have been. I wanted immediate rapport, immediate understanding, immediate confidences. I was lonely and no longer felt capable of exerting the necessary effort to gain acceptance. I was ready to be where living was physically easier, where people really cared about me, and where I could be alone when I wanted to, for hours at a time, undisturbed by requests from anyone.

Everything indicated that it was time to leave. My husband's work was near completion; I would soon be finished working with Naukha and then with Kxaru. We set three weeks as a realistic departure date. That still left enough time to interview Bey, who at seventy-five was the oldest woman at Goshi. She was an able storyteller and had been assuring me for months that I was wasting my time talking to young women. She "really knew" about things. Why hadn't I asked her? Despite my exhaustion, I was intrigued. Perhaps the perspective of age would make a difference. I decided to try.

"Bey, we've already talked about how people still remember some of their childhood experiences, no matter how old they are. You agreed and said that was true for yourself. Won't you tell me about things you still remember?"

"Yes, I certainly remember things from my childhood. I am old and have experienced much. You ask me about something and I'll tell you about it."

"Why don't you tell me about anything that comes into your mind about your childhood, something that has stayed with you over the years."

"Are you saying that people don't remember their childhoods? They do. Ask me and I'll tell you."

"Tell me about the things your mother and father did."

"Fine. They brought me up, gave me food, and I grew and grew and then I was an adult. That's what they did."

"Do you remember any specific time, maybe when they did something wonderful or perhaps, something you didn't like?"

"You are asking me well. Parents sometimes help children and sometimes scold them."

"Did your parents ever scold you?"

"Are you saying that a parent doesn't scold a child? Children do senseless things and their parents scold them."

"What did you do that was senseless?"

"I ruined things, just like my granddaughter. Why this very morning she ruined some things in the hut and my daughter-in-law hit her. Do you think a parent doesn't scold a child? No, a parent scolds a child, then the child learns sense."

"Bey, we are talking very well together; I know you are old and have experienced many things . . ."

"Many things, ehey, mother . . ."

". . . but I want to talk only about you, not about anyone else. I want to know about things you experienced, things your mother did when you were small, and what you did as you grew up, married, and had children. So far we have been talking about things in a general way, in a way that everyone would agree with. That's good. But now, let's talk more specifically about things that happened to you, about any time in your life."

"Yes, we are talking very well. You keep asking me and I'll keep telling you. I am old and know many things."

"I am asking you. But I cannot tell you what memories to speak about. Only you know what you've experienced. Try to tell me about something your parents or your siblings did; or what happened when you menstruated, when you married or had children; or, about your family, your co-wife, your husband . . . anything you'd like. Only it has to be about you."

"Yes . . . we have already talked about my mother and my father and how I ruined things. Now ask me about other things and I will tell you. I am old and know. Those other women are children and still haven't taught themselves. I have seen a lot. I really know. You ask me and I'll tell you . . ."

After a few days of just this sort of conversation, we stopped working together. Perhaps the details of her early experiences were no longer easily accessible to her, or the format of the interviews was difficult for her to adapt to. Or perhaps I was just too impatient to frame questions specific enough to draw her out. Just as likely, however, was that she

thought she was offering what I wanted. She had lived for more than a quarter of a century before the first settlers came to the area; thus she was a bearer of the traditions, customs, and beliefs held by the !Kung as a people and over time. The weight of her opinions was what others most valued and most often asked her for. Wasn't that what anthropologists were supposed to want, anyway?

After these interviews, I had only to finish working with Kxaru and to organize and pack in preparation for leaving. But no sooner did the end seem near than old doubts started to surface again. Was the dissatisfaction I felt with the interviews really a consequence of the limits of the format? Or might I still find someone—someone not as unmalleable as Bey, yet with equally varied experience, who could talk about them from a mature, perhaps even philosophical, perspective? It was clear that most of the nine women had made reasonable attempts to be honest and open about their lives; and yet none of the interviews were especially inspiring.

At last, I thought about Nisa again. I still wasn't sure I could trust her, but something about her held my interest. I thought about how patient she had been with me and how important it had been to her that I understand. She had also been open and warm, even entertaining; and she did say that there was much more to tell. Of course, I had no way of knowing in advance that she would take on the job of teaching me about her life with a seriousness and clarity I had not met in anyone else. I just knew I could not leave without giving the interviews one last chance. The next day I sent a message asking if she would come, live in my camp, and work with me. She could bring her husband and her niece; I would feed the family and would pay her for our work. A few days later her message arrived: she was ready whenever I was.

In Nisa, I finally found what I had been looking for. After she understood the requirements of the interviews, she summarized her life in a loosely chronological order; then, following my lead, she discussed each major phase in depth. In the first interview she repeated the story of her younger brother's birth. Although this version contained more details than the first, the story itself had not changed. This time, however, I was not so badly thrown by it; I accepted it as something I might not understand for awhile. The final interpretation of this story and of some of the others will probably always remain subject to speculation. I came to see that as one of the rules of the game.

Nisa and I "worked very well together." We often joked about how I

(her "niece") was a child and she (my "aunt")[4] was a woman of vast experience whose task it was to teach me about life. We were pleasant and friendly and our rapport was easy. She had a determination to make each interview work and seemed to derive considerable pleasure from the entire process. Although she occasionally asked for direction, she led the way most of the time. At the start of an interview, she often asked to review the end of the previous session's tape, to see where we had left off and what still needed to be discussed. She would say things like, "Let's continue our talk about long ago. Let's also talk about the stories that the old people know. I will teach you so that you will learn." Once, in the middle of telling a story, her thoughts crowded with others. Delighted, she exclaimed, "What am I trying to do? Here I am, sitting, talking about one story, and another runs right into my head and into my thoughts!" Restraining them as she might a small child, she added, "I'll speak about those thoughts after I finish, after the ones I'm now talking about are gone."

When she would come to the end of a story, she would let me know by saying, "That is finished, is it not? Let's talk about another now." If I had no question, she would move on. She had another expression, one of my favorites: "the wind has taken that away." Once she elaborated: "I'll tell you another now. I'll break open the story and tell you what is there. Then, like the others that have fallen out onto the sand, I will finish with it, and the wind will take it away."

Most of her stories were described in rich detail and told with a beginning, a middle, and an end. If I questioned her before she had finished, she often said, "Wait. I'm getting to that. Now, listen." Once, however, she was describing the dissolution of one of her marriages—obviously a trying time for her. She ended her story in a fairly usual way, saying, "That's all, and life went on." An unusually long silence followed. Then she added, thoughtfully and slowly, "No. There's still something in my heart about this that isn't finished. My heart is still shaking. The story hasn't come completely out. I'm going to talk more about it until it does. Then, I'll go on to another. Then, my heart will be fine."

During our last interview, we discussed my imminent departure and her plans for the future. She said, "After you leave, I'll stay around here for a few more days, then go to the bush, to live and to eat. There's still plenty of water, nuts, bulbs, and roots, so even winter will find me there. I won't live with the black people or where the cows stay.

"Because we are people who live in the bush, and who belong in the bush. We are not village people. I have no goats. I have no cattle. I am a person who owns nothing. That's what people say I am: a poor person. Yes, grandmother, a poor person without a goat or a teeny-weeny little cow. Not even a small baby goat that cries out 'Behhh . . . behhh . . .' No donkey, either. I still carry things myself, in my kaross when I travel, and that's why I live in the bush."

She felt that her plans were somewhat jeopardized by a dream—an almost prophetic glimpse of the future—that she had had the previous night. "I dreamed that I was hired to cut grass for a hut being built by the Tswana headman. He praised me, 'You're doing a fine job. After you finish fastening the grass, you'll have some corn meal to eat.' I said, 'I'm not selling my labor for corn meal. I'd rather have money.' The headman agreed, but when I woke up, I thought, 'Why did God[5] tell me I was doing something I didn't want to do?' A long time ago the headman did ask me to do that kind of work and I refused. I told him I wouldn't do it because I wasn't getting paid. Now God is telling me I'll be doing it again." She paused, then added, "But, I don't want to do that kind of work anymore."

Turning to my departure again, she said, "After you leave, I will continue to live. I will see things around me and think about them, as you've asked me to do. When I see something interesting, I'll say, 'Eh, this is something Marjorie and I have talked about. Its very heart is here. Now, there is more about this to tell her.' I will remember it and carry it around with me. When I see something else, I'll carry that, too. I'll carry all the things I have yet to see, and when you come back, I'll give them to you."

Then she said, "Perhaps, some day another white person will come here, perhaps Richard. After he stays for a while, I'll ask him to bring a present to you, Marjorie, from me. I'll find something beautiful—some ostrich eggshell beads or, if I have the leather, I'll sew a pouch with beads so that it will be truly beautiful. I'll say, 'Richard, when you return home, give this to Marjorie for me, only to Marjorie! I'll also beg him to write the things I want to say to you. I'll say, 'Write down on paper that I am giving this pouch to Marjorie. Take it, along with the pouch, and bring it to her. I like her so much that when she left, my heart almost died.'

"But today, I have no pouch or even kaross, to fill up with bulbs. I don't know where I will get them. So, I still haven't given you a pres-

ent." She fingered a bracelet on her arm, then pulled it off: smooth copper beads fastened to a band of dark leather. She handed it to me. "I've been looking for something to give you and found this bracelet. It won't go on your hand because it is too small. Here, put it away. Another day, give it to a child." I protested, "How will you do without it?" She said, "I'm giving it to you and want you to have it. Now, don't ever give it to someone else. Hold onto it. When you have your own child, you will name her Nisa and will put it on her leg. You'll tell her that it is her namesake who gave it to her. Then, when you bring her here, I'll carry her around and give her many other presents."

These were very moving moments for both of us—an extension, so it seemed, of the intensity of our conversations. Nevertheless, I did not become Nisa's "best friend," nor did she become mine. She rarely asked much about me, nor did she seem particularly interested in my life, and there was no doubt that the financial arrangements were important to her. Strangely enough, once the interviews gained momentum and I saw what she was giving, the rest no longer mattered. Her commitment to the interviews and her willingness to talk openly about all aspects of her life was, in a sense, the most valuable gift of friendship. To her, I wasn't just the "white woman" or the "rich one"; I was a Zhun/twa, a "real person," like herself. For that reason, I was worthy of her best efforts.

Her best efforts were what I got. The fifteen interviews completed during those two weeks and another six completed four years later during a second field trip provided me with the deepest insights I was able to gain into !Kung life. These interviews (constituting about 8 percent of all the interviews I conducted with !Kung women) produced close to thirty hours of tape in the !Kung language and hundreds of pages of typewritten, literal transcriptions. These were written mostly in English, with many !Kung expressions retained so that the final translation could reflect nuances unique to !Kung. The chronological sequence in which the narrative is presented does not necessarily reflect the order in which the stories appear in the interviews. In a number of places, a memory presented as continuous is taken from more than one account of the same incident. Other changes come from the deletion of clarifying remarks and the modification or elimination of word and phrase repetitions—a dramatic device for emphasis in !Kung but distracting in English, which accomplishes the same purpose with adjectives. Apart from these changes, the narrative is faithful to the interviews. Wherever

possible, I have incorporated literal translations of !Kung idioms to reflect some of the beauty and subtlety of the language. This may occasionally invest the narrative with a somewhat more poetic quality than Nisa intended.

Nisa's narrative is just one view of !Kung life. Her history does not represent the whole range of experience available to women in her culture; the life stories of other women are often quite different. Also, it is not possible to take everything Nisa says literally, particularly her descriptions of her earlier years. She enjoyed the interview situation with the "machine that grabs your voice." To make her story lively and dramatic, she often assumed the high, somewhat insistent voice of a young child, as though trying to describe the events of her childhood through the eyes of Nisa, the little girl. It is probable that these early accounts are somewhat exaggerated—a combination of actual memory, information about her childhood related to her when she was older, generalized experiences common to the culture, and fantasy. As the narrative progresses, her voice becomes more mature and independent and her stories are likely to be more reliable. I was able to corroborate much of what she said about her later life from independent sources. Thus her description of her adult life may be considered to be as accurate as it is vivid.

