

# ONCE UPON A TIME IS NOW

*A Kalahari Memoir*

A large, leafless tree stands in the center of a savanna landscape. The ground is covered in dry, golden-brown grass. The sky is a mix of blue and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The horizon is flat, with a few small trees in the distance.

MEGAN BIESELE

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Megan Biesele



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To my amazing family of origin:

John and Margo, Bop and Janie





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## Preface

Fifty years ago, armed with a Harvard MA in anthropology, I chugged across the Atlantic on a Lykes Lines freighter from New Orleans to Cape Town, South Africa. From Cape Town I rode the Karoo Express train overnight to Johannesburg and took Rhodesia Railways from there to Gaborone, Botswana, whence I flew in a two-seater Cessna to Maun, Ngamiland District, on a golden morning that seemed to go on and on forever into the afternoon. The bush pilot's lunch consisted of several hard-boiled eggs cracked nonchalantly against the plane's steering wheel and washed down with orange Fanta. He was as relaxed as if he were seated at a picnic table rather than flying high above the Kalahari Desert. In amazement I stared at him and then out the window at herds of giraffes, startled by the sound of the plane, undulating across the sand below.

I had PhD dissertation research to do for my next phase at Harvard, but secretly I knew I was embarked on the defining adventure of my life. For the next eighteen months, roughly 550 days, I would be living with and learning from the click-speaking Ju/'hoan (pronounced like "Jutwan") San ("Bushman") people, many of whom still got their main sustenance from hunting and gathering. I was to study how their social attitudes and subsistence skills, along with their immense and detailed knowledge of their environment, were taught and learned. In particular, I was interested in the role verbal narratives—like folklore and oral history—played in the communications enabling their adaptation as hunter-gatherers.

Botswana has changed a great deal since I arrived there in 1970. The discovery of the diamond pipe at Orapa, the internationalization of beef exports, and the expansion of nature-based tourism have transformed the country's economy into one of the most prosperous in southern Africa. In 1970, few if any of the economic changes beginning to affect the country had reached the remoter areas like western Ngamiland, where I was to work. I arrived in Botswana before bilharzia (schistosomiasis) came down the rivers from central Africa into the Okavango Swamps, before AIDS devastated the country's population,

before multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis reached dangerous proportions in far-flung Kalahari communities—and half a century before the coronavirus threatening its many ethnic groups now. I arrived before distances stopped being measured in British miles and went to international kilometers, and before South African rands and British pounds, shillings, and pence gave way completely to the currency Pula (Setswana for “rain”) of newly independent Botswana. I was there without a credit card, carrying instead eighteen months’ worth of traveler’s checks in a safety belt close to my body: it wasn’t until 1971 that Ruth Bader Ginsberg and other feminists made it possible for US women to hold credit cards in their own names. This was also a time before almost any of the exclusively sand roads of Botswana became gravel or tarmac. It was a time before cellphones, fax machines, and even radiophones: tissue-thin blue aerogrammes or postcards took months to turn around between Africa and the United States. GPS was decades from being invented. Today, GPS and cell phones and drone technology are being used to spread much-needed health and other information, and to document land use activities to help the Ju/’hoansi (“Jutwansi”) to hold on to some of their land in western Ngamiland.

Back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I had managed to convince my academic advisors Irven DeVore and Richard Lee to send me to Botswana as part of their Harvard Kalahari Research Group. The last of the project’s graduate students, I was unmarried and would be “on my own” in the Kalahari after a brief period of overlap with fellow students Melvin Konner and his wife Marjorie Shostak. I had no return ticket back to the United States. I would be without other English-speakers to talk to most of the time. The Ju/’hoan (“Jutwan”) or !Kung language was to all intents and purposes an unwritten one I would have to learn by immersion. I had had some oral lessons in !Kung back in Massachusetts from fellow grad student Pat Draper and knew it had four click consonants, written /, =, !, and //. Only later did I learn that, combined with other consonants, the permutations of these four clicks yielded a total of eighty-four completely new sounds I would have to learn to make with my mouth.

The title *Once Upon a Time Is Now* is a quoted exclamation from my teacher Richard Lee. He made the exclamation after many discussions we had about storytelling’s specific enabling functions for society. As I pointed out the “work” of social cohesion that old stories perform as they are retold, Richard realized what I had been trying to do in treating Ju/’hoan folklore as integral to the ethnography of the present. The book is presented as a narrative: its arc is the story of my own journey to understanding the importance of constantly updated storytelling in

Ju/'hoan life, and it relates the lessons I myself and other Westerners may perhaps draw from it for our own lives. It is drawn from my memory and illustrated with extracts from the nineteen detailed handwritten journals I kept during that first fieldwork. It outlines my experience of a “second socialization” into a culture as different from my own as could be imagined. In the process I came face to face with a very hard fact: despite my anthropological training, I found I had been living in a membranous bubble from which the living reality of people like the Ju/'hoansi had been excluded. I had had them in a kind of never-never land. With repeated painful—but sometimes joyful—experiences, the membrane between me and them began to thin, and I could see them as my contemporaries on the same planet.

I deliberately present the immediacies of my action-packed eighteen months in raw, untidied form. Occasionally I quote directly from the field journals I kept of the sometimes comical, sometimes agonizing ways I learned from life with the Ju/'hoansi. (Journal passages have been lightly edited for print). I attempt to create a simulacrum of the tumult of impressions, sights, sounds, and scents, the steps, missteps, and times of introspection that I hope have led me some distance from the romanticism and naivete with which I arrived in Africa. This rough, vivid format allows glimpses of the larger meanings I pursued over subsequent decades. It allows a kind of dialogue to emerge between myself as a nervous twenty-five-year-old field-worker and my seventy-five-year-old self now recollecting her experiences in some tranquility.

Both of these selves embraced the inestimably valuable things I learned about the Ju/'hoan people, who lived somewhat as hunter-gatherers, the ancestors of us all, had lived for millennia. One of the most important things was what my fellow Harvard student Sarah Blaffer Hrdy spoke of as “original goodness,” a basic underpinning of their egalitarian way of life. I also learned that there was nothing rosy or romantic about this goodness or about egalitarianism: social balance is kept by the Ju/'hoansi through fierce and sustained attention to expectations and “leveling” rules. Another thing I learned was that the continuity of Ju/'hoan society is supported by a strong belief in the possibility of transformation. They relied then, and continue to rely, on transformation by hard work and determination, transformation by community effort, and transformation by efficacious, altered states of mind. The import of all of these is that growth, amelioration, healing, and change are possible in the world by the practice of known human means.

Since that first fieldwork, I have had a busy career of teaching, directing an anthropological nonprofit, further research, and writing. A few



years ago I finally got around to looking back into the box of personal field journals I had not opened for over forty years. I found a treasure trove. It was clear I needed to sift through the nineteen battered little notebooks I had scribbled in nearly every night of those eighteen months in Botswana. I went to a quiet place in the Hill Country near my home in Austin, Texas, for two weeks and sat down and read them all. It was an overwhelming experience. So much that I had forgotten came vividly alive: I laughed, wept, and was terrified all over again at my temerity in taking on what I had taken on. To do justice to the richness of these notebooks, I realized, I would have to do a completely different sort of writing from anything I had ever done before.

I have published extensively in the areas of anthropology, folklore, and advocacy of indigenous societies. This new project would be my first attempt at writing what I've really been wanting to write all along—the backstory, the deeper story, the spiritual story behind everything I have thought, said, and done since I first went to Africa. I saw that the key to this backstory lay in my long-neglected journals.

I had written most of my journal notes literally within hours of events as they occurred. They closely chronicle my personal responses and ruminations about those events. They also bear detailed witness to a slice of time in the history of a particular group of one of the most-studied peoples in all of anthropology. I have spent the intervening half century documenting some of the massive changes that have come into the lives and landscapes of the Ju/'hoansi and other hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari. I had a chance to experience that long-ago slice of time in an extraordinarily intimate way that will never be repeated. I felt keenly my responsibility to share my experiences—and how I made sense of them—to an audience not only of colleagues but of a much wider group of readers.

This first period of full-immersion fieldwork crystallized my intentions for all that I have done since. One of the most important of those intentions was to find a dignified way, through careful transcription and translation of things Ju/'hoan people said to me, to make sure their voices carried meaningfully to audiences far beyond myself. I also intended to publish detailed, contextualized documentation of the Ju/'hoan language, the meanings of many of its metaphors and folk concepts, and of its verbal art, song, and ritual. In the decades since then, I have had a rich and rewarding life of collaboration with Ju/'hoan colleagues, as well as with my academic colleagues, doing just that.

In *Once Upon a Time Is Now* I also describe the simple beginning of my activist career. !Unn/obe Morethlwa, a brilliant storyteller, bead artist, and singer, a nonliterate woman, asked me to take a letter to the

chiefs of Botswana on behalf of the Ju/'hoan people. I did so. The eventual result was the cofounding with my group of Harvard colleagues of one of the oldest anthropology research-based advocacy organizations for indigenous peoples. This was the nonprofit Kalahari Peoples Fund, in which I remain active today. Thus I describe in this book how my first trip to Africa set the stage for the rest of my professional and personal life. I try to present my adventures with the Ju/'hoansi in a form unvarnished by hindsight. This makes for an occasionally hair-raising story.

Thanks to an astounding linguist and teacher, the late Patrick Dickens, I have been enabled to work in a written form of the Ju/'hoan language since 1990, using the professional orthography, dictionary, and grammar he wrote. These Ju/'hoan-language materials have now been adopted by the Ju/'hoan people's organization, the Namibian government, and international linguistic scholars. Not wanting to disrespect the high phonetic complexity of the language, I have chosen in this language-focused memoir to present the names of Ju/'hoan individuals and other Ju/'hoan words in the professional Dickens orthography based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), one which can be rendered using the symbols on an ordinary typewriter. This way of writing the Ju/'hoan language has become the basis for sustaining the use and detailed knowledge of it by the current and coming literate—and computer-literate—generations.

For the convenience of readers unfamiliar with the sounds of the four special IPA characters used alone or with other consonants to make the Ju/'hoan clicks, I list them here, running from the front to the back of the mouth in terms of where they are made.

- / = dental click (cf. expression of irritation in English: “tsk, tsk”).
- = = alveolar (laminal) click, no equivalent in English.
- ! = alveo-palatal click (cf. sound of a cork coming out of a bottle).
- // = lateral click (cf. sound used to urge on a horse).

It may help the reader to use the following rough equivalences in the English alphabet.

- / = t
- = = t
- ! = k
- // = k



## Acknowledgments

My first thanks must go to the Botswana Ju/'hoan storytellers, healers, singers, and musicians—and their communities—who shared their artistry so generously with me. I acknowledge //Ukxa N!a'an at Dobe and !Unn/obe *Morethlwa* at Kauri; Kxao Tjimburu at /Kae/kae and /Ukxa N!a'an at Kauri; Xoa//an at Mahopa and Tcoq'a at Kauri; Jimmy /Ai!ae at /Kae/kae and Ko/'ong at Kauri; and many, many others. I was told often by these people that they wanted to share with the world, through me, the beauty and wisdom of their lives and art. Together, they gave me a glimpse into the daily excitement of living in a sharing, creative community. I also want to thank the three people who lived and worked in my camp at Kauri and traveled with me to the communities of these artists: !Xuma N!aeba, =Oma !Oma, and Philippus Muhakaona all made my eighteen months of rough outdoor life possible and in fact saved my life—literally and figuratively—on several occasions.

I also thank the many Namibian Ju/'hoan people from whom, after the time of this memoir, I continued to learn about Ju/'hoan social concepts and spirituality. Three individuals in particular must be named. The first two are Tsamkxao =Oma and the late /'Angn!ao /Kun ("Kiewiet"), the visionary first and second chairpersons of the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative. I have written about these two men both in this memoir and in my book coauthored with my esteemed colleague Robert K. Hitchcock, *The Ju/'hoan San of Nyae Nyae and Namibian Independence* (Berghahn Books, 2011). The third Namibian individual is the late /Kunta Boo, a revered healer and storyteller whose life story was completely interwoven with the story of the creation in Namibia—and travels through Botswana—of the Giraffe healing dance tradition and its music. I first met /Kunta in 1971 and last saw him in 2018 before his death in 2020. I had the chance to be at dozens of dances at which he was healing during these decades. I am amazed to have been on the same planet for most of my life with this superb spiritual practitioner.

The idea of writing a memoir about my fieldwork came to me rather late in my life, when I was past retirement age. It was suggested to

me almost simultaneously by the late anthropologist Irene Staehelin and the literary and cultural historian Walt Herbert, who both felt that my experiences could help other young anthropologists starting out in fieldwork, and could be of wide interest to scholars in related fields. Irene generously gave me a grant that covered my first two years of work on it. Walt has read several versions of the manuscript and given me copious, extremely valuable, suggestions. Walt and his wife, lawyer Marjorie Herbert, and I founded a writing salon, originally based in Georgetown, Texas. This salon is one of several informal discussion groups with whose encouragement I found the right narrative voice for the memoir. Marjorie and others in the group, including Larkin Tom, Leonard Van Gendt, Graham Oliver, and Carolina Davila-Oliver, also read the manuscript and offered fascinating and important feedback.

Another of the discussion groups that helped me make a transition from academic writing to narrative nonfiction was an Artists' Way group led by Ann Ciccolella, director of Austin Shakespeare. Members of that energetic group held my hand for several years while I anxiously ventured into my first few chapters. I was introduced to the group by retired lawyer Helen Currie Foster, now the successful author of a mystery series set in the Hill Country of central Texas. Helen and her husband, Larry Foster, had the wonderful insight that I needed a getaway place to sit down and read the nineteen long-neglected personal journals of my first fieldwork, and they invited me to stay at their place in the Hill Country when they were going to be away. All alone for two weeks except for the company of three burros, I read through the nineteen journals contained in a box I had carried around the world with me but had not opened for more than forty years. I found a treasure trove, and read it all, weeping and sighing and remembering and panicking all over again at what it contained. That time alone of reading all my journals was the real beginning of what I knew I had to do. From then on, the writing of this memoir has been one of the peak experiences of my life.

Helen and I and two others from the Shakespeare Artists' Way group formed a spin-off reading group (now called "The Full Moon Group") that was another cocoon within which my memoir grew. Helen, retired professor of English composition Stephenie Yearwood, retired lawyer Diana Borden, and I met monthly to discuss books and manuscripts and poetry and photography. All three of them read the memoir manuscript and gave me excellent ideas about what readers would like to find in my story. I am especially indebted to them for reading the last few chapters more than once as I struggled to tie up the loose narra-

tive ends into a meaningful story. (Thanks, too, to Texas writer Marvin Dorsey, who pestered me about the descriptions of the healing dances in those last few chapters until I got them right).

Another discussion group in which this book was incubated has been around since the late 1980s. It consists of a South African writer of children's books, Lesley Beake; a South African archaeologist, Janette Deacon; an American early childhood educator and professional storyteller, Melissa Heckler; and myself. Called "The Posse," this group has concerned itself with the provision of mother-tongue language books and other appropriate fiction and nonfiction curriculum and instruction for San and other southern African peoples' children. The countries of southern Africa have emerged from the colonial situations in which they were when each of us originally encountered them. A crying need has grown for literacy materials and educational approaches reflecting the democratic ideals of these newly independent nations. The Posse coalesced because each of us was immersed in writing, teaching, and activist projects addressing this need. All three of my fellow members of The Posse have read my manuscript and responded with much-appreciated comments, suggestions, and enthusiasm.

In 2021, during covid, I received a very special form of manuscript encouragement and critique from my San Antonio friends Margaret Greco and Robert Botello. Margaret is a member of the Cherokee Nation and an archaeologist who teaches at several San Antonio colleges and universities; Robert is a social work teacher, Spanish translator, matachines dancer, and author of the 2022 book *We Dance for the Virgin: Authenticity of Tradition in a San Antonio Matachines Troupe*. Ordinarily the three of us would have been getting together in San Antonio or Austin to discuss both my and Robert's manuscripts. In covid isolation, Robert and Margaret spent a precious month when they both had some time off work to record their oral conversations about my writing. They sent them to me chapter by chapter, complete with electronic versions of the manuscript with their marginal comments. Learning in a sustained monthlong burst how my manuscript appeared to this indigenous scholar and this traditional dancer/cultural historian, and how I could improve it, was one of the most important intellectual exercises of my life. I am very grateful for it.

I also thank the writer Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, who sat down and read the manuscript practically in one sitting, over the course of about forty-eight hours. I am thankful to her not only for her very useful suggestions but for what I consider the high praise indeed that she sent me, coming as it did from the author of *The Harmless People*, the anthropological classic about the same Ju/'hoan San.

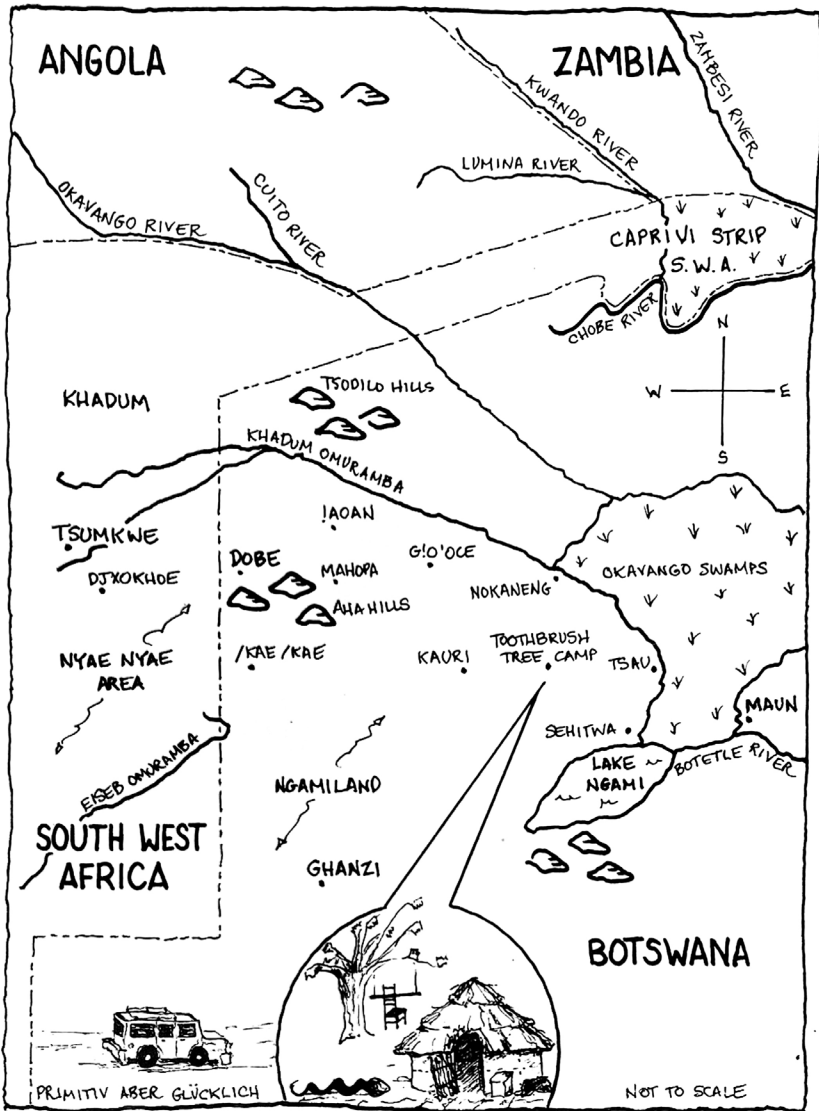
My teachers and colleagues Richard Lee and Melvin Konner both appear extensively in the narrative and both have read the manuscript closely. I am grateful to them for suggesting ways my take on the academic history of ideas could be clarified. In particular, I enjoyed a long exchange of thoughts about Kalahari writing with Mel, who was at the same time writing a wonderful novel about places and events rather close to those in my memoir. I read his manuscript while he was reading mine, and it was great having our notes back and forth cross each other by mail and email.

My other intellectual mentors are almost too numerous to mention. Many of them, and the specific things I learned from them, are mentioned in the book itself. I do want to single out Lorna Marshall, Irven DeVore, and Albert Lord (all three no longer with us) as very important influences during my grad school days in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The example of Lorna Marshall's impeccable research and writing, along with her careful nurturing of me and my career, put me on the life path I have followed ever since. I also want to thank the Harvard Kalahari Research Group (HKRG) and the anthropological advocacy group we formed almost fifty years ago, in 1973—the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF). The original founders of the KPF included (besides Lorna Marshall, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, Richard Lee, Melvin Konner, and Irven DeVore) John Yellen, Alison Brooks, Nancy Howell, Patricia Draper, Richard Katz, Mathias Guenther, the late John Marshall, and the late Marjorie Shostak. A better group of cooperating colleagues could not be imagined.

Other scholars who have read the manuscript have been very supportive. They include Sarah Hrdy, Chris Low, and Mathias Guenther. I thank them and other colleagues who are also looking forward to reading it. Marla Maeder and several other friends and family members, including my cousin Wayne Matlock, have read the manuscript and offered perceptive appreciations and critiques. Two who have not yet read the manuscript but without whose influence I might never have written it are the anthropologist Robbie Davis-Floyd and the Austin, Texas, healer Rima Star. It was through these two women that I came to understand that something like the healing power I experienced in Africa was actually widespread in the world, and potentially available to all human beings.

The readers I wanted most to please (and am most pleased that they do like the memoir) were my sisters Diana “Boppy” Burnett and Janie Hinchliffe. I am very grateful to them for reading the manuscript before it was a book between covers. Janie also did some important copy editing for me and created the book's delightful hand-drawn map.

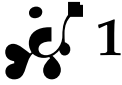
Last, I come to the thanks due to the people most immediately involved in the process by which this book has physically appeared. I thank both Victoria Goodman and Amanda Farrar of Austin for their valuable help in digitizing the photographs. Most especially I thank my publisher, Marion Berghahn; Berghahn Books's senior social sciences editor, Anthony Mason; Tom Bonnington, Berghahn's anthropology editor; Lizzie Martinez, Berghahn's senior production editor; and the design and production staff of Berghahn Books. I am grateful this publishing house has believed in not one but two proposed incarnations of this memoir project, one more academic (in 2015) and the more personal story it has become by 2023.



Camp Location in Botswana. Map by Jane Hinchliffe.







## THE RABIES RUN

Marjorie and I sat in the dark on cold sand beside the flooded *molapo*, our chins on our chests in despair. In the middle of the black water we'd tried to ford we could see Mel on the front seat of the drowned Land Rover, reading the *Merck* medical manual by torchlight. In the luggage section behind him, two dogs howled from the crates in which they were imprisoned.

The previous afternoon we had discovered our beloved camp dogs foaming at the mouth. We had been treating them for what we thought was biliary (a mild canine distemper), inserting by hand into their throats big tablets given us by the traveling vet. But the foaming, which was new, terrified us with the possibility of rabies. We crated the dogs, packed our supplies and clothes quickly, and headed for the nearest town. There, the dogs could be tested and we could find a hospital or clinic for ourselves.

Problems: the nearest town of any size was Maun, Botswana, some 250 kilometers away; the astonishing rainy season of 1970–71 turned the western fringes of the Kalahari Desert into a series of swollen *molapos*, rivers running between transverse dunes in a heavy sand landscape that covered at least two hundred of those kilometers; and the only road between our camp at Dobe and the town of Maun was a deep and twisting track, difficult to navigate at the driest of times but treacherous with sandy and muddy potholes from December to March, the only time rain falls at all in the Kalahari. It was then February 1971.

Only a few kilometers east of Dobe, we'd spent fourteen hours digging ourselves out of our first mudhole by lantern light, our first night on the road. Now, only a few more kilometers east of that first mudhole, we were into our second night: water had been sucked into our tailpipe when we tried to cross a section of *molapo* deeper than we thought it was, and our exhaustion and fear were such that all we could do was sit and worry whether poking pills past our dogs' teeth might have exposed us to rabies.

Other than the dogs' intermittent howling, we were surrounded by the utter silence of the Kalahari. It was then, sitting on the sandy bank with her legs caked in the dried mud of the first mudhole, that Marjorie

began to have symptoms. She would reach out her arm to pick up her hat or notebook, and her arm would spasm, pulling backwards alarmingly. She was convinced she had contracted rabies and would die.

Mel found in *Merck* that if we indeed had been exposed, we had possibly forty-eight hours to start the rabies vaccine series (fourteen days of painful shots to the stomach). And we were still more than two hundred kilometers, most of them similarly flooded, from Maun. At that news, the tension that had been building between me and Marjorie for other reasons—among them that I was an overeager newcomer, and she was ready to finish fieldwork and go home—overwhelmed us. All three of us stopped talking completely.

I was in hell, I thought. I was twenty-five years old and had been in Africa just 50 of the 550 days scheduled for my PhD fieldwork there. I had no return ticket yet back to the US, I was going to be on my own without anyone to speak English to for most of the rest of the time, and the Ju/'hoan language (erroneously called !Kung at the time by scholars) was a basically unwritten one I would have to learn by immersion. I had had some oral lessons in !Kung back in Massachusetts from fellow grad student Pat Draper and knew it had four click consonants; only later did I learn that, combined with other consonants, the permutations of these four clicks with other consonants yielded a total of eighty-four consonants completely unknown in European languages.

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I was the last graduate student admitted to Richard Lee and the late Irvén DeVore's Harvard Kalahari Research Group (HKRG) project, based in the Harvard Department of Anthropology. I left the US in November 1970 to join fellow students Melvin Konner and his wife Marjorie Shostak at Dobe, in far northwestern Botswana, where the multifaceted HKRG project had been based since 1963. My arrival in Botswana was delayed by almost a month because the Lykes Lines freighter on which I sailed from New Orleans to Cape Town, South Africa, wandered around the equator and the South Atlantic for a few weeks due to the captain running out of booze and coming down with delirium tremens. The first mate took a while figuring out how to get the ship to Cape Town. As supplies began to run out, we actually ate flying fish that landed on the lower decks.

Sometimes I spent the days of delay in language study belowdecks to avoid the other six passengers (all American missionaries bent on converting me to a condescending, Christian view of Africa). Or I communed with a handsome Santa Gertrudis bull, bound for herd-siring

adventures on the white farms of South Africa, which occupied a sturdy open crate on deck. Mostly I lived in mounting anxiety over the consternation I must be causing my colleagues. There was no way in those days to get a ship-to-shore message to Mel and Marjorie, awaiting me in remote Maun at the expense of some of their precious last weeks of fieldwork.

When I finally pitched up in Maun, after a long train ride across South Africa and a small-plane hop from the Botswana capital, Gaborone, it was early December. Mel and Marjorie were good sports and began their requested chore of teaching the ropes of Botswana fieldwork to the breathlessly excited new arrival. They'd been in Botswana for two years, had both worked extremely hard, and were ready to return to the US to write up their work. Mel was studying infant behavior among the !Kung or Ju/'hoan San ("Bushmen"), and Marjorie, musical skills acquisition among Ju/'hoan children. I was there to do research on the beliefs and expressive culture of the Ju/'hoansi for my PhD, planning to make a collection of their folktales and oral history and to study their lore and practice of religious healing. I set myself the task of learning the language first, with the goal of eventually not having to use interpreters.

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As we headed west for the first time out of Maun for Dobe, Marjorie remarked that we would "stop at Carvel for soft ice cream on the way out of town." I stared out the window of the Land Rover. What on earth could she be talking about? Although I quickly realized her joke, I was unprepared for the vast, silent range of sand and scrub we began traversing as soon as the huts of Maun were left behind. After Nokaneng we hit a long empty stretch on the way to Dobe. For 150 kilometers along the deep sand road, there was no petrol and no place to buy food. The only water available came from lowering buckets into hand-dug wells that were few and far between and not very near the road, and there were huge distances between very tiny human settlements. I had heard that anything could go wrong along that road, and that it often did.

Crammed into the hot Land Rover with piles of groceries and supplies, accompanied by !Xuma N!aeba, Mel and Marjorie's Ju/'hoan language teacher and aide-de-camp, who was soon to become my assistant in turn, we ground along slowly in low gear toward the setting sun. Unfamiliar species of bushes passed slowly by the dusty windows, becoming familiar by repetition by the end of the day. When it was time to pitch camp, Mel simply stopped the Land Rover in its tracks in the sandy road. Once the incessant motor noise was cut, the absolute si-

lence itself became a sound. Shovels and tarps and tents and a cooking tripod came out of the truck. A place was cleared for a fire, and we made supper. Meat from the Maun butcher, green mealies (corn on the cob), some cheese in a plastic box, fresh tomatoes, and tea. Marjorie told me to enjoy the fresh food, as it was the last I would see for some time. On top of the Land Rover were strapped huge burlap sacks, called “pockets,” of oranges, another of potatoes, and a smaller one of onions. These, along with canned goods, cornmeal, and dozens of eggs carefully buried in a box of sand so they would stay fresh and not break on the bumpy trip, were our supplies for the few months of fieldwork remaining before we would return to Maun. Then Mel and Marjorie would leave for the US. I would inherit the HKRG Land Rover and provision it myself before returning to the bush.

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Because “the rabies run,” as we came to call it, intervened, we returned to Maun sooner than we had planned. Somehow the water receded a bit during our second sleepless night, and we got the Land Rover out of the molapo at dawn. We could then see to avoid the deepest pits and could bush-bash alternate routes around them. Our progress was agonizingly slow.

At last we reached gravel. We drove at breakneck speed down the few kilometers of roadway leading into Maun just as the forty-eight-hour incubation time specified by *Merck* was ending. By this time the dogs had gone quiet in the back. Were they dead already? Could their brain tissue still be analyzed for rabies if they were in fact dead? We were each wracked by such questions, but we kept them to ourselves. I had already revised my definition of hell to include the inability to communicate, in a critical situation, with others. The fear of rabies was one thing, but not being able to talk about it was a hundred times worse.

We drove straight to the little hospital in Maun and around to the back entrance. Mel and Marjorie knew an expat doctor they thought would help us quickly. Providentially, he was standing in the yard when we screeched to a halt. We jumped out of the Land Rover and began—rather hysterically—to tell our story. The doctor rapidly arranged for the dogs to be killed, and for their brains to be sent off to a lab in Lobatse, near Gaborone, for analysis. Then we watched him through a grimy clinic window as he rummaged in a small, gas-powered refrigerator for rabies inoculation vials. At first he could not find any and, thinking of the minutes still ticking away, we felt our hearts sink yet again. “Here they are!” he finally said, hauling them out from the back

of the crowded, messy little refrigerator. We asked whether we had arrived in time for the inoculations to be effective. He said if we had not yet begun to have symptoms, we would be fine if we started the shots right away. We lined up and big needles were plunged into each of our diaphragms in turn.

Painful as this was, I threw my hat in the air with relief that we had arrived in time. Then I turned to look at Marjorie and she was glaring at me with a look that froze my bones. "I'm already *having* symptoms!" she choked out. "You're celebrating for yourself but you don't care if I die!" These were the first words she had spoken to me in two days. I was horrified that she begrudged me relief about my life, but equally horrified that I had shown insensitivity to her fear. Having privately believed that her symptoms were psychosomatic and due to extreme stress, I had allowed myself an instant of celebration of my own imminent delivery from danger.

I remember that Mel was notably silent at this juncture. I assumed this meant either that he was showing absolute emotional support for his wife, or that he had been saddled with an impossible situation in a three-person camp in which two women were at odds. Of course, in our fraught little crucible of a social situation we had been unable to talk of any of this. We were the only English speakers, effectively, for hundreds of kilometers in any direction: everything we might have discussed, but couldn't, hung over our heads in magnified, heavy, unavoidable form. I recall these events for a specific reason: the paralysis of our communication at that time foreshadowed many other poignant, painful, but productive "learning experiences" still to come in my life and work.

I spent the next few grim days alone at Riley's Hotel on a bank of the Thamalakane River while we waited for the results on the dogs' brains to come back. Mel and Marjorie stayed with their British friends, ornithologist Peter Jones and his wife, Isla. Each day we trekked from opposite ends of Maun through heavy grey sand to the hospital for another painful shot each, deep into our stomach muscles. Each day my allergy-like reaction to the shots seemed to grow worse. By the third day I thought the shots would kill me before the rabies did.

Finally the lab report came back: it was biliary (distemper), not rabies, and we were all safe. In a few days, we headed back to Dobe. Tentatively, Marjorie and I began speaking again, and we managed to get through our remaining weeks together in some dignity.

In later years there was a full, warm rapprochement between us. Marjorie published the first of two books that became anthropological classics, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. The rapprochement

was—to her credit—initiated by Marjorie after she had been diagnosed with, and knew she would likely die of, breast cancer. Her *Return to Nisa*, published posthumously, is, just like her first book, used in countless introductory anthropology courses.

The rabies run was a huge and traumatic part of my introduction to fieldwork in Africa. It was the first of a long series of “ill wind” situations in my Kalahari life, each of which ended by blowing me some good. I believe it was the start of my emergence from the cloud of romantic impulses that had gotten me to Botswana in the first place. What I now remember most about my first few months in the field was the enormous help Marjorie Shostak and Mel Konner gave me in shedding romantic impressionism and in learning how to live and work well with the Ju/'hoansi.

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A few early memories help to set the scenes from which my journey to Africa began. My mother worked as a medical technologist; her health had been compromised before I was born by contracting an infectious disease from a specimen during her lab work. As a baby I was afflicted with multiple allergies and cried inconsolably. Both my parents were working at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories on Long Island at the time. My mother eventually took me back to her home in Port Arthur, Texas, where she and my grandparents took turns staying up nights to walk with me and sing to me. Nothing availed. But when my grandparents' Cajun housekeeper came into the picture, there was a fundamental change. She added a new dimension as an adjunct family member and caretaker, and effectively took charge of me. In the process I was somehow set on the path to becoming a more comprehending human being.

In retrospect I believe what did it was the simple addition of more unconditional love. Eloise Thibodeaux, whom we knew as Lovina, grew up speaking French in a huge Catholic family of “colored” sharecroppers between Lafayette and Mamou, Louisiana. After it became clear that she could not scrape together a living there during the Depression, she walked alone across the state line bridge into Port Arthur and taught herself to speak English—and to read—with the help of the funny papers. My maternal grandfather was a petroleum chemist who ran the Gulf refinery at Port Arthur. Lovina became my mother's parents' cook and housekeeper, and she remained a fixture of our family until her death more than fifty years later.

The childless Lovina took me on—along with my sisters and all our cousins when they visited—as her own. She was the perfect allomo-



**Figure 1.1.** Lovina Thibodeaux. © Diana “Boppy” Burnett.

ther. My earliest memories are of long hours sitting on her lap, holding and turning over her two hardworking, prominently veined hands, and marveling at their softness and gentleness. All of us, I think, felt that her fierce love for us transcended the borders of skin color. I will never forget the physical, tangible force of love and the concomitant tough teaching she lavished on me. She told me that when I had a dirty job to do with a rag, I shouldn't hold it at arm's length while averting my eyes and nose but rather grasp the rag with my whole hand and get in there and get it done. She taught me that, in order to “defend my soul,” I should always tell the truth. She also shared with me the beautiful visions of the Virgin Mary that animated her own soul. I never became a conventionally religious person, but the visions Lovina shared opened me to the transcendent phenomena (often associated with religion) that became the real focus of my life and anthropological work.

Lovina also introduced me to the power of ritual. When I was twelve or thirteen, I went through a period of painful headaches. She told me to wash my hair, using a bucket outside on the wooded hillside behind the house, at sunrise three mornings in a row. I did, and the headaches vanished, due to this (probably more African than Catholic) advice. I



was also gradually introduced to Lovina's close-knit family as some of them joined her in Texas and later, when she and I took trips together back to Louisiana. I was thrilled by the affection and easy acceptance I experienced from her family, the closest to indigenous people I had by then met.

Once, Lovina and I walked into a bar and grill owned by a cousin of hers. The cousin, a small, dark, slender man with jet-black, ringletted hair, rushed to the door to meet us. He missed not a beat as he turned from hugging Lovina to greet the blonde, blue-eyed child standing shyly at her side. "Come on in, girl! You look just like a Thibodeaux!" At their homes, I heard Lovina's family telling stories in French and English from Canadian Acadia. I especially remember their African stories. I began to think that, in search of the warmth and fun I had experienced with the Thibodeaux family, I would sometime go to Africa. This belief was reinforced when, as a child of six or seven, I was bouncing on my parents' bed, over which hung a large map of the world. Africa was in the middle of it. In the center of the southern part of Africa, opposite my eyes about as high as I could bounce, was a vast, empty, terracotta-colored expanse intriguingly labeled "Bech. Prot." Whatever that place was, I resolved to go there one day.

My original impulse to go to Africa was, thus, quite simple, childish, and romantic. But soon, under the influence of my father, a cell biologist and geneticist devoted to natural history and to environmental causes, I began to envision specific ways I could get there. I wanted the means to be involved with whatever career I chose. Through junior high, I thought I would go to Africa as a scientist. Paleontology had particular appeal for me. But then I discovered literature. In high school in Austin, Texas, in the early 60s, I had an English teacher named Mr. John Shelton. He opened up literature to me and my classmates so we saw it was a window on the whole of life. That it was, in fact, life itself.

At the same time, my father was introducing me and my sisters Diana ("Boppy") and Janie to the plants and animals, the fossils and geology of his beloved central Texas, where he had spent most of his life observing and studying natural history. My mother, meanwhile, was encouraging us to enjoy music and art and literature and whatever drew our hearts forward. She, too, was a scientist and beyond that she was a promoter of "continuing education for women," a Betty Friedan feminist, an activist in local causes, and a staunch believer in interdisciplinary approaches to complex problems. The Texas senator Barbara Jordan was an occasional visitor to our house with others of our mother's friends devoted to women's political and educational issues.

For me there was no question but that I would become an academic and get a PhD. Both my father and *his* father had each taught for many decades at the University of Texas at Austin, so that, for me, seemed the model to follow. (My sisters, both younger, forged more original paths!) In high school and college, I found my interests straddling the institutional divide between the arts and the sciences. I agonized over whether to go into biological sciences like my father, a research scientist and professor, or to follow the lead of my mother, who taught me and my sisters to enjoy music, literature, and the visual arts. I ended up following my heart and declared an English major at the University of Michigan, where I enrolled in 1963.

U of M had an excellent, challenging Honors English program starting with Great Books that carried on right through the edgiest dimensions of contemporary literary criticism. I threw myself into literary life in Ann Arbor, enjoying the artsy cultural discussions that continued seamlessly from talk about books in my afternoon English classes into talk about films while standing in the long evening lines at Cinema Guild. Cold as the U of M campus was, it presented me with something like a full-time outdoor café-society intellectual life, and I loved it. But I continued to feel that my responsibility to the natural world—understanding it and conserving it—would somehow be neglected if I neglected science. I didn't know what to do then about a personal propensity that was, seen from later vantage points, a kind of hyper-responsibility. I thought I should somehow transcend disciplinary splits and do it all.

By my junior year, with the help of some excellent literature professors and their courses, I had been introduced not only to the great written works of Western civilization but to philosophers and critics like Ernst Cassirer, Suzanne Langer, Northrop Frye, and Kenneth Burke. I realized through them that my main interest lay not in literature itself but in its social functions. The capacity of literature and other expressive forms to create communities of agreement and understanding seemed profound to me: it seemed, by forging shared meaning, to be constructing the essence of human life itself. It was much later that I learned about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis concerning language and its role in the construction of perceived reality. I saw that to understand how literature created separate worlds of agreement for human beings in different times, places, and cultures, I must study its earliest forms—in other words, oral literature. Visualizing human time as a very tall column of sand in a giant glass test tube, only the top few inches of which were characterized by written works, I looked into the fields of

folklore and oral literature as avenues to comprehending the deep human symbolic past.

One spring break I didn't go home to Austin but stayed in Ann Arbor over the holiday. I had just discovered Marshall McLuhan and was excited about the implications for my work of "medium as message." In the library stacks I found untidy piles of *Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations*, the Canadian media journal started by McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter, which contained publications by both of them. Dusty and freezing in the cold stacks, I read through them all, that holiday, along with books by Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and other "oralists." I was greatly moved by Edmund Carpenter's article "No Upside Down in Eskimo Art." These discoveries respecting the power of media in the framing and creation of meaning brought me the closest yet to my holistic vision of what I was trying to do. What was that? As I then formulated it, I wanted to know *from the inside* what it felt like to be someone from another culture, walking along in a landscape known intimately, practically, and down to its last detail. I was becoming aware that the only way "inside" was through the media and language used by the people in a culture to communicate to each other and potentially to the wider world.

This formulation of my purpose owed something to a fascination I had found as a child in reading folktales (those by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, etc.). I read them not only for their adventurous plots but for the details they contained of life in other cultures and places. I remember my excitement at reading, probably in the brothers Grimm, that a man going on a journey took along a walking stick and some bread and cheese that he put into his wallet. "His *wallet*?" I asked myself. "Clearly there are some things I don't know about the world!" I later learned that language use has both history and variants, and that the same words were often used for different things in different times and places. In a related discovery, I learned that many folktale plots are widespread across the world, despite differences in geography and ecology, and I began to ponder the reasons this might be so. I read James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*, and Arnold van Gennep, and a long, slow fermentation of constructive ideas began. I was fascinated with the idea of the evolutionary value, to human beings, of narrative, and of tracking it back into prehistory.

Shortly after discovering McLuhan, I took my first course in literary criticism. We read the ritual theorists and Aristotle on the ineluctability of tragedy, and the puzzle of how to approach the social functions of literature and art simply cracked open for me then and there. I found that there were knowable relationships between myth, folklore, and lan-

guage, and also that there was an academic field open-ended enough to constitute a matrix for all my vaguely interlocking forms of inquiry. It was called anthropology, a word I had not heard until I was a junior in college. My first course in anthropology was with the ethnologist Leslie A. White, who had recently published *Evolution of Culture*.

White's publication year, 1959, was also the year of the centennial of the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Perhaps not coincidentally, this anniversary helped renew the interest of cultural anthropology, along with many other branches of science, in evolutionary perspectives on its lines of thought. Anthropology, I believed, could bring together for me the worlds of science and the humanities I had thought were separate. I realized that doing justice to my main interests would mean studying social and cultural anthropology, but that, due to disciplinary divisions, I might also need to study several other academic areas, including comparative literature, psychology, and maybe others. I didn't know how I could do that, but I intended to try.

My approach up to this point exhibited my typical overkill, but at the time it seemed to make my path forward clear. It was as if a great moral weight of decision was suddenly taken off my shoulders, and in fact since these junior-year realizations I have never looked back. I jumped into a double major in my senior year at Michigan and graduated in both English and anthropology. I looked around at graduate schools for programs that would allow me to pursue my interests beyond the boundaries of their anthropology departments. I found the perfect situation in Harvard's ad hoc PhD program, which allowed students to custom-tailor their relationships with several departments while centrally pursuing a degree from one of them. I signed up to do a degree in anthropology based at Harvard's Peabody Museum, focusing on social anthropology as one of the subfields (along with archaeology, linguistics, and biological anthropology), in which I would be expected to become competent. I also requested courses and advisors in two other departments, working with Henry A. Murray, a psychologist of personality in the Department of Social Relations, and Albert B. Lord, of the Comparative Literature Department. Lord had collected oral epics in Yugoslavia and cocreated the classic theoretical approach to oral composition and performance with Milman Parry, called the Parry-Lord theory. I was at last, I thought, where I needed to be, to do what I wanted to do.

However, as a former English major, I knew I would have a lot of catching up to do in anthropology. Most of my fellow students had focused on anthropology for the bulk of their undergraduate careers. I also felt, like many students who manage to arrive at Ivy League

schools, that I did not belong at Harvard. My first year I tiptoed timidly around the Peabody Library, the museum, and my study carrel in the attic, terrified that I might run into one of my professors. A newcomer to many anthropological concepts, I battled with the famously rigorous required core courses, fearing one or more of them would cause me to flunk out of grad school. Somehow, though, I managed. I found structural anthropology and symbolic anthropology courses not only more doable but extremely compelling—they were absolutely germane to my evolving approach to myth and oral literature. More than anything else in my life up to that point, I wanted to understand the social implications of shared symbolism. To figure them out, I knew I had to stay at Harvard by hook or by crook. So I muddled through.

One of the happiest experiences of my Harvard years was becoming a teaching fellow for Albert Lord my second year. I heard about Lord's work from a fellow grad student, Chris Boehm, who had already done fieldwork—in Montenegro. Lord's mentor, Milman Parry, had invented an early sound-recording machine using wax cylinders to capture the sounds of oral performances. With the heavy machine strapped to his back, Lord had carted Parry's wax cylinders up the mountains of Montenegro and Albania in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s so they could record Yugoslav epic poetry. Now in the 1960s he was sharing with a generation of students what his Yugoslav work had taught him about the principles of oral epic composition and performance. I began to see that folklore study, far from being some sort of "stepchild" field of anthropology, was itself full of both rigor and insight. In its focus on analysis of recorded texts, I saw, it could constitute my logical bridge between written and oral literature. These influences started to shape my personal approach to the social function of literature. I began to look for a place to do fieldwork where I could try to understand the expressive culture of people still living exclusively "oral" lives.

I found that place when I took an ethnographic film course taught by Robert Gardner, in which Melvin Konner happened to be a fellow student. When Mel heard about my plan to collect oral texts and look at their social function in some nonscribal group, he told me about the Harvard Kalahari Research Group project with hunting-gathering Bushman groups in Botswana. He also told me I should meet Lorna Marshall and read her classic series of papers on the !Kung of the Kalahari. Lorna, seventy years old at that time, had done the pioneering ethnographic work on the !Kung hunter-gatherers (later called the Ju/'hoansi), transforming herself, after the age of sixty, from an English professor into a professional ethnographic researcher and writer. She and her husband, Laurence, had taken their son and daughter,

John and Elizabeth, on a series of expeditions to the Kalahari starting in 1950.

At that time the Peabody Museum could not find a single anthropologist interested enough to undertake the arduous journey to study one of the world's last groups of practicing hunter-gatherers. (By the midsixties, of course, Harvard had become an epicenter devoted to what was then called the "human baseline" provided by the Kalahari peoples and other contemporary hunting and gathering societies.) The Marshalls, however, saw the need early and just got up and went, funding their complex and difficult trips for the Peabody themselves. All four of them contributed irreplaceable work to the understanding of Kalahari peoples: Lorna in ethnography, Laurence in still photography, Elizabeth in her enduring, classic book *The Harmless People*, and John in ethnographic film. Their family home, at 4 Bryant Street in Cambridge, was a stone's throw from the Peabody; Lorna wrote for decades in an upstairs office in that house. I made an appointment with her, we drank tea and talked, and after several such visits she took my breath away by asking me to work for her as a research assistant.

My exciting new life was encompassed within a few magic blocks in Cambridge. Divinity Avenue had both the Peabody Museum ("Peeb" to us grad students) and William James Hall, housing the Social Relations Department (known as "Soc. Rel."). One block away (arrived at by a clandestine passageway alongside a faculty childcare playground between university buildings) was Lorna and Laurence Marshall's house on Bryant Street, with John Marshall's film archive in the basement and Laurence Marshall's still photography archive on an upper floor. Albert and Mary Louise Lord lived right around the corner. Lord's classes in oral literature and folklore were held a couple of streets away on the main campus in the Classics Building, with Widener Library, where the Parry-Lord Collection was housed, just beyond. In film class, across the quad from Widener, Mel told me about the fieldwork he planned to do on infant and child behavior in a newly independent country I had never heard of in southern Africa. It was weeks before the penny dropped for me: a little over a decade after I was bouncing on my parents' bed, the Bechuanaland Protectorate had become Botswana.

I wanted to arrive in my eventual place of fieldwork with my eyes wide open, ready for adventures. But a drone note of anxiety about anthropological practice and theory was constantly sounding in my brain. How could I ever square a welter of first impressions and the joy of detailed learning with the scientific rigor entailed by currently accepted methodology and theory? What about my ongoing human responsibilities to the people I would study, once I had gotten to know them? In

Cambridge my encounters with ideas about cultural evolution, hunter-gatherer studies, and the budding field of “action anthropology” went round and round in my head, generating as-yet-unanswerable questions.

I knew there had been an immense impact on the research consortium I joined, the Harvard Kalahari Research Group, by the Man the Hunter Conference that took place in Chicago in 1966. My two professors Richard Lee and Irven DeVore, along with others who took part in *Man the Hunter*, established the field of hunter-gatherer studies and oriented it in approaches related to both cultural evolutionism and primate studies. So, before and at the start of my fieldwork, I found myself turning into a pretzel trying to fit my ideas about the social function of literature with cultural evolutionary thought in anthropology. This was a nerve-wracking process for a former English major. In the end it was a worthwhile intellectual exercise, landing me somewhere between cultural ecology and an always-questioned “symbolic” fringe area in hunter-gatherer studies. But it involved me very early in wondering whether I could do what Harvard wanted me to do for a PhD and keep true to myself in the process.

I had long been aware that I was a very thin-skinned person. Some said I was hypersensitive, but I knew deep down that empathy was not only a core value to me but one that in any case I seemed to have little choice but to honor. In the pages of my prefieldwork journals, empathy and sympathy vied strongly with intellection for how to know, and how to be with, people in the world. These traits had loomed large, along with intellectual reasons, in my rationale for choosing anthropology. Written anthropological works, especially those by consummate craftspersons of the written word like Lorna Marshall, seemed exciting and filled with human insight. I was thrilled, for instance, with Lorna’s careful, articulate prose about the delicate social balance kept by the !Kung hunter-gatherers’ attention to unwritten social rules. My fellow student at the time, Sarah Blaffer (Hrdy), drew my attention to the !Kung’s “exquisite etiquette,” which the pioneering Lorna Marshall had been first to bring into the ken of anthropology. *The Harmless People*, the evocative book on the Marshall expeditions of the 1950s by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, also inspired me as a fine example of sensitive observation and writing. Elizabeth wrote as empathetically on the Kalahari animals as she did on the people, increasing the richness of her anthropological observations by including the people’s social relationships to the animals and plants of their environment.

Yet in my graduate courses I was being taught a model for how to “do” anthropology that seemed almost mechanistic to me: make a

hypothesis, construct a questionnaire, make numerical observations, crunch the numbers, and either prove or disprove the hypothesis. Where would be the informant individuals in this schema, and where would I be in relationship to them? I couldn't envision myself following people around, watching them, and writing things down about them, knowing that I would be distorting their behavior in the process. It seemed an unequal, and therefore unfair, set of activities. Others might carve out scientific relationships to people as data, I thought, but I promised myself I would always insist on absolute mutuality in all human dealings, especially those with informants, from whom I already felt privileged to be able to learn. Like all absolutes, of course, this ideal was romantic and unrealistic, but I had no idea—yet—just how very much it was so. Nor did I reckon with my eventual informants' insistence, in their turn, on mutuality with *me*—on their own terms.

I was also unrealistic, by academic standards at the time, about how interdisciplinary a thesis I could write and have it accepted. When I submitted my plan for my PhD and fieldwork, I tried to bring together all the relevant paradigms, as well as all the fields of my interest, into what I thought was an innovative, comprehensive "ad hoc" design. I felt that creating an imaginative, innovative, and highly personal plan was exactly what I was at Harvard to do. Only gradually did I see that some of my fellow students—especially the female ones—felt pressure to hitch their plans to a specific professor's wagon in order to ensure a successful graduate career. I was shocked when I realized some of them had arrived at Harvard with ideas as rosy as mine about what they wanted to do, but that they ended up adopting subordinate topics that burnished their professors' academic and research careers instead of their own. I was determined not to capitulate in that way, but as a newcomer to the field of anthropology, I had to rebuild my confidence in my own vision over and over. I felt I had to make double the effort to prove the validity of what I wanted to do.

Aware that my plan was ambitious and perhaps overextended, I pursued it anyway. I was also fully aware that I would have to cover the main anthropological subfields simultaneously for my qualifying and general exams. For a couple of years I felt I couldn't really tell the left hand (which held my anthropology department commitments) what the right hand (which held my oral literature, literary criticism, and psychology involvements) was doing, and vice versa.

This schizy, somewhat grandiose situation was due partly to my not yet having achieved a cohesive vision of what I was doing, and partly to academic politics and disciplinary splits. However, despite the ambiguities of this period I knew I was on the best track for me personally.



Before I left for the field, I trusted that my linking solution would be found embodied in the people with whom I would eventually do fieldwork—in the way they solved the problems of living with each other and within their environment, and in how they felt and talked about these things. I felt this expressive dimension of life was one that had not yet been addressed as fully as it might in the emerging field of hunter-gatherer studies pioneered by Lee, DeVore, and their colleagues. I was hoping, in other words, that I could bring the right and left hands of my studies together by meeting the specific people studied by the Botswana project and experiencing the importance of expression and communication in their hunting and gathering adaptation.

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In the end, I think I was able to do something very like that. In the chapters of this book I explain how experiences I had in those first months of fieldwork set the stage for my lifetime intention. I have spent the ensuing half century advocating on behalf of the Ju//hoansi and other San peoples, largely to foster awareness of the intricate symbolic mechanisms of their egalitarian culture. Wanting to make the expressive art and lessons of the Ju//hoansi more available to the world beyond the Kalahari, I have mostly tried to use, not paraphrases or my own interpretations, but careful transcriptions and translations of their own recorded voices. I wanted to bring readers closer to both the clarity of Ju//hoan thought and to the mystery, especially in the healing dance, of what the Ju//hoansi themselves say is beyond knowing.

I believe I was enabled to do this by the months of fieldwork chronicled in this book. I had the chance to live closely with a group of people who, like their ancestors, thought deeply and acted expressively about the best way to live their lives in the environment that surrounded them. People whose survival depended not only on rigorous sharing but on functioning as a creative, intercommunicating collective. People whose insistence on the equitable sharing of resources was endlessly reinforced by communal artistic and spiritual activities. People whose storytelling created a world of unique agreement among them, a world that was adaptive and functional and enfranchised the imagination of every single individual as part of their ongoing, ever-changing tradition. I learned the lessons I did about living oral and ritual tradition by swimming in the ceaseless tide of energetic variants generated by the several hundred Ju//hoan-speakers—and their storytellers, musicians, singers, and dancers—with whom I came into contact in that first, eighteen-month, slice of time.

My time in Botswana, immersed in the day-to-day context of Ju/'hoan existence, seeking out and easily finding my own "singers of tales," allowed me to bring together evolutionary perspectives with specific ways that storytelling and other arts are enabling for society. I eventually saw that, as in biological evolution, each story, each idea, is a random existential experiment. Stories that work, that enable social cohesion, are among the most important intellectual achievements of humankind. The stories the Ju/'hoansi told themselves over and over about sharing, social cohesion, and the very possibilities of transformation and healing constitute, by constant renewal, the powerful engine that made it possible for them to get along with each other. They told and danced and sang the stories, incorporating the flashes of insight that occurred to different individuals in the process. Stories lived in their never-ceasing variants, born of the involvement of each participant, of each new generation. Their energy, in a very real sense, was drawn from the storytellers and their listeners, the singers and dancers, each time the creative community gathered to celebrate life and challenge death.

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So I knew intuitively that I would find links between cultural expression and cultural adaptation to environment. But it took me a lot of time to convince Irven DeVore that my thesis work would add value to the Harvard Kalahari Research Group. By the late sixties the HKRG had been in operation for more than five years, and it was well-launched in the direction of classic and adaptationist hunter-gatherer studies, with projects ranging from an input-output analysis of !Kung Bushman subsistence and how it was procured, to child and maternal behavior, to archaeological analysis of the material culture of the forebears of the !Kung in the same region—which they had continuously occupied for many tens of thousands of years. The idea that studying the verbal art and other expressive forms of the !Kung (Ju/'hoansi) could contribute materially to an understanding of their society was a hard sell at the time. Mythology and folklore were still seen, as I have said, as "stepchildren" or cultural froufrou by much of anthropology at the time. Though folklore as a field was already on its way to becoming extremely highly regarded at many world universities, ethnographies we were exposed to at Harvard in the late 1960s often relegated expressive culture, myth, and folklore to a final and epiphenomenal "chapter 10." I was on fire to change all that.

Richard Lee was in Canada for the critical semester. So I knew it was up to Irven DeVore to admit me to the project. I tried in vain to

catch him at his office hours. I made appointments with him that he failed to keep. I wrote screeds expanding on what my ideas were and why I thought they would be productive even though they were revolutionary in anthropology at the time (though not so revolutionary, I later learned, in literary criticism, feminist writing, and other fields that were so formative in the enterprise of cultural critique!). I eventually resorted to pushing brief descriptions of my fieldwork hopes and dissertation plans under DeVore's office door. I'm sure I made a pest of myself but I was also absolutely certain that this was what I needed to do and that my research perspective could make a worthwhile contribution to hunter-gatherer studies.

I had a strong feeling that my interdisciplinary approach to the adaptive value of narrative could help to place narrative within the cultural evolution paradigm. Too bad I did not know then what Richard Lee's teacher Sherwood Washburn, perhaps the main founder of US primate studies, who also influenced hunter-gatherer studies, had already said in 1951. In his essay "The New Physical Anthropology," Washburn had made a clarion call for using a multidisciplinary approach to human evolution, because evolution itself was multidisciplinary! Luckily, in the end I was written into the big National Institutes of Mental Health grant Lee and DeVore were applying for at the time. I was to be the last of their graduate students to work at the Harvard camp at Dobe, Botswana. I was launched. I congratulated myself on having made my point. Yet years later, DeVore chuckled as he told me why he had finally instructed Lee to admit me to the project: "You were so damn persistent I just decided you'd probably make a good field-worker!"

Membership in the small, special group of Lee and DeVore's graduate students has, even beyond academic concerns, profoundly influenced my life and continues even now to do so. Humanitarian impulses eventually led me and my HKRG colleagues toward activist work on behalf of the community we studied. Together we founded the Kalahari Peoples Fund, at this writing in its fiftieth year as an active and well-regarded US 501(c)(3) nonprofit. I should point out that I did not set out to become involved in "action anthropology" or "development anthropology." When I started my career I cared most about how expressive forms held a society—through its individuals—together. I was becoming more and more convinced that it was symbolic reinforcement via multiple forms of cultural media—everything from rock engravings and paintings to songs, oral poetry, and folklore—that cemented understandings in a society so that diverse individuals could coexist and get on with the business of group survival. I realized dimly that narrative forms were somehow of vast importance in this mix. Though the

idea that we're "hardwired for narration" is commonplace by now, it was an intriguing new idea for anthropology at the time. It took me some time to realize I might show how narration helps us understand the hunting-gathering adaptation by studying it in a specific context.

At the same time, I was striving to incorporate into my theoretical purview the realizations about knowledge, memory, and creativity that came of my interdisciplinary approach to the importance of expressive forms. As I've said, in grad school I was catapulted into theoretical trends, issues, and debates. Harvard at the time followed British functionalist anthropology in speaking of "social" (rather than "cultural") anthropology. But the Harvard Kalahari Research Group's adaptationist paradigm postdated and challenged British functionalism. Due to my recent switch from English literature to anthropology, all such theoretical stances were new to me, and I struggled to find a way to make my work comprehensible within them. I made an uneasy truce in my mind by adopting the current labeling of all social practices as "adaptations," a concept familiar to me from biology. Meanwhile I went ahead with my grander plan based on the strong visceral conviction that the synthesis I intended actually existed on a different level from competing theories. I thought this level was still to be discovered by me and/or others, and I intended to give that a try. (If theories were competing, I reasoned, wasn't reality still in question?) I was heartened by this notion.

I also remained deeply stirred by the insights coming from hunter-gatherer studies that were developing institutionally right under my nose at Harvard. Though because of the ambitious interdisciplinary path I had charted for myself I didn't manage to actually enroll in any of the large and popular hunter-gatherer courses taught by DeVore and others, I was getting the basics of these courses practically by osmosis from fellow students with whom I hung out. The powerful data and insights presented in these courses foreshadowed the great themes of folklore and the social organization of hunter-gatherers that still animate my life, especially the strengths of their sharing and their social egalitarianism.

What, I realized later, I *didn't* get from my time in grad school was any real sense of what doing fieldwork with hunter-gatherers, or "former foragers"—or in fact with anybody—would actually be like. In particular it is ironic that, sitting in a well-funded, internationally acknowledged center of research on the Ju/'hoan San ("Bushman") people, many of whom were still living by hunting and gathering, a center with access to huge files of photographs and comprehensive bodies of ethnographic film and sound recordings, I managed to get the idea that

doing fieldwork with the Ju/'hoansi in Botswana would be a quiet, calm experience. I guess I was expecting my time with them to be one of principled “participatory” observation, but observation nevertheless, experiencing the peaceful coexistence, selfless sharing, and mutual caring of people in a well-oiled social machinery that had stood the test of time. I never in a million years expected the confusing din, the unfulfillable demands, and the puzzling contradictions that met me on arrival—and that stayed with me, off and on, for the next eighteen months (not to mention for years thereafter)!

In chapter 2, I present a simulacrum of the welter of chaotic impressions that hit me in my first days in Botswana. Even here, many major themes of that first fieldwork start to emerge: how to cope with the physical and social demands of being there; issues of sharing, giving, and remuneration; and my first healing dance and the importance the healing beliefs began to take on as I planned my work. That I am able to access now both unvarnished first impressions and the process by which the larger themes developed is largely due to one of my professors at Harvard, Dr. Cora Du Bois. I never forgot her injunction to me and fellow students embarking on fieldwork to write down our impressions “before the scale of custom forms upon your eyes.” Thanks to her, I can call on nineteen notebooks full of such observations—and of notes about how I scrambled to keep my head above water during my revealing, but often excruciating, field experience. These raw, untidied anecdotes reflect what were for me a necessary precursor to whatever understanding I finally achieved from that experience—not only about the Ju/'hoansi but about myself.



## THE HARVARD CAMP AT DOBE

Botswana and Namibia (in 1970 still South West Africa) are two of the most arid countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Water is a limiting factor in many areas, and variability in the timing, amount, and distribution of rainfall has to be considered carefully by local people in the planning of their everyday activities. People, wildlife, and livestock depend almost entirely on ephemeral rivers, surface water after rains, small springs, and deep groundwater. There are seasonal wildlife migrations, but not in the huge numbers found in places like Kenya and Tanzania with more abundant water and grasslands. Many of the same animals, such as wildebeest and large antelopes, exist in the Kalahari as in East Africa, but they are more likely to be encountered in small groupings. They were hunted by the Botswana Ju/'hoansi with poisoned arrows, a technology requiring a huge amount of environmental knowledge, technical skill, and athleticism. Their wild food gathering also required a high degree of expertise and information.

The area where the Ju/'hoan hunter-gatherers resided when I arrived in Africa stretched from Tsumkwe and areas slightly west of there in South West Africa to Dobe, just inside the Botswana border, and from there east to the towns of Gomare, Tsau, and Sehitwa near the Okavango Delta (see map). Sehitwa sat just north of Lake Ngami, south of which was the Naro-speaking San area that included Ghanzi. The remote Dobe area was characterized by Richard Lee as "a hunting-gathering stronghold" but also contained both Herero and Tswana cattle herding groups, and was under the control of a Tswana chief, Isak Utuhile. The Ju/'hoan people were clustered and relatively isolated at Dobe, but some of them also lived and worked for Tswana and Herero in small villages east of there, including Mahopa, !Aoaan, and G!o'oce.

In 1970 most of the Dobe people's subsistence was gained by hunting and gathering in an area as far as the abundant mongongo nut groves to the north of their settlements near Dobe pan (a seasonal pond) south towards the marula trees of the Aha Hills. The people moved their camps often as rains fell or as waters dried up during the season, following the ripening of known plants and the movements of animals. Not classic nomads in the sense of trekking vast distances with herds to

grazing and water, they were better understood as “tethered nomads,” pursuing the water and resources in a roughly circular, fairly predictable, annual round of gathering and hunting areas, building new huts of sticks and grass at each new place they settled.

The Harvard camp at Dobe in Ngamiland, far northwestern Botswana, was a mile from the five-foot-tall barbed-wire fence that then marked the border with South West Africa. It stood literally at the end of the road we had traveled on since Maun. When we arrived after two exhausting days of grinding through heavy sand and climbed out of the Land Rover, the quiet was so profound I could hear my blood singing in my ears. It felt like we had reached the end of the earth.

Expecting somehow to find there a clearly delineated order and evenly spaced, sturdy canvas tents, I was amazed at the camp’s air of disorder and insubstantiality. In its fewer than seven years of existence, it seemed to have been ground into pale powder and straw by relentless sun, wind, and rain. The camp consisted of a roughly circular wattle-and-daub kitchen thatched with dry, disheveled grass, and a few worn and torn canvas tents at varying distances down bumpy sand paths from the kitchen. There was also a rakishly angled *tjipitju* (house of metal objects)—a tool shed—nearby. Beyond the circle of tents, the camp rubbish pits seemed to be accumulating middens—layered deposits of food, empty tins, and paper refuse—that would become archaeological conundrums of the future. (“What were these people *doing* out here, in the last decades of the twentieth century?”) Marj and Mel’s tent was nearest the kitchen, and mine was pitched some fifty yards away, close by but far enough to seem remote and on the edge of things when the moon rose, or when jackals or hyenas howled at night.

The camp was separated that extra-rainy rainy season from the Dobe Ju’hoan people’s camp by a shallow pan, a temporary pond called a *dobe*. In these seminomadic people’s lives this pond was recurrently important as a congregating place during the rainy season. A few hours after our arrival I met the people from G/aq’o Kopela Maswe’s village, the group with whom the HKRG had its closest ties. Maybe twenty of them came to visit us, men, women with babies slung close to their backs, girls, and little boys, wading through the clear water of the pan. I could hardly breathe for excitement. Was I at last here among the people I had read so much about? Was this going to be just like in the ethnographic films? I thought I recognized some of the people from pictures in educational materials that had been prepared by other HKRG members, including Pat Draper and John Yellen, for the Educational Development Corporation (EDC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I tried to say the greetings I had learned from Richard Lee and Pat Draper and

had practiced endlessly on shipboard. But the croak I managed could barely be heard above the cacophony of cheerful greetings that came to Marjorie and Mel—and by extension to me—from the little group of men, women, and children.

However, I was given no time to feel awkward. The value of arriving as part of a group with long-established relationships became immediately apparent. Here is an excerpt from my journal of that day:

We went [first] to Mahopa and met !Xuma's wife on the trail. He and she barely greeted each other after three weeks' absence, though her greetings for us were effusive. At Dobe we were warmly greeted too. It was wonderful to get here. The [HKRG] camp is all windswept dry grass and rustling thatch, picturesque and casual and scruffy. We spent the afternoon unloading the truck and putting up tents, etc. Towards evening the people began to come back for talk and tobacco and medicine. Mel gave a man an injection for venereal disease. Marjorie put eye drops in two babies' eyes. The people sat around talking and watching their children play wild tumbling and chasing games. It was very easy, informal, and happy—I felt little constraint from doing just what I wanted—which was watching, trying to talk a little, playing with the children. As it got dark, the people slowly left. We had supper in the crazy, pleasant, thatched kitchen . . . We are getting up at dawn tomorrow to go hunting, so I came down to my tent early. After a very much-needed bath taken in rain water that collected [in a huge pool] on my tent canvas, I am in bed.

Of course, this scene of my first camp day was played out before I understood much at all of what people were saying. In hindsight, I am glad to have had some halcyon days before I commanded more of the language. They made me aware of how prone to romanticization outside observers can be if they do not understand the speech of people they are observing. Little did I guess that the cheerful smiles, chatter, and laughter that greeted our arrival were closely mixed with witty and absolutely hyperbolic complaints about us and how little we had brought the people from Maun!

Though my time with Mel and Marjorie in Botswana was relatively brief, it was packed, like my arrival, with memorable "Kalahari firsts." One of these "firsts" involved the name Ju/'hoan people would know me by. Others in the HKRG had been given Ju/'hoan names by people who wanted to establish special relationships with them, and I wondered whether and when this might happen for me too. Before leaving Cambridge, I had learned that Irven DeVore was known in northwestern Botswana as N!aici N!a'an (Old N!aici), and Richard Lee, who had



a beard at the time, as /Kunta Tzi!kui (/Kunta Whiskers). A few days in, Kopela Maswe's wife, Baq'u, jumped up without preamble from the little crowd of women with whom she was sitting and "gave me her name." I felt she had been waiting to "claim" me, and I was concerned about the gift-giving responsibilities this might entail in the future. But over time I found the namesake relationship had many dimensions beyond the economic ones I expected. My social and spiritual mentorship by Baq'u persisted, in fact, for almost fifty years until her recent death. Lorna Marshall was so right about how significant this name relationship was for the !Kung: when my name in Botswana became "Baq'u," a world of fictive but powerful kin-like relationships with Ju/'hoansi was opened up for me. I felt these links as a kind of glow, or channel, that made deeper communication possible. The channel was particularly clear with the woman who had made the original gesture—I think precisely *because* she had made it. The power of the channel was palpable, and prompted me to contribute to making it stronger together as time went on.

But the origin of the power of this connection remained a kind of mystery. For one thing, I was puzzled by the fact that Baq'u, along with all the other Ju/'hoansi, appeared to have absolutely no interest in where I came from or what my life was like there. Aside from wondering why I, a woman of marriageable age, was in Dobe with no husband and no children, little curiosity was shown about me by any Ju/'hoansi. Marj and Mel said that was still true for them also, even after two full years. Together, we shook our heads over the one-sidedness of the flow of cultural and personal knowledge here. Only later would this impression be rectified for me, as mutual experience gradually cemented my relationships with specific individuals. (And as I became aware that, as absolutely centered on their own lives and families as the Ju/'hoansi were, it was no wonder they expended little energy on asking about our faraway families and experiences!)

Remaining puzzled at the time, though, we said that the name relationship was probably most deeply involved with more tangible things and agreed that for now we'd have to leave it at that. We knew that namesakes and fictive kinship were involved in things like reciprocal gift-giving and thus also with asking for gifts. In her classic chapter "Sharing, Talking, and Giving," Lorna Marshall wrote of a !Kung man who said he didn't mind being asked for gifts, that asking "formed a love" between people. Lorna wrote: "At least it formed a communication of some sort between people, I thought" (Marshall 1976: 310). I remembered Lovina Thibodeaux and the easy way she and I could both ask for and receive things from each other. I knew that the channel of

fictive kinship was a kind of love, socially and symbolically created. I felt that this and other understandings of social life were what I must center my anthropological work on. They became the predominant themes of both my field notes and many of my later writings.

When writing my notes, I was remembering Dr. Du Bois's admonition to write down impressions while they were still fresh, and was taking it seriously. Each day at Dobe was packed with new experiences. On December 12, the day after we arrived, I wrote this.

I was awakened by =Oma !Oma [one of the young Dobe men who had worked for Pat Draper and her husband Henry Harpending] at dawn to go hunting. We drove out along the [South West African] border looking for tracks. Within minutes fresh warthog spoor was seen by Kopela Maswe from the top of the Land Rover. We stopped and the dogs were off on its trail. Mel and the two Bushmen ran behind them with spears, while Marj and I followed as fast as we could with cameras. At one point the warthog made an abrupt about-face and nearly charged Mel. But it ran past him and Marj and I got a close view of it streaking across country, its black back hairs erect above a nail-grey body. The next time we saw it the Bushmen had stabbed it with spears and were standing over it, exclaiming happily. By the time they had it cut up and disemboweled and we carried it back to the truck, it was only 7:30 AM.

We continued further up the border in search of more game, but saw no promising spoor. We returned to the Dobe village with the meat. There we saw the inside of /Kaece's house with its ostrich-eggshell water carriers, shelled mongongos, and beaded headbands. We talked to Kopela Maswe about giving me some language lessons. He agreed to do it in the afternoon. We came back to our camp and had breakfast. We talked about nutrition, looked at each other's books, built some bookshelves, talked to some Bushmen women who came by to see Marj. Then I went for my language lesson. It was amazing to sit in the village all by myself with about six of the men and be talking to them, learning words. I had a wonderful time and concentrated very hard. Then I came back to our camp and put my tent in order. The old men arrived for Mel's "seminar" then and we all gathered in the *tjipitju*. The topic was the ancient times before the animals became human beings.

Very quickly an old woman, //Xukxa N!a'an, took the stage as a storyteller. She told and pantomimed several animal stories—it was just great to listen to her, even though I didn't understand. Marj, Mel, and I resolved to film and tape-record this same kind of thing tomorrow. When the people went home, Mel helped me put my bed up off the ground so snakes wouldn't crawl into it. The sun set and a full moon rose. It feels more and

more wonderful to be here every day. The atmosphere is so relaxed and low-key that I feel not anywhere near the tenseness I thought I would. I'm really enjoying this. Maybe that's why I seem to have amazing stamina compared to my earlier lack of energy.

For dinner I cooked thick warthog steaks. They were absolutely delicious—like good, good porkchops with no fat on them. They say if an animal is killed relatively quickly the meat does not taste so gamy as it does if the animal is at bay for a long time and the tissues are full of adrenalin. We drank rosé with dinner and listened to medieval harp music. . . . I seem to have so much to report that my journal has little depth since I have arrived in Botswana. I hope to get settled down soon and start putting down my feelings in a more coherent way.

DECEMBER 13, 1970

Things are still happening too fast. This morning we got up at dawn again to hunt. After an exhausting and much longer run than yesterday the men killed another warthog, stabbing it with spears after having run it into its burrow. Mel had delivered the fatal stab. When Marj and I arrived he looked winded, sweaty, and proud. . . . When we got back to camp Kommtsa /Ui was there, he whose [nick]name I was told means “if there is only one egg left in a nest, the others must have been eaten.” Mel asked him to do *hante*, a kind of dialogue story. He started in beautifully, with Kopela Maswe echoing him. They told a hunting story in a special rhythm with echoes. It was beautiful and hypnotic. This is the kind of thing I want to understand completely.

Marj and I then went into their hut to do yoga relaxations. We both fell asleep the minute we finished them! Then we got up and made warthog steaks for brunch. I had a language lesson in the afternoon, worked on the tape recorder, sewed, and visited. In the evening we talked about the political future of the Bushmen. Mel's theory is that the South West African counterinsurgency forces want to amass Bushmen on their side of the fence in order to use them against Herero and “terrorists.” The border police are making lavish gifts to !Kung [Bushmen, San] and trying to persuade them to move to Tsumkwe. As yet no settlement scheme there. But as Mel says, it looks like the Bushmen's future is either second-class citizenship in Botswana or the lives of mercenaries in SWA [South West Africa]. He feels the only alternative is for the Herero to see the necessity of joining forces with Bushmen and of raising their economic status along with their political consciousness.

In my first three days at Dobe, then, I not only went hunting twice, participated in the bringing home of game meat, and cooked and ate

it, but was exposed to storytelling (even dialogue storytelling!), had language lessons, and had serious discussions with Mel and Marjorie about the ethnic and national politics in which our hosts were enmeshed. The immersion was extremely busy and rich in new experiences for me. I benefited immensely from the facts that the Ju/'hoan community by then already had nearly two years of familiarity with Mel and Marj, and that they welcomed me readily as a member of Irven DeVore's team. My life with the Ju/'hoansi started off at a rapid pace, and it never let up as long as I was there. Already on my fourth day I was writing about the vital topic of remuneration to informants, one that occupied me throughout my fieldwork.

DECEMBER 14, 1970

One of the most important lessons Mel and Marj seem to have learned through much agonizing and are passing on quickly to me is that it is a racist attitude to expect Bushmen to give us any information without our paying for it in their currency. We have no right to expect that, just because we're white and rich, these people should sit down and spend time with us and pour out the inmost feelings of their hearts and the secrets of their culture for nothing. It is a much more radical solution to set up a business relationship as the basis of the exchange of information, rather than to try to force the establishment of a tenuous web of exploitation of a people's basic politeness and respect for foreigners. It is a civilized way of doing business with a people who may never in their lifetimes comprehend an abstract idea like "social science." The business relationship can then serve as the foundation for more close personal involvement because the basic trust that their dignity as autonomous persons will be respected has already been established. I can see the wisdom of this position immediately—it is a stand against the kind of ripping-off that has gone on in anthropology for a long time.

Later, now, after many experiments and debates around this issue of exchanges and research, I am aware it is almost never possible to establish a single rule to fit all situations. A research relationship is but one in the huge class of human relationships that must be negotiated and renegotiated depending on an immense array of variables. As I went forward in time I came to see the goal in my research as full attention to whatever arrangement fostered the clarity of the channel of communication at the time and in the place. I had particular success with models of exchange familiar to both my culture and Ju/'hoan culture—one of which I will discuss in the next chapter on how I worked with the Ju/'hoansi in recording folklore and oral history. But at the

time of my discussions with Mel and Marj, it was good to have one end of the spectrum of possibilities articulated in this way. So I began to try to balance this idea of a “business relationship” with my growing appetite to pursue the understandings with one another that hold Ju/’hoan life together. So many of these understandings were and are symbolic: I began to focus on the real power in Ju/’hoan life of metaphor and mediated meanings. Already on December 15, 1970, I had the chance to be present at a throwing of oracle disks, circles of dried eland hide about two inches across, that were flung into the air and gravely interpreted according to how they came down on the sand. They were given designations like “the village,” “the waterhole,” “the people,” “the animals.”

DECEMBER 16, 1970

The disk-throwing prophecy has fulfilled my wildest expectations. . . . It has the elements of projective test (access for me to the subconscious), dramatic performance (access for me to ideas of art), and their combination in prophecies with definite structural form. The conversation with God seems to be at least semiformulaic. The man emerged from the two-hour session in something like a trance, didn’t know where his village was anymore.

The last two days have been very trying, filled with sick people, sick babies, medicine running out, two tape recorders and all the trucks broken. Yesterday there was a beautiful time, though, when I was walking back from the Bushman village with my new puppy. My little friend //Xukxama and another little girl came with me, excited by a coming thunderstorm. They turned somersaults and did great, one-armed cartwheels almost the whole way, yelling KARO-O-ORA! in the thunder. The cool was a great relief from the heat, which had been around 111 degrees F[ahrenheit]. I got back to my tent just as it was blowing down, and took refuge in it with the dog. *Everything* got wet and dirty and blown over. Later people came to rescue me and found me and the dog wrapped up and huddled in the wreckage of the tent like Wol [Winnie the Pooh’s owl friend, whose house blew down in a storm]. We put the tent back up again with great effort. Naturally during the night another huge storm came and blew it down again.

Instead of the “desert” I was expecting to work in, I found myself during the prodigious Kalahari rainy season of 1970–71 in what seemed an immense tropical downpour lasting many weeks. I was able to siphon all my bathwater from a big puddle that formed heavily and precariously over me in the tent canvas every night—every night, that is, that the tent didn’t actually blow down. Happily, though, I was able to use one of the first Ju/’hoan sentences Pat Draper had taught me: *Maq du taqm tju o mima!* The wind has blown my tent down! It was much



**Figure 2.1.** //Xukxama. © Megan Biesele.

later that I learned I had wrongly used the plural form of the verb *du taqm* (*du n=hao*) for “blow down,” since in this case the object—tent—was singular, and the form of this Ju//hoan transitive irregular verb was determined by the number of its objects, not its subject. But the people knew exactly what I was talking about and seemed delighted to continue teaching me. They were very generous, and besides, my mistakes were always good for a laugh.

Language learning was the foundational task I had set myself. The Ju//hoan language was at the time completely oral: it had no orthography, no dictionary, no literature. A few Afrikaner and German linguists had begun translating the Bible into Ju//hoan in a cumbersome orthography written under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church: we heard they had started with the book of Mark. The Harvard project was not in regular touch with them, and did not include any linguists. But Pat Draper, who had completed her fieldwork at Dobe some years earlier, overlapping with Mel and Marj in 1969 as they overlapped with me in 1970, had a good oral command of the language. For my language study Pat and I used some admittedly impressionistic written material she and our teacher Richard Lee had prepared. Two decades went by before a practical, professional orthography of Ju//hoan was created by Patrick Dickens—and that took place in the Ju//hoan-speaking area across the international border in South West Africa, just as it was

gaining independence as Namibia. Only after 1990 did Ju/'hoan spellings begin to standardize along professional linguistic lines, and only then were a dictionary, grammar, and literacy curriculum adopted by both the Ju/'hoan people and the Namibian government. In contrast, the Botswana government has not, at this writing, yet recognized this language nor allowed its orthography, dictionary, and learning materials to be used in schools, though there were signs in 2022 of some progress in that direction.

So my oral learning of the language had begun in the three months I was at Dobe, in the most hands-on way imaginable—during the many activities that were the daily bread of old-timey-style fieldwork. I spent these months focused on learning Ju/'hoansi well enough to begin to work firsthand without an interpreter. This period provided the groundwork for the total language immersion I experienced after Mel and Marjorie returned to the US. From then on, except during provisioning trips to Maun or when visited by itinerant diamond prospectors, I was on my own without anyone to speak English with—a good formula for language acquisition. For me, the roughly six months—half at Dobe and half at my eventual camp nearer to Maun—before I felt I could begin recordings and interviews, was a glorious period of participant observation. I found myself greedily hanging as much new vocabulary as possible each day on a scaffolding of hands-on ethnography.

Though I had started language lessons with Kopela Maswe, it became clear that Pat Draper's own teacher, the older man !Xuma (also known as !Xuma N!aeba, or "!Xuma, father of N!ae"), who had traveled with me, Mel, and Marjorie back from Maun, would be my best choice for a regular language teacher. !Xuma spoke no English, and this fact turned out to be key in my learning process. I could only ask questions about language in Ju/'hoansi, and !Xuma answered them in Ju/'hoansi, vastly improving my vocabulary and grammar in the process. As a bonus, which seemed miraculous at the time, !Xuma was also willing to be one of two Dobe people I would employ to accompany me to Ghanzi, some two hundred kilometers to the southeast as the crow flies, the intended site of my own camp. After Mel and Marj left in a few months, Irven DeVore had instructed me, I should move my camp to this town, where he thought a single female field-worker would be safer than at Dobe but still have close access to Bushmen people. The second person who materialized to accompany me was a younger man, =Oma !Oma, whom Henry Harpending had trained in Land Rover repair and maintenance. I was amazed at the ease with which these arrangements were made, but of course at the time I was not yet reckoning with the ceaseless tide

of conversation that went on among the Ju/'hoansi as to how my life in their region should be organized.

DECEMBER 17, 1970

Already both !Xuma and =Oma !Oma have expressed a desire to go with me to Ghanzi. Both would be invaluable—!Xuma can speak both Tswana and Herero fluently, and =Oma can repair Land Rovers and even drive them. I like them both, too. I had no idea things would fall into place so easily. Other things, of course, come hard: decisions like the distribution of food, medicine, and tobacco are agonizing. The absolutes of wealth and poverty must be confronted—there is little place here for euphemism, bandying, or deception. The absolutes of giving and receiving are shrewdly known.

DECEMBER 18, 1970

This morning I got up at dawn to go out gathering with Tci!xo and Baq'u. We had been out about an hour when suddenly Baq'u pointed ahead and said, "g!aih!" Both women ran for cover and I followed. [I hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of what they had seen.] Luckily I had my list of animals along so that as soon as we stopped behind an anthill I found out that the animal was a wildebeest. Baq'u ran off to the village with [her little son] Kxaoma on her back to fetch some men. Tci!xo and I and Raspberry [Mel and Marj's dog] kept watch on the wildebeest. We watched it for nearly an hour before Baq'u and N/haokxa and their children came. The hunters had circled around to the north of the animal, and I never saw them. Soon there was running and Raspberry was barking off in the distance.

But the women didn't want to follow. We went on gathering. //Xukxama with her little digging stick was tiny and efficient and perfect. We came to a pan of indifferent water, and the children waded into it and drank. I watched them and thought how they looked like graceful animals lapping the water. (I told Mel and Marj this when I got back, and precipitated an interesting discussion of the racism involved in romantic picturings of the noble savage).

I remember feeling rebuked during this discussion but knowing immediately how right the rebuke was: I should not have likened people, however picturesque, to animals. It was one of a number of crystal clear learning events I have remembered as if they happened yesterday. Many such events had to do with exposing and rectifying romantic pre-conceptions with which I had arrived. Others had to do with ways to cope with the psychic demands of fieldwork, which were also very different from the expectations with which I had come to Dobe.



I have reflected often in later years how fortunate I was to have as mentors Mel and Marjorie. These two initiates to the fieldwork experience still struggled visibly with many of the selfsame dilemmas I myself was facing and would face after they had left. Far from recollecting their emotions in tranquility and passing down their assembled advice from a place of higher wisdom, my fellow graduate students expressed their continuing anguish via admonitions that clearly contained scoldings they had quite recently given themselves. At the time I felt apprehensive about the next mistake I knew I would make and for which I could be brought up short. But the immediacy of some of Marj's and Mel's responses actually paid off for me in terms of the rapidity with which I learned important lessons. For one thing, I had an unparalleled chance to begin planning how I would do things differently in my own camp once this necessarily exhausting and stressful initiatory period with my tired mentors was over.

DECEMBER 19, 1970

Last night Mel read me some of the entries in the journal he kept when he and Marj first came to Dobe. Much of [his writing] was enthusiastic and romantic, the way I feel now and write now. At this point he is much too depressed to keep a journal [he said], and if he did it would probably be very gloomy. I decided due to his example to begin now to keep an event calendar separately from this journal. The event calendar can be telegraphic, enumerative; this one ought to be more thoughtful, and not receive entries every day, but when it does, it should get good and careful ones. . . .

It's been a topic of interest to me to notice how my language ability seems to fluctuate precisely with my fluctuations in moods of openness and closedness towards people. I guess when I really *want* to communicate I can find ways to do it. I make more of an effort to get access to bits of information I have stored somewhere. When I am feeling "inward," weak, wanting to be alone, there is first the resistance to communication that must be overcome and then also the language barriers to be crossed.

I find that I am still sufficiently unattuned to the language that I can "tune it out"—I can let it become a jumble of meaningless sounds whenever I want to. I seem to be able to be calm and unworried so much of the time here that I let myself do this quite often. I really don't feel much sense of rush about learning at all—it's coming fast enough without my straining. Often I just sit with people and let their words turn into clicks and strange breaths and high and low tones, and just smile and enjoy being with them.

By December 21st, however, I had gone through several vacillations in language confidence. I said in my journal:

I feel an almost superstitious doubt that I will ever learn this language. I feel stymied by it today, like I've reached an elementary plateau beyond which I cannot go. Maybe something in myself will keep me from learning. Maybe this is the learning task in which my doubts about myself will be at last justified. I fear that there is some logic, some truth, some actuality which is beyond my mind, and that it has been only by dint of patching things together with bubblegum and great deception that I've been able to come this far in my academic life.

Mel helped me immensely with my ditherings about whether I would learn the language effectively. He said simply, "Megan, it's an innate capacity of the human mind to learn language." So I relaxed, and eventually I got comfortable with it, and was able to get to work.

DECEMBER 21, 1971 (continued)

We talked tonight about [Claude] Lévi-Strauss's observation that doing fieldwork is like [psycho]analysis. In the sense that trying to make contact with strangers is like the frustration generated by confronting a nondirective analyst, creative contact with one's own self is fostered. The rules of social interaction are not understood, only groped for, in both situations, and one is thrown back wholly upon one's own resources. . . . I feel that being here may well have some [therapeutic] effect on me. The elements of my not being able to rely yet on Bushmen for approval to keep up my self-esteem and of my feeling about them that they are more tolerant of casual coming and going, combined with my relative insulation from being judged by them due to my status as a mysterious "European" [the word used for white people in general is /*hun*, or steenbok, an antelope whose red skin is seen to look like those of sunburned white people visiting or colonizing southern Africa,] . . . may help me to act, and let other people act, more independently. . . . I also have the feeling that Bushmen are more emotionally independent anyway, due to the way they are raised.

Looking back now on these journal pages that unthinkingly equated "inwardness" with "weakness," I understand how little my own culture of the time valued the introversion in which I clearly specialized. I was also fresh from some painful challenges to my sense of emotional independence in that a romantic relationship in Boston had ended abruptly for me just before I left for Africa. I was questioning personality and autonomy issues continually in my journals, and these became thoroughly entwined with the relationship issues of fieldwork. Like any traditional initiate, I was wide open to social learning at this stage of my life. I was paying rapt attention. The clues to Ju/'hoan personality

formation that were all around me were falling on fertile soil. I began to see avenues toward an important life goal I had formulated—“to act, and let other people act, more independently”—and to school myself to openness for this every day.

In contrast to these new possibilities I was glimpsing for myself as a newcomer, Mel and Marjorie seemed to have become more stressed and depressed as time went on during their fieldwork. I had had quite a few occasions to see how much they both sometimes enjoyed being with the Ju/'hoansi: Mel loved babies so much he was often chortling along with them as he studied their development, and Marjorie had a delightful, intimate rapport with the women she was interviewing. But they both spoke of being unhappy now a lot of the time, and ready to leave for home. I began to wonder whether their unhappiness may have had something to do with the pressure to get the requisite academic work done before they left. I thought this pressure may have gradually eroded the simple human joy they might have originally felt at being with these amazingly welcoming people in this beautiful semidesert. Marjorie even mentioned how disappointed she was in herself that she felt that, due to work, she could no longer just pick up her camera and go off for a restorative stroll alone, as she saw me doing when I needed quiet. (Later I was to experience this same feeling of time constraint about work, as well as the difficulty of going off alone once I learned the language. People I encountered on going off on a stroll wanted to either accompany me and talk or make sure I didn't get lost!)

My event calendar for December 22, 1970, described a full and complex day that not only addressed questions of work and balance, togetherness and aloneness, but also culminated in amazement at my first trance dance. I also learned that though Ju/'hoansi were eager to have the benefits of the little Western medicine we could provide, their own long-standing healing tradition was alive and well and existed for them in a separate and supremely important realm. This realization was in keeping with my dawning understanding of them as balanced opportunists, drawing eclectically and unapologetically on both their own and any other available resources.

Yesterday was an up-and-down day. Did yoga by myself, had breakfast, helped Mel treat sick people. Then came to my tent to work on letters, but women started showing up. Tci!xo, Kxamce, N/haokxa, N=aisa. I really didn't want to see them but it took me a long time to tell them to go away. Got a headache as a consequence. In afternoon went over to the *tju/ho* [village] and everyone seemed grabby and I was depressed and couldn't talk. Came back to my tent in gloom. [Then] Mel came and told me someone

had actually asked him with interest who his and Marjie's parents were. He said he had been doing baby observations but hadn't felt like going on with them, so had just talked. I said I thought that the odious necessity of being an observer of these people may have been one factor in the barrier he has felt of getting to know them as people. I think he may resent them for the fact that he must get up each day [and] observe them, and they in turn sense this. Certainly their attitude towards him as an observer would be different from their attitude toward him as a friend. Mel and Marj both are coming around to this [point of view]—Mel says it is partly as a result of my being here and seeing things with fresh eyes. I'm very glad.

While we were eating supper after a sunset walk to the Dobe pan, a dance started over at !Xuma's hut. We went to join it. I sat with the women and clapped and tried to sing. When !Xuma started trancing, I got very excited and awed and felt like I would very happily have cried. To see at last that this thing I had heard about for so long was a true thing involving individual people I could come to know and love was just too beautiful. How wonderful that this fine thing was not just made up by anthropologists but really existed spontaneously in western Ngamiland a few days before Christmas 1970!

At this dance I saw men of all ages dancing with other men and boys of all ages, their short, precise steps moving them in a slowly revolving circle around seated women who were clapping and singing with other women and girls of all ages. Younger children clustered closely with their mothers and aunties in the tight circle on the sand. Babies were in laps or right up next to their mothers' bodies, skin to skin at the dance just as they were most of the time everywhere, absorbing the rhythm and the singing through their bodies as well as through their ears.

It was also at this dance that I first experienced the transporting power of *sa*, a fragrant powder that Ju/'hoan women pound from plant roots and keep in decorated tortoise-shell boxes hanging from leather thongs around their necks. I had learned from Marjorie that women selected the plants whose scents they loved best, in effect creating personalized designer perfumes. These variations of their *sa*, so closely identified with the individual woman who made them, were thought to be intensely erotic, and many subtle jokes were made about their use in attracting and seducing men. Yet *sa* used in the dance was also a substance used for spiritual cleansing, and to facilitate temporary passage to the other world, the world where healing could take place, the world to which a healer could travel on so-called threads of the sky to request that God spare the life of someone who was ill. Some-

times a woman wearing a shell box with *sa* in it would leap up from the circle of singing women to fling pinches of the fragrant powder at men who were dancing strongly and going into trance, to honor their hard work of spirit travel and healing. I came to love and revel in this powerful scent myself: once I recognized its delightful power, I found ways to make sure I always had a fresh supply the whole time I was in Botswana.

I used *sa*, just as the Ju/'hoansi did, to lift my spirits when feeling downcast, and to transcend difficult situations. “Up and down” (or “down and up”) was a very realistic way to describe many of our days. Just as things were seeming hopeless, some unexpected breakthrough—like this dance—would occur. Just as often, some peak experience would be followed by a plunge back into frustration and difficulties. On December 23, I wrote:

Today at the Mahopa waterhole I had an insight about Mel which I think explains a lot of his actions. He very unhappily took off his shirt, shoes, and belt, and withdrew everything from the pockets of his shorts. Then, almost desperately, he said, “I’m going in.” He seemed to be throwing himself into something [the waterhole] against his will, exactly as he seems to plunge into the Land Rover engine, [repairing the] tape recorders, and many conversations. Today while he was fixing the Land Rover’s fuel pump for the umpteenth time he looked sadly at his greasy hands and said, “In the Eastern European intellectual tradition, all that a scholar is supposed to dirty his hands with is printer’s ink.” He thinks of himself primarily as a scholar, and all these tasks are for him just hateful means to an end. I wonder whether having to overcome such resistance many times a day for so long doesn’t hurt him very much.

(Mel told me years later he had said this about Eastern European scholars in self-mockery, and that in fact he felt “grease-monkey pride” in fixing the ever-more-decrepit Land Rover.)

But with these daily promptings to keep up morale before me, I resolved to do things very differently when I had my own camp. In particular, I wanted to avoid the deadening effects of having my relationships with people devolve into those of the merely observer-observed. I wanted to establish mutuality as early as I could—and to maintain it. I wanted to be there as a person, not just as a scholar. I wasn’t sure how or whether I could do this, only that I definitely intended to. (The degree to which I managed to do—and to not do—this will become evident by the end of this book. By the time I was winding up my fieldwork I, too, was experiencing times of depression that sometimes looked a lot like

what Mel was going through. Yet these alternated for me with times of feeling great harmony and even exultation as problems and tasks and relationships were worked out and clarified.)

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On December 24 and 25 we were invited to Christmas dances by the neighboring Herero community at Mahopa. Mel and Marjorie communicated with their Herero friends mostly in Ju//hoansi. The Herero were consummate cattle people and employed Ju//hoan people to help them with their herds, milking, and domestic tasks. Ju//hoansi worked basically as serfs for the Herero, not being paid but receiving milk, occasional meat, and cast-off clothing in exchange for their labor. The Herero, heavily Christianized but strong at the same time in their own social and religious traditions, feasted at Christmastime and invited both the Ju//hoansi and their ethnographers to join in.

DECEMBER 25, 1970

Last night was Tamah [Herero] Christmas Eve. We went in the Land Rover to Mahopa. A Herero in a pointed hat came up to us out of the dark and said, “Wapenduka [Are you well]?” “Bapenduka [We are well],” we replied, and followed him over fields to the party. We crowded into a hut where many lovely Herero ladies sat in resplendent Mother Hubbards [body-covering Victorian clothing advocated by missionaries in the nineteenth century and adopted by Herero women—instead of skins—as their ethnic costume]. Facing them on the other side of the room were their men, each with his smooth knobkerry. Herero men have something about them that is classically African: loose, shambling clothes, knobby knees, pointed shoes, a gnarled stick.

I experienced a most powerful sense of encountering African stereotypes during this festive time with the Herero. I think I saw them as “classically African” because most Western representations of African people I had been exposed to as a young person involved the cattle-owning, usually Bantu-speaking, mostly Christianized ruling classes of many African countries portrayed in the pages of *National Geographic* and similar publications. Though I detested the conversion work of missionaries, I found the Christian faith of the Herero very dignified. This impression was reinforced in a most emotional way for me when I heard them singing, in their own language, Western hymns and Christmas songs whose English words I knew from my own upbringing. The fascination of the music, though, was in the way the Herero tailed off each of the familiar hymns, as they did their own cattle songs,

in a weirdly solemn, descending buzz of finality. The ending of each song reminded me that I was nowhere near Kansas, anymore.

DECEMBER 26, 1970

We went to the Mahopa dances again yesterday afternoon. This time there was [also] a Bushman trance dance going, a strong one, under a group of trees, and under another tree was the Herero cow dancing. It was all very thrilling to me. But within a few hours I was crying. Marj and Mel understood well the experience I was having, though I was surprised: it was the first time such a feeling had broken in on me so forcibly. I had been watching the Herero dancer Kukerra, with his subtle and perfect mastery of the cow dance. I had been watching him and a hundred other people, Bushmen and Herero, who knew what they were doing and were involved. I was just watching. And pretty soon the contrast between being so caught up and my having degenerated into nothing more than a pair of eyes was getting to me. At first I attributed it to shyness and my huge admiration for Kukerra. I was thinking about how a short but perfect portrait of him should have been written by Melville and included as a chapter in a book like *Typee*. I was planning, in the unfortunate absence of Melville, to write the chapter myself. I thought I was becoming emotional over the strength and beauty of Kukerra's genius. But suddenly I was merely revolted at my own self for being there, a mute and gawping tourist with her hated symbol, a camera, in my hand.

Marj and I discussed this feeling, which she has had over and over again. Despite the joy and beauty of such occasions, they always remain semiabstract, an "experience" from which one is forever separate. *But rather than berating herself for being there, [Marj] laments the fact that such dead experiences take a toll on her own self.* She convinced me that the Herero were really thrilled to have us there, and that under the circumstances there was no way for us to have entered more fully into the life that was going on. It seems that what we must do is to keep a realistic appraisal of our outsiderhood always in mind so that we're not repeatedly hurt and disappointed. But what a way to spend one's life! It makes me think than an instinct I have, of already not wanting particularly to do a great deal more extended fieldwork, is basically very sound. As I was walking across the scuffed sand of the compound last evening, the thought that this land, this group of people might have been . . . my own friends, with ceremonies we ourselves have made . . . was very welcoming. . . .

Revitalization is ultimately possible only in one's own culture. That is why Mel, Marj, and I spend such a large part of every day sitting around [trying to] talk about anything but Bushmen. I may have a chance to test this idea at Ghanzi. I can set up whatever kind of life seems best to me there, and can experiment with the different distances I could possibly

maintain from exclusive involvement with Bushmen. There is really no reason, aside from an absurdly romantic one, why I can't go on with my own culture while doing work on Bushman folklore. And I owe it to myself not to become low and embittered the way poor Mel has. . . . I guess I'm glad that I'm seeing all this so soon so I can make sensible plans. Though I feel a complex need not to be shattered now for Mel and Marj's sake. But it isn't just the language, or differences in customs. It's the inability of another culture to transport you beyond your own self. Without such periodic peak experiences, your self dies. I am feeling already a definite urge to get drunk, something I rarely feel at home. I think it's really the need to be transported that I'm feeling.

Writing now, many years and many trance dances and other cultural experiences later, I have a view that goes beyond what I wrote that day. Though I do believe a central experience of fieldwork is confrontation with the opaque cultural walls that tend to prevent one's really deeply understanding the other culture, I have seen that some transparency, some balance, is actually possible. I feel there's no absolute gap between cultures that cannot be bridged—at least to some extent—with experience and empathy. Experiences of transport are, among other things, the result of building more and more synapses, more connections to ideas and to people. But for this to happen, time must be spent, and “attention must be paid.” Channels of empathy and trust must be nurtured and kept open.

Less than a week after I wrote sadly about the unavailability of “transport,” I began to catch a faint glimpse of how the gap between myself and the people I was there to “study” might begin to close.

#### NEW YEAR'S DAY, 1971

I had a very strange waking dream last night before I finally fell asleep. I was sure that !Xuma and Kopela Maswe were standing outside my tent, discussing me in a language that was at once Bushman and English. !Xuma said of me something infinitely tender, like “This little thing here, who came in through the back door like a yellow rose . . .” The most moving part of it was, though, that when I heard those words I was as if paralyzed, couldn't move to get out of bed and go to them. I was only able to break the spell after quite a few minutes. Then I moved my head with great difficulty, as if waking out of another world. I looked but there was no one there. I was *incredibly* surprised.

On that New Year's Day both Marj and Mel shared with me vivid dreams they had each also had the night before, and I shared my dream



about the “yellow rose.” Each of us had dreamed of inexplicably intense interactions with the Ju/’hoan and Herero people. I had no doubt as to whether our shared dreaming was simply the result of another emotional day or was something more powerful at work. I felt at the time, and believe even more strongly now, that it was the latter for all three of us. I know that in their later trips back to Botswana, both Mel and Marjorie eventually found reliable paths to maintaining joy and balance with Bushman friends.

I realized again the great fieldwork advantage I was experiencing in these first weeks with Marjorie Shostak and Mel Konner, in being able to share impressions and bounce ideas off these fellow Americans who had already spent two years in a situation I was just entering. I believe this situation, followed as it was by fifteen more months “on my own” out there, was practically ideal for me, committed as I was to my goal of both academic and personal adjustment. I have often wondered how, without that introductory period, I would have managed the immense swings between ups and downs that seemed to be an inescapable part of the field experience. I was lucky to have access to some of Mel’s and Marj’s experiences to begin to chart my own hoped-for path.

One of the most important suggestions I got at the time came from Marjorie. Characteristically blunt, she said I would have to draw the line in defining my own relationships with Ju/’hoan people during my fieldwork. I struggled with this directive for many years, but it always proved helpful in reinforcing the need for strength in “my end” of the two-way relationships I hoped eventually to have there. Eventually I came to see this suggestion (tempered of course with openness) as good advice for strong human relationships in general.

Another set of deliberations most closely involved things I learned from talking with and observing Mel. On January 16, 1971, halfway between my arrival at Dobe and our “rabies run” back to Maun at the end of January, I wrote the following:

I told Mel the other day I felt the quality of my own emotional life had declined since I had been here. I felt somehow set back into less open, less free periods of my life. Much more seemed confusing to me than things in my life had been seeming recently. Mel said he felt doing fieldwork was rather like being sent back into puberty. One feels awkward and outsize, unable to make contact with other people except rarely. There is a steady drone of unhappiness waiting whenever the confusion falls silent. I don’t feel actively miserable yet, as he does. He got up this morning feeling that there was something deathlike in him to be so unhappy yet stay on. He said today for the first time he can no longer take what he’s doing to him-

self here lightly. . . . [One reason for the pressure is] that we are utterly mysterious to [the Bushmen] and the only real judge we thus have of our actions is ourselves. Similarly, the only real comfort we have, and support, is again only ourselves. We are alone inside walls, questioning and hoping that what we do is right.

This question of the paradoxical loneliness of fieldwork within an apparently highly social context also lent itself to a consideration of the kind of work we were supposed to be doing in observing and learning from people.

JANUARY 17, 1971

One of the many ways an anthropologist can objectify people is by regarding them as work. Or having them remind him [or her] primarily of work. He [or she] must resent them if their major emotional connotation . . . is allowed to be this. Especially if the work has anything of the mechanical about it—if its performance is short of intrinsically enjoyable, the anthropologist will resent and objectify the subjects of study. Somehow the observers' social enjoyment must to some degree overlap with the subjects' social enjoyment, so that the two know each other as people and not just employer and employees. Some leisure time must be spent together, and it must be personally self-seeking time on the part of both. The anthropologist can sit around chewing the fat sometimes with people, seeing them not endlessly as subject matter but just, at times, as people he or she would like to chew the fat with of an evening.

One of the aspects of life here at Dobe that I myself would change is this rigid separation between daytime work with the Bushmen and nighttime relaxation among ourselves. I feel we need to spend more comfortable, nonwork times with them. Granted, Mel and Marj are so exhausted by their work when sundown comes they are ready to be rid of Bushmen entirely, and need a time of rest. But I wonder if the day couldn't be otherwise arranged so that there *would* still be energy and inclination left in the evening to spend time together with Bushmen without the onus of being a professional observer of them.

With these inward and outward deliberations as prologue, I constantly tried to balance my own fresh experiences, once I actually got started on my own fieldwork, with what I hoped was analytic understanding of them. I was often confounded and overwhelmed in this endeavor, not least because of the relentless demands of daily living with people I understood so little. The Ju/'hoansi constantly requested gifts, services, food, and tobacco. Nothing in my graduate courses had

prepared me for their demands, and I quickly gave away most of the clothing and other supplies that were supposed to last me for eighteen months. Mel and Marjorie—and thus I—had inherited from the earlier professors and grad students who had lived at Dobe a challenging weekly routine. This routine informed the relationships of the camp not only to the mostly hunting and gathering Ju/'hoansi but also to the cattle-owning Herero families, for whom some of the Ju/'hoansi worked. Mondays through Fridays were fieldwork days. Saturdays were meant to be days of rest and recreation (but never were). On Sundays, to show thanks for being guests in the area, we turned the Harvard camp into an all-day medical clinic and tobacco distribution point for our hosts and neighbors.

None of us liked the idea of encouraging the Ju/'hoansi's rampant smoking, especially with their straight metal cylinders (of pipe or pounded sheet metal from discarded tins), into which they crumbled long, rough, lung-destroying whole tobacco leaves. But despite our trying, the precedent set earlier had proved impossible thus far to break. Mel (who later became a physician as well as an anthropologist) took seriously the medical responsibilities conferred by our mobility, money, and knowledge in this remote area. He spoke often to the people about the dangers of smoking. He and Marjorie also quickly conveyed to me that it was our duty to arrive with first aid and other medical supplies, and to use them to the limits of our knowledge (with the *Merck* manual as backup when necessary). But the enormous demand for medical help in this region, and the almost complete lack of health services at that time other than a monthly mobile clinic that rarely actually made it that far west, made Sundays taxing and exhausting for us.

I was so busy trying to help other people with medical needs that I neglected, for over a month, what turned out to be tropical ulcers on my shins, ulcers that must have begun in the fourteen hours of slogging and digging in the gray ooze of the first mudhole of our memorable "rabies run." When I finally paid attention to the fact that my lesions weren't healing, and learned from *Merck* that I would have to use gentian violet to get over them, it took me a further month of daily treatment and purple-stained socks to fully heal.

Though I remembered being admonished in Cambridge to take along things like eye ointment and Band-Aids to help people, I had not expected more complex medical responsibilities. I was especially unprepared for the way medical tasks became enmeshed with social ones. Even healthy local people came by on Sundays, content to wait for hours at our camp until their turn came in the leaf-tobacco distribution. Ju/'hoansi regarded the day as a kind of festival, enjoying visiting, jok-

ing, and flirting with people from neighboring camps. If a person felt shorted in the distribution, he or she indulged in the enjoyable art of complaint discourse, and that too was part of the festival atmosphere—for those who were not the target of complaints. At first I was blissfully unaware of the creative invective being showered on the heads of us Harvard camp members. But when I began to decipher what was being said, the outrageously overblown, often *ad hominem* critiques of our stinginess took my breath away. We were called “bags without openings” for our supposed hoarding of leaf tobacco, food, clothing, and many other imported commodities the Ju/’hoansi had long ago come to regard as theirs by rights. I soon began to understand why Mel had referred to the Sunday tobacco distribution-cum-universal medical consultation as a “skating rink in hell.” I resolved that when I had my own camp things would be more manageable. But even though that camp ended up being far from Dobe, it took a long time before I could actualize any different, but still effective, formula for reciprocity with the Ju/’hoansi and their neighbors.

“Na’msi, na coro, na n/om, na, na, na.” (Give me food, give me tobacco, give me medicine, give, give, give.) *Na* is the imperative form of /*an*, to give. Addressing “the *na* question,” as I came to call it, dominated not only the first months of my fieldwork but many years afterward. When I was first living at Dobe, unprepared for a social world in which Ju/’hoansi felt it was perfectly fine to ask for anything they saw I had but they didn’t, I gave away far too many of my clothes, supplies, and equipment. I suppose my sense of guilt at my relative material wealth could not help but be inflamed by a situation where most people’s possessions amounted to little more than they could carry on their backs. Ju/’hoansi also had no bank accounts, no larders, and no social security beyond the truly *social* security of their sharing networks. It was a long time before I learned some useful verbal dodges and began to enjoy the ability to say no correctly in Ju/’hoansi: “I only have one of these,” or “How can you ask me, a young woman all alone here without even her parents, to give you that?” or “This is only loaned to me by someone else; it’s not mine.” I knew I had finally got a handle on things when, using such phrases, I began regularly to get good-natured laughter in response. And as time went on, I began to experience acts of generosity towards myself that did make me feel included.

One coping mechanism for handling requests I learned from South African anthropologist Margaret Jacobsohn, who had learned it from her years with the Himba people of Namibia’s northwest. “Asking confers status on the one being asked,” she said. That was a realization that gave me some much-needed perspective to help me past my

usual deer-in-the-headlights visceral response to requests. It was a hard lesson to put into practice, though—to accept the tribute, but still say no when I had to. Some lessons about sharing and giving only came through to me after many years of living and working with the Ju//hoansi. I remember one I learned only after I had moved, in the late 1980s, across the border to work in Namibia. A hunter came into the camp where I lived, carrying a great deal of meat from a wildebeest kill. None of us had had meat for a long time and all of us were hungry. As I was a friend of the hunter's, I hoped that a piece of meat would be given to me. As the afternoon wore on, the meat was cut up and given out to successive waves of community members. I stayed by my hut, busy with small tasks, affecting nonchalance. The sun went down. No meat came. I felt like the ultimate outsider and sulked in silence. Days later I asked my friend why he had not brought me any meat. "But you never asked!" he said in astonishment. I realized I had mistaken my own, unquestioned cultural rules for supposedly universal politeness. I resolved to pay better attention to the new rules within which I was now living.

Many of the lessons it took me a long time to learn were ones I encountered in those first months with Marjorie and Mel at Dobe. We found it hard, in fact, to talk of much else beyond how to cope with the social challenges. We reminded ourselves that no matter how difficult it got, we had the inestimable ability to leave the place compared to those who had to stay. That the Ju//hoansi and other indigenous peoples like them had long-developed social strategies for staying in relative peace with their kin, living face-to-face in small groups for their entire lives. One of the very effective Ju//hoan strategies we observed was indirect commentary on others' behavior through song. One song women played on the *g//oaci*, a five-stringed lute, was called "Baq'u Tsaqn" (Two Baq'us), after two women, both named Baq'u, who gossiped excessively. The song very gently and elliptically suggested they should tone it down—and on hearing it, they did! Another strategy was the use of humorous mimicry to comment on—and sometimes change—others' social behavior.

Though I never saw Mel or Marjorie mimicked, I was treated to several examples of mimicry of other members of the HKRG who had been at Dobe in previous years. They were side-splittingly funny but carried unmistakable social lessons. Thus I was able to recognize what was happening when I once came up suddenly on a group of Ju//hoansi laughing delightedly at something. The mimic portrayed a person, seen from behind, striding away primly at a fast pace with a remarkably tight-assed walk. It was, of course, myself. My breath was taken away

by the truth it revealed not only about my gait but about elements of my character.

This was but one of many peelings of the onion skin of what I had arrogantly regarded, in my midtwenties, as a mostly completed cultural self. How little I knew of what lay in store! I came to see that I was given a second chance at socialization—given the opportunity, during my fieldwork, to replicate many of the learning milestones achieved by well-socialized Ju/'hoan children as they grew to adulthood. Many of these milestones had to do with learning the lessons of egalitarianism—the sharing and other mechanisms so basic to the Ju/'hoansi's adaptation. I learned that these milestones, inculcated by adult teachings into each young person and endlessly reinforced in story and song, were an indispensable part of what made their society work. These lessons made up, in short, the driving force behind Ju/'hoan culture. They were what made the hunting and gathering adaptation last for so many millennia of human history. I began to glimpse how I could understand and convey the expressive forms underpinning adaptive sharing, and maybe, just maybe, begin to frame a worthwhile thesis.

One of the most pervasive strategies the Ju/'hoansi had for living well together came under the heading of social leveling. Richard Lee's (1969) article on the subject, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," was published in *Natural History Magazine* not long before I was chugging across the Atlantic on my freighter. So it was only after I went back to Cambridge after my first period of fieldwork that I had a chance to read his now-classic piece. At the last Christmastime during his own fieldwork, Lee purchased an ox to slaughter for the people. Though it was a stout ox with plenty of meat for the people in the camps, in the days leading up to its slaughter the people complained loudly to Richard about its skinniness and inadequacy. Soon Richard was sweating bullets about whether there would be enough meat for everyone to have a share. When the feast finally took place and all were satisfied, Richard learned that the people had intentionally belittled his fine ox so that he wouldn't get a swelled head over his own generosity. Young people have to be continually told not to compete with others or to show undue pride in their accomplishments, people said; the only way we can all get by is for those who have, to share with those who don't. Richard's article, one of the most famous in all of anthropology, has since cemented understanding of Ju/'hoan sharing practices for several generations of anthropology students.

Due to this timing, I had the chance to discover many of the strict rules of Ju/'hoan social leveling on my own. One day I was sitting with three Ju/'hoan women and some children in the sparse shade of a small

thorn tree. Beyond the shade, we were surrounded by an ocean of sunlit sand and silvery grass. We had sat down to rest after gathering honey-colored *morethlwa* berries into a collection of old tins. I saw one of the women, /Asa, put a small handful of berries into the cupped right hand of her two-year-old daughter, N!ae. /Asa then took half the berries out of N!ae's right hand and put them into her left hand. Next she nudged her daughter toward another child, indicating that N!ae must share half of what she had been given. N!ae toddled a few steps through the sand to face a little boy about her own age. She gravely dumped her left hand's contents into his hand, and the two children began munching berries as they returned to play.

I was to see this scene repeated many times in little N!ae's life. Sharing food seemed to become as much a part of her as her hunger and its satisfaction. The idea that gifts must not be hoarded but should flow directly through one's hands is reinforced in hundreds of ways by Ju/'hoan mothers and fathers. If an adult is given a full plate of food, he or she is supposed to eat just part of it and then pass it on to someone who, sitting with politely averted head, clearly needs and wants a share. These "leveling mechanisms" keep everyone in a group equal. I realized they were part of what I might focus on as the "social technology" that lets groups like these minimize competition and survive on scarce resources—and that this social technology was a lifelong conditioning to share, to heed social cues that eventually became strong enough to compete with the cues of hunger.

Others of my colleagues, including Polly Wiessner and Mathias Guenther, later wrote about the many specific leveling mechanisms related to status and resources that preserve equality in San societies. An important leveling mechanism I myself observed involved social discipline related to hunting. One evening G=kao and his young teenage son, Kxami, came into the Dobe people's camp radiating suppressed excitement. They were returning to camp after Kxami had shot a poisoned arrow into his first large antelope. Not a word was spoken, but everyone knew this was as good a promise as any of meat to come soon: in ensuing days Kxami would be able to use his already substantial experience to track the antelope as it died from the poison. However, far from boasting of his success, Kxami came in and sat quietly by his mother's fire. "I didn't see anything," he said when she asked.

Everyone knew that meant he was on the track of something big. That night, Kxami's mother and all the others pointedly ignored him. I was told he left camp silently the next morning before dawn. When he and his hunting partners brought home the abundant meat of a large kudu a few days later, his mother and others played down his contri-

bution, saying that the meat was meager and dry, not worth bothering with. They seemed to me to be almost insulting him. Kxami was not even the one who had the role of distributing the meat. Instead it was his blind grandmother, the owner of the arrow with which the kudu had been shot. When he set out to hunt, his grandmother had loaned him the arrow, so the meat belonged to her.

I watched Kxami carefully in the days after he brought home the kudu. I wondered whether he was feeling sad that more was not made of his accomplishment. In fact, his eyes sparkled and he appeared to have grown about a foot since before his hunting trip. What was going on?

I learned that insulting or disregarding Kxami and the meat he brought home was the Ju/'hoan way of making sure he didn't get too big an opinion of himself. Defining the owner of the meat as the owner of the arrow rather than the hunter who actually brought down the animal was the Ju/'hoan way of underscoring everyone's need for protein. Arrows could be owned and loaned to a hunter by anyone, from women to children to the disabled. This way ownership of the meat could be shared. The ability to share the meat could *itself* be shared. Kxami took unspoken pride in his accomplishment for social reasons deeper even than the provision of meat. He enabled all the individuals in his small group to survive by perpetuating their systems of sharing and social equality.

Lessons like these were all around me at Dobe every day as I watched parents and children living their lives. I participated in gathering trips with women and children, and in hunting trips with men and teenage boys. Sometimes, as I had already seen, the gathering trips turned into hunting trips when the women discovered fresh tracks and sent a runner back to camp to report to the men. Pat Draper described this frequent occurrence as reporting on "the state of the bush": it underscored the collaborative and egalitarian nature of men's and women's roles in Ju/'hoan society. My breath was taken away by the possibilities thus opened up. I began to realize that, by mutual understanding, women could actually be as salient as men in a society. (Seems obvious now, but this was in 1970!) From that realization, I started to think that mutual agreement and good communication could solve all problems. We could learn better ways from other societies and put them to good use in changing our own. Of course, I was hopelessly optimistic there. Nevertheless, from that moment, my personal motto for fieldwork (and life!) became "toward increase of understanding."

Sometimes the learning and understanding, both linguistic and factual, took place in a plodding manner. But on many occasions their



speed was enhanced by being part of a memorable adventure. One late afternoon as we neared our final departure from Dobe, I was sitting in the topsy-turvy straw kitchen chopping onions to put into a stew for supper. Suddenly a snake slithered across my sneakered foot and disappeared into the straw wall behind a row of shelving. Propelled by some force far transcending my leg muscles, I flew through the door on the opposite side and shrieked for help. =Oma !Oma, Mel, and an older Ju//hoan man came to the rescue. The older man took the knife out of my hand and ran boldly into the kitchen. He shortly staggered back out, sans knife, clutching his hand to his face. The snake had turned out to be a spitting cobra. From the shelf between the tins of cocoa and beans, it had spit into the man's eye. But he only *had* one good eye, and it had spit into that one!

Luckily, Mel, reader of the *Merck* manual and of regionally specific first-aid information, knew that the antidote for spitting cobra venom was a milk eyewash. Also luckily, some Herero had given us milk the previous Sunday, and we still had some in the gas-powered fridge inside the kitchen. Mel tiptoed bravely into the kitchen, secured the milk, and washed the man's eye forthwith. He made a complete recovery, but we were not able to use the straw kitchen after that, because the cobra was never found or killed. Fortunately, we were leaving soon. "/Xai/xai taahn m!a!" (The cobra has defeated us!) people said. A quick and memorable way to learn the name of a snake!



## AT “TOOTHBRUSH TREE”

I didn't record how the decision was made, but before Marjorie and Mel left it was clear that I would not have to relocate my own camp as far away as Ghanzi, some 300 kilometers by road from Dobe. We learned there was a sizeable group of Ju/'hoan people living outside the town of Tsau, which was on the main road only 125 km away, about half-way between Dobe and Maun. These Ju/'hoansi sometimes did work for Tswana people, caring for their cattle, cutting thatching grass, and pounding *mabele* (grain sorghum) for their staple porridge, an alternative to mealie (corn) meal. But they also had their own camp on a smaller road that led from Tsau straight back to /Kae/kae, south of Dobe. Both the main road and this smaller road, simply tracks in the sand, were “cutlines” in a grid made by diamond prospectors who were sampling the whole huge western Ngamiland District.

The Ju/'hoan camp, known as Kauri, was sited at the edge of a rich hunting and gathering area almost uninhabited by people. Small herds of Cape buffalo and wildebeest migrated through there, moving to and from the Okavango Swamps. The Kauri people hunted, foraged, and worked for agriculturalists by turns. Those who had jobs with Tswana farmers (or with Herero pastoralists a bit to the south) shared milk and agricultural produce with those who regularly hunted and gathered westward from Kauri.

I also learned that, though many Bushmen in Ghanzi understood Ju/'hoansi, the main San language there was Naro. So setting up my camp near Ghanzi would have meant starting over on a new language after quite a few months of familiarization with Ju/'hoansi. Kauri was also a better choice than Ghanzi because it was closer to Dobe, making our visits back there easier. The Kauri people had close ties with the /Kae/kae people, who in turn had close ties with Dobe. I was glad to be traveling with the people, !Xuma, =Oma !Oma, his wife, Di//xao, and their young child, whom I had brought with me from Dobe. I saw at once that they would make connections wherever we went in the whole Ju/'hoan area, due to their extended families and also their fictive kinship ties.

These Dobe people who came with me, and were always with me in the dangerous passage between the Dobe area and Nokaneng, and elsewhere, also saved my life on more than one occasion. They provided foraged food and located water when we broke down on the road and ran out of supplies, tracked me when I got lost, warned me about snakes they saw on trails much sooner than I saw them, and became in effect my trusty traveling household. Though none of them spoke English, I relied a great deal upon them for emotional support, as well. Once Mel and Marjorie departed, I had no English speakers to talk to about the conundrums and demands of fieldwork. So I saw the new life I envisioned living at Kauri as freer for me in some ways but also much more strenuous psychologically. I was relieved that when I was meeting new people and setting up a whole new camp, I would at least have a few of my Dobe friends with me.

Before settling at Kauri, however, I had to spend a full month in Maun waiting for the Land Rover to be fixed. During this frustrating time I camped at Ngamiland Youth Training Centre across the Thamalakane River from Riley's Hotel in the town, along with !Xuma, =Oma !Oma, Di//xao, and their little girl. The Land Rover needed extensive repairs for which new parts had to be ordered and installed, unfortunately by a notably flaky and recalcitrant mechanic. It was an older, fairly primitive vehicle, for which parts were hard to find. Unlike the fine modern Land Rovers of today, it lacked air conditioning and had a number of features that, surprisingly, had to be operated by hand. These included the four-wheel-drive gearlocks (you had to stop the vehicle, get out, and unlock the gears manually on each wheel before going into heavier ratios); the windshield wipers (the operation of which could ruin your wrists in a rainstorm); and the crank starter (a long, heavy, metal iron that had to be inserted into the engine from the front and cranked with a huge amount of shoulder power any time the engine would not start on its own, which was often). Waiting for the correct parts to arrive, we were on the riverbank long enough for me to contract my first case of malaria. But eventually on April 14, 1971, we were on our way.

At Toteng we drank *mabele* porridge and sour milk [tangy buttermilk, or curds and whey left after butter had been churned], fixed another flat, and pushed on. Trip to Tsau long, hot, and marred by our falling sideways into huge rut while !Xuma was practice driving [the Land Rover]. We nearly turned over. But I managed to drive it out easily with 4-wheel drive. Got to Tsau and started looking around for a camping spot in all this baking heat. Little success. Finally camped in a grove of thorn trees. In the night heard voices of Bushmen going by in the road, and !Xuma and I went out to in-

investigate. It was a party of guys on donkeyback from Kauri, heading home. Kagece was there, the young man who works at NTC [Ngamiland Trading Company] and has helped me before. We had a long talk in the moonlight about distances + people + donkeys + horses + water + fresh meat + chickens' eggs, all elements in my decision of where to make my camp. It was agreed that Kagece should stay overnight with us, then show us the way to Kauri in the morning: !Xuma and I had failed earlier to find it.

So the very next day came the introduction to the people with whom I would be spending the next fifteen months. This time, there were no old hands like Mel and Marj to smooth the way: even !Xuma and =Oma were newcomers to Kauri. But the Ju/'hoan name relationship came to the rescue and soon overcame the little bit of awkwardness everyone felt. !Xuma introduced me with my Ju/'hoan name, Baq'u, and people fell to explaining, with enthusiasm, what that meant in terms of people at Kauri with whom I would automatically have fictive relationships. !Xuma and =Oma outlined at length their own (actual as well as fictive) kin relationships to people the Kauri people knew at /Kae/kae. Observing this simple symbolic convention of the name relationships quickly made it possible to set forth in social comfort with guides from Kauri to search for a suitable place to make our camp.

APRIL 15, 1971

We sat on the ground in the shade and talked about the possibilities of my living nearby, and about why I was there. Kagece and =Oma N!a'an took us to the waterhole, about a mile from the village. There is water there in a long shallow pan at this time of year—muddy but delicious. Other times of year the people draw water from a [bitter] well nearer the village—we went there next. Then we started looking for a campsite in earnest. It was hot, tiring work, driving around thru the bush in the blazing heat of day and getting out to investigate clump after clump of disappointing trees. One bunch would throw too thin a shade, another had marks of standing water around the tree roots, another looked fine until we discovered a big mamba up in the principal tree. About noon, discouraged, we sat down and shared a paw-paw and the Bushmen ate some more *perishi* [mealie porridge]. Our next try was immediately successful. We found a beautiful spot on a rise overlooking a dry pan full of tall grass, with many big trees casting a broad shade, lovely white-feathered grass, an anthill for an oven, and a great view in all directions. I am a little afraid of snakes here though, but that is the only trouble with the place. It is about sixteen kilometers east to Tsau, about five kilometers west to Kauri. We will haul water in two drums from Tsau's good well, and if we get hard up we'll go to Kauri's [bitter] wa-

terhole. We can get beef (I'm not sure how often) from Kauri, and eggs, and bushfoods; maybe milk too. There are cooperative people there who will build our rondavels [thatched houses]. "My" Bushmen will be close enough to visit . . . and they already know many of these people. I'm a little worried about what DeVore will say when he comes out and finds me so isolated in the bush, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

In the early PM drove to Tsau to get the rest of our equipment stashed at BTA [Botswana Trading Association store], pay bill there and give Modisa a bottle of brandy, draw water + mail a letter, see about borrowing some water drums. Very tired when we got back but everyone started pitching in with great vigor to put the camp to rights before a rain should hit us, and we got a fantastic amount accomplished before sunset. Everything perishable got stowed under canvas, much grass and bush was cleared so we could watch out for snakes, and I made some preliminary decisions about the layout of the rondavels. (I think it's going to be a lovely, quiet camp and a long string of good days.) We were done before sunset and I took a much-needed bath + washed my hair [using about a third of a bucket of our precious water].

Then we drove to Kauri to arrange for eight people—four men, four women—to come in the morning to talk houses. We'll settle the balance of the price tomorrow morning. I'm debating whether to pay them some of the money in tobacco to establish a precedent that people who work for me get tobacco, but nobody else does. I refuse to have a general *shoro* [tobacco] distribution if I can get away without it. At Kauri we sat around in the dusk chatting. I told people I had a certain amount of medicine and would help them as much as I could, but that I would not help Tswana or Herero because they have enough money to go to the doctor when he comes to Tsau. Kauri is a beautiful village at night—I could see five little fires burning in front of rondavels, and away under some trees the children started a dance circle as we talked. . . . !Xuma had been given a huge bag of *n/ang* [raisin berries], the best I've ever tasted. As sweet as [real] raisins. Tomorrow I plan to get the housebuilders started, mark out a road to my camp from the Kauri road, make signs so my friends can find me, get the rest of the weeds and bushes cleared out (much as I hate to), get a flat fixed, drive to Tsau for drums of water and big supplies like mealie meal + sugar, set up a shrine to literacy so I can start getting some of my mail answered, do medicine, and maybe have a language lesson with !Xuma from the Tswana-English Dictionary. I also have to figure out salaries.

On April 16, our first whole day in the new camp, we hashed out, down to the penny, the details of a business relationship to get the camp houses built. I thought it would be one way to build the Kauri people's

trust of me by demonstrating that I would work with them in a businesslike manner and always keep my word.

I agreed to feed the workers for a week with mealie and told them that when the houses were done I would kill a goat and we'd all have meat. I also set up a drawbridge desk under a tree, walked over the area where the side road will eventually [be made], and thought some more about the layout of the houses. I drove to Tsau and got drums and water, mealie meal, meat, etc. !Xuma and I fed everyone when we got back, then people drifted away and I drifted to my desk and that was when I started to worry about this whole enterprise. . . .

In spite of a busy and successful day . . . I feel tonight what the responsibility of a whole camp is going to mean to a person alone. The main problem is my not being enough of a public presence, I feel, to keep the spirit of a working camp steady. With me it flares and then banks down again when I am being quiet unto myself and withdraw from the people who are working for me. I feel that the whole enterprise becomes absurd to them when I am out of contact with them—think that they must wonder what I'm thinking, what I'm doing here if all I want to do is be alone. But I don't really know what they think. The enthusiasm around here waxes and wanes so fitfully that it is hard to say what the prevailing temper is. The main point is that I feel very strongly that most field-workers have more social vigor than I do. I enjoy so much just futzing around and arranging things quietly, and need a lot of time to myself just to keep my head on straight. But I feel so strongly that in this context my behavior is puzzlingly antisocial. I am also still unsure of the authoritarian role—most of the time my [employees] do what I ask them to, but occasionally they seem not to hear at all and I wonder if I have become a mouthing fool to them. I also wonder about the sharing: I think they think me pretty fair, even very generous, often, but then sometimes they don't share with me and I am a little hurt and wonder why. Mostly they do share with me and things are fine among us all. I guess a major worry of mine is that they will be bored. But then when there is a lot to do I worry that they are overworked!

I feel closest to =Oma. I often get tongue-tied when talking to Di//xao, and !Xuma is puzzling, hot and cold by turns in his attitude to me. I think it's amazing, though, that I could live so close to three people for six weeks or so already and be no closer to them than I am. Language is still a barrier—we can't yet really discuss important or subtle things. But the economic relationship, I feel, clinches the standoff. I feel apologetic and self-justified towards them by turns, as I imagine them impatient and grateful by turns. There is certainly a constant tension involved in having employees, and time is robbed of some of its savor. It is especially bad in

the bush because the employees never go home to their own lives at 5 p.m. They are here around the clock. It was such a relief being away from them for a few days at Moremi [game park, on a trip with anthropologist Jiro Tanaka]. I could forget to wonder about their state of mind. . . . The camp is beautiful, though, and calm and quiet. It will be a good place to transcribe tapes with !Xuma when and if I get any. I am so impatient for my speech to be good enough and for my [repaired] tape recorder to come so I can really begin!

I had been told that at Dobe I would have the use of a professional Tandberg reel-to-reel tape recorder. Unfortunately, before Mel and Marj left, the Tandberg malfunctioned and Mel was unable to fix it. I was also unable to arrange for it to be repaired anywhere near Tsau or Maun. I sent it off to the capital, Gaborone, to be fixed, but it never came back. So eventually I borrowed a second-rate, much smaller reel-to-reel from the nuns at the Sehitwa medical mission between Tsau and Maun, and most of my material for the rest of that first field trip had to be gathered on that. I began to record a few stories at Kauri, knowing these were captured, self-contained texts that could be transcribed and translated later as my language facility improved. I learned that the camp had pretty quickly acquired a second local name, G//aoandohm, “Spirit Voice,” the term the Kauri people applied to my tape recorder.

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On the evening of April 18, my three campmates were visiting at Kauri and I was alone in my camp for the first time. After the busy, friendly, social time of the first few days at the camp, I was delighted to have some time by myself to take stock of my surroundings. My hut was not yet built and I was sleeping outdoors, and the equipment and supplies were mostly still in boxes piled under canvas. But I had a definite sense of being in the right place, my own place, the place that would be my home for the next fifteen months. I opened a canvas folding chair next to my desk. I had been warned, back in Cambridge, that chair and table legs tended to plunge themselves deeply and inconveniently into Kalahari sand. Accordingly, the folding chair I brought had rounded tubing instead of straight legs, and I had made my “drawbridge” desk from a wooden door slung by long hemp ropes from a big tree. I found my journal and a pen. I watched the sun go down. I felt the wind die down.

As it grew dark, I set up a candle on the desk inside a hurricane lamp glass. I remembered I had a little gin left from Maun, too little to share. I decided to drink it by myself in celebration of my lovely little

chosen hill of sand, and of obstacles overcome in getting to this point. I opened a tin of "koejawel halwes in dik stroop" (guava halves in thick syrup) and added the syrup to the gin along with a Schweppes Bitter Lemon. After my strenuous day doing camp chores in the sun, I became rapidly intoxicated by this concoction. Thrilled beyond measure to be in my own camp at last, I felt my adult life was well and truly beginning. By candlelight, I wrote in my journal: "I was thinking the other day of [this] strange interface where hunting-gathering elegantly meets academia, and wondering if the connection is a decadent one. To me it's poignant, rich, meaningful, both in terms of my own physical life and in intellectual interest." Then I shifted to my event calendar and wrote: "I must be growing up—I'm drinking by myself, the first time I ever remember."

Yet the next day I didn't feel so much like an adult, nor did I feel so happy to be where I was.

People started arriving before I was even out of bed, which started things off badly. Having at least fifteen minutes of privacy first thing in the morning seems imperative. Got two flats fixed, thanks to =Oma, and off to Tsau for petrol, etc., after a hassle about who was to go along. Things went well in Tsau for a while—saw the new chief and got official permission to live here, got some letters mailed, did shopping. Trouble began when I was invited to drink beer at a couple of places. Things suddenly got too much for me and people were bugging me about too many things, so I started to cry. =Oma very solicitous, suggested I send him to Tsau for the errands next time with a piece of paper, and I think I will. Got back to [camp] and fed everyone lunch—!Xuma hxaro'ed (gave) me a whole little goat and cooked it. And then I started to feel bad again. =Oma came to me and was trying to be helpful and said maybe I should go home and that N!aici N!a'an (Irven DeVore) should send Marjorie back instead. "Marjorie is more like a Ju/'hoan woman than you are," he said. "If people ask her for too many things she fights back like a fierce little dog—she doesn't put her tail between her legs," which of course made me cry again and I said "Yow!" and went stomping off into the bush. I sat on the ground for a while and was glad to see =Oma and !Xuma eventually coming after me. That !Xuma's first word to me was my own name, in English, was miraculous. It had an electrifying effect on me, like magic sympathy *à travers les âges*. For the space of that one word there was no language barrier between us. We talked a long time about why I was unhappy, and I think resolved some things.

After that it became a little easier to say no. I began to feel alright about structuring my days so I had a little time to myself. I was still a



little guarded but started to relax socially and even to have fun. Visiting back and forth with the Kauri people in my first weeks after that, I learned that they had quickly begun to refer to my new camp as “the Toothbrush Tree Place.” Our little clump of trees and vegetation contained bushes with astringent twigs that were excellent for cleaning one’s teeth and freshening one’s mouth after a meal. Larger local branches furnished the raw materials for my kitchen hut. This “stick kitchen” at the top of the sandy rise we had chosen for our site was a delight to me, and it made me feel both centered amid the camp and its visitors and somewhat private when I cared to be. Our cooking fire was outside the kitchen and a little ways away. I built lashed shelving inside the kitchen for my tinned goods and the hoard of ancient spices and baking ingredients I had inherited from the Harvard camp. Often, inside the kitchen, I would chop onions and put together the ingredients for a communal meal, then carry them to a big pot on the fire around which =Oma !Oma, Di//xao, !Xuma, and whatever visitors we had were sitting and talking. If something needed to be stirred and we didn’t have a spoon that was long enough, someone would stand up, cut a suitable branch from a nearby tree, and whittle one.

I noticed that from the inside of my stick kitchen I could see very well what was going on in the bright sun outside, but that from outside one couldn’t see the inside of the kitchen, as it was so much darker there. I thought I would see if taking photos secretly from inside would eliminate people’s self-consciousness. For a few days I took candid photos secretly from inside the kitchen without people noticing. But soon I felt embarrassed about that, and I have ended up never using any of those pictures.

In retrospect, I realized I had little need to worry about the Kauri people’s reactions to a camera. Few of them had ever seen a photograph in those days, and fewer still had seen their own reflections in a mirror. I was the one who was visually self-conscious, not they. Living closely with Ju/’hoansi, I began to be aware that my own life, in comparison to theirs, was riddled with various forms of painful and disabling self-consciousness. I knew I had been somewhat shy at home in my own culture and had always been trying to get beyond that constraint. But I had never thought possible the dimensions of personal confidence and freedom that the Ju/’hoansi seemed to enjoy. I realized I wanted to learn as much as I possibly could about how they brought up their children to be such well-adjusted, socially competent human beings. Instead of self-consciousness, I saw in them its opposite—an admirable self-containedness, a trust in their own abilities and expressions. I found myself entranced by the confidence of individuals I was

coming to know. I think it had everything to do with their zest for life—which at times included enthusiastic zest for invective against people who thwarted them! I was learning so much, not just about them, but *for my own life* by living at Kauri!

A little ways beyond my stick kitchen, the employees had a supply tent for staples like mealie meal, tinned beans, sugar, and tea, so they could put together a meal for themselves whenever they wanted. I made a decision to have enough staples on hand at all times so that whoever was visiting at the fire could also be fed anytime a meal was made or tea was brewed. Often the employees would be given wild meat or gathered foods by the Kauri people, and these went into the communal meals as a matter of course. I marveled at the easy sharing made possible by the observation of well-understood social rules and gradually incorporated its benefits into my *modus operandi*.

From the front door of the kitchen I could see down the little hill to a large anthill (actually, a termite mound). I had read that early travelers and outdoorsmen in Africa sometimes made ovens inside of such anthills to bake their bread. With great difficulty, given the cement-hard dirt of my anthill, I hollowed out a cavity big enough for two loaves in bread pans to sit on a metal grate above a bed of coals. I closed the door of the oven with a cookie sheet against which I leaned a heavy stick of firewood (everywhere was sand: there were no stones anywhere nearby). The oven baked passably well, but the bread always retained a slight methane odor, no doubt from the generations of termites that had lived in the mound and deep below it in the ground.

We washed our dishes, mostly of enameled metal, in metal basins, and propped them up to dry on a *g!ahgui*, a rack of lashed sticks five feet or so off the ground. Anything we needed to keep away from animals, ground pests, and damp was also suspended on the *g!ahgui*. I gave up quickly on the faltering Dobe gas fridge and opted instead for drying and for timely use of fresh things as my preservation solutions. A nearby tree had its sturdy lower branches cut short, and from them hung string bags of potatoes, onions, and oranges after our rare trips to Maun—at least until we ate them and the tree cupboard was again bare. Once we had a huge smoked ham hanging there that had been given to me by Dr. Hans-Joachim Heinz, an entomologist and anthropologist. And several times we had big burlap bags of dried fish from Lake Ngami, a lake usually empty but full enough this year of good rains to support the one-man fish-drying operation of another friend, Zoot September, from Cape Town. (I was disappointed to learn, however, that perhaps due to their being foreign to their area, few Ju/'hoansi would eat either pork or fish, despite pervasive hunger. I had to eat most of the

dried ham and fish myself, and they were pretty unappealing by the time I managed to finish them.)

All in all, I found figuring out our camp setup terrific fun. The cooking arrangements helped me feel I was creating a domestic reality I could live with over the three or four months at a time between supply trips to Maun. These arrangements were a good combination of the communal and the semiprivate, and they worked well both for my shyness and for my wish to live socially as much as I was able. At Dobe, I had felt the kitchen belonged to Marjorie and I was but an interloper. Both Marjorie and I, being in the field and away from the huge feminist ferment going on in the world at that time, were late in taking advantage of the new spirit of cooperation that, with women's liberation, suddenly became possible among American women in those years. On return we both found it miraculously easier than it had been to not be rivalrous with other women. A revolution had truly occurred between 1968 and 1972! By the time Marjorie and I again overlapped in the field, in 1975, sharing cooking and much else was far easier for us, thanks to our American sisters—and women around the world—who had been creating this revolution while we were gone.

At the time I had also felt the Dobe kitchen had an air of excluding the Ju/'hoansi. I certainly didn't fault Mel and Marj or their predecessors for needing a private space for their meals. But as a lone outsider, I needed to share more meals and have more companionship with my campmates and the nearby village. I felt lucky that Kauri had a much smaller community of Ju/'hoansi than did Dobe and its surroundings. Even if the entire community had come to dinner (which they never did, due partly to their distance from our camp), we could have fed them all with relative ease. As it was, our new setup provided perfect hospitality circumstances for the storytelling sessions that soon began at "Toothbrush Tree/Spirit Voice" and continued there for more than a year.

My camp was about three miles from Kauri, which also had an alternate name linking it to the landscape. People told me its "respect name" was Zaog!u, "Grass-Water," a reference to a marshy place surrounded by hollow-stemmed grass that grew abundantly there. The grass stems could be used by foot travelers to suck clean, cold water from the boles of certain known big trees. I learned later that *zao* covered two related species of grass, *Tristachya longispiculata* and *T. superba*.

I debated how best to set up the storytelling sessions. If Toothbrush Tree had been closer to Kauri, I could have easily spent evenings hearing stories told in the "ordinary circumstances" of village life. But we had looked, and for various reasons (mostly absence of shade and pres-

ence of snakes), we had seen no appropriate nearer site. I reflected that a lot of time each day would be consumed by the storytellers walking three miles each way to my camp or by my packing up recording gear and going to Kauri and back every day. I also knew that, unless food was provided, some large proportion of the Kauri adults would have to be out in the bush for hours each day hunting, gathering, cutting firewood, and carrying water. I wanted a big enough group to provide the audience needed for vibrant storytelling. I resolved to experiment with solutions to this problem. My first experimental solution was to set up a retreat-like atmosphere, a kind of vacation for storytellers. I was lucky: this worked so well I never had to look for an alternative.

I invited the old people at Kauri, ranging in number from four to eight depending on their visiting relatives who came from as far away as /Kae/kae or even the Dobe area, to stay with me at my camp for a week at a time. They brought their own sleeping skins and blankets and slept around our communal cooking and talking fire. I had a few extra tents where they could sleep in case of rain. I would have enough staples and tinned foods stockpiled to feed them for the week, and we all cooked and ate together. Often the younger people brought fresh wild meat (like kudu, wildebeest, or buffalo) or slingshot guinea fowls I could pay or trade for. These extras, along with gathered foods I could get from people according to the season, would go into a three-legged pot with onions, rice, tinned vegetables, beans—whatever was on hand—for an ever-changing stew. The gathered foods ranged from succulent wild salad greens and giant mushrooms to spiny cucumbers, potato-like roots, several kinds of *Grewia* raisin berries, and sour plums. Sometimes we had delicious sour milk (actually curds and whey cultured in big, dried gourds after the churned butter was removed) from nearby Herero villages and cattle posts. The old people were delighted not to have to search for food during the weeks they were with me, and, as I had hoped, they relaxed into our retreat-like atmosphere of full-time storytelling. The fact that this kind of hospitality exchange was comfortable for both me and the Ju/'hoansi made the storytelling arrangement delightful and productive. I got up each morning wondering what unexpected bounty—in terms of both unpredictable wild food we could share and of further sharing of stories—the day might bring.

Any day's discoveries, whether in the bush or in our camp, could illuminate the contents of the often mysterious stories I was hearing. I wanted to be able to responsibly propose in my dissertation this challenging idea: that the social usefulness of the expressive forms can be understood by relating a society's metaphors to its technology. For this

I needed to understand the metaphors embedded not only in the folklore but in the activities and problem-solving of everyday life. So it was my intention to get as broad a collection of Ju/'hoan oral tradition as I could—and to understand its content—during the rest of my time in Botswana.

My mentor Lorna Marshall and her daughter Elizabeth had written down quite a number of Ju/'hoan stories in English during their fieldwork in the 1950s, with the help of interpreters. I wanted to follow up on their lead by providing both recordings in Ju/'hoansi and a sense of the tradition as a whole. I felt I needed those things to begin to answer the academic questions with which I had arrived. These questions included, What do folklore stories do for a recently hunting and gathering (or foraging) people like the Ju/'hoansi, whose society was (at that time) regarded as a contemporary exemplar of the most ancient and long-lived form of human organization? And does narrative have specific enabling functions for society? I also felt I must situate the Ju/'hoan storytelling traditions as fully as possible within the physical conditions of their lives at the time. So I saw my role as a dual one, including not only recording and documentation of verbal materials but also ethnographic and environmental contextualization.

As we got started with daily taping sessions, not knowing the scope of the repertoire, I didn't try to put any order into which stories were chosen. I decided to let the cast of individual storytellers, their enthusiasms, and their whims dictate what was next to be recorded. At Dobe I had seen that old people told the stories they knew with appetite and delight. My job, I felt, was to keep tape and batteries in the recorder, and to be ready to let 'er rip whenever the storytelling impulse struck.

I first heard a suite of elaborate and bawdy stories about tricks played by women upon men, alternating with retaliation by men on the women. The storytelling grew more and more hilarious with each episode. /Xoan N!a'an, one of the older women, explained to me that "the man began all the trouble." So for a while I thought that Kaoxa (one of the many names of a male trickster back in the times "when the animals were still people") was always the initiator of the tricks. He was—when the storytellers were women. But one day I heard the story from an old man. "/Xoan N!a'an's been telling you all wrong," he said jocularly. "She hasn't told you it was the *women* who began it, in the beginning." He then proceeded to tell the story himself, starting out, "The women lived and thought, 'What shall we do to this man?'"

In general, the husbands were tricked into eating their wives' sexual parts or falling into a pit of sexual secretions or excrement. The husbands in turn tricked the women into biting into the testicles or anus

of the husbands or made love to them in the guise of dead meat. Mel Konner had told me he collected a version of this story in which the husband is reconstituted, after one such episode, from his own penis, which the wives have discarded thinking it only the penis of an aardvark. In some versions both Kaoxa and his wives get into each other's stomachs by pretending to be plant food, then laugh or giggle there, making life unbearable. One storyteller explicitly said that Kaoxa wanted to make love to the women so he tricked his way inside them by turning into ripe *kito'an*, which looks like a red cucumber. When the wives are eaten in turn, they sometimes pop right out through Kaoxa's stomach wall and he has to be sewn up again by obliging flies. "This is the same thing you did to us!" the wives crow.

We had a great deal of fun laughing at these stories as they were elaborated day after day. Part of the fun was the worth given to each person's renditions of the various stories: you never knew what the next storyteller would want to incorporate or emphasize in a given story on any given day. People insisted fiercely on each person's right to tell the story in his or her own way. I saw in action here an example of the fact that oral traditions in most cultures vary greatly around a core set of themes, stories, and beliefs. It was clear that this variability added to the richness of the experience—for everyone—of telling and hearing stories. It also increased the speed of my language learning: as I listened, soon familiar with the basic plots, I was still scrambling to keep up with the vocabulary I was learning from the different versions. Each day I would consult !Xuma with my list of new vocabulary. He answered my questions in Ju/'hoansi, and that was how I learned.

One night while several older couples were staying at my camp and sharing stories such as these, we experienced a termite swarm. The old people sprang to their feet as one and called out for me to bring a lantern. Having no idea why, I went into the kitchen and found one with a working mantle, lit it, and brought it back outside. The old people and my campmates had rapidly dug a circular trench about a foot deep with a mound of sand left in the middle. On this mound, they indicated, I was to put the lantern. As soon as I did, the huge, fat termites began literally throwing themselves at the light, getting scorched, and falling into the trench. The people hurried to smother them with sand. Soon there were layers and layers of termites and sand in the trench. Within a few minutes the trench was full and, with the lantern removed, one could barely see where this mass slaughter had taken place. In the morning the suffocated termites were dug out, and the sand was knocked off them. Then they were heated in our three-legged pot. When heated, they generated their own oil. They were naturally

a bit crunchy, due to their twig-like mandibles and legs as well as to the grains of sand that still clung to them. Tasting to a Texan a bit like cracklins, they were obviously considered a great delicacy.

When my mud house was finished and thatched, I had a raised wooden bedframe (a *g!ahm*) built and mudded into the floor. I put my folding mattress on the frame and slept there in a sleeping bag. The dried mud walls, leavened with cow dung for strength, were dark brown. I built short bookshelves around the walls at eye height and mudded them in, as well. I bought bottles of white shoe polish in the sparsely provisioned trading store at Tsau, and I invited the Kauri children to paint white animals on the brown walls. The effect was like being inside a rock art cave. I had a door made of lashed sticks fitted to the hut's one opening.

Through the gaps between the sticks I could see the sun go down and, much later, the moon go down. As I wrote in my journal, "The stars bright, all the way to the horizon, fool you time and again out of the corners of your eyes, thinking stars are animals staring at you through the trees. And tonight, the yellow crescent moon, cut into two enraged cat's eyes by the single-pole lathing of my door."

At the dark of the moon I could step outside and the fabulous *whoosh!* of the Magellanic Cloud stars streaming down toward the Southern Cross would simply hit me in the face: I was as far from light pollution as a person could likely be in this world.

Nights at that house seemed endless, starkly beautiful, and perfect for solitary journal writing. Nevertheless, I found I kept waking in the mornings with a feeling of desolation and loneliness. Within a few weeks I had moved my mattress and sleeping bag to the fire, to be close to the people there when I awoke. About nine months of the year were bone dry, and it was easy to sleep outdoors. Sleeping outdoors by the fire made me much happier. I used my thatched house mostly for storage. I also changed clothes in it and bathed privately behind it using a bucket on a stand and a bar of soap. The hungry Kauri dogs ate my soap so often that I had to hang a bar of soap on a rope high in the air from the thatch on the roof. "Up off the ground or face the consequences!" became another of my mottoes.

The storytelling and the nights sleeping around the fire and, soon, dancing with the Kauri people began to bring me closer to them. After experiencing the healing dances at Dobe and Mahopa, I felt fairly confident that these would also be regular occurrences among the Ju/'hoansi at Kauri, and I was not disappointed. In retrospect, it was the dances that provided the most immediate way for me to feel comfortable with the Kauri people. No language was required, and there was something



**Figure 3.1.** Megan's house at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

extremely powerful about dancing repeatedly with the same people. I came to know how each man and woman danced and to anticipate their styles and gestures. I learned who the strongest healers were, and I saw the others make gestures of loving appreciation to them, throwing pinches of fragrant *sa* into the air in their direction as they danced slowly around the circle. I saw both young and old men and women flirting with each other in the dance, and I began to be able to decode how safe or how daring, depending on kinship rules, was each instance I saw. Timid about participating at first, I was warmly encouraged by both men and women to start learning the clapped cadences and beautiful polyphonic singing that made night after night electric and enabled the healing. Dances happened about once a week and were the perfect introduction for me to this group of people I was coming to know in other ways at the same time. Concerned about "doing it right" and respecting their dance, I asked an older woman, !Unn/obe, how I could learn to dance just like they did. She replied, "You just do what you feel like doing." I realized this dance was a radically capacious



form: though some people excelled in it as dancers, there was no such thing as a mistake, even for an outsider.

One key element that seemed to hold dances together was the ubiquitous, fragrant *sa*. The women were enveloped in the earthy, musky perfume of *sa* powder they pounded from the hard little ball-shaped roots of certain water-pan plants. Seeing how the people loved this magical powder, and loving its varied scents myself, I asked some women friends to take me to the dry water pans where it could be dug, and to make me some. I traded oranges and sometimes little containers of cooking oil for *sa* and for *sa*-scented ochre. The Ju/'hoan women were sometimes able to obtain this ochre from Herero women, whose men had horses to take them to the far-off places where ochre was to be found. Ju/'hoan women and Herero women alike loved to dry and pound orange peels to add a citrusy aroma to their *sa*. And every Kalahari dweller I ever met coveted any sort of oil or creme to spread on their perpetually dry skins. Dressing up specially for a dance meant women's faces were shining with creme or oil, or were dramatically scarlet or yellowed with ochred oil, or that the scent of newly pounded *sa* enveloped them—or all three, whenever possible. When you saw a woman thus adorned striding purposefully toward a dance, often with layers of beadwork around her neck and freshly cleaned and softened skin blankets on her body, you knew she meant to enjoy that dance to its fullest.

I loved the evenings when we knew there was going to be a dance and we would traipse down the sandy track to Kauri village. By day I was beginning to feel a simple familiarity with Kauri, with its handful of thatched huts with their doorways facing this way and that, standing at roughly the edges of a cleared sandy space, with one more elaborate mud and thatch house at a distance. The more substantial house was that of a man who had a regular job with Tswana pastoralists near Tsau and had been able to start his own small herd of *mafisa* cattle, earned by working each season for a number of years for payment in calves. He was still part of the Ju/'hoan village but clearly upwardly mobile in a way that set him beyond the means of other Ju/'hoansi. I thought his constant slight look of social anxiety must have to do with his economic status. The contrast between the hunter-gatherers and the pastoralists, such as the Tswana and Herero, could not have been more stark. Though in that area practically everybody spoke all three of the languages and there were a number of intermarriages, the pastoralists were seen as the haves, the Ju/'hoansi the have-nots, with each side of the divide cordially and systematically trying to exploit the other.

Kauri at night was another thing entirely. It had a fantastical look to me, like a place at the edge of the earth, a place in a dream. Walking there, we turned off the sand track at a barely visible break in the tall grasses. I used a flashlight when I had live batteries to put in it and shone it on the narrow trail in careful watch for snakes. I was never alone on such trails but always following !Xuma, or =Oma !Oma, or some other Ju/'hoan person, knowing from experience how easy it was to get lost, especially at night. As the trail brought us to the clearing, we could see the dance fire with a little watching fire beside it. Often people continued to sit at their own small cooking fires and watch or listen from there, before joining in the dance when they were ready.

The dances usually began about sunset with the enthusiastic and playful singing and clapping of little girls, who would gradually be joined by boys and older men and women as the night grew darker. Entries to the dance were completely casual and lacking in time pressure. Women, often with babies on their backs, would simply appear when they were ready, and the ones already seated would make room for them in the tight circle where they sat with legs overlapping. When they sang and clapped, women often turned their heads toward other women at their sides, the better to hear each other and to improvise beautifully within the singing. Babies and young children nestled close to their mothers' bodies, often sleeping for many hours or whole nights within the circle of firelight and music. Boys and men would wind dance rattles around their ankles and up their calves and begin to dance in a line that made a circle around the backs of the seated women. Sometimes, at what signal or whim I knew not, the line of stamping, rattling dancers would reverse itself and travel slowly in the other direction.

At first, both at Dobe and here, I brought my own sense of time tension into the dance. When a dance started I was worried that I would miss something or not be there for the whole of it, and that I would therefore be an interruption for others. When I finally understood fully how reliable the sense of flow was for everyone, myself included, in these dances, it was an immense relief to me. It was a form with the power to dissolve many obstacles, including the pervasive sense of outsiderhood I carried with me always in Africa. The goal I had arrived with was to understand their culture "from within," but some powerful diffidence or shyness had tended to hold me back from real participation. However, the dance's sensory elements—cold grey sand under my bare feet, the unearthly beauty of musical counterpoints in singing and percussion, the popping and smoke of pungent fires, and the cacophony of excited talk and laughter that erupted each time there



**Figure 3.2.** Dance at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

was a pause in the singing—combined to rouse in me a fierce desire to take part and to learn all I could about what was going on. Late in the night, and often just at dawn, there would be a climax of dancing, singing, and palpable healing that involved every single person present, including myself.

The morning after each dance, I tried to talk to !Xuma or others of the healers, and to the women who had been singing the night before. I asked them questions about what I had seen and experienced. I also asked those who went into trances whether they had traveled to the “village of the spirits,” and if so, what they had seen there. Each person’s description of these experiences was idiosyncratic to himself or herself, and yet all were accepted as part of the multifaceted truth of the world beyond—the world knowable only through altered states of consciousness. In this way I slowly built my understanding of the panoply of ideas and beliefs that supported this astounding community performance—one that the people, appetitive and joyful, undertook over and over again. I also realized that in the folktales I was recording, and just beginning to be able to understand, there were many intriguing references to the dance and to healing. I decided to let these references lead me where they would, and I gradually understood them to be not only mutually reinforcing but absolutely basic to the structure of belief that kept community members here in tune with each other.

The central theme of all of this was mutual tolerance and the paramount importance of social relationships. This theme was prominent in

the folklore, and it played out among a cast of characters who gradually came alive for me through different versions of their adventures. Back at Dobe, Mel had told me that a large number of the folktales he had heard were focused on an enigmatic heroine. Various seen as a beautiful antbear (aardvark) maiden, an elephant, a python, an eland, and in several other forms at the same time as she was seen as a woman, this heroine had a striking series of adventures. Mel and I had wondered whether they might constitute some sort of epic cycle. Mel told me he had never heard the episodes strung together or told sequentially, but I was still, at that time, convinced there must be some "authentic" or original way the whole story had been told at some time in the past. I was determined to find some expert storyteller who might know how the heroine's episodes fit together in a sort of ur-story. Beyond that, I was asking, might there also be a similar series of young men's adventures in Ju/'hoan folklore?

With these themes in mind, I began looking for experts. It turned out that both storytellers and listeners often mentioned, without prompting, the names of the people from whom they had learned specific stories or ritual information. People seemed quick to acknowledge good storytellers, dancers, musicians, and others they regarded as repositories of information. Common refrains were "She (or he) *really* knows" or "He (or she) is a *tci-!han-kxao* (an owner of knowing things)." Often these knowledgeable people were located elsewhere than at Kauri. Some were a few miles away at cattle posts to the south like Xaxa, !On!a'an, and Muhoahoi, but many were among the Kauri people's relatives more than 120 kilometers away, back near the border at /Kae/kae, Dobe, and even as far north as Tsodilo Hills. I realized I had underestimated the distances most Ju/'hoansi probably cover during their yearly rounds of extended-family visits. They seemed to think nothing of traveling many kilometers on foot to bring new babies for family to see, to exchange gifts with their relatives, and to take advantage of seasonal food and water sources. These people were walking—or when they could, riding donkeys—a lot! Though I obtained many of the stories I wanted right there at Kauri, I was given enough clues to the existence of distant storytellers, healers, and musicians to know that I would be doing quite a bit of traveling. I began to see the references to these artists as beckoning points of light along my evolving route on a constantly unfurling map of western Ngamiland.

I was learning that Ju/'hoan expressive life was not only direct and scatological at times but could also be characterized as highly oblique, indirect, and allusive. One of the many pleasant surprises I received was learning to what extent metaphorical play is part of everyday conversa-

tion among the Ju/hoansi. For example, a number of “respect words” are used in dangerous circumstances such as those involving lions or rain. I expected to learn a few of these, but it turned out that there are hundreds of such respect words to be used when circumstances dictate. They can enhance the politeness, prudence, or delicacy of any utterance. Ordinary implements, parts of the face and body, items of clothing, huts, encampments, areas of land—all have respect words associated with them. These form what is almost a second language for the Ju/hoansi.

Working on these words one day with the Dobe people when I was visiting there from Kauri, I asked for the respect terms for various animals. We began with carnivores. The terms for these were given as I asked for them. When we got to the great meat animals like the antelopes and buffalo, however, I no longer needed to ask. The respect words for these were reeled off in rapid succession, in a kind of litany form I had heard used previously for these meat animals’ regular names.

Sometimes the respect words had significances that utterly escaped me. Some of them were unfamiliar words altogether, which could not be literally translated. But many of the words were readily translatable and their metaphorical significance apparent. For instance, one of the respect words for python is *g!u-tzun-g/a’a*, “water-nose-eye.” Feet are called “sand-pressers,” faces “what’s-up-front,” breasts “chest-meat.” A pestle and mortar are called “speech” because of the sound they make when food is being pounded. A territory is not only called “tree-water,” as I’ve mentioned before, but “sand-surface,” and a pot is called “fire-medicine.” Water is “soft-throat.” Lion is “night,” “moonless-night,” “night-medicine,” “cries-in-the-night,” “calf-muscles,” “calf-muscles-of-nightfall,” and “jealousy.” The delicious swarming termites are called *kxani*, which I translate in this context as “good luck.”

One of the most interesting spontaneous metaphoric interchanges involving respect words took place over a teapot boiling on my fire. I had just shared a pot of tea with a group of old women. Now the tea was all gone, so we were boiling the leaves a second time. A man approached the fire and sat down. Politely not looking at the pot but staring off into space, he asked the women, “Are the *com* (buzzings, a respect word for bees) being chopped out of the trees?” By speaking obliquely of bees, he meant honey, a word that is also used to refer to cane sugar, which in turn metaphorically implies tea with sugar. “The light-colored honey up at the front of the hive has been chopped out already,” answered one of the women. “Now the dark honey at the back is all that is left.” The man’s polite question was about whether there

was still any freshly brewed, sweetened tea in the pot left for him. The woman's answer implied that, no, the tea leaves were all that was left in the pot and would have to be brewed a second time. Their metaphors, used in a simple social situation, operated not at one remove but at four.

When stories were being told, it seemed to me that the most attention was given to storytellers who excelled in using respect words and complex metaphors. At first I was looking not only for "the best" storytellers but for urtexts that I thought would be somehow more authoritative than others. I had not yet understood that the real excitement lay in the widespread contemporary knowledge within the entire society of the tales and items of belief. That it lay in the endless creative variants and different performances, all treated as valid—but still discussed with critical acuity!—which made their tradition the property of all. This understanding gradually developed, eventually becoming the real intellectual adventure of my fieldwork. But for the time being I was following every lead toward finding "experts." Some I had already met or learned about from colleagues, including the elderly grandmother //Xukxa N!a'an, the first storyteller I worked with at Dobe; Jimmy /Ai!ae, a thumb-piano composer at /Kae/kae; and Kxao =Oah, a healer at !Aoan. Names like these became intriguing points of light on the map I wanted to visit and revisit. They were part of the zigzag trail I followed to learn about cosmological ideas and figures in folklore, and eventually, as I will explain in chapter 8, about their relationships to ritual contexts I focused on in my thesis—sickness, initiation, hunting, childbirth, weather control, and danger from carnivores.

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Though I quickly began to record stories, I had resolved not to make recordings of interviews until I felt I could both put questions well and understand a reasonable number of the responses. Through my conversations with fellow students back at Harvard, I had developed a commitment to open-ended, creative interviewing, and I knew I had to be fairly conversant in the language before I could follow an answer well enough to ask an appropriate next question. Little did I know that my very first, and one of my all-time best, interviews would be recorded—at the command of the would-be interviewee—well before I was ready to ask any questions at all.

In preparation at Harvard beforehand, I had told Richard Lee and Irvén DeVore that my plan was to collect Ju/'hoan folklore and other narratives and try to understand their function in Ju/'hoan social life. Lee had also introduced me to the Brandeis psychological anthropolo-

gist Richard Katz, with whom he had in recent years carried out joint fieldwork on Ju/'hoan psychic healing at Dobe and /Kae/kae. The US National Institutes of Mental Health, our grant sponsor, asked me to provide data on women healers to complement what Katz provided on Ju/'hoan men healers.

My plan, then, as I saw it on leaving for Africa, was to concentrate on folklore and other verbal art collection. To do this right, I felt, I had to learn the language well, learn as much as I could about the environment, and make all sorts of ethnographic observations. I also wanted to study the beliefs and practices of altered-state healing, especially with women healers. In other words, I was contemplating eighteen months of total immersion in the cultural activities and expressions of people who hunted and gathered at least part-time in a desert, a privilege rarely available to anthropological field-workers today.

A few months after I established the camp at Kauri, I had occasion to make a trip west to the village of !Aoran, not far from Dobe. There I was offered the use of a small thatched mud house perched on the side of a dune of heavy grey sand. I arrived late one night, greeted some people I knew, and was introduced to others. Then I unrolled my sleeping bag on the sand floor of the hut, and climbed in. At dawn the next morning, when I was still in the sleeping bag, I heard someone speaking to me from outside the hut's door. When I opened it, two men stood there, the younger leading the older, a blind man, using a walking stick carried between them. Through his translator the blind man said, "Turn on your machine—I have something to say!" The blind man was the healer I had once seen healing a child there at !Aoran, when I was still with Marjorie and Mel. Dick Katz had also told me about this man, Kxao =Oah (Giraffe), named for the spirit animal that had led him to become a healer.

I scrambled to turn on my tape recorder, and for the next few hours an extraordinary narrative of one man's acquisition of healing power in his youth, and his use of the power in midlife and into old age, spooled onto the brown cellophane tape. There was no chance or need to ask questions, had I even been able to. I knew I was not catching everything that was being said, but it was clear to me that this was an important firsthand account of religious healing. For the time being, it seemed vital not to interrupt this sustained burst of enthusiasm. Fortunately, the borrowed tape recorder had not yet been made useless by the omnipresent blowing sand, and it faithfully recorded the whole of this freely offered (or should I say imperiously demanded?) communication.

Humorous and intense by turns, Kxao Giraffe described his voyage into the abysmal waters of an underworld, his ascent to God's camp

on "sky threads," and his own initiation into the powerful mysteries of the healing dance. He wove together his otherworld journeys, his trance journeys as a curer into the bodies of sick people, and his own first experience of an altered state into a single unified narrative. It was his own story, different from those of other healers, yet accepted by them as a facet of the "truth" of what was beyond ordinary human consciousness. Translating it later, I also understood that Kxao saw all of his own journeys as one, despite what we who haven't been on such journeys would understand as chronological time gaps. They all took place in what was truly another—dare I say timeless?—world. I later included a translation of this narrative in my thesis, saying, "In a sense, all three of these themes—the curing journey into the body, the journey to the sky, and the reception of power (*n/om*) for the first time—are one in that they are all initiations, leaps of faith requiring that one dare the loss of soul." This was my first inkling of the great courage required for this kind of healing.

I saw that what Lorna Marshall translated as "half-death" (Marshall 1999: 88–90) was a willingly undertaken near-death experience, one that took immense daring, immense willingness to offer oneself. I mused on the close verbal relationship between the word for the healing trance—*!aia*—and the word for death itself—*!ai*—and awaited a time when I could adequately ask questions about this relationship, hoping for ultimate answers.

To trance is to *!aia*. *!Aia* is a verb that is cognate to *!ai*, to die. A healer has to "die" to this world temporarily to access the beyond-normal powers of another world, in order to use them for healing. Once a healer has "died," he or she can travel on the vast web of threads in the sky said to then become visible and beckoning. Kxao =Oah grasped these threads with his fingers or inserted them under his toenails and ascended on them to the place of God to plead for the life of the sick child—and the many other people he healed through the years. Other healers told me they took the threads in their hands and climbed them, sometimes carrying younger, novice healers on their backs to, literally, "show them the ropes."

Many anthropology students are by now familiar with Ju/'hoan healing power from Richard Lee's article "The sociology of !Kung Bushman trance performances" and from Richard Katz's classic book, *Boiling Energy*. Katz and Lee did their work with healers in the sixties, a few years before I joined the HKRG. When I later read the drafts for Katz's *Boiling Energy*, published in 1976, I realized the extent to which my two predecessors had also worked with Kxao. It seemed their work may have readied Kxao to offer me his account promptly on my arrival. Because



I was understanding and responding as much as I could in his own language, however, and was recording it all, I may have gotten a much fuller account of his experiences than had my colleagues. I could tell right away this interview, when carefully translated, would add new and valuable material to the record.

For those who may not know about the phenomenology of Ju/'hoan healing, I should emphasize that Ju/'hoansi describe the healing *n/om* as power or energy, a kind of supernatural potency whose activation paves the way for curing. Associated with it are special powers shared with many other shamanic traditions of the world, like clairvoyance, out-of-body travel, x-ray vision, and prophecy. *N/om*, residing in the belly, is activated through strenuous trance dancing, beautiful polyphonic singing, and the heat of the fire. It is said to ascend or “boil up” the spinal column and into the head, at which time it can be used to pull out any sickness or unrest afflicting the people in the group. Arriving at this state where healing becomes possible also involves an experience in the chest and midriff called *//xabe* (being set free, being untied). Over half the men in Ju/'hoan society at that time had experience as healers, as well as a large number of women. Kxao's account was one of many I ended up recording over the years.

That morning Kxao said:

Just yesterday, friend, the giraffe came and took me again. Kaoxa [the trickster god] came and took me and said, “Why is it that people are singing, yet you're not dancing?” When he spoke, he took me with him and we left this place. We traveled until we came to a wide body of water. It was a river. He took me to the river. The two halves of the river lay to either side of us, one to the left and one to the right.

Kaoxa made the waters climb, and I lay my body in the direction they were flowing. . . . My feet were behind, and my head was in front. That's how I lay. Then I entered the stream and began to move forward. I entered it and my body began to do like this [Kxao waved his hands dreamily to show how his body traveled forward, undulating in the water.] I traveled like this. My sides were pressed by pieces of metal. Metal things fastened my sides. And in this way I traveled forward, my friend. That's how I was stretched out in the water. And the spirits were singing.

The spirits were having a dance. I began to dance it, too, hopping around like this. I joined the dance and danced with them, but Kaoxa said to me, “Don't come here and start to dance like that: now you just lie down and watch. This is how you should dance,” he said, as he showed me how to dance. So the two of us danced that way. We danced and danced. We went to my protector and Kaoxa said to him, “Here is your son.” To me he said:

"This man will carry you and put *n/om* into you." The man took hold of my feet. He made me sit up straight. But I was under water! I was gasping for breath! I called out, "Don't kill me! Why are you killing me?" My protector answered. "If you cry out like that, I'm going to make you drink. Today I'm certainly going to make you drink water. . . ." The two of us struggled until we were tired. We danced and argued and I fought the water for a long, long time. We did it until the cocks began to crow. [Kxao softly sang a medicine song.]

That's how my protector sang. He told me that was how I should sing. So, my friend, I sang that song and sang it and sang until I had sung in the daybreak. Then, my friend, my protector spoke to me, saying that I would be able to cure. He said that I would stand up and trance. He told me that I would trance. And the trancing he was talking about, my friend—I was already doing it. Then he said he would give me something to drink. My friend, my little drink was about this size. . . . He made me drink it and said that I would dance the dance I had learned. And so, my friend, I have just stuck with that dance and grown up with it.

Then my protector told me that I would enter the earth. That I would travel far through the earth and then emerge at another place. When we emerged, we began to climb the thread—it was the thread of the sky! Yes, my friend. Now, up there in the sky, the people up there, the spirits, the dead people up there, they sing for me so I can dance.

When people [just] feel bad, my friend, I don't dance. But if a person dies . . . I carry him on my back and lay him down. I lay him out so that we are lying together. He lies with his feet this way. And his head lies across my shoulders. I lay him across my body and carry him on my back. I carry him and then lay him down again. . . . That's what I do, my friend. I dance him, dance him, dance him, dance him so that G//aoan (the great god) will give his spirit to me. Then I return from G//aoan and put his spirit back into his body. My friend, I put it back, put it back, put it back, put it back, put it back and that's how he comes out alive. Sometimes I cure a person, and he dies, and G//aoan says, "This person is going to die today. I will take him and go away with him!" . . . He won't return . . . ! Not when he speaks like that. Now we who have been with this sick person, staying with him, when G//aoan tries to leave with him, we are stingy with him. We do not want to let him go.

For I am a big dancer. Yes, I am a big dancer. I teach other people to dance. When people sing, I go into a trance. I trance and put *n/om* into people, and I carry on my back those who want to learn *n/om*. Then I go! I go right up and give them to G//aoan!

My friend, when you go to visit G//aoan, you sit this way [in an attitude of respect, with arms folded across the knees.] People sit this way when

they go to G//aoan, the great, great god, the master. . . . When you arrive at G//aoan's place, you make yourself small. You have become small. You come in small to G//aoan's place. You do what you have to do there. Then you return to where everyone is, and you hide your face. You hide your face so you won't see anything. You come and come and come and finally you enter your body again. All the people, the Ju/'hoansi who have stayed behind waiting for you—they fear and respect you. Friend, they are in awe of you. You enter, enter, enter the earth, and then you return to enter the skin of your body. . . . And you say, "He-e-e-e!" [Kxao makes the trembling sound of those who have "died" in trance and returned.] That is the sound of your return to your body. Then you begin to sing. . . .

My friend, that's the way of this *n/om*. When people sing, I dance. I enter the earth. I go in at a place like a place where people drink water. I travel in a long way, very far. When I emerge, I am already climbing. I'm climbing threads, the threads that lie over there in the south. . . . I take them and climb them. I climb one and leave it, then I go climb another one. I come to another one and leave it, then I go climb another one. I come to another one and climb, then I come to another one. Then I leave it and climb on another. Then I follow the thread of the wells, the one I am going to go enter! The thread of the wells of metal. When you get to the wells, you duck beneath the pieces of metal. [Kxao weaves his fingers together and puts them over the back of his head.] And you pass beneath them. . . . It hurts. When you lift up a little, the metal pieces grab your neck. You lie down so that they don't grab you. When it grabs you, you have entered the well. Friend, when you've entered the well, you just return. And then you come out. That's what this *n/om* does. . . .

Friend, that's how it is with this *n/om* that I do! Its possessions! They're many! Gemsboks, leopards, lions, things like that. When people sing, his possessions come, the great, great god's possessions! Friend, just as you have come to me here, G//aoan's animals will come to us!

After about six months in Botswana, I was able to go through this entire monologue of Kxao's and, with the help of !Xuma and others, begin to put together a full translation. By then I was also able to request interviews with other people who, I knew, had knowledge of things I wanted to know. I could record the interviews and understand the answers well enough to go forward in a creative, rather than rote, manner. But the nuances and associations behind these narratives have continued to deepen for me in the fifty years since that time, as I have recorded the life stories of other healers and talked to healers and healed alike about their beliefs and experiences. Some of the most profound realizations connected with the words of the healing beliefs

finally crystallized for me only in July 2018. That happened when I was working word for word through the Botswana material with Fridrick /Ai!ae /Kunta, one of the translators in the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group (JTG) I started in Namibia in 2002. (More on this group will be found in the epilogue to this book.)

I have always valued my early experience of being freely given his story by Kxao, a man who clearly wanted to share it with some wider world. It cemented for me the worth of radical openness—and open-endedness—in doing this sort of fieldwork. After that memorable early morning recording session in 1971, I vowed to be ready at all times for similar opportunities. Part of my success that day, I feel, was that I was perceived by Kxao as a clear channel. I presented myself as the unschooled novice that I was, and he simply poured his knowledge and experience into me. I wasn't even able yet to translate a good proportion of his words.

It may also be true that my natural reticence or shyness worked for me on that occasion. I didn't do any kind of initiation or motivation, or ask leading questions. I was merely a good listener. Kxao seemed to see me as a vessel to carry his knowledge. After hearing his story, I knew a big part of my role in life going forward from that moment would be bearing witness to this long-honed, efficacious, and beautiful healing dance. But I have continued to feel, and to present myself, largely as the novice in their culture I will always be. As a result I have learned something new each day I have since spent with the Ju/'hoansi.

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I have already touched on some of the things I learned in my first few months; many of them could be summed up as social lessons. I learned some of these lessons from the Ju/'hoansi over and over; some of them became incrementally clearer over time. Situations in which I had the opportunity to learn or more deeply learn what I thought of as "the lessons of the Ju/'hoansi" kept recurring throughout my time with them. These came to me, a member of an overpopulated, competitive, highly stratified society, from a group of people who lived most of their lives face-to-face on an equal basis with the same few dozen people. Their very lives depended on managing to get along in harmony with each other over the long term. Most of the lessons focused on the absolute necessity of egalitarian sharing, and on tolerance and respect for each other. Not speaking "for" another but allowing each to have a say, in storytelling, in group decision-making—this was a deeply enshrined value. In their environment of scarce resources, moreover, the Ju/'hoansi

taught their children the worth of keeping their eyes open for opportunity at all times. They also learned that the most reliable resources of all were their relationships with each other.

Balance in relationships with others was to be kept at all costs. These others included the people who had gone before—the departed kin, seen by the Ju//hoansi as maintaining lively interest in the well-being of those still on earth. The Ju//hoansi extended the obvious power of blood kin relationships in several ways. First, they named children for the grandparental generation, thus creating instant shared identities and bonds that lasted people's lifetimes. Second, they employed the simple expedient of identifying selected nonkin as fictive kin with the same roster of names from which their children's names were chosen, making way for even more shared identities and bonding. They taught their children the rules for asking their kin for things—but also, over and over, reinforced the rules for giving to their kin.

A very important lesson the Ju//hoansi taught me was one that, at twenty-five, I had not yet learned well from my own society. That lesson was the power of indirection in bringing home a lesson, a commentary, or criticism. Ju//hoan people who excelled at modeling modesty, indirect teaching, and methods of sharing their wisdom without making others feel small became moral leaders. Leadership was constantly pared and re-pared to an efficacious level by the reinforcement of the ideal of equality—and by instant social disapproval of any form of self-aggrandizement.



## YOU HAD TO HAVE BEEN THERE

I have lived in a number of wonderful, quirky places in my life; none seemed so improbable yet so quintessentially *mine* as my camp, Toothbrush Tree, near Kauri. An island in “the middle of nowhere,” with an ocean of sand and brush stretching away in all directions, it had all I needed: my thatched living rondavel, a thatched kitchen with walls made of lashed sticks, my door-desk suspended from a huge syringa tree, our supply tent, my camp members’ tents (and later their plastered huts), occasional guest tents, and a communal cooking area. This was my home from autumnal April 1971 until wintry June 1972. There I saw the starkly different Kalahari seasons turn, learned to gather the bush foods that went with each season, and saw from the door of my hut small migrations of wildebeest and antelope passing close by under the little sand rise known to me and the few dozen Ju/hoansi at Kauri as both “Toothbrush Tree” and “Spirit Voice.” Somewhat perversely, it was delicious to me, at this time long before GPS, that none of my friends or family elsewhere in the world knew exactly where I was. I felt more alive than I had ever been before. It was a revelation to be in that one place for more than a year: when April rolled around a second time I greeted the drying, cooling season as a familiar fact of my own life.

I had left Dobe at the end of the wet season. In that wet season, from November to January or February, the Kalahari turns into what I can only describe as a “short jungle.” Green vines and creepers writhe in all directions, but only up to about three feet above the ground. Salady foods like *!guashi* leaves and the peppery, tangy, fleshy lobes of *//guia* abound, along with huge white edible mushrooms that sprout from the sides of anthills. Small antelopes like duiker and steenbok can be advantageously hunted in the rains because the tracking is easier. Many Ju/hoan folktales begin with the words “It was raining, and they were hunting duikers.” I began to understand that a world of seasonal information and atmosphere was evoked for Ju/hoan listeners when they heard these few words at the start of a story.

As March and April come on, drying begins, and people turn towards digging the edible tubers that have benefited from the rains. By then, many such foods, looking like potatoes but tasting mostly like

cucumbers, have swollen and ripened underground. Some of the tubers function as actual water sources in many areas of the Kalahari during the drier months of the year. April, May, June, and July become cool, then cold and increasingly dry, with the tall green grasses turning golden and silver and sometimes a gorgeous metallic red before they are all consumed by termites. One can stand in a patch of grassland in June and, if the wind is not blowing, actually *hear* the clicking of grasses being eaten down by millions upon millions of termite mandibles. Animals become harder to track, and tubers become harder to dig. It's a time of real hunger, and people grow visibly thinner. By July, the air during the day is like an elixir, dry and cool and bracing. At night it may freeze, and people say that since they are too cold and hungry to sleep, there's not much else to do but stay up all night dancing to keep warm and well.

We danced often and easily at Kauri. I remember so well driving back to my camp in the morning after an all-night dance at the people's camp the night before. The people who had come in my employ from Dobe—Old !Xuma as language teacher, =Oma !Oma as mechanic, and =Oma's wife, Di//xao, and small daughter—were with me. =Oma's wife had opted to accompany her husband at least for a while, to see how she would like visiting distant relatives at Kauri. !Xuma's wife, N=aisa, however, had said she had too much work to do and would stay at Dobe. She joked as we were leaving Dobe that !Xuma should find a young cowife and bring her back to help with the work. !Xuma later told me that it was great fun to have two wives when you were an old man—all the younger people thought you were hot stuff, even if you weren't!

When we pulled up at Toothbrush Tree that morning after our night of dancing, I took my unused bedroll and was heading wearily toward my hut to stow it. I looked back and saw old !Xuma jump out of the Land Rover and burst into dancing again. Immediately the others in the truck began singing and dancing with him, and a new little dance continued for another fifteen minutes or so, ending with a glorious flourish. To me this seemed like a declaration of irrepressible energy: just when you thought all strength was gone, it could flare again in the most unexpected ways. After that I saw over and over again that Ju/'hoansi like to end things—from dancing to storytelling to performing hilarious mimicry—on a surprise or a high note or both. With them, I felt that I had somehow entered a kind of haven—a nurturing space—for creative spontaneity.

Through the months at my new camp, I got up most mornings on fire to see what new things I might learn that day. And because we



**Figure 4.1.** Morning dance at Kauri. © Megan Bieseles.

were all perpetually hungry, it was just as exciting to find out what fresh bush foods we might find to eat each day, beyond the boring and bland staples (mealie meal, oatmeal, tinned beans, corned “bully” beef) I had brought from Maun. Because there were many days when there were only tinned beans to eat, and many days when nothing fresh or enticing was available, I ended up writing excitedly about the days when I was surprised by the appearance of something delicious. Someone might show up with a couple of newly slingshot guinea fowl, for which I paid a few shillings, and which I could boil into a lovely soup with onions and whatever bush vegetables were on hand. Sometimes there was a rabbit haunch, or a slab of fresh kudu meat, or strong-tasting, dark-red eland meat, or even a hunk of Cape buffalo. One of my HKRG predecessors, demographer Nancy Howell, had written and mimeographed a very useful “Kalahari Cookbook” full of helpful tips about cooking these exotic things. I often went gathering with the Kauri women, who showed me how to find sour plums, berries, tubers, mushrooms, and nuts. Feeling like a hunter-gatherer of both food and information, I seemed to have entered a fairy-tale land of discovery.

Within my first few days at Kauri, the business of living began to merge seamlessly with the business of research and learning for which I was ostensibly there. On April 19 I wrote:



In the late afternoon we drove to Kauri with a big basket of *mabele* (grain sorghum, also called kaffir corn) to have it pounded. I took beads to Di//xao and we talked for a long time about how they would be sewn. I looked for eggs again in vain. I walked back to my camp, leaving the truck for the others. I got back after dark, and was glad to get a fire and lantern going. I cooked an incredible sweet and sour warthog stew with guava halves. When the Bushmen got back we drank some wine and talked around the fire. =Oma talked about what Henry (Harpending, a previous graduate student who taught =Oma auto mechanics and how to drive) meant to him, what his [own] plans for the future were (work for black people, he said, but demand a salary of at least five pounds sterling a month). I asked about whether he would like to take a second wife when he is a *ju n!a'an* (grownup). "No!" he said emphatically. I briefly wondered whether there might be a dawning monogamous ideal in upwardly mobile younger Bushmen. But then he said he wanted a second wife right away, while he is still young and strong!

The journal entry for the next day began:

Today has been a fine day. *Everything* went smoothly. I got up at dawn and nobody arrived for about forty-five minutes, which gave me time to dress, brush my hair, and have coffee and leftovers for breakfast before /Ukxa came and sat around the fire with us. By then I felt positively hospitable, and began to see in the old guy definite possibilities as an important storyteller, mimic, and player with words. Other Bushmen are delighted to listen to him twisting language, imitating little crazy birds, and being generally silly in an elegant way. More women came later on bead business, and !Xuma diplomatically gave them coffee without letting it become a decision for me to make. Then it clouded up and rained, and we all crawled into the tents !Xuma and =Oma had set up. People seemed interested in the fact that I was writing down their speech, and interested in teaching me, unlike the Dobe people who seem somewhat tired of teaching anthropologists by now.

This is coming to seem a lovely place to be. The men came and began putting up my house after we cleared a big space for it and marked out the size circle I wanted. They dug deep (two-to-three-foot) holes in the sand at about three-foot intervals around the circumference, and stood the poles in them with notched tops at a uniform height (about my height). Then they cut slender, flexible saplings and staggered them through the notches, bending them into a circle and tying them together with twine. I gave them a good meal of tinned meat over mealie meal (they didn't like the steak and kidney, so I gave them the minced steak). The women came from gathering grass and I fed them too, and gave everybody tobacco. No-

body asked me for anything extra! !Xuma's words to them on my behalf yesterday [asking them to cut down on the volume of requests they made of me] seemed to have really sunk in. Then I went with the women to see the sheaves of grass.

It was sad how suspicious I was this afternoon of the beautiful calm of the women who were gathering grass. I kept thinking this can't be true, these women must have something up their sleeve. But they didn't. We walked to see the sheaves they have been cutting for four days. We bound up a last few of them in the late afternoon. One small woman sat on a sweet-smelling pile of discards nursing her baby and binding sheaves. In a big pile some of the heads were long and red and some were golden, fluffy, shorter. I asked why. The red ones are *tci disi*, female things, and the gold are male, they said. The women were barefoot, ragged, calm, and graceful. Quiet: a group of traditionalists. Charging *me* a shilling a sheaf for something Rapunzel would have had an easy time spinning into gold. . . .

On the way back I met some men coming from the new borehole. They pointed out the way and I walked over there. I found three handsome, muscular fellows working there, none of whom spoke anything but Setswana. . . . They gave me some biltong (jerky) and I reciprocated by asking them to come to my camp to get sugar, which they needed. We walked back to my camp and got it. The *mabele* lady was there with it all ground very finely and beautifully. We sat around the fire and chatted. I hemmed a pair of =Oma's overalls. Bushmen here all seem to understand Setswana [the language of the Tswana pastoralists]. Everyone left at sunset and I was all alone, since my people were happily off at the village again. Lots of work done today (garbage pit—gargantuan—dug, two huge sets of dishes washed, two tires fixed, two tents set up). I swept out the truck, etc., etc., and there was an encouraging amount of work done on the houses. And I was calm and happy all day. I gave out lots of medicine, but the demands were not excessive. I looked over the land with !Xuma, who is as enchanted with it as I am and talks of staying another summer and planting a crop of corn. [Many Ju/'hoansi knew how to grow the few crops that would produce in the Kalahari, but uneven rainfalls and the rarity of places where groundwater collected made planting not a very winning proposition except under very favorable circumstances.] I learned that *tobo* (house plaster) must be made with anthill sand rather than regular sand because the texture is like that of wet sand, not sifty like regular sand. I learned the names of lots of the trees around here, and a nice new word, *!aihng!u*, for *n!ore* or place, or country, literally meaning "trees and water."

While I was at Kauri I learned how to find the location of tubers where tiny dry vines emerged from the ground; how to roast the tu-

bers in the coals, covered in ash in such a way as to keep them from burning; and how to knock the ash off with a stick so the flesh wouldn't taste gritty. I learned how to boil the purplish flesh off mongongo nuts and eat it as an astringent porridge, and how to crack the two layers of shell within and roast the delicious high-protein nut at the center. I learned how to carry a baby on my side or back in a *g//abaxa*, a softened small antelope skin with skin ties sewn to the four corners. I learned from tracks and from live observation that the brown hyena, unlike the spotted hyena, has a peculiar, uneven gait. The Ju/'hoansi ascribe this brown hyena trait to a withered leg acquired in an accident described in a folktale about male initiation.

Seeing and learning new things like this every day, I could positively feel myself expanding and changing. I saw, in fact, the possibility of living life like a story. I saw that oral tales might have a special ability to merge with and inform the identity and life path of a young person. Watching children listen raptly to their parents and grandparents telling stories, I saw that the stories could actually be quite integral to the sort of education young Ju/'hoansi were receiving from their elders. Boys delighted in hearing the stories in which boys and men featured heroically. Not only the Ju/'hoan girls but I myself began to identify with the courageous python heroine of the folktales, all while recording many versions of her transformative story. Here is one of them, in which a huge bird called a kori bustard features as the python's husband. (I title the stories for the purposes of this book only: Ju/'hoansi don't give their stories names.)

### *The Python Falls into the Well*

The kori bustard refused the jackal and married her older sister, the python, instead. The kori bustard said, "All right now, everybody, I, the kori bustard, will marry this girl, the python." So the kori bustard married the python. They lived together for a very long time. But the jackal was saying to herself all this while, "Oh, here's this man with such a wonderful head feather! I wish my older sister would die so I could marry her fine husband."

Then one day all the women went gathering. But the jackal refused to accompany them, saying to the python, "Sister, let's go draw water from the spring. Your husband is away, so let's go fetch water and bring it home." So the two of them walked to the spring. A big *n-ah* (buffalo thorn) tree stood near it. Its broad shadow fell over the well, and one of its branches was stretched out above the water.

This was the branch that broke and fell into the spring that day, carrying the python along with it. The jackal and her older sister arrived at the

spring. The jackal said, "Climb that tree and knock down the fruit. If you fall, I'll catch you."

But the python said, "You're a strong girl, climb the tree yourself and knock down the *n=ah* so we can eat. You're a young girl, a child—go on, climb the *n=ah* tree and shake down its fruit so we can eat."

"No," said the jackal, "you're the one to do it; you're soft and slippery, and you can slide along the *n=ah* branches as well. Go on, you climb it. Do you think so badly of me as to imagine that if you climb and fall I won't catch you? I'll watch you and run back and forth beneath you as you climb and then jump to catch you as you come down."

At last the python agreed. She slithered, and climbed, and slithered beautifully up the tree. When she came to the branch lying over the spring she went out on it to knock the fruit down. She shook the branch, and the *n=ah* fell down on the ground.

The python ate some of the fruit up in the tree, and the jackal ate the rest down on the ground. Then the python began to move out upon the branch so that she could reach another branch. But she lost her grip! Her smooth body slipped off the branch and she fell into the spring; "G!o-ae!" was the sound she made.

Her sister the jackal ran home to their camp. She went to her sister's husband and said, "Come and see! My sister has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree!"

At that, everyone wailed. "If she has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree, what will we do?" When night fell, everyone just went to bed. The python's husband went to his house, and there was the jackal, pretending to be his wife. The kori bustard told her to spread out their sleeping skins for the night. Secretly he stood bone arrows upright in the sand beneath her sleeping place. She lay down on top of them and began to complain that the place was thorny. But her sister used to sleep in the same place, so she had to be content. An arrow pricked her and she died in her sleep [from the poison]. Her anus protruded from her and stood out from her back. The kori bustard said, "Hey, everybody! What has happened to the good wife I married? Why is it that today so many *n=ah* seeds are sticking in her arse?"

He stood beside the dead jackal crying for his lost wife. He mourned for her loud and long. The people said, "Get together, everyone. Let's go and pull his wife out of the spring for him and bring her home. What makes you think we won't be able to get her out?"

The kori bustard said, "How can she possibly get out? I'm just never going to see her again."

But the others said to him, "Gather lots of people together, tell everyone to come together and help you get her out. Call the wildebeests, call all the animals, whatever their names are. Gather them all together so they can work on trying to get her out."

The kori bustard said, “How can they help? Who will be able to reach her? All of us are too short: everyone’s legs are too short to reach her, since she’s so far down. Who will be able to get to her? If you go down that far, you’ll never see the sky again. You’ll go right down to the bottom and never come up again. A person might never see daylight again! That’s how far down the python is.”

But the next morning the kori bustard got up and went to the spring. He gathered all the animals together: the giraffes, the wildebeests, the springhares, the gemsbok—all the many animals, all the animals there are. He called them together, and told them to come to the spring. He called the female animals and he called the male animals. He told them that yesterday the python had sunk to the bottom of the water. He gathered them together and called and gathered them, and there were female animals and male animals who collected at the spring. As many as there are animals came, and they spread as far as the eye could see. The sight of them was something to behold.

Then one by one they came forward to try their luck. Each one would stick in his leg and reach into the spring. But each one failed to go all the way to the bottom, and they all drew back their legs about halfway down. Each one said, “I can’t figure out a way to do it.” The gemsbok stepped forward and put in his leg. It went down, down, down—and he almost fell in. So he pulled back his leg and stepped aside. Then the wildebeest stepped up and tried it.

But he, too, nearly fell into the water. So he drew his leg out too. The kudu tried next. He put his foot in and nearly tumbled in himself, so he pulled it back out again. As many as there were animals, as many animals as have names, that’s how many animals tried and failed.

All this while, the giraffe just stood there, and so did the ostrich. The ostrich came forward then, and put in his legs. He sat down at the edge of the well and stretched his legs down and down and down. With the very tip of one claw, he was able to scratch the python.

“Mm,” he said, “I got pretty close. It felt to me as if my fingertip was touching something. Why doesn’t that long fellow over there come forward and find out if it’s really the python I’m feeling?” At this the giraffe drew himself up very tall. “If that guy tries it,” said the ostrich, “he’s bound to get the woman out. That woman will get out if the giraffe reaches down for her!”

Then the kori bustard said, “Mm, the rest of us will go back to camp to look for things to spread out on the ground to receive her. We’ll spread skin mats from the well to the village.”

So he and the others went to do that. Many of the animals said, “Aah, this will never come true.”

But others replied, “Don’t talk like that. Just be silent. They’ve gone to fetch mats and they’ll come back and spread them out. Then you’ll see what the giraffe can do.”

No! the kori bustard didn’t call for mats to be spread first. First the giraffe stuck his foot into the spring. Down, down, down, down it went. At the bottom it reached the python. The giraffe took hold of her and felt her all over. Then he withdrew his leg and said to the others, “I’ve put my leg all the way down and it feels like there’s more than one python down there.” The python had given birth in the bottom of the spring! “Now, go to the camp,” said the giraffe, “and find some things to spread out on the ground. Then bring them back here and spread them nicely.”

When they heard the giraffe’s words, everybody laughed and grabbed each other in delight and fell to the ground. “How has this guy managed to do it?” they asked each other.

Then they ran back to the camp and began to spread mats from the camp to the spring. Then the giraffe stepped out of the crowd again. He rocked backwards and forwards on his long legs as he approached the spring. He reached in with his leg, and reached and stretched right down to the bottom. He grasped the python and shook the mud off her while she was still down there. Then he opened his mouth and laughed!

He began bringing her up and up and up toward the surface. It was a very deep spring! It was a fearsome spring, and a deep waterhole. As the python came near the surface, the other animals saw her and hugged each other. They fell to the ground laughing. The giraffe brought her up, and lifted her to the surface. At last he laid her on the ground. She lay there and vomited up water. Then the giraffe pulled a baby python out of the spring and laid it beside its mother.

The animals were so delighted that they embraced each other and rolled on their backs on the ground. Here’s our beautiful girl again,” they said, “What the jackal did was a terrible thing.”

Then they brought a whisk to wipe her face. “Gla!” it went smoothly across her brow, and they said, “Yes, isn’t this the woman we were looking for the other day? And today she’s come up out of the spring, and here she is.”

Then they greeted her and embraced her and exclaimed over her: “Yes, this is a very good thing the giraffe has done for us.”

Then the python walked on the trail of mats with her child back to the camp. She walked beautifully and gracefully back home to her own house.

“Yes, it’s our daughter again,” said the people of the camp. “Here she is, and that jackal over there is dead, and good riddance.” The kori bustard greeted his wife and said, “Oh, my good wife, today you’ve come home to

me!” She glided regally and smoothly like she always had, and she sat down before her house and looked around at everyone.

Later she took her child to bed and they both slept well for a long time. The people said, “Mm, this is the right woman. This is the daughter of our camp for sure. She fits in with the camp so well, and she’s so very beautiful!”

So the people lived there together. After a while they separated and traveled around to different places. The kori bustard’s heart was so happy that he ran about tossing his head feather. He ran and tossed his head feather in praise of his wife. And the two of them went on living. Mm, yes, that’s how it was. My friend, that’s how it happened.

Many questions came up for me as I puzzled through the process of translating these stories. I knew that the kori bustard had his suspicions and so laid arrows beneath the sleeping skins to reveal that the deceptive jackal had taken his wife’s place. He pretended that his wife always slept on skins laid in that spot, and *she* never complained. But why specifically “bone arrows”? And why did the people lay skin mats all the way from the well to the village? It took me some time to ask all the questions each story raised, to follow all the references I could, often having to chase down the precise translations of words and phrases. Sometimes the answers would come to me from everyday activities I observed, or from ritual contexts, or from other stories. For instance, spreading skins to walk or sit on that sandy, often rough ground was a very nice thing to do for a person. I saw spread skins being used in marriages, to mark out a special spot for the young couple to sit during their ceremony, and in a number of other stories there were skins spread out to honor someone. In the python story, the trail of skins marked her welcome back into the embrace of her loving family.

“Bone arrows,” as opposed to the metal-tipped arrows used by the Ju/’hoansi today, marked the story as “a story of the old people,” reaching back to a time before metal had reached the Ju/’hoan area. But it was years before I knew the significance of some details. For that early time, I learned as much as I could about intriguing, unfamiliar items and actions in the stories, filling notebooks with questions I sometimes didn’t get answered until much later.

I was constantly aware of the privilege of being in such a place, with such people, at this time of my life. There was a sense of timelessness there for me, in that I didn’t always have to make my usual lists and deadlines for myself. Learning just began to unfold seamlessly along with the process of living. It was also sort of breathless: I felt I was on the edge of important discoveries at every moment. Yet I knew that my fieldwork was to extend only eighteen months in total. It seemed

a woefully short time to fathom the richness of knowledge and understanding available to me. There were so many stories, so much environmental and social knowledge I wanted to document and record. But I often found that need to record in conflict with the need to remain open to the serendipitous moments exploding from the circumstances of where I was and what people were doing. It was their knowledge and experience, after all, that I was attempting to understand, and they were carrying those with them into whatever they were doing and wherever they were doing it. Planning ahead to do certain things, or stopping the flow of events for meticulous documentation, were rarely options and would often have introduced distortions anyway.

So I often changed my plans for the day and followed new avenues that opened. If women were going gathering, I went along and learned about food plants. If someone said we were going hunting for a few days and offered a donkey for me to ride, I packed up and jumped on. During all the activities people were talking, talking all at once, talking to each other, talking to themselves, talking to me—and I was listening. Everything people said and did offered potential clues to nuggets of connection and meaning in the folktales and the healing dances. I realized the hard part would be paring all this richness down to something like a thesis. Struggling to focus, I began to develop a mental map in my head of whom I would need to learn from, where I would need to go, and what I would need to explore and understand by the time I had to go back to Cambridge. My research plan began to inscribe itself onto western Ngamiland, the area of Botswana where Ju/'hoansi is spoken, as a kind of master route around the area to meet key people, these “points of light” of whom I was told.

I thought of Kauri, and my solidifying relationships with people there, as a base from which to explore my evolving mental map. This kin-based, language-based, and culture-based map was becoming studded with places where special things had happened or could happen if I traveled there, and with the names of individuals I heard about who “!han tcisi”—knew things—whether storytellers, healers, or musicians. Most of them lived to the west of Kauri, at !Aoan, Dobe, and /Kae/kae, but some were as far east and south as Ghanzi. At Ghanzi, Ju/'hoansi, a Northern Khoisan language, intersected with Naro, a Central Khoisan language.

I learned about the storytellers of Ghanzi from !Unn/obe N!a'an, also known as !Unn/obe *Morethlwa*, a Naro woman who had married a Ju/'hoan man, Kha//an N!a'an, from /Kae/kae. Together, they had come to live at Kauri. *N!a'an* was not a surname the elderly married couple shared; instead, it means “old” in Ju/'hoansi. Most of the storytell-



ers had *n!a'an* as part of the names they were known by. Old Kha//an whittled chairs and other wooden objects and was an accomplished storyteller and healer (as were many of the adult men and women). !Unn/obe, fluent in both Naro and Ju//hoansi, had a double fund of stories, some of which, notably the heroine stories, overlapped. After a few weeks of daily storytelling, I asked her one day if she knew any other stories I hadn't heard about. She promptly brought out a wild tale of a man who had been created from the rib of a woman. "!"Unn/obe-o!" I said. "Where did you get this story?" "I learned it from the missionaries at D'kar, near Ghanzi," she replied, confirming with her version of the plot—a twist on the Adam and Eve story from Genesis—what I had already observed about the importance of women in San society.

!Unn/obe also became a great resource for me on the San's relationship to successive waves of early settlement of Ghanzi by Afrikaner pioneers. These Voortrekkers came north from South Africa to establish ranches in what was at the time the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The years 1895 to 1898 saw the first official settlement in Ghanzi, but some earlier groups of Dorsland (Thirstland) trekkers had gone through there in 1878, most of them ending up in South West Africa, which later became Namibia. A few of these returned to the Ghanzi area of Botswana later. Successive waves of Afrikaner settlers kept coming from South Africa, one of them as late as the 1950s, which may have been !Unn/obe's time as a domestic and missionary churchgoer there.

When my language proficiency eventually got good enough, I interviewed her about the settlers. She worked in Ghanzi for an Afrikaner farm family, and her story, told "from behind the washing lines," painted a poignant picture of the strained race and labor relations in the colonial days that were still going on, in such isolated places, in the middle of the twentieth century. "We helped them live in the bush," she said. "They really only knew farming. They may have known how to live in the bush of the Karoo but had to learn a lot about how to live around Ghanzi. We were the ones who taught them about *morama* beans and truffles." Always, as she talked to me, !Unn/obe sewed, scraped skins, cracked nuts, or strung beads—without benefit of a frame—in striking and beautiful patterns.

I found that learning folktales was a very natural way to build both vocabulary and an understanding of grammar. I was hearing and recording as many versions of "the same" stories as I could. I could soon recognize most of the plots and thus had a structure of events to help contextualize each storyteller's word choices. This approach, of learning language at the same time as I was learning items of lore and



**Figure 4.2.** !Unn/obe *Morethlwa*. © Megan Biesele.

environmental information, made me feel like I was always off on an adventure. In a way, everything was being created anew, all the time: in fact, the same storytellers told the stories differently in different social contexts, so each iteration was further grist for the mill of understanding. I barely wanted to sleep, for fear I might miss something.

I got many versions of the “boys’ story” I had wanted to record ever since Mel Konner made me aware of the “girls’ story” of the python/elephant/aardvark heroine. The heroine stories also vary a lot, but they consist in large part of dramatic confrontations between the heroine wife and her in-laws, ending up with the heroine’s rebirth or with her giving birth to a child. The boys’ stories, in contrast, are mostly about hunting, daring and surviving death, and altered states of consciousness.

Here is a summary of a familiar “boys’ plot” I heard many times. /Xoan N!a’an (Old /Xoan), a widow at Kauri, told this version of a tale about the sons of a trickster god with several names (the title is mine only, not used by Ju//hoansi):

*The Two Boys and the Lions*

The god had two sons, !Xuma and Kha//’an. The boys went hunting and killed an eland. Lions came and killed the boys in turn and buried them in the eland’s stomach contents. The father was helped to track the boys by a tortoise who put his head into the coals of the fires they had made along their journey. At the last fire the coals were hot, and the tortoise’s head was burned, so they knew the eland’s death place was nearby. When they reached it, the god immediately saw that his sons were buried in the eland’s stomach contents. He asked pied babbler birds and other birds to sing, but the boys didn’t come out of the pile of stomach contents. Then he asked all the animals in turn to dance, but his children still did not emerge. So he hung a meteor, “this fire that hangs in the sky and kills people,” up in a tree. When he called the meteor down onto the eland’s death place, it blasted through the stomach contents, and !Xuma and Kha//’an jumped out. They cooked the eland meat and ate well. They took the rest of the meat home and the lions had none.

When I first recorded this story, it seemed obscure and mysterious to me. I knew that, by their nature, myths always contained opaque and mysterious elements. Yet I was sure that ethnographic knowledge could enlighten me as to some of the details. Why, for instance, would the lions bury the two boys in the stomach contents of the dead eland? It took hearing other versions of “the same” story for me to begin to put the clues, allusions, and references, ranging from details about the environment to unfamiliar folk concepts, all together. But over time I heard further versions, got better at the language, and also had more and more chances to participate in events like hunts, gathering trips, and healing dances. I began to see the delicate references to animal behavior, to social attitudes, and to magical healing beliefs, which made of stories like this rich and memorable tapestries of information. I realized, though, that the unexplained references in the stories were so numerous, and so nuanced, that I barely had the tiger by the tail: to do justice to their richness in my thesis I would have to have an encyclopedic understanding of Ju/’hoan language, material culture, local flora and fauna, and on and on.

I began to see that, in giving up English literature as the focus of my higher education, I was foregoing the easy familiarity of my first language and its references to Western culture I had absorbed as if by osmosis. I had gotten myself into a situation where I would have to work in a language with not only a somewhat different alphabet and grammar but with social and environmental references that seemed to stretch out far beyond me, as unknowable as the vast Kalahari horizon.

This realization was overwhelming, but I was stuck with a task I had told the academic world I would and could do. Although I felt I had just cracked the surface of my work, the weeks and months were flying with terrifying speed toward the time of my departure. All I could think of to do was to put my head down and push forward in the way I had started: one foot in front of the other, always taking the clear next step as it offered itself to me at the time, illogical though it might seem to “outsider” eyes. I often imagined myself back at Harvard trying to answer questions about why I carried out my fieldwork as I did, and coming up only with “You had to have been there.”

So, plodding forward in those early weeks of working at Toothbrush Tree with the old people from Kauri, I recorded another version of the same “Two Boys and the Lions” story from the elderly hunter /Ukxa N!a’an (Old /Ukxa), he who loved wordplay and imitating birds. In this version the trickster god is named G!ara, an alternate name for Kaoxa.

#### *The Two Boys and the Lions 2*

G!ara sired two sons, one named !Xuma, the other named Kha//’an. Once the two boys were chasing an eland. G!ara followed their tracks but did not catch up with them. He had with him the tortoise, and the two of them were following Kha//’an and !Xuma.

G!ara and the tortoise came to the remains of a fire where the boys had slept along the way. G!ara told the tortoise to stick his head in the fire to see whether the center was cold. The tortoise stuck in his head and left it there awhile, then told G!ara that the fire was dead.

So they kept on tracking and tracking until they saw another old fire. Again G!ara told the tortoise to stick in his head and feel the heat. The tortoise left his head in the ashes awhile but at last reported that this fire, too, was dead.

Again they tracked the boys. When night fell they came to the place where the eland had died. They came to the fire the boys had lit the day before, the fire they had lit when they killed the eland. This time the tortoise put his head into the fire and cried, “Dzi dzi dzi dzi!” G!ara said, “My father’s namesake, hooray for you!” They had come very close to where the boys were, so that the tortoise had burned his head in a living fire.

G!ara and the tortoise jumped up and ran, ran to where the eland had been butchered. There they found that lions had been making waterbags of the eland’s stomach. They had taken out the eland’s stomach and had made waterbags of it. With the contents of the stomach the lions had made a pile to bury Kha//’an and !Xuma. Yes, the lions had made waterbags for fetching water. [As an aside, Old /Ukxa said, “That’s what lions do. Lions kill a thing to eat, and they bury its stomach contents in the sand.” Aha! I

thought. The story had made this point about lion kills through sideways allusiveness. To understand the reference, I had to know this further detail about Ju/'hoan knowledge of animal behavior.]

G!ara came up to the pile of stomach contents and saw his sons imprisoned in it. “!Xuma and Kha//an—is this you here?” They said, “Yes, here we are.” Then G!ara went to hang the bones from the back of the eland’s neck in a tree. He meant to make lightning, this fire that comes down from the sky with the sound “huru.” G!ara hung the bones in a tree.

He hung them up, but they fell down and went “//oh” in the sand. “No,” he said, “these bones won’t do.” So he went and hung up the horns instead. The horns stood up straight and stayed there. In this way G!ara was calling the lightning to come and kill the lions.

When he had hung up the horns, G!ara moved off a little way and gathered small birds together, gathered them so they could speak to him. He tied the birds all around his head, and they cried, “khoai, khoai, khoai.” He untied them and said, “Why do these things chatter so much?” G!ara threw the birds away. Next he took the little bird Tcxoe and tied him on his head, and sat down to wait for the lions.

After he had sat awhile, G!ara made the night come. He spoke to the night, saying, “/e/e! /Grow dark so the lions, who have gone to fetch water, will have to return.” It grew dark, and the lions returned. They came up to G!ara and offered him water. They gave him the biggest waterbag, but he refused it. “Give me that little waterbag over there, let me just sip a little, so that the water will go around,” he said.

Then he took the biggest waterbag and gave it to the tortoise. They all drank and drank and drank. Then G!ara said, “Now that you have finished, let’s eat.” So the lions cut the fat from the carcass and they all ate.

Next, G!ara said, “We’re going to dance. Let’s dance, so it will rain.” G!ara led off and the tortoise came behind him. The lions came behind the tortoise. G!ara said to the lions, “Now you two dance together; don’t separate. The tortoise and I will also dance close to each other, so that there will be a space between us and you lions.”

So they danced and danced and the dance began to be “heavy.” “Now descend!” bellowed G!ara. And the lightning came down—“hobo!”—and struck the lions flat. G!ara called out, “!Xuma, you and Kha//an come out and help me beat these pawed things!” The boys came out of the pile and ran to their father’s side to help him beat the lions.

Then G!ara stood back and said in surprise, “What will I do now . . . how will I powder myself with *sa* so my brains won’t be spoiled by this killing I’ve done?” So he went and got the eland’s hoof. He put coals in it and took a big whiff of the smoke—“he-e-eh.” But it didn’t work, he didn’t go into a trance. So he said, “No good. What kind of dried-up, tasteless thing is this?”

He walked back and forth thinking. Finally he killed the tortoise, his nephew who had accompanied him. He grabbed the tortoise so he shrieked “ee!” and snapped his neck in two. Then G!ara scooped out the meat from the shell. He took eland fat and poked it into the shell. He put in the fat and heaped coals on top of it and sniffed the smoke, and this time he began to trance.

Wow. I asked myself, why would hanging horns in a tree bring down lightning? Why would powdering oneself with aromatic root powder allow relief from having killed something? Why would sniffing smoke from a fire of fat made inside a tortoise shell enable a person to trance? Teasing out these references led me into ritual contexts whose sideways allusiveness provided ever more richness to the texture of meaning in the tales.

I heard yet another version from Baq’u N!a’an, Old /Ukxa’s wife. Baq’u and I of course had an easy relationship from the start, due to my having been given her name by the woman named Baq’u at Dobe. So I called Baq’u *Txun*, or “Grandmother,” and though I was patently not a Ju’hoan she called me “Little Name,” or “Namesake.” Warmth then grew between us as if by magic. The Ju’hoansi have a repertoire of about fifty men’s names and about fifty women’s names, usually conferred, as I’ve said, on the grandchild generation. These names provide an entrée for strangers to a satisfyingly complex layer of fictional relatedness complementing the web of actual kinship that exists among the people. They also provide links to people in the old stories: two of my best Ju’hoan friends had name relationships to the trickster’s two sons, named Kha//an and !Xuma.

I heard many different versions of stories whose plots had become familiar to me, from the old storytellers who came to stay with me at Toothbrush Tree, from people to whom I had different relationships due to factors such as the name relationship, or from other people I had worked with, whether they were regularly employed by me or not. Whenever I heard a different incident or item or character in a new version of a story, I had a chance to ask about it, learning new vocabulary, cultural equivalences, or environmental references in the process. Some of these things I managed to learn in time for them to go into my thesis, but many of them I only understood much later.

For instance, it took years for me to understand the significance of the different-sized waterbags in the story of the trickster god and his sons and the lions. At last a Ju’hoan man in Namibia, across the border, performed the story so graphically that I saw G!ara’s trickery clearly: G!ara refused the large waterbag because drinking from it would ob-

scure his view of the returning lions, the lions who had returned to claim their prey, his two sons buried in the eland's stomach contents. Instead he hung the small waterbag on his lip and drank in such a way that he could still see everything the lions did. The question I had been carrying around in my head for over a decade, about the puzzling waterbag detail, was resolved in a few seconds of pantomime. I came to see pantomime as a key element of storytelling performance. In fact, in the cases where I had heard the lion and waterbags episode told without pantomime, and been puzzled, all the rest of the audience understood the words to refer to some pantomimed version of the tale each of them had heard and seen before, perhaps many times before.

While the older people of Kauri were staying with me on their storytelling retreats, I sometimes took various ones aside (along with a few native-speaker listeners) and, as I had with !Unn/obe, tape-recorded each and every story they cared to tell. Sometimes hearing all these stories would take days or weeks for each storyteller. At the same time I was also following up on leads provided by Lorna Marshall's notes and articles concerning cosmological figures like the intriguing *G!xoa-G!xoa Koara* (Knee Knee None) people, who "eat the sun" every night when it turns into a ball of red meat and disappears over the western horizon. In Kauri, Botswana, a scant 150 kilometers from where Lorna worked in Nyae Nyae, South West Africa, I found that these figures were more often called *G//atzasi*, "Those Who Sleep Standing Up," an alternate name also recorded by Lorna. "About the *G//atzasi*," I wrote in my journal, "I additionally learned that some people regarded them as being only half-people—they have one eye, one ear, one breast, one leg + arm."

But most of the other details I heard about them were the same as those Marshall later included in her *Nyae Nyae !Kung Beliefs and Rites*:

They have human form but are not ordinary humans; they are *n|um* [*n/om*] people, we were told. They look like Bushmen except that their feet are as thin as grassblades, and they have no joints in their knees. . . . The Knee Knee None have hip joints, but it is so hard for them to sit down or lie down without knee joints that they always stand. When they sleep they lean against trees, or, if they can, they wedge themselves into crotches in the trees. When they eat, they lift the food from the fire up to their mouths with long, sharp sticks.

These people regularly eat the sun. The sun is their *//hara* [cultivated field or other main source of sustenance]. . . . Every evening the sun comes down to earth and turns into an elephant. (In another version, the sun becomes a giraffe.) The Knee Knee None kill it, and when we see it round and fiery red at sunset, it is the meat we see. The people then dance the Sun Dance. When the meat is cooked, the adults tell the chil-

dren to run away and play. (One version of the account says they chase the children away.) The adults then eat the meat. When the children come back, the adults pick their teeth and give the bits of meat that have stuck in them to the children for their supper. (To chase children away and to withhold food from them is the most unBushmenlike behavior that could be imagined.)

When they have finished, one of the men takes the elephant's clavicle bone and throws it across the sky to the east. There it falls into water. By morning, it has grown to be the sun again. It comes out of the water, dries itself in a tree, and bright yellow once more, begins its daily journey. The sun has its own *n|um* [*n|om*] which makes this happen. The !Kung [Ju/'hoansi] told us that sometimes they heard the clavicle bone passing over them at night. It makes a humming sound like a wind. They think if a short man throws it they hear it, but if a tall man throws it, it passes so high over them that they hear nothing. (Marshall 1999: 247)

Cosmological explanations like this, and the stories that the Ju/'hoansi told, are a far cry from heavy-handed allegories or moralizing tales. Beings who are the antithesis of good people, in the Ju/'hoan view, are stingy with food for their own children and have to endure life propping themselves uncomfortably against trees to even sleep. Yet these creatures of the imagination conveyed volumes of information about attitudes the Ju/'hoansi thought important to inculcate, and about behavior they thought important to avoid. That they did so in the form of memorable images, within a deceptively simple narrative, made them all the more powerful. For me, learning enough about the symbols in the stories and rituals to write with true confidence about them literally took decades. It was a process of tolerating ambiguity and entertaining mystery until I had enough context for the ambiguities and mysteries to resolve themselves. The process was much like the slow, natural way I had come to understand, earlier in life, what I did of English literature. In other words, it was much like just living and learning: it was part of my socialization. One socialization is all most people get. This second one was extra, a glimpse into an equally rich world afforded me as a consequence of my choice to be there.





## A ROAD TRIP

As in all life, there were a lot of ups and downs in my fieldwork life at Kauri. A day of exultant discovery would be succeeded by one that was grey with sameness or failures in communication. I was slow in reaching clarity about the stories and figures of the Ju/'hoan imagination I had first heard about from Lorna Marshall back in Cambridge. But the process gradually became more reliable. Communications in Ju/'hoansi about ordinary daily life, though, still eluded me at times. Missing verbal cues often made me feel out of focus and blue. I was fine if I was working on concrete things with people, like the ongoing construction of the Toothbrush Tree camp, but I often bemoaned my inability to enter into the banter and joking that accompanied these activities.

MAY 17, 1971

[I] brought a load of *gumi zisi* (cow manure) back to my camp. Women started mixing it with anthill sand and water. Men working on =Oma's house. Tcoq'a finishing kitchen roof. =Oma Djo in the bush cutting poles for a kitchen bench. G/aq'o making a door. What I did was help with [the] roof, help with *tobo*-ing (plastering) a piece of the kitchen wall behind the food shelves, arrange the kitchen, cut grass over kitchen door, make a shelf for things in my house (termites horrible here—everything should be on a shelf). . . .

MAY 18, 1971

But I have been feeling cut off from people for the last few days—nothing to say. When people sit around the fire and talk, I go into a kind of stupor. I am convinced that the way to get into verbal creativity in this culture is to enter the daily gabble of conversation: that must be where the art is. It is certainly where the enthusiasm is. I find I can only enter conversations, though, when I am asking questions. Otherwise it is too rapid to follow, and I am ignored and feel like I'm not really there. But to enter into ordinary conversation seems a monumental task. I haven't even got the energy to listen to it for very long, much less participate in it. Talk tires me, but they seem to thrive on it. I need to be alone some; they seem rarely to seek that. It is a weird situation this, my not really having my own life here to be

involved in; rather, [I am] preying on theirs. Consequently I feel rejected where I would otherwise not be hurt, because I would have other emotional resources.

I'm also upset by another plateau I seem to have reached in the language. There is enough dialect difference between here and Dobe, too, to set me back a month or so. Often I feel absurd because my work demands so much facility in the language and yet I still get tangled up in the language of everyday transactions. . . . But later today women finished *tobo-ing* my house, Tci!xo finished *tobo-ing* the kitchen. Those two houses are done. In PM things tapered off nicely. . . . The evening was a great surprise—that I could be with people again. Part of it was the kitchen—I think the familiarity of sitting in a kitchen comforted me . . . [and] we had a gay time. I understood virtually everything that was said. Then opening the food trunk and letting people choose what they wanted for supper gave me a good feeling. We had a silly supper of pickled aubergines, potatoes, lima beans, cheese, and tomatoes. At one point everyone left [clearly preferring to sit by the fire] but Di//xao and me, and we *talked together* for the first time really, with her volunteering information, her great round face shining. !Xuma was happy because he has a new girlfriend. He told me N=amece had seen a dead elephant in the bush and was carving the tusks, and did I want to go see the dead elephant on donkeyback in a few days? . . . I feel of course much better, but realize that ups and downs are exaggerated because all depends on how you're hitting it off with "them."

By the end of May, though, roughly six months into my fieldwork, I was surprised and delighted to make an important transition. I went from feeling a fool for things I was missing in the language to suddenly understanding pretty much everything (except for things, fair enough, people didn't want me to hear, which were easy to conceal from me). At least this was true when I was asking questions or hearing stories, and when I had become familiar with contexts and plots, though ordinary rapid conversation among others often still eluded me. (But that was fine with me: I had no wish to eavesdrop on people who were already sharing so much of their lives with me in that slice of time.) I resolved to stop trying to push that boundary, regarding it rather as a kind of natural privacy, which could benefit both me and the people surrounding me.

I reflected that it couldn't be entirely comfortable for them to have me there: though their ability to all talk at once made them seem, to me, to lack self-consciousness, I noted among some an inability to meet my eyes. My understanding that there was indeed some self-consciousness being dealt with by some people was confirmed on Friday, May 21:

“Another interesting thing today was that Big Kaqece drank a lot of beer and was able to look me in the eye while talking. Also his stutter almost disappeared.”

My event calendar entry for that day and the next two reflected the balance finally achieved thanks to the language breakthrough and my comfortably set-up camp.

Had two good interviews with Di//xao Pari /Kai (Goat Foot)—she’s tireless. All her kids around and she still wants to do [folklore] work, + *tobo* the houses in her spare time! I’m looking forward to spending some days at her village, since she’s invited me. /Xoan N!a’an came and listened in on the interview + didn’t interrupt but at times laughed herself silly over some things Di//xao said. So I’ll have to make inquiries when I interview her. I was impressed with the quality of abandonment in her laughter. She seemed to give herself up to it wholeheartedly. She is the only woman trancer here, too. I wonder. . . .

Some interesting things that came out of the interviews today were the name of an ancestor of Bushmen, /’Oma /’oma or /’Oma /’omane, whose brother is Jiso [Jesus]! Both are sons of Kaoxa. Also got leads on a number of stories. Di//xao said all peoples’ gods were the same, even if they have different names.

Women still working on the Bushmen’s houses, *tobo*-ing them. Finished one, started on the other. =Oma Djo working on a kitchen bench. Everything very calm for me today. I was able to get down to some papers and studying. Nice to be set up at last.

=Oma !Oma went to Tsau for water—big hole in some important part of cooling system on way back, so took them a long time to come in.

SATURDAY, MAY 22, 1971

I was sitting around the fire in front of !Xuma’s house (where the center of sociability seems to be moving to) after a nice quiet cup of coffee early this morning, when Kxauru’s husband came up and gave me a fresh young guinea fowl. I was very pleased. . . . We plucked and cooked it right away . . . and it was delicious. Tender and perfect, just detectably different from chicken. . . . Had a very good interview again with Di//xao—[her baby] N!hunkxama fell asleep, thank heaven—about death and burial. . . . Got some info on medicine used to bring a person’s soul back when supposed dead.

Then lunch—only a few people still working and eating. Then I had a bath. =Oma !Oma ran into difficulties fixing the truck + we both fiddled with it the rest of the afternoon. Very pleasant. Still a good sense of getting down to business, order, + calm. Good evening talk with =Oma and

!Xuma about our immediate plans, the water and food situation, the truck repairs. . . . I feel much closer to people, somehow, than I did several days ago. I think I'm more relieved than I'd like to admit that I have my books lined up and organized and my house neat and my interviews started. After all, it's been five and a half months of continual disorder and overtaxing of the heart and brain.

I see that I'm going to have to spend a good deal of time in the villages, though, both to get stories in context and to witness all the things I have only heard about, like births and deaths, menstrual dances, etc. I feel anxious to do that now, as I'm more or less settled. And now going to villages, I know I'll always have a quiet, neat place to come back to.

I just hope I can get the damn hole in the Land Rover cooling system patched up tomorrow. Richard Lee has the right idea, that of going around on donkeys. The truck will probably always be my main trouble.

The next day =Oma !Oma invented and crafted the needed Land Rover tool from leftover metal bits out of the old Dobe *tjipitju*. The tool could turn a right angle inside the tightly packed Land Rover engine and allowed the hole to be stoppered permanently.

SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1971

Well, the truck took all day to fix. It was infuriating. You couldn't get at the place, and then the solder wire kept falling out, and the red-hot screwdrivers were only good for a few seconds. Finally as the sun was going down we jammed a wooden plug with a burlap sack around it into the hole [using the new tool invented by =Oma !Oma] and it held! Jumped in to take a trial spin, and lo + behold something else went wrong—the petrol pedal. . . . It's minor, I think, but we'll see tomorrow. Meanwhile today I had a pretty good interview with Di//xao about stars, rainbows, and rain.

Discussions about rain, especially about the gentle, healing “female rain” as opposed to the destructive “male rain” accompanied by lightning and thunder, always prompted welcome thoughts in the Kalahari. Even then, at the start of the dry season, talking with Di//xao about rain brought the frustrations about truck troubles into perspective for me that day. Escaping worry, I slept well.

The truck problems were solved, at least temporarily, and I began traveling to other places to visit *ju sa !'han tcisi*, “people who know things.” This phrase applied to wise, mostly older, storytellers, healers, and musicians. On my trips I was often accompanied by a few of the Kauri people who wanted to visit their relatives along the way. Our first trip, in April 1971, turned out to be memorable in many ways. It was

to be a big clockwise circle from Kauri to /Kae/kae to Dobe and thence back to Tsau, from where we would return on the sand track to Kauri. I had been talking about the trip for several days before we left, and various people asked me whether (or rather informed me that) they would go with us. Kha//an and !Unn/obe, knowing some *hxaro* (delayed reciprocity gifts) were probably waiting for them in /Kae/kae, wanted to visit Kha//an's daughter's family there. /Xoan N!a'an wanted to visit her sister in !Xabe, between /Kae/kae and Dobe. With the members of my own camp, our camping gear, and supplies, that already made a full truckload.

I planned to drive due west from Kauri to /Kae/kae along the "cut-line," the sandy track made by Consolidated Diamond Mines, known as CDM. This was the South African company that was prospecting western Ngamiland by sampling the sand for diamonds along a grid of such cutlines. On the day of departure, I and !Xuma and =Oma !Oma and Di//xao and their child spent hours packing up the vehicle and shutting down our camp. The last thing I put into the Land Rover was the huge, all-important Herero sour-milk gourd I used for traveling. This gourd was bound with leather straps used to carry it or suspend it from the low branch of a tree. It contained the buttermilk culture we used to turn gifts of fresh milk along the way into a nourishing drink that was deliciously tangy, completely portable, and did not have to be refrigerated.

About midmorning we drove down the sandy road to the Ju//hoan camp at Kauri and found the would-be travelers calmly sitting by their fires doing household tasks. They didn't seem ready to go, or to have any bags or bundles packed. "/Am n/hau! M!a ka u-o!" yelled !Xuma. (The sun is going down! Let's go!) I had already learned that "The sun is going down!"—meaning "Hurry up!"—could be said, to comical effect, at any time of day, even right after the sun had come up—or long after it had gone down. The three people who had wanted to go with us strolled slowly into their houses, and my heart sank. Surely the sun *would* go down before we got to where we meant to sleep that night. But in a very few minutes, all of the travelers were heading for the Land Rover with small bundles on their backs. I chided myself for realizing only belatedly how little time it takes to pack, for people with so few possessions.

On this first trip back to the western communities from Kauri, I was traveling with !Unn/obe and Kha//an as well as with !Xuma, my language teacher, /Xoan N!a'an, the storyteller, and =Oma !Oma and his wife, Di//xao. As we traveled and spoke of those we were to visit, I often heard these people's names and others in the Ju//hoan name rep-

ertoire mentioned. The geography of Ngamiland began to seem like a fabric of kinship dotted with repeating colors. As I've said, the Ju/'hoan practice of naming creates a special relationship between the child and the grandparent for whom he or she is named. The fact that we were on a story recording trip and that two of our group had the same names as the two sons of the trickster god who first invented the trance dance was an entirely unremarkable circumstance—except to me. I had a strong feeling that time, even the time before time, was folding back on itself, always making more connections like this one to the Ju/'hoansi's ancient repertoire of names, always enriching the fabric of understanding.

Piled into the Land Rover together, talking, singing, and watching for meaty birds to slingshoot out the windows, we became a kind of mobile story corps. We camped for two nights along the CDM track until we reached /Kae/kae, the next settlement of any kind, where I knew we would find several Ju/'hoan camps coexisting in the usual apparently congenial—but at base uneasy—symbiosis with camps of Herero herders. The fun and freedom of travel before we got there made the trip completely delightful. Everyone was happy and excited to be traveling in a Land Rover over miles they had so often traversed much more slowly on foot or donkeyback.

I was entranced by the way the members of our small group welded themselves into an efficient and comfortable unit. The tasks of setting up camp at night and getting a supper fire going, fetching water and firewood if any was available, seemed to be cheery second nature to all. Though I had always enjoyed camping with friends in the US, there had often been awkwardness in it, because none of us camped often enough, or spent enough time in each other's presence, to be really relaxed. In contrast, the seamless comfort the Ju/'hoansi showed with each new situation on our road trip was a marvel to me. Camping preliminaries were quickly gotten out of the way so the really enjoyable part of each day—talking, telling stories, eating around a fire, and sometimes hearing music played on a small thumb piano pulled out of someone's back pocket—could commence. If we had to camp in an area where the travelers feared lions, leopards, or hyenas, they simply cut thorn branches and built a ring of them so we could make our camp and our fire inside it and forget about predators.

Once during this trip I finally reached a breaking point about something that had been literally gnawing at me. The Ju/'hoansi quickly solved my problem, however. I had had a sore, itchy, achy spot on my back, just above the waist, for some time. I had thought it was an insect bite that would heal, but it kept getting worse. It felt like something was eating me from within. Driving along the lengthy, hot track to /Kae/Kae,

the pain and strangeness of the spot at last got to me, and I exclaimed, "People, something is eating me!" We all got out of the car. I pulled up my shirt and bent over. =Oma !Oma said, "Why didn't you speak up sooner? We can take care of this right away." He took out a small penknife, sterilized its blade with a match, and deftly picked something out of the sore spot. He then opened his hand and showed me what he had extracted. A small white grub squirmed in his palm. It was a botfly larva, common, he said, in places where there were cattle or antelopes. "We get them all the time." I looked at it for a second in horror and then realized I had felt immediate relief. I was grateful to =Oma for his matter-of-fact handling of the situation. A splash of Dettol antiseptic on the wound, and we pressed on.

When we reached a village on a trip like this, we would invariably be invited to stay at the fire of relatives or namesakes of those with whom we were traveling. The kin connections and the names, even mine, Baq'u, made us into instant family wherever we went. If it was the dry season (approximately nine months of the year), we camped in the open, laying out our bedrolls or sleeping blankets right along with those of our hosts around their fire. If it was rainy, often there would be a hut or small shelter of sticks and tarps we could sleep in. I also carried a small blue tent, which I sometimes set up to have a little privacy. In it I could just sit up, but it allowed me to change clothes and have a place to read at night or before it got too hot in the mornings.

The blue tent's sewn-in floor also let me relax awhile from my constant vigilance about snakes. Mambas, cobras, and puffadders abound in Ngamiland. I had heard it said that there are two kinds of people in the world, those who can stay calm and do the rational thing if a snake appears, and those who can't. I was afraid, given my spitting cobra experience at Dobe, that I was in the latter category, and because I once found myself flying straight upward out of a meeting when another snake (not poisonous) crossed the sand in the middle of our circle of chairs. I had also already crashed my desk chair over backward in the sand when a small green mamba fell onto my desk at Kauri out of the big tree from which it was suspended. Soon, however, I was to find that when I absolutely had to, even I could summon the courage to face a snake.

It happened this way. We arrived in /Kae/kae at night, and, even this late in the season, rain was pelting down. Dry spots in various huts were found for my Ju/'hoan friends, and then Kha//an's sister took me to a little stick hut a bit away from the village. The hut had been built for my teacher Richard Lee in a previous season. It had an ancient tarp over the top that kept out most of the rain, so even though it was

not tall enough to stand up in, I thought it would keep me reasonably dry. I nipped into the house quickly, spread out my sleeping bag, and climbed in. I read by torch (flashlight) for a while but was soon sleepy, lulled by the soothing sound of rain in the otherwise absolute silence. I turned off the torch and laid it so I could find it in the dark, at arm's length from the right side of the sleeping bag. Settling down for the night, I lay still for a few moments in the pitch blackness.

Then "whump!" Something heavy and clearly alive fell from the stick roof onto my stomach and remained there. I had no way of seeing what it was, but I had earlier seen large coiled snakes fall from high shelves and even from the inside of a Land Rover engine. I thought I was a goner. Whatever it was remained immobile. I reached ever so slowly for the torch. Slowly, slowly I placed it beneath my chin and pointed at the weight on my stomach. I had to turn on the light, had to know what I was dealing with. I fully expected that when I turned it on I might receive a fatal strike in the face.

What the bright light revealed on my stomach, however, was not a snake but a giant frog! Horrified but mightily relieved, I came out of that sleeping bag like greased lightning. The frog, my rejected prince, hopped heavily out the door. I spent the rest of the night reading by flashlight and glancing uneasily at the door as the rain continued to come down. Until that moment I hadn't known that giant frogs existed in the Kalahari. I later learned that they lived beneath the sand most of the time, emerging only during the rains. There was general hilarity the next morning when I stumblingly told the story. Soon I got over my fright and joined in the laughter.

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I had come to /Kae/kae hoping to hear music by Jimmy /Ai!ae, a well-known composer of thumb piano songs. Jimmy's compositions were so good that many thumb piano players took them up and played them, always acknowledging that they were originally Jimmy's. He called himself, and was known as, *Jikxao*, the Owner of Lying, the Master of Tricks.

I first heard about Jimmy from Marjorie Shostak when we were still at Dobe together. Marjorie, as I've said, had been making a study of Ju/'hoan children's acquisition of musical skills and had heard Jimmy play at /Kae/kae. She also shared with me a long interview she had done with him, a life history, actually, focused primarily on the events he experienced that brought him to play and sing with the thumb piano as he did. One of these events was "spirit sickness," which he said he contracted when he fell headfirst down a well; another was being



struck by lightning. Jimmy was one of very few musicians who sang or spoke words along with his music. People also said he was the only person who used the thumb piano as other San use dance music—as a vehicle for trance and a medium for speaking to God.

Jimmy was in his twenties when I went to look for him at /Kae/kae. He was one of the first Ju/'hoan adopters of the thumb piano, which according to ethnomusicologist Nicholas England appears to have come from the north and east, ultimately from Bantu groups via speakers of Central Bushman languages. The instrument had only been adopted recently by the Ju/'hoansi because they lacked materials for its construction—chiefly heavy-gauge metal for the keys. But in 1958 a windfall occurred in their area during an epidemic of foot-and-mouth-disease. A team of South West African veterinarians came to /Kae/kae to construct *kraals* (corrals) in which to kill infected cattle, and they dumped their extra wire and nails there. Since then, some of the wire and nails had been pounded into musical keys. Thumb pianos had been gaining popularity, and by the time I was there in the early 1970s, most Ju/'hoan settlements had several of them.

We located Jimmy sitting under a tree, out beyond one of the /Kae/kae camps in the late afternoon. I learned he often lived somewhat apart from other people, a choice that would be unthinkable to most of the highly sociable San. Jimmy looked much like other Ju/'hoansi, but the habitually pained and distracted expression on his face set him apart. Though I liked him immensely as soon as we met, I was also a little afraid of him. With few preliminaries, he launched into a haunting song I recorded but was able to translate only much later.

Terrible God deceives, torments.  
 God's arms descend into my fingers.  
 Yesterday God said, "Be my child and listen.  
 Take what I say to the people."  
 God's arms.  
 God's arms.  
 A young soul lives in the western sky  
 And is still learning.  
 These are my tears:  
 I mourn at death for years and years—  
 This is what I have to tell.  
 God spoke, telling me to take up  
 These metal bits and this scrap of wood  
 And with them to sing.  
 Where will I hide from God's death?  
 The day when God speaks where will I be?  
 Where will I hide from terrible God who torments me?

The year of my death is known.  
 The day of my death is known.  
 Hoo, hoo!  
 Owner of tricks, yes, am I.  
 Master of lying, hoo.  
 One who can fool you, that's me.  
 Master of tricks, yes.  
 Owner of lies!

I found the music otherworldly, impossibly sad and sweet, sounding like the music of souls in suspension. There was something else, too—a demonic note. Often the phrases were harsh and full of ingenious, clanging discords. The music was entirely his own, very different from any other thumb piano music I had heard—even when others were playing his compositions. But the music worked: it gave the impression of using diabolical materials to build a new kind of sweetness, one unheard before on the earth.

Jimmy was regarded as a very special person, set apart from ordinary people. Others considered him to have a great deal of power because of the uniqueness of his relationship to the great God. He was seen as different, even from other healers or *n/om kxaosi* (medicine owners). Healing men, such as Kxao =Oah, of whom I wrote in chapter 3, and the healing women I will describe further on, went into trance at dances and did battle in that context with the spirits sent by God to bring misfortune and sickness. They also drew out the invisible arrows of illness that the lesser god and the spirits had shot into the bodies of the sick. Jimmy, however, tranced not at dances but most often when playing the thumb piano. He felt himself to be a special medium for transmission of the word and power of God.

His songs had the triple function of praying to God, relating to other people what God replied, and lamenting his own outcast state among humanity. He was sort of like a “holy fool,” socially marginal but spiritually powerful. In some important sense, Jimmy did seem like an outcast—but an outcast of his own making. Though he was respected for his power and his art, he was seen as extremely hard to get along with. His exterior was thorny—this among a people celebrated for their ability to maintain smooth relations with each other. I myself felt concerned that he could make me do things I might not want to, like taking him places or giving him things, just by the power of his personality.

Another name he called himself, and was called by others, was “Jimmy Diasi,” Crazy Jimmy. *Di* as an adjective meant crazy, as a noun meant madness, and as a verb meant to be crazy. *Diasi* literally meant “crazinesses.” This was similar to the *!aia* (trance) and *!ai* (death) cog-

nates I learned about from other healers. But I had also heard the word *dia* in another context with which it seemed to have cognate connections, that of performative excellence. Jimmy's performances were highly musical, their brilliance taking his listeners into unknown realms of spirituality. "Ha dia!" is roughly translatable as "He nailed it!" I loved it that, in Ju//hoansi, a crazy musician could be crazy wonderful, even transcendent, just like in English.

Meeting Jimmy was the beginning of my understanding of the reverence Ju//hoansi hold for true creativity, wherever and however it occurs. Like many Ju//hoansi, I was both enticed and repelled by the discordant mystery of Jimmy's music. I knew I needed to understand much more about both the deep references in his art—some of which I was coming to know through the folktales—and his own strange relationship to them. I invited him to visit for an extended time later at Kauri, and eventually he came. There we worked together over long swaths of the reel-to-reel recordings I had made of him, so that I eventually understood the phrases, even the elliptical ones, that he used over and over. I wrote an article on his music for *Botswana Notes and Records* (Biesele 1993: 171–88), which contains a large number of translated songs.

I chanced upon Jimmy again later in 1971, during a winter visit to Dobe. There was an eclipse of the moon visible from the Kalahari at that time, some two years after the US Apollo 11 moon landing in July 1969. Radios were few and far between in Ngamiland at that time. So word of the moon landing—but not of the coming eclipse—had spread. Jimmy played and sang ardently during the eclipse until the moon came back, easing the tension of a dangerous time. "Why have senseless children played with the moon and ruined it?" he sang, rolling his eyes dramatically and thrusting his head forward and back on his neck like a pigeon.

After our time staying at /Kae/kae with Kha//an's daughter and other relatives, we headed north toward Dobe. We were intending to deliver Di//xao (=Oma !Oma's wife) and their toddler to her people. Di//xao had become too homesick to stay at Kauri, but =Oma !Oma said he would continue to work for me. So we drove the Land Rover to one of the villages near Dobe where Di//xao's family had been living several months before. We learned that her people were not currently in residence, that they were living even further north, near Cherocheroha, in the direction of the mongongo groves, gathering the wild fruits and vegetables of that abundant rainy season, and hunting.

I was quite taken aback. How would we find them? There were no roads—not even tracks—through the heavy sands of !Xu, the region of transverse dunes between Dobe and the groves. We were carrying a drum of petrol lashed snugly behind the back seat, and its contents were

measured to suffice for only the kilometer distance we had planned to travel, with very little for contingencies. A stick poked down through the drum cap revealed only six inches of petrol left—and we still had 125 kilometers of heavy sand back from Dobe to Tsau, which had the nearest petrol pump. Yet we couldn't ask a young woman alone, carrying a small child, to make a trek like the one between Dobe and Cherocheroha. Nor did the village people know when her family would return to the Dobe area. So the next morning we began bush-bashing northwards. I was in utter trepidation, worrying about, among other things, running out of fuel, thus losing precious weeks of assembling the materials for my thesis. But as =Oma !Oma, who knew how much petrol we had and how much might be needed, was, along with everyone else, relaxed and cheery, I decided I would just have to trust in his confidence.

After we spent hours banging into stumps, falling into aardvark holes, and cutting our truck out of thorn bushes, the afternoon sun began to wane and we had not found Di//xao's family. I began to feel quite desperate. Every thicket, every clearing, started to look the same to me, and I worried that we might be going around in circles. My hands on the steering wheel were so hot I thought they might actually be getting burned. I was so weary and anxious that I felt we should go no further. "Stop!" said Di//xao suddenly. Gratefully, I stopped the Land Rover. She was sitting behind me on the back seat and pointing out her window. "Mba !u," she murmured. "There's my father's footprint."

In minutes we had located the people we were looking for. I was amazed but glad, as they were to be suddenly reunited, though everyone else concerned treated the whole episode as quite routine. The contrast could not have been starker between my amazement and their matter-of-fact certainty that the people would be found using a combination of tracks known to all with geographic and social information about their likely whereabouts. It whetted my appetite for learning about tracking knowledge: not a magical skill but an element of "people's science." This skill was reinforced by information on animal behavior encoded in the folktales, on which Ju/'hoansi and their ancestors had clearly relied for millennia.

We left Di//xao with her people and turned the Land Rover's nose south again. Driving much more quickly than on our trip north, we followed our own track back to Dobe. Mindful still of our dwindling petrol, we immediately continued on towards Nokaneng and Tsau.

We drove pretty well into the long stretch between G!o'oce and Nokaneng before stopping, because there was a full moon. Then we had trouble find-

ing a place to camp because there were termite diggings everywhere, and they eat your blankets in the night. Finally we stopped and cleared away the dry grass and built a big fire. We had a quiet, pleasant supper, and then long conversations. . . . It was all very interesting. A glorious sleep, then, with my feet right up to the fire.

Drove all day and never saw any game but an ostrich. Once we all piled out of the truck and ran through fabulous grass to a long-ago bee tree, but it was now empty. On the way we found a *n=ah* tree, the kind G!kon//’hom-dima [literally, “the beautiful aardvark girl,” another guise of the python-elephant folktale heroine] falls out of into the well [in her adventure mentioned in chapter 4]. It was a tall tree with small reddish fruit. !Xuma also dug up a /*ha* root, which we later roasted—it tasted like a cross between broccoli and potato, like most roots here seem to.

We made it back to the petrol pump in Tsau with at least two inches to spare in the bottom of the drum. This experience was one of many pivotal moments leading to my eventual focus (in my thesis and indeed in the rest of my life) not only on tracking but on the knowledge and communication systems—in general—of the Ju/’hoansi and other hunter-gatherers. I was thoroughly galvanized by the idea that there were close relationships between the ways information was communicated and remembered (including via the stories I was recording, which were rife with information about how animals behave, and how humans *ought* to behave) and the people’s achievement of daily subsistence. The deep reliability of the knowledge base they established that way seemed to have everything to do with the serene confidence I observed among my Ju/’hoan friends. It allowed them the security of knowing that what they were already deciding to do next was unquestionably a sound judgment, thoroughly grounded in proven information and wisdom.



## A CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Not running out of fuel in the dangerous passage between G!o'oce and Nokaneng/Tsau was a huge relief. I thought I had learned my lesson and could start to pattern my behavior more on that of my confident Ju/'hoan friends. But my relief when we returned to Tsau that day was soon replaced with anxiety. I was worried that my professor, Richard Lee, might have arrived and might be waiting at my camp to ask me how far along I was with my thesis research. The early 1970s were *way* pre-cellphone, even pre-radiophone in the Kalahari, and the only way for a message to have reached me was my poste restante box in Maun, far to the east of Tsau and Kauri. So that time, and each time I was returning from a trip and was on the last stretch of the back road to Kauri, I worried that Dr. Lee could have arrived and could be awaiting me at my camp. I imagined him eagerly expecting to be shown a neat stack of transcribed and annotated stories, complete with metadata and an overarching plan for the insertion of it all into a meaningful whole within an evolutionary theoretical framework. That day and on several other occasions I skulked guiltily around Tsau at dusk before taking the sand track to Kauri, asking people there if a foreigner had come through asking for directions to my camp, um, a short guy with a beard? Possibly also driving a Land Rover? No? Are you sure? The contrast between the joyfully adventurous days we were having and my thesis anxiety—shareable with nobody within hundreds of kilometers—was coming to seem absurd.

Yet I knew deep down that the way I was proceeding was allowing me to learn what I needed to learn in a very effective way. I was not “drilling down” through an academic plan and “getting it done” in a way I could explain to anyone at the time. Instead I was proceeding opportunistically, taking promising paths as they presented themselves, to meet the shadowy goals with which I had arrived in the field. I didn't know whether it was working fast enough, but I knew it was working. I felt assured that the general vision I had started with, that of uncovering storytelling's enabling functions for Ju/'hoan society, was continuing to develop organically as I lived and participated in whatever was happening, asked questions, and pondered their answers.

So I resolved to try to “get out of my own way” and go with the flow of experience there, not resisting but taking advantage of its mysteriousness and ineluctability. It was becoming clear to me that with any more programmatic approach, the holistic vision I sought—one I could barely articulate but was sure was there—might elude me. Basically, I saw that a kind of membrane between me and the immediacy going on all around me—one built up by experience in my own culture—needed now to be peeled away. And I was being given opportunities, practically on a daily basis, to do just that.

I took an important cue from the way the people saw their *n!oresi* (their home resource territories) and the wider territory of Ngamiland that contained all the *n!oresi*. They seemed to think of them as maps to the important assets of their lives. The *n!oresi* were not only mental maps of the resources—water sources, places where wild foods grew, and hunting grounds—but were marked by points of light that were the “people who know things”—composers, expert trackers, excellent dancers whose work they could enjoy and learn from. Taken together, the interlocking *n!oresi* formed a reliable map of physical and spiritual community resources that were open to everyone. I came to see that this dazzling resource map was made possible not only by the leveling mechanisms of their sharing system but by lack of competitiveness in creative achievement—beautiful things, like medicine songs, were seen to “come through” people, to belong to everyone, and were to be used and celebrated by all. There seemed to be a precise parallel here to the modesty of Ju/’hoan hunters about the animals they killed. The meat they brought in for the community through quietly doing their job as hunters did not bring them personal glory: it was meat destined for each member of the group. This realization of the parallel between sharing of meat and of powerful, created beauty was for me a major turning point: I felt it firmly structured my understanding of basic tenets of Ju/’hoan culture—and thus, my thesis.

It’s hard to emphasize enough how the storytellers and healers I had met all seemed to fit, with the rest of the Ju/’hoan people, into one creative community. The same augmenting and reinforcing meanings crossed all the media I had encountered and were freely shared. I never got the sense that knowledge or meanings or artistic skill were being sequestered by anyone: rather, they seemed joyfully accessible to all. The very word “artist” began to take on new meaning for me. Ju/’hoan art did not have overtones of proprietorship or market value, as the word now has in Western cultures. I saw that Ju/’hoan artists were more like spiritual guides who could not do other than pursue their artistry. Jimmy the composer; storytellers like //Xukxa N!a’an, !Unn/obe,

/Xoan, and /Ukxa; the men healers Kxao =Oah and Kxao Tjimburu, and the women healers like Tcoq'a N!a'an I worked with later at G!o'oce; the women and girls who sang for the dancers or played the lute-like, five-stringed *g//oaci*—all were viewed as channels to the beyond, giving access to other realms (of aesthetic enjoyment, of knowledge, of health and welfare) to everyone. As an unlikely visitor to this realm of psychic plenty, I was very much motivated to share awareness of its riches responsibly. But how?

At first I saw my main responsibility as learning enough about Ju/'hoan culture to explain its treasures and peculiarities to fellow Westerners. I felt I owed this to those who had not had an opportunity to travel to a place like the Kalahari. I began to understand ever more deeply how one's own culture, unchallenged, could seem to be the be-all and end-all, leaving one terminally suspended inside an impermeable bubble.

In truth, it was only at Kauri that I began to learn the startling fact that I, too, had a culture, and that it was quite as relative, quite as arbitrary, as any other. I believe I started to absorb these facts only there, because I was learning the radically different Ju/'hoan culture via the individuals I was now dealing with on a daily basis. At Dobe, with Mel and Marjorie as my guides and with the Dobe people's view of me colored by their history with the Harvard project, my social relationships had been largely mediated by others. It was indeed as if I had been in a bubble, as if I had had, not only growing up in the US but also at Dobe, a nearly invisible, foggy membrane between me and many kinds of "Others." At Dobe this seemed true even of Ju/'hoan individuals with whom I had been hunting or gathering "on my own" without English-speaking colleagues, even of the storyteller //Xukxa N!a'an, from whom I heard my first folktales, even of strong, direct, articulate Baq'u, who bestowed on me her name. This membrane had been clouded for me long before I arrived at Dobe, of course, by romantic and other misconceptions of indigenous people held by Western culture in general.

At Kauri, where my social experiences were less mediated by other outsiders, the membrane began to thin. The process was a patchy one, took time, and seemed to be a thing that needed to be repeated more than once. The bubble began to clear up in spots for me, often through dramatic encounters with the wrongness of my own preconceptions. I remember vividly and with lasting embarrassment one such encounter. After my houses and kitchen hut were completed, and after I had danced with and heard stories from the Kauri people who came to stay with me for some months, I was invited to visit the village, not only informally, as I had been by Di//xao, but a bit more formally, by a fam-



ily. I was to stay at the cluster of huts of the family of Boo (pronounced Beau), who had acquired the nickname surname “Becker” after a white farmer for whom he once worked. I congratulated myself on having politely held off from inviting myself to Kauri, and on having given enough proof of my friendliness that someone might see me as a pleasant guest. I packed a knapsack and bedroll light enough to carry the few kilometers to Kauri, feeling that for my first “village experience” I should leave the Land Rover—and my campmates !Xoma and =Oma !Oma—at Toothbrush Tree/Spirit Voice.

The first evening was very enjoyable, with a quiet, harmonious, brief dance followed by a boiling pot of buffalo meat one of the hunters had obtained from a Herero who owned a gun. (Ju/hoansi also hunt Cape buffalo occasionally, but without a gun it is a very dangerous undertaking indeed.) I rolled out my bedroll beside Boo Becker’s fire, as did some of the rest of his family. I saw women preparing their families’ sleeping places: first they laid down the stoutest mat they had, a tarp or a large antelope skin, and at one end of the mat they laid a small, straight tree trunk, perhaps four inches across and five feet long, to serve as a pillow. The next layers were draped over the tree trunk to soften it and then flattened down over the length of the mat. These layers consisted of all manner of skins, cloth and fabric, usually thin and much tattered, though some families had one or more store-bought blankets as well. Their beds were often little wider than the single twin beds I was used to, yet when bedtime came, the mother, father, and all the children crept in together and kept each other warm.

By the time I got up the next morning, most of the children were larking about with other kids at their own or nearby campfires several yards away. Women and men were hanging up the sleeping things to air them. Many of the adults were going about their business, bringing in the few goats so they could be milked and the milk used for tea. I was brought a large tin mug of strong tea with hot, fresh goat milk, and it tasted like heaven. I sat for a while with my tea, enjoying watching people move into their morning. It was refreshing that nobody seemed to feel awkward in any way because of my presence. I was somehow comfortably invisible, even in this intimate and homey scene.

Not really knowing what to do with myself, though, I reflected on what my role as a guest might be. I had not planned to do interviewing or record stories, but just to observe and participate as might be indicated. I felt I should center myself at the camp to which I had been “invited,” but Boo and his wife and their entire family were absent, dashing about from an early hour doing chores, such as fetching water at the edge of the village. I began to feel large and obtrusive and

self-conscious, with the familiar question “What am I doing here?” hammering softly at the back of my brain. The feeling was made worse by the fact that by late morning there was no sign of breakfast or any other meal forthcoming. None of the boiled buffalo from the night before was visible: maybe it had all been eaten. I had not brought with me so much as a handful of groundnuts.

As the sun grew hotter towards midday, I realized I had a throbbing headache from hunger, heat, and, probably, social tension. In a moment of abashed self-realization, I saw that I had come to the village in the grip of preconceptions that were straight out of nineteenth-century Europe or America. A guest would be given three meals a day and would be directly invited into the days’ activities, wouldn’t she? Instead, the situation was a wide-open one for guests, just as for any other individuals there, to do pretty much as they pleased, or as they needed to do—short of pilfering food from what I suddenly saw were pretty much nonexistent larders.

These were people who truly did not store, hoard, or do much planning for the next meal: they had knowledge of what the options were on any given day, could plan ahead on known fail-safes, but most of the time were relying on what the day would bring. They probably all knew what their neighbors had at any given time, but they were certainly not going to steal it, given that everyone knew the footprints, shod and unshod, of everybody else in camp, and given that each person absolutely depended on others on the days when they personally had no food. Sharing and being shared with by others was the only constant resource, the only permanent bank account. Humbled, I stayed as long as I could until hunger and the limitations of my own social knowledge drove me back to my own relatively well-stocked camp.

Many, many of the other realizations I had around that time also centered on my mistaken assumptions about Ju/’hoan food culture. Once I was traveling with both !Xoma and =Oma !Oma and a truckload of Kauri people, again on the diamond track to /Kae/kae, and I discovered that I had not brought along nearly enough loose tea or teabags. What I had would clearly not last everyone until we got to the next trading store. That could be a week away. That night at our roadside campfire, the usual festive mood of journeying prevailed. Everyone shared in gathering wood, making the fire, cooking, and making tea. I waited until the first pot of tea was consumed, then said that we would need to ration the tea if we wanted to drink a little every day until we got to !Aoan. I also stated the obvious, which was that there was never any guarantee that there would even *be* tea in stock in any trading store, especially in one as remote from real roads and towns as !Aoan was. =Oma !Oma and

the others around the fire stared and blinked at me for the briefest of instants. Then they measured out fresh tea leaves for a second pot, put water on to boil, and the convivial hilarity went on unabated.

Nettled, I first worried that I had expressed myself inadequately in Ju/'hoansi. Next I mentally dragged myself over the coals for losing control of my employees and the supplies in my mobile camp. Last, I chided myself for being so uptight, yet again making judgments that welled up unexamined from the depths of my own culture, with little recognition of theirs. It was clear that Ju/'hoansi on the whole found it more sensible to take tarts when tarts were passed, as Alice did in Wonderland, than to fuss about concerns for the days ahead. To them, it seemed, a road trip was no more perilous, in terms of provisions, than were the other days of their lives anywhere. Ideas from grad school readings danced in my head that night about "Dionysian" cultures versus "Apollonian" ones. Was I witnessing here the confrontation of my own prissy capitalist upbringing with the comprehensive sharing ethic that had brought the hunting and gathering ancestors of us all safe and sound through the millennia of prehistory? I knew these were oversimplified categories I was tossing around, but they helped me get some perspective through a night of self-questioning—and the next several caffeine-less days on the road. On top of all else, I was confronting for the first time my degree of dependency on tea and coffee to lift my energy level to meet that of the Ju/'hoansi.

Despite what might have looked to an outsider like rudeness about the tea supply, there was at the same time an exquisite politeness and care about how tea and other commodities were shared—on this road trip and also in general. A person who didn't show up or ask for a share was assumed not to be interested, and was blithely ignored. In contrast, a person coming to sit at a fire where food or tea was in process of being served was understood to be presenting himself or herself for a serving. However, he or she was not supposed to ask directly for it. As mentioned in chapter 3 with the extended metaphor about honey, sugar, and boiling the tea leaves twice, he or she was supposed instead to look anywhere but at the teapot or at the *potjie* (Afrikaans for the ubiquitous three-legged iron cookpot). And he or she was to use only respect words or elliptical metaphors to refer to what was being served. This social delicacy of the Ju/'hoansi was able to coexist with their Dionysian sense of style (the stylishness my own socialization had coded as "throwing caution to the wind"). Everyone in western Ngamiland but I, it seemed, knew the rules, the careful words and gestures, that made such a seemingly contradictory balance possible.

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A lot of what I found myself doing in my fieldwork, in fact, was trying to understand the balance Ju/'hoansi found among seeming contradictions. A contradiction that constantly captured my attention was one between individualism and conventionalism in spiritual settings like the healing dance. It would start to look like a contradiction to me, but over and over, I would see it resolve into an admirable balance. This balance had everything to do with the embeddedness I now saw of each individual—and of each individual's innovations upon tradition—in this creative community.

For instance, on this same trip from Kauri, camping again at /Kae/kae, I heard words declaimed by a healer in trance that enhanced my understanding of the balancing power of Ju/'hoan artistry. We drove west through the flat soft sand region to the slight hilly uplift that begins at /Kae/kae. This uplift at the start of the Aha Hills contains the /Uihaba bat caves and a sinkhole, Huwetju, said by the Ju/'hoansi to be the hole from which God and his animals popped out onto the surface of the earth. The full moon was just rising as we neared /Kae/kae, and a dance was in progress on the side of a mild slope facing east. "It's Kxao Tjimburu and his family dancing!" said someone in the truck excitedly. We hastily made camp and then walked quietly towards the music, the silver sand's surface shining and the hard, tiny leaves of the bushes glittering with moonlight beside our path.

Kxao, whom I had met once before in the daytime, had oiled his skinny, always bolt-upright body and had wrapped frayed bands of red fabric around his upper chest. I had been told he had created his own special dance, and had long ago taught his wife and all his girl children to sing for him in a special way. Indeed, there were all the girls and women, in a tight circle around the fire, their legs interlocking, their heads all inclined to the right, the better to hear each other and to sing in effective polyphony. From them rose the scent of *sa*, warming with the heat of their bodies as they clapped and sang. Kxao's sons and other boys and men were following him in a line that in tiny, complexly stepped increments was inscribing a precise circle in the sand. The Ju/'hoansi use the phrase *djxani tcxai*, "to dance a song," for this dancing and the singing that is inseparable from it. In performance, especially as the night moves on, it is as if dance and song become one. I had heard and seen a number of dances before, at both Dobe and Kauri, but this one was of a wholly different order. Originally the product of a single inspired individual, it had become the actions of a multiperson

organism, so attuned had Kxao and his extended family become to each other's artistry over the years.

Some of our traveling group were quickly absorbed into the singing and dancing group as if by centripetal force. As we approached the group around the fire, the singing stopped briefly as greetings were exchanged with kin who had not seen each other for a long time. During such arrivals, I had found, travelers would be joyously welcomed and have the limbo and the tiredness of travel removed by having their temples touched with cooling *sa* and then blown upon by adoring relatives—pew, pew! /Xoan N!a'ang, traveling with us, was wafted in this way with *sa*, and the people murmured incantatorily to her, "Tju/ho o aga" (this is your village) and "!O!o sa =hom" (older brother and father-in-law), over and over before starting again to sing.

A rank beginner in the complex music, I sang as much as I could and then went to sit by one of the "watching fires" where other people were smoking and joking. But I was close enough to hear Kxao's words as they suddenly rang out of his whole body, already ecstatically in trance: "Mi ku =oa mba!" (I am imitating my father, doing as my father did!) This cry and its context made me feel I was hearing a voice from a timeless world. Was Kxao ecstatic because he was reunited with his dead father in that instant, faithfully doing what his father had taught him was important to do in life?

I began to glimpse that the healing dance was a nexus of strength at the absolute center of Ju/'hoan experience. I saw that it demolished any contradiction between the individual and the group. And that it could have everything to do with relationships—and identity, and respect—among kinspeople down through the generations.

This is literally, I thought, life in death and death in life. *!Aia*—trance—is an obvious cognate of *!ai*—to die. The Marshalls had translated *!aia* as "half-death," and Richard Lee used *koe !ai*, "like death," but to me it seemed as frightening and absolute as the real thing and was clearly held by the Ju/'hoansi in much the same awe and respect. Healers in the coveted altered state in which healing can take place are first and foremost gaining access to that realm where their parents—and other relatives who have passed on—abide. Relationships with deceased elders persist vividly after death. As in everyday life, relationships are the most powerful resource of all. When Kxao sang out that he was imitating his father or doing as his father did, this was a signal that he had entered the realm where he and his forebears could still communicate, still be united, still be "as one." In spite of the obvious innovations Kxao had brought into the dance in his lifetime, he was experiencing the ecstasy of being a part of the whole that had long been

this dance and its history in the lives, energies, styles, and ideas of all his people. Both men and women of the Ju/'hoansi, who dance and sing for each other so the healing energy can be activated, are celebrated for this hard and beautiful work of ecstasy that is done for all.

I was to hear the words "I am imitating my father!" sung out many times over the following months and years, by Kxao and by other healers as they went into trance, laid hands on others, and in this powerful state, proceeded to heal them. I also heard a woman who had been singing and clapping and then jumped up to dance shout in utter joy, looking towards the sky, "We're dancing and our old, old people see us!" Over time I have learned much more about this healing dance that has been so central to the lives and cultures of San people all over southern Africa. I have come eventually to regard it as a collective art form, one of the great intellectual achievements of the human world. It shares with other artistic forms a profound respect for messages from the beyond, especially from direct ancestors, made possible by many kinds of creative activity. The dance, the stories, the music, all keep alive the flame of belief that healing, transformation, and transport are possible—for healers and the healed alike.

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I could see that stories, with all their emphasis on transformation, were deeply important in all this. But I was still wondering about the coexistence in Ju/'hoan folktale tradition of many versions of "the same" tale. There seemed to be as many ways to tell a traditional story as there were storytellers. I was dazzled by this richness, but also confused. How was I going to pinpoint "expert" storytellers or "authoritative" versions for my Harvard story collection, if there were so many good storytellers, and so many versions of each story? One day in Kauri I was sitting beside !Unn/obe at the door of her hut as she sewed beads onto a dancing skin for her husband. I asked her why some stories were called "the same" as others even when they were told differently by different storytellers.

She shrugged. "All these stories about the old times—people use different words and different names for the same things. . . . Different people just have different thoughts," she said. Her shrug was the first glimpse for me of the elaborate tolerance for individual variation—a tolerance underlain by respect for, and interest in, each person—that I was coming to see in her egalitarian society. Ju/'hoan storytelling aesthetics, it seemed, gave wide latitude not only for variation in daily behavior but also for the expressive styles of different individuals.

Some of the variations I saw and heard in expressive style were downright flamboyant. //Xukxa N!a'an, the first storyteller I had listened to at Dobe, was a good friend of !Unn/obe's but told "the same" stories as she did in very different ways that bore her own indelible signature. //Xukxa was fond of using comical reduplication in her stories to emphasize outrageous actions. (Later, Mel Konner told me that biblical Hebrew contains instances of such reduplication for emphasis as well: scholars refer to it there as the infinitive absolute, among other terms.) For //Xukxa, arguing people did not merely *n=uiankhoe*, contradict each other, but they *n=uin-n=uiankhoe* (thus reduplicating the expression); the marks of gnawings made by a hare on the moon's face were /'om-/omsɪ, "gnaw-gnawings"; dirty-minded speech was "foul-foul," or /kau-/kau; vultures could drop //aba-//aba, voraciously and scandalously, out of the sky onto corpses; people could not only kill but "kill-kill" each other, !hun-!hun. Kxao Kasupe, =Oma !Oma's father, a man about //Xukxa's age also living at Dobe, liked to wave his hands in emphasis while telling a story about the beautiful heroine elephant girl (who could also appear as a python or an aardvark maiden). As his hands waved, he was comically prolonging the glottal stop in the word /'hom (beautiful) to show how this woman could be lovely beyond description.

I heard other versions of the heroine's story and her beauty, but they also foregrounded the virtuous nature of the heroine, describing in great detail her demeanor, clothing, and ornaments. !Unn/obe's versions emphasized dialogue between the heroine and the enemies she vanquishes, as well as euphemisms of trickery as the heroine pretends to step behind a bush to powder or "freshen herself up" while actually plotting magical vengeance. (You will see one of !Unn/obe's long, detailed versions of the heroine story in chapter 9).

Bemused, I began to wonder about the relationship between storytelling style and its content or message. If the medium was the message, might personal ostentations in style liberate a tradition from slavish adherence to content, yet somehow preserve that content in its essentials? I began to ask whether culture were perhaps a less monolithic concept than I had thought, whether individual expressive energies were in fact what combine to make a culture. The concept of dialogue within a tradition *itself* constituting the tradition began to stir for me.

What makes disparate stories "the same" as each other includes not only plot and characters but the way they address similar themes or problems of culture. One frequent theme in Ju/'hoan tales, for example, is the difficulty of maintaining right relationships among in-laws. These themes will be well known to all and provide the well of refer-

ence from which all versions ultimately take their power. The different storytellers' versions never violate these themes but rather explore their ramifications, turning them over and over in a sort of fascination to see how many intellectual or artistic changes may be rung on "the same" theme and plot.

It is difficult to convey, without multiplying further examples, the richly individualistic nature of Ju/'hoan tradition. When I was first confronting this richness and, at times, apparent contradiction, I felt myself floundering in my work of understanding the tradition as a whole. I felt rather like Bartholomew Cubbins in Dr. Seuss's story of *The Five Hundred Hats*. Each new version I heard was like the successive cocked hats Bartholomew found on the stairs of the tower, one embellished with one jewel, the next augmented by another jewel, the next by a jewel and a feather, then one with a jewel and two feathers, and so on. Yet I never heard a listener complain, except in jest, "You're not telling it right!" All the versions of a story told "the same" story.

How could this be, in what I had been led to believe was a highly "conservative" culture? How could such diversity exist in a society that prized equality of individuals perhaps beyond all else? As an anthropologist, I knew Ju/'hoan culture's social technology contained many mechanisms for social leveling and the prevention of self-aggrandizement. How could I square this knowledge with the personal flamboyance I was seeing in storytelling?

!Unn/obe's shrug, as I said, provided my first insight into the answer. The complexity that bemused me was ordinary to her: it presented no problems whatsoever. Why, then, was I struggling so much with it? I began to think about the perspective from which I was trying to understand her tradition.

For one thing, I was from a scribal culture, and she from an oral one. She was nonliterate, as were her listeners and the other storytellers who told variants of the stories !Unn/obe was telling. I had gone to Africa, after all, with the specified intent of studying a narrative tradition as completely oral as I could find in the world in the 1970s. Now that I had found one, I had no idea what to do with it! My literacy was a screen that prevented me from seeing the powerful strengths of oral communication. My literacy was an enormous component of the fogged membrane between me and the understanding of people in an oral culture.

Working on defogging the membrane, I gradually began to piece back together my academic reading about the nature of oral versus literate communication—Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, Eric Havelock's *The Greek Concept of Justice*, Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. I remembered that literate people must in a real sense struggle to realize



that, where speech is both the norm and the model for all verbal communication, two messages may be regarded as “the same” though they are rarely verbatim equivalents. This equivalence of message explains storytellers’ insistence that they are faithfully “repeating” an old story when they are actually telling it in their own words. Each telling thus reflects the performance situation of the moment *and* participates in the timeless authority of tradition. Concentration on specific wording and phraseology per se is a phenomenon of alphabetic literacy that has long distorted scholars’ understanding of communication in oral societies. Thinking anew about the Parry-Lord theory after some time in the field gave a new dimension to the question about the oral antecedents of the Homeric epics. I began to understand more clearly how many oral variants of those stories must have been told before they were written down and fixed for all time.

Yet each of those variants must have seemed in some way to be “the same” story, likely carrying the same social lessons. Looking at an oral tradition as a whole, I recalled, means detailed attention to the idiosyncrasies of its performed parts. I found that all the versions of a Ju/hoan tale would convey the same indirect social lessons, provide a scaffolding of events for graphic portrayal of moral and immoral behavior, and in the end be catalogued by listeners and storytellers alike as “the same” story, though they were widely divergent in style, language, and dramatic detail.

And the socially shocking events often referred to in the folktales, for instance in those dealing with vengeance among in-laws, are routine parts of their oral tradition for Ju/hoan listeners. But their familiarity doesn’t diminish their entertainment or their (indirectly instructive) value. The same is true for expletives and scatological references, which enliven both folktales and daily talk for the Ju/hoansi, while the actual behaviors are subject to scrupulous social avoidances. (Ju/hoan talk, like that of many other cultures, is vivid with humorous hyperbole, none of which would ever be carried out in deed. An example I heard of a perfectly polite greeting between two old men, friends who hadn’t seen each other in a long time, was “face like a dead-spirit face, go screw yourself!” After this opening, the two elderly pals hugged each other and fell about laughing. Yet the personal space and quiet dignity of both parties, I saw, remained intact and was even enhanced. I could easily imagine a parallel verbal exchange in a pub in Ireland or beside a football field at home in the US.)

It seemed that with people of circumspect social behavior, expressiveness could sometimes flourish in opposite proportion. In the area of equality of ownership of possessions, Ju/hoansi are fierce levelers.



**Figure 6.1.** Baby on tarp at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

Yet I began to see that their verbal agility, especially in storytelling, was not subject to leveling mechanisms in the same way as their social behavior was in life: it seemed individuals could push their creativity in speech much further without risk of censure. Later I was to read that George Steiner commented, in *After Babel*, that “certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives” (Steiner 1975: 55).

I took these realizations as cautions against the linguistic colonization of a local oral tradition by my literate mindset. A resilient oral tradition continually challenges the literate urge to standardize, to fix in print for all time, to specify the right or original or “authoritative” version of a tale or any sort of utterance. Such an oral tradition must preserve the right to individual ostentation within its own culturally defined limits. For my thesis work, I needed to find a way for the meaningful variability of a contemporary oral tradition to penetrate the consciousness of a world increasingly dominated by print and electronic media.

I reflected that both oral and written stories consist of the accumulations of the performances and changes in a tradition over time. Far from limited to outdated models from the past, the repertoires of contemporary “traditional” storytellers could continually expand and transform to address the current moment in which the storytellers found themselves. I sensed that Ju/’hoan oral tradition, by its very evanescence,

probably like many other oral traditions, could constantly re-form itself for new contemporary situations. After all, just as writers do best to write about what they know, oral storytellers, even those drawing on a long history of traditional materials, do best if they comment in their stories on their own particular place and slice of time in the world.

I began to see that specific storytellers now, as in the past, do cultural work appropriate to their times and crucial to the continuation of culture. They do this by influencing children and other individuals as they learn and mature. What emerges from this perspective is a humanized view of the past as ever-present grist for the mill of the future. Thus the title I chose for my memoir of this fieldwork in storytelling. The performative approach, one emphasizing the “work” done by stories in culture, well characterizes the insight later articulated to me by Richard Lee once I had written my thesis. (I had finally gotten over my panic that he would come to my field site and find me lacking.) “Oh, now I see what you’ve been talking about, Megan,” he said. “Once upon a time is *now!*”

Richard has a knack for memorably encapsulating important concepts. In that case, he nailed one of the most powerful lessons yielded by my fieldwork. I had gradually come to see that old stories are powerful not because they come from the past but because they are being told in renewed form in the present. They are told in the present in specific ways by specific individuals with specific histories. They are told to specific children, who imitate what they hear in stories, who see from their elders’ behavior, and who are encouraged to innovate in creative ways specific to themselves as individuals.

Indeed, there seems to be an essential relationship between the storytellers’ experiences and their aesthetic choices, one which determines the dimensions of the stories’ power and energy. I heard enough stories from !Unn/obe that I had a chance to look closely at both her history and her style. She had been twice married, both times to rather eccentric Ju//hoan men. She had a wry but resigned attitude toward men’s foibles, and she kept up a gentle but firmly effective joking with her second husband, Kha//an. She had lived half her life in skins in the bush, and half as a serf doing barely recompensed domestic labor, as I mentioned earlier, for Boer ranchers who settled in Ghanzi. She learned Afrikaans and spoke from her perspective at the outdoor kitchens and washtubs where she cooked and scrubbed for others. She had indeed lived for a while on the mission station at D’kar but had rejected the religious teaching in favor of the Naro and Ju//hoan healing religion.

When I met !Unn/obe in 1971 she was living in a grass hut again in the sixth decade of her life. She sustained herself as part of a socially traditional community by gathering wild foods and sharing them. One

of the names she was often called was !Unn/obe *Morethlwa* (Setswana for raisin berry). She also told me she sold ostrich-eggshell beadwork to occasional tourists traveling through the area in trucks—but at that time and in that place these trucks could not have numbered more than five or six per year. Her people’s isolation and hunting-gathering heritage were increasingly under pressure not only from white ranchers but also black Tswana and Herero pastoralists, who wished to expand their cattle herds into the former San foraging areas. (Though white ranchers in southern Africa generally control their cattle with fencing, and black pastoralists do it through herding practices, the effect on hunting and gathering people is the same. Their land, cut by fences or invaded by herds, no longer allows the free movement of migratory meat animals, and their vegetable food resources are often ruined by the large trampling hooves of nonindigenous cattle.)

!Unn/obe’s perspective on changing times had been informed by a great deal of experience on the boundaries between her own and the incoming societies. As a thoroughly marginalized individual, she had all the makings of a trenchant political analyst. She was, in fact, the catalyst for my own political awakening, informing me shortly after we met that what had “ruined” her people were four things brought into her remote area by outsiders: tobacco, sugar, alcohol, and coffee. “These things have turned us into slaves,” she said matter-of-factly. In a long interview I did with her in late 1971 she explained without rancor but with great clarity the process by which contact with settlers where she grew up in the Ghanzi District, south and east of the Ju/’hoan area, had gradually circumscribed her people’s freedom:

When the white people had filled up Ghanzi, we then saw for the first time the things that came with them. We saw for the first time engines to draw up water, and all the other things that we had never seen until the white people came. The white people certainly have a lot of things!

But when the first whites came, they had to pound up and eat what [we] ate. They used digging sticks like ours at the beginning. They collected food and ate it. In fact, I came to know *zan* roots [used to sour milk distinctively for churning butter] through the Boers. They spoke, and we dug *zan* roots for them and pounded them and laid them out to dry. Then we’d churn and churn and churn with them, receiving only black coffee to drink for doing this. Then we’d churn and churn some more, and the butter would come, and they’d put it in bowls, put it in bowls, and then they’d sit and drink the buttermilk and distribute some to us also.

Another portion of the milk they would refuse that we churn, because they wanted us to put it into their coffee for them to drink. When the empty

tins were full, the Boers were finished with this work. The milk spent the night here, and the butter spent the night there. The water engine would stop and make a sound like “ko-ko-ko,” but the cattle still drank because we Ju/’hoansi drew and drew and drew their water by hand. We cranked and cranked until the trough was full and the cattle could come and drink. If there was no engine—uh-uh! A Bushman would do the work! Bushmen worked hard! We, the red Bushmen, are the ones who did the work of that place, Ghanzi.

Women did the work of drawing water. Women took care of the cattle. Women took care of the calves. Women took care of the horses. Women took care of the donkeys.

The men worked cutting trees for poles and lumber and all kinds of wood uses. Men did this, and they also milked the cows. The women were slower about getting up in the mornings, because they had no warm clothes. The Boers for whom we worked at that time are no longer in Ghanzi, as we sit here now. Then the word came to us, the word of Seretse [Seretse Khama, first president of Botswana]. The word was *ipelegeng* (self-reliance). Seretse said to the Boers, “White people, treat your employees nicely and with respect.” When the word came down, they ran off. They are no longer over there in Ghanzi. There are only different Boers there now.

The Tswanas said, “We’re not chasing you away. We’re just saying you should pay your employees regularly, so they can make a decent living.” Some of them agreed, even if doing it defeated them [i.e., they couldn’t carry it out in practice]. Some of them just packed up and left without asking any questions. Took their money and left. I’m telling you. The pain we had from them was just that they didn’t pay us, and our heads were good enough to tell us this wasn’t right.

When I turned off the tape recorder at the end of this story, !Unn/obe and I were both quiet for a while. She sat with bent head working on a beaded necklace that I had commissioned her to do: I had brought the beads from Maun and would pay her for the piece when it was finished. I had asked her to make something with the theme of *glu-!’o!umi*, “backbone of the night,” the Ju/’hoan term for the Milky Way. I asked her a question I had been wondering about for a long time: “Do the Kauri people who work for Tswana or Herero in this area get paid for taking care of their cattle for them?”

“Not well,” she replied. “A few people here work for the black people, but they only get old clothes and some milk, and maybe a calf at the end of a year or two years, if they have worked very, very well. Most of us have to keep moving around to other places, asking for food from our relatives. We usually only stay at Kauri a short time and then move on.”

“But you and your family have been here a long time this year. Why haven’t you been traveling as usual?” I asked. “Because of the beadwork and the little handicrafts you buy from us,” she replied. “That and the housebuilding work for you, and the meals we got while we were telling stories. We’ll stay as long as you are here.”

I was floored. I had not realized how close to the edge the Kauri people were, that my presence and what I thought of as my tiny financial input were enough to cause a group of thirty or so people to change their subsistence plans for a year or more. I was amazed and shamed by how blind I had been. When I spent the night at Boo Becker’s camp at Kauri, there had been no breakfast because there was nothing to eat for breakfast. If there had been something, there would have been a meal prepared, and I, because I was there and was a human being, would have been offered a share. This was the way it was for the Ju/’hoansi in western Ngamiland in the 1970s, every day of their lives.

I say “close to the edge,” but I came to realize that if they were so, they were reliably and resiliently so. They were stable close to the edge because they were quick to incorporate any unexpected resource—such as my unheralded and unlikely presence at the edge of their short-term camp for an unknown period of time—into their list of temporary options. I began to understand that—perhaps like “good” Afrikaner farmers—I fell neatly into a slot of rational opportunism they kept open for just such occasions.

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After that I thought all the time about the meaning of my presence in Kauri and in Botswana in general. I felt sickened by the way I had assumed I could just swan in here, have a glorious time living with these wonderful people in the bush and learning so much from them, then disappear on my own mysterious schedule, of which they knew nothing. I asked !Xoma what I could do to help the Kauri people while I was still here.

!Xoma had already been thinking that we could clear some small garden areas in the nearby *molapos* where there was fertile silt and where water stayed for some time after rains. If we could get hold of some seeds, good food crops would result, he said, and he himself would be content to stay here for some time. He thought the Kauri people would also appreciate the opportunity to grow some vegetables for themselves. So I bought tools, seeds, and a couple of donkey-drawn ploughs, and we started a community garden project. Though growing food in the Kalahari is always a dicey proposition due to spotty rainfall,



**Figure 6.2.** Ju/'hoan ladies clearing brush. © Megan Biesele.

the project did produce a bit of extra food. That started me wondering what else I could do to help in some larger way beyond just providing seed and buying a few crafts.

After the new year started, in 1972, I approached !Unn/obe with this question. She was ready with her answer: my literacy was a tool she could use. “You’re a =*xanu jua* (paper person, literate person),” she said. “Take a letter to the chiefs of Botswana.” She dictated the following letter to me, which I translated as faithfully as I could. It went off by post to the Office of the President (and was, not surprisingly, never answered). But later I managed to have it published in *Kutlwano*, Botswana’s features magazine, and it may have reached some governmental eyes that way (*Morethlwa* 1972: 14–15).

To whom it may concern:

One day a white person came and saw me. I soon forgot him and was just sitting by my fire as I always had. I knew nothing of what he was doing. But all the while he was sitting and thinking about how I could make a better living.

I knew nothing of what was going on in his mind. All I saw was a strange person. And one day he came to me, and I was so frightened I nearly ran away. I just didn’t understand why such a person should come to me.

While I stood there shaking with fear he looked at me and greeted me. And my heart asked, “Yow, is this a person who likes me, that he greets

me like a friend?" And I just stood quietly and watched him. And he came nearer and started to talk to me.

"I have come from far away," he said. "I have come on purpose to see you."

And I said, "Really? See me so you can do what to me?"

"See you and give you some water to drink. And see what it is you find to eat in this bush."

And I heard what he said. And I just sat there until he said to me, "You're going to plant crops."

"What will I find to plant crops with?" I asked.

"You will plant seed."

"Where will I find seed?"

"I will give you seed."

And I said to myself, "Now maybe if I do this I will eat this year."

And the seed really arrived. And it went into the soil. And it germinated. And [it] was food, food you could really eat. And I saw all this.

I have no land of my own. I am just a little bird and have nothing to hold me fast to one place. For this reason I feel pain, my flesh does not feel at rest.

We Bushmen just have no chief to raise us up. I want the chiefs of Botswana to give us a place of our own where we may rest. I am a person who has no one else to take care of me, to feed me. Therefore I ask that education be given me, so that I am full of sense and can feed myself.

!Unn/obe *Morethlwa*  
Kauri, western Ngamiland

Absorbed in the narrative, dialogic format she had chosen for the letter, I was halfway through taking the dictation before I realized that !Unn/obe was talking about me! (The pronouns he and she, him and her, his and hers are all the same word in the Ju/'hoan language.) I looked at her in astonishment as this awareness dawned. I don't think she was aware I had been so unaware: telling a story to inform someone or to accomplish a practical end was second nature to her. And she probably never thought I would fail to infer the pronoun gender from the context.

Beguiled by her effective rhetorical approach, I left the pronouns as I had taken them down—he, him, and his—in the letter I sent off. I felt conflicted about the little time I had remaining in Botswana before I would have to go back to Harvard, and I didn't know whether I would make it back to continue this big responsibility I had unwittingly undertaken. So I thought it best to keep the actual context of the letter vague.



At first, too, I was taken aback by the apparently passive and subservient words of the dictation (i.e., *give* us equality and benefits), especially in contrast to the forthright story of the first Boers in Ghanzi! Unn/obe had told me a few months before. But by the time I sent it off I was convinced of its diplomatic wisdom. I reflected that where her first communication had been relatively comfortable, oral, and conversational, the second was designed as a formal approach to a mysterious hierarchy in a written medium, whose conventions were unknown to her and possibly full of pitfalls. When making an ask to a person whose face you cannot see while he can see yours, best to be wearing a smile.

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That was the simple beginning of my activist career. Unn/obe's charge to me—"Take a letter!"—could not have been a more clear-cut call to action. I felt the appeal to my possession of the tool of literacy approximated a simple appeal I might have received back home—for instance if a neighbor had walked across my driveway and asked to borrow a hammer. I could not but hand it over—and was happy to do so.

I resolved to speak to my fellow graduate students, and to the professors who sent us out on fieldwork to Botswana, about what we could do as a group to advocate for and support the Ju/'hoansi, who had introduced us to such cultural riches. It turned out that many of my HKRG colleagues, including Mel and Marjorie, my language teacher Pat Draper, Richard Katz, Richard Lee, Nancy Howell, John Yellen, Alison Brooks, and Irv and Nancy DeVore, also felt the same as I did. Along with Lorna and John Marshall, and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, we started the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF) in 1973, shortly after I returned to Harvard. One of the first anthropological advocacy groups in the US, it is still highly respected today.

For nearly fifty years KPF has supported and carried out projects as diverse as mother-tongue educational projects in the click languages, water development in the Kalahari and protection of water sources from elephants, and legal support for San land and resource rights. KPF's story is a long chronicle of discussion, tentative plan making, study of experimental projects in other parts of the world, and learning by trial and error from projects we undertook at the behest of San people. That story is one I will tell later, in another place. This book's story, that of my first fieldwork experience, is the story of the shared events that cemented my commitment to San individuals and communities.

My first eighteen-month experience laid the foundation for the practical and political work in southern Africa, combined with research and activism, that I'm still doing today.

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By Christmas 1971, I had spent a year with the Ju/'hoansi. I felt I had learned a lot, but I clearly still had layers and layers of fogged membrane between them and myself to peel off. There were moments when I thought I was comprehending, bit by bit, the profound depths and strengths of this Ju/'hoan culture, which I felt bound to witness and convey to my anthropological colleagues as well as to a wider public back home. These moments were sheer delight for me. Yet in the times between these epiphanies, I often felt self-conscious or sealed away from participating in the moment. I despaired about the filmy barrier that always seemed to grow back between me and the Ju/'hoansi each time I pried some of it away.

Once when we were at Dobe on a trip, another of the layers of membrane separating me from Ju/'hoan people was peeled away like tree bark by a stroke of lightning. I sat by a fire at Dobe one day near the beginning of 1972. Ju/'hoan people were also at the fire, cooking and eating and talking in the bright light of an afternoon sun. I was dozing a bit and letting the voices blend into a blur. I was sleepy after a morning spent trying to pay attention to every word as I continued to work on my Ju/'hoan language skills. By this time I had spent over a year there already, doing that.

My camp employee, =Oma !Oma, sat holding forth on a rickety handmade stool. =Oma had continued work with me ever since I first started my new camp at Kauri, helping me with my camp and with the gradually disintegrating old Land Rover. The Land Rover had by now acquired the jaunty name "Primitiv aber Glücklich" (Primitive but Happy), from the caption under a photograph of a toothless and grinning San grandmother I had seen in a book in a library built by German Lutheran missionaries. I painted the name onto the back door of the vehicle with white paint; the door itself was now held onto the vehicle only by leather thongs, the hinges, like the grandmother's teeth in the photo, having fallen out and disappeared.

Though younger than most storytellers, =Oma seized the narrative floor with relish. He was telling a tale about a visit he and two friends had made to a nearby trading post, and about the outrageously low prices the rich, fat trader had offered for the crafts they had brought to sell.



**Figure 6.3.** “Primitiv aber glücklich.” © Megan Biesele.

In my somnolent state, I followed only a fraction of what he said, instead enjoying =Oma’s delight in his own articulateness. Though he never left the stool, he seemed to strut and prance in the telling of his story. His teeth flashed in the sun as he put his head back and embellished the ridiculousness of the interaction. “We refused, saying that with the price he offered for this bow and arrow set all four of us would have to share a single *cooldrinki* [Coke or Fanta].” Mimicking the trader, =Oma shouted “Get out of here!,” waving his hands. “And then when [the trader] tried to run us off he tripped over his own stomach! *Ha g!u taahn ha!* [His stomach itself defeated him!]” Hilarity rose around =Oma and his listeners like stirred dust.

Soon people were wiping their eyes with laughter. =Oma, in shorts and wearing a shirt with no buttons, sat up straight on the stool making grandiose gestures with his arms in illustration. A tiny young man like his father, Kxao Kasupe, and all the rest of his family, he seemed to me to grow in direct proportion to the fun in his narrative. I watched him in admiration. As I did, my dozing was suddenly transformed: it came to me that he was my contemporary in the 1970s world, that we were sharing the world in this instant. I had not known before that I still, after a whole year, had had him and other Ju/’hoansi frozen in never-never land.

I felt that day that the world shifted on its axis. Though I had lived and worked and eaten and slept right next to =Oma and his people for the whole of the year 1971, it seems I had still regarded them as being in a world different from mine. I saw them and heard them, but they

were somehow mediated, myths of themselves, phantoms nurtured by my life's collection of attitudes toward Others.

This was many years ago. I am embarrassed by the incident in retrospect, as it seemed rather late in a person's life to be having such basic realizations. But I am profoundly grateful for it, as it and others like it have made all the difference in what has happened to me since, in Africa and elsewhere. The fact that this transformation of consciousness occurred allows me to know that it can happen again. I know this possibility can help me face, progressively, many challenges of this kind in sharing the world. But what about fellow Westerners, I asked myself, who have not had the extraordinary chance I had to clear away some of the screens and walls and bubbles and begin to make a shared life on this planet with people like the Ju/'hoansi? Could I ever convey in writing, especially in the academic writing I was pledged to Harvard to provide, the profound privilege and learning opportunity I had had in going to Africa? Looking back on these experiences, it's still shocking to me that I arrived in Africa with so much to learn about the lives, realities, and even the *existence* of indigenous people with whom I shared the world. But I believe that in my pervasive blindness I was not so different from many other white Americans of my age, at that time. That, too, is shocking.

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Meanwhile, the "lessons of the Ju/'hoansi" continued to accumulate for me. I saw more and more clearly that all their media, all their avenues for enjoyment and learning, revolved thematically around the central message of tolerance and equality of individuals. I saw that their insistence on the equitable sharing of resources extended reliably to artistic and spiritual resources. Those who were artists, those who were healers, were not set apart as a class with any more rights than others. Like all others in the society, they were subject to the overriding necessity of group survival, and thus to sharing what they had. Those who had special gifts saw themselves as channels through which inspiration came unbidden, from unknown sources, to be used to the benefit of all.

The sense I had of having somehow landed in a creative community of individuals functioning for each other as well as for themselves was beyond anything I had ever experienced—it was beyond my wildest dreams. I told myself a collective work of art like I had observed here—such as the constant dialogue among living stories, or the gorgeous achievement of song and movement that was the healing dance—must

be no less a work of art than what we in the West call “a work of art.” In fact, I marveled at how very much *more* art—and social genius—it must take for diverse individuals to coordinate themselves in these ways I had seen!



## JU/'HOANSI, THEIR NEIGHBORS, AND I

Social genius also seemed needed in the racially and ethnically complex world of modern Botswana in which the Ju/'hoansi found themselves. Though I had thought them quite insular in their remote communities, I found that many of them spoke several other African languages fluently. Their dexterity in switching codes to suit the many different cultural situations they faced made them seem positively “cosmopolitan” to me. It gave the lie to the classic anthropological trope of isolated, reified “cultures.” Features of, and differences among, the neighboring cultures were topics of perennial interest and comment. Much of this commentary centered around the wealth and resource disparities that, to the Ju/'hoansi, were all too salient in this multicultural environment. It caused me to think much more about the long history of the San peoples with white and black herders and farmers, the centuries-long fluidity of their subsistence strategies, and the wrongness of the notion of an uninterrupted history of pure hunting and gathering.

One of the folktales I heard often from the Ju/'hoansi concerned the relationship of the world of hunter-gatherers to that of herders and agriculturalists. I began to think I might work toward an integration of the folk history in Ju/'hoan oral literature with key truths about their multicultural past. In general, in Botswana, the hunter-gatherers spoke Khoisan or “click” languages, did not have chiefs or headmen, and talked of themselves as having “red” skin. They talked of agriculturalists and pastoralists, like the Tswana and Herero, as “black people.” Aside from the observable differences in skin color, the “black” peoples mostly spoke Bantu languages and were organized into hierarchical chiefdoms. They also made stricter boundaries, in general, between men’s activities and those of women.

The folktale about the relationship between the Ju/'hoansi and their black neighbors centered on the difference between the kinds and amounts of resources the two groups had. It was the story of the ancestor /'Oma /'Oma, supposed brother of “Jiso” (Jesus), about whom I had heard from the woman known as Di//xao Goat Foot. The relative wealth of their Herero and Tswana neighbors, for whom many of the Ju/'hoansi worked as laborers, was a constant topic of comment. Such

wealth disparity is a social conundrum addressed widely via folklore in similar situations in southern Africa. Called variously by Afrikaner and European collectors “The Pulling of the Riems,” “Tug-of-War,” and “Scraping the Pot,” the story addresses the question of how this observed inequity came to exist. Di//xao’s version contained many elements of the various versions I heard. I can summarize it in English as follows:

*’Oma ’Oma*, a Ju/’hoan man, had the first cattle and herded them alone, but they had no kraal (corral). A black man came and asked whose cattle they were. The Ju/’hoan man said they were his but agreed to herd them back to the village with the black man to spend the night. One of the cows had given birth, so the black man said, “Let’s milk her and taste the milk.” *’Oma ’Oma* was afraid of the cow, so he asked the black man to tie her up with a leather riem (thong). The black man told *’Oma* to wash the pot so they could cook the milk and eat it together. But *’Oma ’Oma* refused, saying the other should drink the milk and he would scrape the pot. Then *’Oma ’Oma* gave the black man a leather riem that was tied to a piece of (sansevieria fiber) string. The two of them pulled on its opposite ends. It soon broke, and the black man got the riem, while *’Oma ’Oma* got the string. The black man said he would keep the cows and the Ju/’hoan man would be his servant. *’Oma ’Oma* had to go off and eat little things like the three kinds of wild raisin berries, and the black man began to cultivate sorghum and maize and ate them along with beef and milk.

I puzzled over *’Oma ’Oma*’s role in his own and his people’s apparent downfall. When I asked people why he would accede so easily to the black man having the benefits of agriculture and herding while he and his descendants did not, the answers varied greatly. Some came with good-natured laughter over what a fool *’Oma ’Oma* had been, while some contained the very interesting statement that *’Oma ’Oma* “did not think it was right to eat the meat of an animal that does not run away from you.” Several of my Kauri friends felt strongly about this idea, which I thought might be related to maintaining a respectful balance between a hunter’s ability to kill and his prey’s ability to get away.

Later I was to pursue in earnest the implied spiritual dimensions of the relationship of Ju/’hoan hunters to their game. I had read that in the ideology of some other hunter-gatherer groups in the world, certain game “gives itself up” under certain conditions to the people as food. But at that time I focused on understanding how the folktale expressed the uneasy balance my Ju/’hoan friends maintained with their richer neighbors. (And were trying to maintain with me as well: in my notebook in early July 1971, talking about *’Oma ’Oma*, I asked about

the wealth disparity between the Ju/'hoansi and white people. I wrote, "I've gotten this several times: 'Bushmen first were out front but white people have caught up and passed them.'" It was around this time, also, that I learned that a Ju/'hoan word used sometimes to refer to white people was the same word I had heard them use to refer to black people: *!xomh*, or "carnivores," with the implication that both groups were seen as preying upon the Ju/'hoan people. (The word Ju/'hoan, in contrast, carries connotations of "real people," "plain people," and "ordinary people.")

This fraught interethnic environment was complexly linked, of course, with both the colonial history of the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the apartheid of nearby South Africa. I encountered plenty of conundrums myself in my dealings with Herero people and a few Tswana people in the Dobe and the Kauri areas. Because I knew so little of these other cultures, some of the interactions were not easy ones. My experiences with them ran the gamut from cordiality to hostility, with lots of other things in between. I had a genuine, rewarding friendship with an immensely tall and stately Herero woman named Enama Haradi. I occasionally retreated to her quiet, sturdy thatched home to be taken care of when life with the highly sociable, gregarious Ju/'hoansi had tired me out. I spent some nights with her, sometimes having deep conversations about topics like South West African politics. (Other times we giggled about men we liked.) We spoke together comfortably in Ju/'hoansi, the language we had in common. In other situations, especially those where I had to interact with Herero and Tswana men, I did less well: I often had occasion to thank my stars that I was working primarily with the gender-egalitarian Ju/'hoansi.

The contradictions among ways the different ethnic groups, including whites, viewed each other at that time in that part of Africa were stark and ever-present. I often found myself overcompensating for what I perceived as the southern African "legacy of apartheid," which permeated many daily interactions among people of different groups. There seemed to be a lifelong unease that came to the San from being at the bottom of the social ladder in almost every circumstance. I thought I saw it most markedly among men who had been to Johannesburg for work. These were "men," I wrote, "who have been to the [gold]mines and are afraid to meet my eyes."

Sometimes these difficult social distances made me feel ineffably lonely. I was facing huge social challenges daily and had few opportunities to discuss them, or be comforted. I spent a great deal of my energy on trying to arrive at interpretations of the social discomfort I was feeling, so as to understand it and accept it better.



I realized . . . that what I want (to give *and* get) is consideration and sympathy, and all I get in that direction is exaggerated respect—same word as “fear,” in Ju/’hoan. Lots of “yes, ma’ams,” which don’t please me any more than the “hey-yous” I get. . . . And yet the respect-fear seems insurmountable. I feel truly alone. I don’t think anything can break this barrier, given my position here as employer, doctor, store proprietor, owner of a vehicle. . . . If I were only a visitor, perhaps.

In addition to the admitted gulf existing between me and the Ju/’hoansi, there were gulfs between me and other local peoples. It was also becoming clear that the relationships between individuals and their groups, whether Ju/’hoansi, Herero, or Tswana, were vastly more different from each other, in each cultural context, than I had ever dreamed they might be. I seemed to be in a long, detailed mystery novel, where I had to guess mightily at the motivations of individuals as to their relations with others in their own groups, with people in other groups, and with myself. I was perpetually on my toes, trying to find the right balance between being open to people and protecting myself from what, in my low moments, felt like opportunistic exploitation by some of them. Yet, overriding any shortcomings I may have felt in any of these peoples’ treatment of me, was the sense of guilt I carried because of my relative wealth and privilege.

The journals I kept in the years leading up to my arrival in Africa revealed I had long been dealing with similar questions of self and other in regard to my own culture. I knew I had been, in my kind, observant father’s words, “a funny combination of confident and unconfident.” How right he was turning out to be, I thought, in the glaring light of the several very different Kalahari cultures—all well versed in producing tough and well-adapted individuals—which shone upon me for those eighteen months of my first fieldwork.

One of fewer than a handful of white people living in the huge expanse of Ngamiland west of Maun and Ghanzi at that time, I stood out like a sore thumb. Taller than all the Ju/’hoansi but shorter than all the Herero, I was puzzling to people: a woman of child-bearing age with no child or husband, driving a vehicle and riding horses bareback and in possession of medicine and (relatively) endless food and other supplies. So I was a constant focus of gossip and speculation, the butt of jokes both gentle and not so gentle, often called stingy even when I was aware of being overgenerous.

I was above all trying to share as well as I could according to local expectations of sharing, and of necessity I often failed miserably at that. My nonfood supplies were supposed to (but didn’t) last me eighteen

months, and most of my food I had to truck in periodically. Whenever food was being eaten, I felt immense social pressure not to eat the whole plate I had been given, but to politely pass it on half-eaten, to be gratefully finished by someone else. Old !Xuma several times took me aside and, in what appeared to be a rare gesture among Ju//hoansi, said, "You're not eating well enough: you're passing your plate on to other people too soon. Maybe you should let me bring your plate to you in the kitchen instead of eating with all of us by the fire." The pressure, of course, came largely from myself; it was much, much later that I finally learned that the Ju//hoan definition of a good person included not only just giving to people, but also, when in need, "just asking people for things."

My food-sharing dilemma was not made any easier by the perilousness of the food supply in both my camp and traveling situations. I had always been okay when I could get some protein for breakfast, but in remote areas that was often not possible, and my emotions and social competence suffered predictably. Sometimes I felt fragile and worried that I might blow up at people without real provocation. Yet, often enough, some abundance, some windfall or kind gift of sustenance, would miraculously show up to save my day. I seemed to have landed in an adventure-filled land between the extremes of existence, whose oscillations, though painful, were becoming almost reliable. The down days were dreadful, but sometimes the up times helped to build my confidence for long stretches in between.

JULY 4, 1971

Late in the afternoon, I've just realized it's the Fourth of July. What a laugh. Chicken barbecues on a Sunday afternoon at home. And relatives visiting, and accidents on the highways. Here at Dobe the food has run out. In fact all over Isaak's [the local Tswana chief's] kingdom there is precious little to eat. Nobody even has a goat to sell. I myself had nothing to eat today but a little piece of biltong and some sour milk.

Yet in my journal around that time, I also wrote about important discoveries that kept quietly occurring.

The other night I heard singing from the direction of the Bushmen's houses. I thought there might be a dance starting, so I went to join it. But the fires were unattended and dying, and the people were all inside. From one rondavel some mild singing was coming. I knew who was sleeping there—a couple, and a bachelor, and a married man whose wife wasn't there. All in their blankets on the floor of a small rondavel. Singing before they went to

sleep. Suddenly I saw with great clarity the impossibility of such a scene in my own culture. Such quiet, unassuming companionableness, such acceptance of what it means to be human. . . . I have been impressed too by the way all ages of people get along together. Young people are treated as if they were people too, and older people take an interest in them that is sincere and never belittling.

Then there was a day of easy multicultural harmony. We were whiling away the hot part of the afternoon listening to a woman playing the *g//oaci*, a lutelike instrument. A man named David Muhakaona, half Herero and half Afrikaner, was visiting.

[David Muhakaona and Kha//’an N!a’an] lay together comradely on a flattened carton listening to *g//oaci* music, Kha//’an lying behind David and resting his head on David’s outstretched arm. The freshening of the wind in the late afternoon, the coolness and possibility of dances and amazing closeness and even transport as we sat on the hill and heard Xoa//’an play, and I sat in a circle with everyone and felt not one bit afraid [that I would be asked for anything]. . . . Kha//’an bent down and gave Boo a dried steenbok skin. Boo, delighted, said he would make a Christmas *coana* [loincloth]. Kha//’an [who had taught me skinning] told him with great pride how I had skinned the steenbok, my first, by a sliver of moon [at night] and a fire.

But the rapid, unpredictable alternation of good days and bad days, of the need to be open with the need to create a protective circle around myself, were the elements of the basic vulnerability that underlay my fieldwork experience. I was living outdoors in all weather, with minimal privacy, for more than a year, with people whose language and ways and environment I was learning as a baby learns—with frequent mistakes. It was utterly exhausting—and utterly revealing. Each time I was cast down by unexpected adversities, I had to somehow bootstrap myself back up using the new knowledge I had gained.

What, in fact, *was* I doing here? I felt I was somehow on the forward edge of human experience: after all, no one with my own particular history and sensibilities had lived in the Botswana desert with this particular group of still-sometimes-foraging, click-speaking individuals, who like all humans seemed sometimes mellow and sometimes completely contrary. That I was there at that moment with those people was little more than a historical and academic accident, yet there I was, with my remaining months stretching out both way too short and way too long before me. Everything I needed to learn and to do in the time that was left had to be woven into the fabric of the unrelenting exigencies of liv-

ing life each day—including my own needs and those of the growing crowd of new people at each community I worked in.

My event calendar, notebook, and journal for the period from August 7 to August 15, 1971, recorded a concentrated week of extreme ups and downs. I had left Kauri for a while, planning to spend up to five days at G!o'oce, near !Aoaan, where I understood there to be a relatively new women's drum dance tradition. I wanted to see dances and record interviews with women healers there for my National Institutes of Mental Health assignment—that of providing complementary information on women's trance to the research on male healers carried out by Richard Katz. After that the plan was for me to leave =Oma !Oma and !Xuma N!a'an ("Old !Xuma," the same person as !Xuma N!aeba) at Dobe to visit their people for a while.

On the morning of August 7, I was at !Aoaan filling a drum of water for the trip to G!o'oce. A tall Herero named Gideon came to me asking if I could check on a woman of his family who was acting strangely, suddenly babbling nonsense. He requested that if I thought she was ill, I take her with me to her relatives at Xaxa, near Kauri, from whence she could get transport to the Sehitwa hospital for medical treatment. So it looked like I might be driving, not east to G!o'oce, but from the Dobe-Mahopa area through /Kae/kae to Kauri, going first south and then eastward on the diamond cutline. (Everyone in the area usually knew with precision what my movements with the precious truck were likely to be, and I was always barraged with requests to take people places they wanted to go. Most of these I had to refuse for lack of room, but I felt that medical emergencies were different. Since I had room in the Land Rover, having dropped off =Oma and !Xuma and some other travelers in the Dobe area, it was going to be hard to refuse this request. We planned to check on the woman the following day, and I was hoping she might somehow be better by then and not even need to go east with us.) But first Gideon and I went back to Dobe to finish some small exchanges and join a short hunting trip I had been invited on and didn't want to miss.

AUGUST 7, 1971

While [Gideon] was at Dobe, I borrowed his horse and galloped through the abandoned Harvard camp to the border, and back. Tci!xo gave me some Bushman sandals and I repaired the thongs with a strip of eland hide //Xukxa N!a'an gave me. In the afternoon I went hunting with Dabe, Tsa'a, and =Oma—as far as the border only, because they were going across. [Though at that time the international fence consisted of only a few strands of barbed wire, I was, unlike the Bushmen, not allowed to cross into what

was then South West Africa unless I went through an established border post]. We walked very quickly to the fence two kilometers away, and beyond the fence [my companions] took off running into the tall grass. On the way to the border we had met Kopela and Kapanje and /Ui and their families returning exhausted from Com!au with mongongo [nuts]. They were sweating and very tired. . . . N!hunkxa sat down in Baq'u's shadow while =Oma gave the newcomers some tobacco.

In the evening there was meat—hyenas had killed a cow at !Xubi and the meat was very cheap, so I bought enough to feed the whole village for four shillings. . . . In the night a bull came crashing into the village through the thorn fence. Surprisingly, I was the only one to wake up and see him standing in the moonlight about twenty feet from where I was sleeping on the sand. I woke N!uhnkxa and we chased him out.

AUGUST 8–9, 1971

The beginning of the disasters. . . . There was only a little mealie meal left that had been supposed to last me and !Xuma our week at G!o'oce, since there is none at the store now. Kopela came and asked for it. I said I couldn't leave it with him, I had nothing else to eat, and would therefore leave him some (unground) mabele (grain sorghum) instead. He said, "Why don't you take the mabele yourself, you can have it ground by someone." This seemed pretty unjust to me, especially as I had just brought his village some fifty rand or so from the sale of artifacts in Maun, so there was money around. [At that time British and South African currencies were both in use near the border as well as the new Botswana Pula.]

Then we noticed a flat on the Land Rover. By the time we fixed it and were pouring petrol, my nerves were already getting frayed. A very confused trip to =Kabe and !Xubi worsened it, especially as at !Xubi it became obvious that I would have to change all my plans and take the Herero lady immediately to the hospital. [I found out later that there were several cases of encephalitis in Ngamiland at that time—her confused speech was a symptom.]

There was a giant medicine and tobacco rush on me at !Xubi [at the same time as I was assessing the situation of the sick woman], coupled with a fantastic din of Bushmen demanding things. . . . We put the sick woman, obviously suffering from some sort of brain damage, into the Land Rover. Her escorts and their baggage, including a gourd of sour milk and three wine bottles full of clarified butter, were stowed aboard.

We drove down through the Aha Hills to Huwetju. We left the Herero cooking lunch and set off to see the cave. We walked a long way through scratchy grass and brambles through the broiling midday sun. But we never found it. It had been years ago that both Jimmy [the musician, who

was traveling with us] and Kha//'an N!a'an had seen it, and the brush had grown up so that they lost their bearings.

Came back very tired and hot, glad for a good meal, the only one, really, since leaving Kauri. And, as it turned out, the only one until getting back to Kauri. Drove on towards /Kae/kae. On the way, several minor things went wrong with the car, all of which I was able to fix, thank goodness. Some question of whether we would have enough radiator water to reach /Kae/kae, but we did, me with a completely black face from scrabbling around in the sand under the hot Land Rover.

/Kae/kae was a sad place [for me] to be, because of all the interesting Bushmen there that I just can't get involved with because I have work to do elsewhere. Again I was deluged with demands and reproaches, and felt almost faint from emotional tiredness.

Kha//'an N!a'an was giving me a goat, so we went to his daughter's village. . . . But what to do with a full-grown billy goat? We bound its legs and tried to stuff it, too, into the Land Rover. Finally it was decided that Kha//'an would drive it with his other goats to Mahopa, and that another day I would kill it there.

Drove about twenty miles east of /Kae/kae along the new diamond road, and stopped, very tired, to camp. We helped the sick woman out of the truck to a bed by the fire, and all fell asleep. Jimmy woke me when the moon was still high to say that the woman was dead.

Her husband was absolutely silent. We decided to press on. In the freezing cold of 4 AM we loaded the corpse into the back seat [she was very tall, like most Herero; rigor mortis had set in, and so her feet had to stick at least a foot out the window] and headed for Xaxa, her home, about twenty miles south of Tsau.

The only thing good about that grisly ride was that we saw a gemsbok, my first, a thing that truly astonished me by its size and power. It wasn't a thing like a little steenbok that leaps and is gone. It was a thing like a flesh and blood unicorn, so big it wasn't hid by the bushes, covering fantastic amounts of ground with no sense of effort at all. We could see it running for a long, long time.

The bad things about the trip were: no coffee, and nothing to eat all day; horrible cold until a few hours after dawn, when all blazing suns of hell let loose; driving and driving and bush-bashing for miles and miles until even now, a day later, when I close my eyes I see thorn bushes coming at me; the radiator boiling so many times I lost count; running out of petrol and having no pipe to siphon with; the back door of the truck falling off; everything in the truck spilled by the jostling; and arriving absolutely spent at the Herero village to deliver the body and not even being offered a cup of water for my pains.

Worst of all, in order to deliver Jimmy where he was going I had to go to two new Bushman villages. One was !Au N!a'an, a place where I had wanted for ever so long to arrive calmly on horseback to work with the old people, but instead arrived against my will in a boiling Land Rover at the end of my rope. . . . [And] people started asking me, as we arrived there, for rides back to !Aoan!

Anyway, there were still some thirty miles to do before Spirit Voice, and all I could think of was getting there and going to bed in my own house. Of course there were lots more complications before I got home, but finally, at sunset, having been driving these awful roads with no food to speak of for fourteen or more hours, I pulled in to my camp thinking about making pizza or baking a cake in my anthill oven.

Imagine my joy at finding that G/aq'o Glusi [G/aq'o "Stomachs," he of the extremely concave midsection, who was supposed to be watching the camp for me] had kindly sold the contents of my kitchen! Including the flour. Sugar was gone, both brown and white, and everything had been gone through. . . . I summoned my last energy and made spaghetti sauce and ate it and fell into bed.

AUGUST 10, 1971

My house in a shambles and my heart filled with resentment not only against the [ransackers] but also against myself, for having been so innocent. Today it is Bushmen who have taken advantage of me and shown me how thin the veneer of respect is between us [but also how very hungry everyone is at this time of year, at the tail end of winter]. The last three days have been an endless nightmare of wrong connections with people. . . . Today, the morning after, is bright and sunny but I am all ashen inside, with a bad taste in my mouth and in desperation where to go from here.

The Land Rover, home at last, sags in the sun on a punctured tire. The spare is flat too. The back door fell off on the trip to carry the dead Herero woman home. Inside the truck the last shilling's worth of sugar has tumped over, and a giant spider sits guard on the last gritty sausage. The snakebite antivenin has broken open and spilled. There is a layer of sour milk and of beef-smelling, melted clarified butter, spilled from the dead woman's gourds and bottles, over the floor of the luggage space.

The only water in the camp is dirty, sickness-bringing stuff from the well. I didn't ask to have it brought, but the guy who brought it is hanging around demanding that I pay him a pound, an outrageous price. My kitchen has been rifled—the guy who was watching the place claims to have "sold" things to some people who wouldn't take no for an answer. The flour and eggs I was fantasizing baking a cake with were (quote) "eaten by a dog" [and they may have been, but I had no way of knowing whether this was

true or just a way for G/aq'o to protect his family from being accused]. All the dishes, every single solitary dish, is dirty. The termites have ravaged the rondavels in my absence, and the sound of them nibbling away at them in the night wears at my nerves like Bushman requests.

The most unsettling thing, though, is the inside of my house. The books in the bookcase have been looked at, then put back upside down. The beads have been fingered. The fragment of mirror I have has been smeared by a greasy hand. I'm not sure, but I think my bed may have been slept in. It is unsettling because I think how much they must envy and resent me for having these things. . . .

The bad part for me today is that I realize I have been deluding myself absurdly, thinking all was sweetness and light between me and the Kauri people. It is precisely this feeling of cold light dawning on a hangover, raw pain deep somewhere inside and a dull fury at the person who has already left the rumpled sheets and gone, that makes me see that my own relationships with other people are to blame. . . . Nobody loves a victim because she brings it upon herself.

Yesterday's final scene might have been averted had I not been too polite to ask for a cup of milk from the Herero. When we were pulling in to Xaxa in the early afternoon, after driving 150 horrible grisly kilometers through the bush, having got up at 4 AM when the woman died by the campfire, I thought that the most awful thing I could imagine was that in my exhaustion, the Herero would not offer me something to eat. It was worse than my imaginings—not only did a bevy of lamenting women in full sail [their voluminous Mother Hubbard dresses] climb into the truck, but when we got there I was offered not even a chair, much less a drink of water. I was so tired I almost fell asleep on the ground right before their eyes. And yet I was too polite to ask for anything. I think I was mainly astonished, figured they were deranged by their grief, or something. And [it] did not stop there. I staggered out to the car. They wanted tobacco, medicine, a tire valve, money to borrow. I wondered whether, even if I had had command of the Herero language, I could assert my rights in a balanced way.

Today I am at the end of some rope. I want to pull in my extended hands and somehow, someday, get back to work. Trying to be open to people here could kill me. But I am gnawed at by a feeling that if only I knew how to use this extreme situation I might cure myself . . . and *go home whole to my own people*.

At the time, acknowledging that I *did not know* what to do next was the closest I could get to a resolution of this exhausting event. I reflected that one of the most difficult things about returning the dead Herero woman's corpse to her relatives was that not a single person thanked



me for bringing her home. I had limited experience of Herero etiquette in this. But I had already puzzled over a pattern I saw among Ju/'hoansi of not thanking me for things I gave them or did for them. As often as not, a gift from me would be accepted silently and then I would be upbraided for something *else* the person had wanted but I had not brought. It took me a long time to learn not to expect thanks, to understand that the kind of sharing the people did was based on insisting that people do what they *should* do as good people—share what they had with those who didn't. Thanking people appeared to be not only superfluous to the Ju/'hoansi but an indication that one was surprised that someone would actually do what they were supposed to, or had been asked to, without acknowledgment.

Later called “demand sharing” by archaeologist Nicolas Peterson and “tolerated theft” by Nicholas Blurton Jones and others, this pattern, I came to see, was basic to the long survival of the Kalahari hunter-gatherer bands in their land of scarce resources. It was a pattern that guaranteed the most equitable distribution of resources, no matter how scarce these resources were. Individuals in their bands were socialized to share in certain ways because their lives—and the lives of everyone in their group—depended on participating in that group's accepted patterns of sharing. Group survival was the absolute requirement for individual survival.

So it was much later that I found some balanced perspective on what had seemed the pillage of my camp by hungry people while I was away. I could eventually reflect that G/!aq'o G!usi had been acting not exploitatively or irresponsibly but in complete accord with his own upbringing as an egalitarian person. I had put him in an impossible position by expecting him to have the social resources to say no to his relatives about selling my supplies. And if it had been Herero or Tswana who wanted to buy them, it may have been even more difficult for G/!aq'o to refuse.

Eventually, too, I could also laugh at the discovery that not all the mess of the bookshelves in my house had been caused by human beings. Some of the books on the plastered shelves had actually been eaten—upwards from their bottoms—by termites! (The worst book damage was done in this way to Karl Marx's *Capital*, eaten all the way to the top line of type, so that the book title, but no longer any of the text, could be discerned. All that was left of the book was an uneven triangular chunk about the size of a fat half sandwich. I imagined Marx too could have found humor in this.)

At the time, though, I was rubbed raw by the experience. Here's what I think kept me from “using this extreme situation to cure my-

self," as I wrote in my journal during my initial desperation. It was the knowledge that I had not only to keep my head on straight and act socially responsible during the rest of my time in Africa but to somehow produce a worthwhile PhD thesis out of the whirlwind of impressions I was trying to process. It all seemed simply too much to ask of myself in this short time. I think it was around the time of this stressful trip with the Herero woman's corpse that my journal and my event calendar (and maybe even my notebook at times!) began to merge inextricably with each other. I felt completely caught up in daily exigencies, and I despaired of ever disentangling enough "data" from them to be able to show my face again at Harvard. The writings, however, recorded just enough pleasant and serendipitous experience that I managed to keep going, as my event calendar for the same day as my previous journal entry (August 10, 1971) shows.

Felt overwhelmed and moved slowly. Had only two creative urges left—to organize the disorder of the camp, and to be alone all day. I washed all the dishes, which was a pile. I was knocking down termite dirt [from the walls of my house] when someone came up on a donkey. I thought "Oh damn" . . . but it turned out to be Philippus (Muhakaona), whose half-white, half-Herero father, David, had visited at Kauri the day we listened to the *g//oaci* music. I had met David and Philippus earlier in Dobe at Herero Christmas before Mel and Marj left. Philippus couldn't have turned up looking for work at a more perfect time. Me with two flat tires and the prospect of another trip to the Dobe area to pick up !Xuma and =Oma again, not knowing whether I trusted anyone at Kauri to watch the camp. . . . He was heaven sent. We had tea and talked about South West Africa. Then he fixed the punctures and I washed my hair and made mongongo fudge [using Nancy Howell's Kalahari cookbook] and finished organizing everything. Things seem a little bit more possible now. I think when I go back to pick up the people at Dobe I'll put cotton in my ears when the going gets rough.

AUGUST 11, 1971 (event calendar)

Last night I told Philippus that the world was round and not flat. Boy, was he surprised.

Tonight he asked me why India was red. (He once saw a map of it, lying between two bright blue oceans, in a stereopticon picture.)

My mind, of course, went back to the mysterious expanse of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in the middle of southern Africa, on the map in my parents' bedroom. How similar our conceptions were, Philip-

pus's and mine, due to the same kinds of limitations on our geographical experience!

This morning I made a nice, calm trip to Tsau. I can't imagine why everything went off so well. Philippus patched two tires and we got off pretty early, did our shopping, had a pleasant visit with the Herero, drew water, bought fresh meat, + back by about 1 PM. I ground the meat and had a goatburger for lunch. Various dealings with people—medicine, beads, rides, clothes washed, etc.

In the late afternoon P[hilippus] and I got on his donkeys and went to Kauri to talk to some people about tomorrow's trip [back to !Aoan to pick up =Oma and !Xuma and resume our plan to work with women healers]. A very pleasant time. We talked all the way there about Herero customs—one interesting thing occurred to me about the different cow medicines and how the milk or meat of various cows is taboo to certain classes of people. It seems like the cow medicines function for them much as Bushman food avoidances do. [I had a theory that these “avoidances” helped to spread out the availability of certain foods among the population during lean times]. I should think about this more. I also asked him about how the Herero first got cattle, and he told a story much like the Bushman one. [Both emphasized the relative ineptitude of the foolish /'Oma /'Oma.]

[Philippus said] that the central fire in a Herero village symbolizes the sacrificial altar of Abraham and Isaac—he didn't know whether they had a fire before the missionaries—I'm sure they did and this is a syncretism. Anyway, they still sacrifice sugar, mealie meal, etc. to this fire (for the dead), and use its ashes as symbolic medicine. The dead, and the strength of cattle, both are implied in the fire.

We visited around at a couple of [the Kauri] camps. Turns out =Oma One-Eye took a wife while I was gone (Di//xao the bead lady gave her away). Tonight will be their second night together. N=amce and his wife have made a dry-season shelter of their own separate from the others. I asked why, and he said there were too many people sharing his food, so he decided to live separate. [N=amce had a few cattle he raised from calves given him for work with the Tswana, so he is seen as someone who can be asked more often for food. He and his wife did seem a little sad to have moved away from the rest of the Kauri people.] On the way back to camp on the donkeys, we smelled a faint but lovely flowering of trees in the dusk.

AUGUST 12, 1971 (event calendar)

All day trip to the west. =Oma One-Eye helped me find a bush shortcut to the Nokaneng road. Met Kachambungu, Enama Haradi's brother, at Nokaneng, gave him a lift to !Aoan. The wind was at our back, so the radi-

ator boiled over repeatedly. The car drank two jerry cans full of water for a one-hundred-mile trip. Reached !Aoan after dark and refilled jerry cans and pumped up a tire. Made it then to !Xuma's village, where tire gave out and we decided to spend the night.

A drum dance was in progress. One of the elephant songs that goes with drum dancing is the weirdest, most interesting Bushman song I've heard. [A small, slight man] was doing *tara*, a shaking solo dance. The women were standing up and clapping vigorously. The drum was the side of a jerry can, played by various young men. [The man] later came and, instead of curing, crossed people's upper lips and temples with *sa* powder. I hoped he would do me because it is so soothing and magical to me. But he didn't.

[One man] told me he had caught [his wife] with another man. He had discovered them by their footprints in true Bushman fashion. He had fought with [his wife] . . . and had taken the case to (Tswana Chief) Isaak at !Aoan. He retold this at the fire with great drama and enjoyment, very publicly. I slept in !Xuma and N=aisa's house.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, 1971 (event calendar)

Good thing I didn't know at the time today was Friday the thirteenth, or I would never have got through it creditably. I was pretty frightened at the thought of all the responsibilities and emotional pitfalls that loomed for me. N=aisa prevailed on me to move her worldly goods plus a drum of water from Mahopa to Dobe, where she is setting up housekeeping. So after fixing a flat we went to !Aoan to fill the drum and buy tobacco. Back at Mahopa we collected artifacts, did endless medicine, passed out tobacco . . . next to drop off N=aisa's things at the new Dobe village. Then the scary part—to =Oma !Oma's village to see if he or his father, Kasupe, was still mad at me [I had blown up at Kasupe earlier for hounding me for something]. Turned out a nice visit there, though (especially as I was bearing tobacco and the makings for a small feast.) I was quite busy conserving my energy—afraid to really go all out to anyone because I knew I still had a lot of the day to get through. So we feasted, and people gave me the things they had been working on to [graciously] thank me for things I've given them—I got a baby-carrying skin made from a young gemsbok's hide, a bow and arrow, some ostrich beads. [I remember feeling, oh, at last, I've made it at least a little way into their system of reciprocity.]

[The battered wife I had been told about] had a fabulous shiner and ugly scratches on her head and hip. [Her husband] hit her in the eye with a shoe, she said. I was really shocked at the violence with which he seemed to have reacted, also surprised he hadn't found out about this love affair sooner. Of course Marj knew of it ages ago, and had told me.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 14, 1971 (event calendar)

A fast and not in the least painful (except arduous, as always) trip to Kauri. The wind was in our face so we only boiled once. Got back about midafternoon. Philippus had cleaned up the whole camp beautifully and seemed happy to see us. I had a bath and then did some little sewing jobs with leather while people cracked mongongos, played the musical bow, and cooked some goat and ate. Too tired to do much else but read after I had put things away. =Oma and !Xuma came to my house to visit and to tell me they thought Philippus was all right even if he was a Herero, so they didn't mind if he stayed.

I came to feel that the multicultural challenges I encountered during my fieldwork, like those the Ju/'hoansi themselves faced with grace and humor, ultimately presented me with further dimensions for the growth of social understanding and flexibility. I felt I was trying to emerge, not from a single bubble, but from a cluster of bubbles, each with a secret code that, if I found it, could help its membranous surface to clear.

I was (and am still) asking myself questions about the ethics of work like mine and Mel and Marjorie's, which involved us in such intimate knowledge about the lives of the Ju/'hoansi and others with whom we shared that slice of time. It is shocking to me now to reflect that it was only recently, many years after our fieldwork, that the American Anthropological Association adopted codes of anthropological ethics, some now written and enforced by indigenous peoples' organizations. In the arena of ethics, in areas like compensation, resource sharing, and protection of informants' intellectual property rights, I was greatly underprepared for fieldwork by my time in grad school in the late sixties. I'm also sure there was a course in field methods I should have taken but didn't.

For a while I privately blamed my professors for not having prepared me better for work in the field. Yet, seeing the immense daily, personal challenges to the field-worker that old-timey, long-term, full immersion presented, I could hardly hold them responsible. I wondered whether I myself would ever be equal to the task of preparing younger students effectively. I do wish I had been better prepared in the area of professional ethics. But in hindsight I would not have wanted to deprive students of the transformative adventures by which they might learn for themselves. I came to regard the raw and revealing events of fieldwork as an opportunity for personal growth I would have had in no other version of my life story. Friends said later that the adventures and mis-



**Figure 7.1.** Philippus and =Oma. © Megan Biesele.

takes I experienced in the course of those first eighteen months surely helped expand my patience, empathy, and cultural understanding.

Thinking about it myself, I decided I would have to somehow unify my research with what I hoped would be my change towards being a more tolerant and understanding individual. This was a tall and preposterous order, but at the time it seemed the only way I could go forward. I also felt I would have no choice but to include, in my eventual account of what I had learned, the painful adventures by which I learned it.

AUGUST 15, 1971

[S]uddenly now I can see the time I am spending here not so much in terms of tediously arrived-at data but of a radicalizing experience that is of infinitely more value than research. And Harvard be hanged—or better, changed.



## THE THREADS OF THE SKY

The change I envisioned had specifically to do with Harvard's anthropology department—and by extension, with academic anthropology in general. For me, it was never going to be enough to present an academically acceptable thesis account of my time in the field and then regard my career as made. I felt I was just at the beginning of doing what was of utmost importance to me: enabling expression of the existential position of indigenous peoples like the Ju/'hoansi in the modern world. I felt that my own work must not fail to raise awareness of their intricate cultural resilience as reflected in their stories, art, and ritual.

I was also thinking a lot about the precarious future my Ju/'hoan friends, like other indigenous peoples of the world, were facing, including lack of access to education, and the land expropriation, mining ventures, large-scale cattle operations, and high-end tourism enterprises that could cut them off from their own natural resources—in short, every kind of marginalization and structural violence. Though all these forms of exploitation were happening around them and to them, Ju/'hoansi and other San hunter-gatherers had at least one great thing that was theirs alone—*n/om*. Their healing dance medicine was the arena in which they were the acknowledged masters. “We are poor people with little to give,” they often said, “but we can tell other people about *n/om*, our healing dance. It is so beautiful! We can teach other people, and they can learn it and do it for themselves and their people.” Herero, Tswana, and other Bantu groups spoke admiringly of Ju/'hoan expertise in healing through dance and singing. Bantu people were cordially welcomed when they attended the Ju/'hoan dances. Though not required to, sometimes they paid or made gifts to the Ju/'hoan healers when they brought a sick person of theirs to be healed.

There was very general agreement among those who attended dances that the altered states of consciousness they fostered were, along with the whole community's participation, what conferred the healing power. Outsiders and Ju/'hoansi alike honored the unspoken line that existed between trances brought on through learned disciplines of dancing and singing, and altered states brought on by alcohol or marijuana. Alcohol and marijuana, both present and much enjoyed



**Figure 8.1.** Kxao =Oah. © Megan Biesele.

by most people but hard to get in that time and place, were considered lesser mind-altering forms. They were seen as substances from another context altogether, to be kept strictly apart from the dance, as things that would interfere with the serious business of spirit travel and healing. I was impressed with the degree to which people honored this contextual separation and underscored its importance.

It was almost impossible to imagine, for instance, that a healer like Kxao Giraffe would ever dissipate his fine healing focus by trying to cure someone on a day when he had been drinking. People I spoke to about this told me that healing simply took too much concentration. The first time I saw Kxao =Oah (Kxao Giraffe) healing was at !Aoan, near Dobe, before Mel and Marjorie left. Present at that healing were Herero, Tswana, and Kavango, as well as Ju//hoansi. At the time I had not yet recorded or translated the extraordinary monologue Kxao presented to me that early morning when he told me to “turn on my machine.” As mentioned, I had heard of this blind healer from Richard Katz, but I was unprepared to understand some of the things I saw when he healed.

One of the things I did not understand then was what was happening when Kxao rose and stepped away from the child he was healing. He strode out of the circle of singing women and began climbing up



the side of a rickety thatched hut that stood nearby. Before he climbed, he seemed to be inserting something beneath the big toes of his bare feet. What was that something? "It's the thread of the sky," a black man beside me whispered matter-of-factly in English, in answer to my question. "He's going to God."

I saw Kxao's head thrown back, his sightless eyes in their sunken sockets appearing to see all the way to heaven. He made as if to climb by his toes up the flimsy sticks of the thatched hut. One of the younger Ju/'hoan men dancers went to him and gently steered him back to the healing fire. With renewed vigor Kxao laid fluttering hands on the sick child and sang long and loudly for him, his song punctuated every so often by jerks of his neck and accompanying staccato shrieks each time the *n/om* in him boiled over.

In the fifteen months or so I was in Botswana after that healing dance, I had a chance to attend maybe fifty more dances, almost all of them culminating in trancing and sharing of *n/om*, the healing power. At one dance early in my stay, when I had a tummy bug, I was one of the sick people who received healing. When the healer came around the circle and laid his fluttering hands lightly on my shoulders and my stomach, I became for a few moments the focus of all the singing and all the energy of the group. The world seemed, briefly, to stand still. I remember feeling profound calm descend on me, a state I'm sure promoted healing. This was true even though I still had much to learn about the belief system on which the dance was based.

Every dance was different, yet somehow each one of them was "the same," reminding me of the paradoxical unity of the different versions of the folktales. Some stories were told with high energy and were highly dramatic, and they went on all night; some were told gently and sweetly and ended quietly, as people headed for their beds in restored harmony with each other. Some dances were very large, if people were visiting their relatives in distant camps; some, like the one I heard at night from outside a sleeping hut, were raised by just a few people, often singing for a single sick or troubled person.

A few of the dances were marred by discord, and did not cohere, and were dismissed as having been "light" or inconsequential. At such dances people were disappointed in themselves and loudly said so. But in general, I saw, the dances followed a reliable pattern: they were started in fun, in play, often by children, usually just before sundown. Women singers and men dancers came to join in and eventually, over the course of hours, wove sound and motion into something that had a powerful and unstoppable life of its own. In the course of a night men might also sing and women might also dance; children moved freely in

and out of the dance circle, and often they spent whole nights wrapped in blankets between their mothers' knees, or snug on their mothers' backs in carrying skins, bobbing and bouncing in time with the music when the mothers jumped up to briefly join the line of dancing men.

Watching the intricate dancing of the men, I saw that their steps included both faithful repetition of stereotyped patterns *and* innovations on those patterns. As Lorna Marshall (who herself danced ballet) wrote,

The basic step is a precise, loud stamp. A man lifts his foot two or three inches off the ground, or a little more, and stamps it down with vigor. The basic pattern appears to be a period of four steps; a man stamps with one foot, say his right, then with his left, again with his left, again with his right, with an accented beat on the first and third steps—right, left, left, right. The steps carry a man forward very little. In stamping the unaccented steps he may move forward no more than an inch or so, or not at all, but on the accented beat he steps forward three or four inches.

The men vary their steps in several ways. When they are tired they may just walk to the rhythm. One sees old men dance this way. Strong dancers may make two stamps to a beat, or very strong young dancers may float a light triplet of stamps onto a beat. A man may hop with both feet on beat one, move one foot forward with a stamp that scuffs up the sand on beat two, hop again on beat three, and scuff his other foot forward on beat four. He may put two stamps or three into the beat after the hop. Individuals keep to no one way of dancing consistently throughout a dance period. They change from moment to moment in response to mood and energy. The !Kung dancing is so expert that it looks easy, as ballet does, until one sees someone dancing who is not practiced in it, with a mischievous young !Kung following him and mimicking his slovenly, ill-timed steps.

The volume of sound made by the dancers varies, falling in slack periods, rising when the intensity rises. At the moments of highest intensity, all the men would be stamping loudly and some young, very vigorous dancers would be bent over in the right-angle position, lifting their feet higher off the ground than is usual and driving them down like pile drivers. Such strenuous dancing occurs only in bursts. Even the young men cannot sustain it long. (Marshall 1999: 72–73)

The people liked to sing and dance all night if possible, to take advantage of the extra surge of healing energy they said rose up along with the sunrise. Anyone within earshot of a dance could join in. Or word could travel and bring people in from distant *n!oresi*. The singing for the dances was universally welcoming, a force that drew people like a magnet. One of the things about the healing dance that struck me most forcibly was that for the Ju/'hoansi, no matter how dramatic, thunderous, or surprising the course of a dance might seem, each dance was yet another iteration of something that was routine, predictable,

and reliably productive. Dancing always seemed a good thing to do, no matter what the circumstances. Even if a sick person was not healed, the people who gathered to help him or her were brought into consonance with each other as they worked together to make the dance grow “heavy” with efficacy. Anyone at a dance could feel the power of this “heaviness” when it asserted itself.

The power seemed to lie in the connectedness between the bodies of the dancers and singers as the music and their movements came together. This was what my colleague Richard Katz had spoken of as “interpersonal synchrony.” I saw that once this synchrony had been achieved, once people had seen that the mysterious power had reliably arisen yet one more time, people left the dance with lifted hearts no matter what the occasion for it had been, and no matter what the outcome. “Outcomes,” in fact, seemed beside the point, once everyone had participated in the dance. The dance itself was the point.

Years later I read that Dorothea Bleek, of the Bleek family of linguists, who had done so much work with the /Xam in South Africa and had also traveled through part of the Ju/'hoan area in Botswana in an oxcart during the 1920s, had noticed that healing dances were as often held in times of plenty as in times of hunger or sickness. She went on to describe the social tensions that arose over the complex sharing of a superabundance of food, saying they were as powerful and dangerous as the tensions stemming from scarcity. Social balance, I eventually came to see, was everything to San people: without it, group survival was not possible. But balance was never easy, always requiring nuanced understanding of each other, efforts to heal rifts by dancing together, and adherence to strict rules of sharing. Egalitarianism, though it may seem casual or lackadaisical to outsiders, or even a saccharine, romantic concept, is underpinned by determined effort and by fierce and sustained attention to expectations and rules. I wondered whether, judging by its long-lived success, this effective social technology had taken a lot of trial and error to perfect during prehistory. I came to think of egalitarianism as another of the great cultural achievements of humankind.

It was the relationship of Ju/'hoan individuals and their own individual creativity to their carefully maintained egalitarian system that most thoroughly excited my interest. Far from implying a “sameness” of any kind, the egalitarian ethos of Ju/'hoan life seemed to release individuals to “be themselves” in most definite and delightful ways. This phenomenon expressed itself most forcibly in stories I heard about the discoveries—the innovation moments—of *n/om* songs, those with palpable force to enable healing.

Lorna Marshall wrote about one such innovation moment, “When Be of Samangeigei was given a Giraffe song, she did not see //Gauwa [God]. She only awakened in the morning with a song in her head. She sang it to her husband /Ti!kay who recognized it as a medicine song. ‘Anyone with sense would know,’ informants assured us” (Marshall 1999: 76). I began to collect accounts of the innovation of this Giraffe song and other *n/om* songs. I saw that these accounts were based on instances of inspiration that occurred to specific individuals but were quickly made community property by being shared, and by the ongoing creativity in their use by other individuals. I began to see that the oral storage processes of tradition may “conserve” the past at the same time as they allow great latitude for individual contributions. Be’s inspiration for the Giraffe song, which spread east from her home in what was then South West Africa across wide swaths of both that country and Botswana, became a story with many variants. They were all, in an important sense, “the same” story, yet as they were embellished and burnished and further shared by individuals, they became the property of all.

One account held that the woman named Be was alone one day in the bush. She saw a herd of giraffes running before an approaching thunderstorm. The rolling beat of their hooves grew louder and mingled in her head with the sound of sudden rain. Just then a song she had never heard before came to her, and she began to sing. G//aoan (//Gauwa, or God) told her it was a medicine song. Be went home and taught the song to her husband, /Ai!ae (/Ti!kay). They sang and danced it together. It was indeed a song for trancing, a medicine song. /Ai!ae taught it to others who also passed it on. Old men then, in 1971, and most recently in 2018, named for me the people who learned the song in turn as it spread eastward from (then) South West Africa into (then) Bechuanaland Protectorate. I was told, and was able to document, that the Giraffe medicine tradition gradually replaced the former “Gemsbok” singing and dancing over vast areas of the Kalahari.

I decided it would be important to locate Be to hear her story for myself. I tried but failed to visit her and Old /Ai!ae, her husband, as permission for me to cross the border into South West Africa was withheld by the still-apartheid South African government at Pretoria. In 1972, Ju/’hoansi who came across the border fence reported that Old /Ai!ae had died. However, people continued to affirm that Be was alive and well at a camp some thirty miles west of the border. Twenty years later, when I was working in Namibia, I finally met Be and heard her account directly from her lips. Shortly after that, Be died in a fire: her hut burned down around her. People were devastated, as was I when

I heard the news. The child who caused the fire was never punished; people just said, as they invariably do in such a case, “he was not old enough yet to have sense.”

After Be died, I heard and recorded three more accounts of her story from the late healer /Kunta Boo, the last as recently as 2018. /Kunta enlarged the story by adding details of how the Giraffe song and its dance were practiced by his own nuclear family, and how it spread still further south into his extended family’s territory in Namibia and eventually into Botswana. It crossed multiple language lines among the San. This song and dance, innovated by one inspired woman and her husband, is still the San healing form of choice over much of eastern Namibia and western Botswana seventy years after Lorna Marshall first heard about it.

Be’s story of innovating the Giraffe song underscores the widespread acceptance of sharing processes in Ju/’hoan artistry and religious practice. It also emphasizes the respect given to individual renderings of what is beyond the world of human beings and to individual ideas of how to communicate with it. All the accounts of the origin of the Giraffe song share a conviction that Be was in an altered state of consciousness at the time of the inspiration for the song. These states, whether dreams, trances, or daytime confrontation with the spirits, are regarded as reliable channels for the transfer of new meaning from the other world into this one.

Healers on their travels along the threads of the sky bring back the benefits from the other world to the community on earth. They communicate to those who participate in the dances that support their travels not only healing power but also information about how things are in the other world and how people in this world would do best to relate to them. Great attention is given to trancers’ accounts of what they have experienced, and each one’s account of a genuinely altered state is respectfully heard. Individuals’ accounts of travel to the other world (what Westerners might call “out-of-body” travel) tick off some of the culturally expected signposts along the way, but they also naturally differ according to the individual’s experience. I saw no one being held to an orthodoxy of any kind. To an observer like myself, the respect given to individual tellings of such travels was an exercise in both radical tolerance for difference and the possibility of a collective reality.

The rendering of individual accounts into culturally shared images, such as the ones Kxao Giraffe directed me to record early in my fieldwork, seemed a central process in the spiritual unity of the Ju/’hoansi. It was an interweaving of tradition and creativity that seemed to keep the society itself alive, so that individuals were experiencing their own

lives as contributions to shared reality. It seemed that past traditions were nothing unless they were alive, renewed, today.

The energy of these traditions was available to groups of people dancing and singing together, but it was also available, between group events, to individuals. As I wrote in my event calendar on September 15, 1971: “Walked back with !Xuma [from Kauri] at sunset to find =Oma !Oma dancing . . . alone by a fire on the hill.”

My Western presupposition when I saw him there alone was that he was unhappy or homesick. Yet =Oma !Oma didn’t seem moody or withdrawn as he danced—he just happened to be alone while matter-of-factly wanting to dance. I mused that there seemed no concept of performance or audience here. =Oma seemed to be doing his dance solely for himself. I remembered that Nicholas England, the ethnomusicologist who accompanied the Marshalls, had described the music, and musical rituals, of the Ju/’hoansi as “self-delectative” in character. Learned from infancy, they seemed an entirely portable and flexible resource of enjoyment for an individual—whether with others or alone.

How moved I am when I spend a long time with someone, [having hired him] to tape *sitengena* [thumb piano] music, and after he’s done and I pay him, he still plays on for himself after I’ve gone to bed. . . . Last night, after I left Jimmy and went to bed, he played on. I had a sort of revelation that if he hadn’t wanted to play on, if he’d been drained, it would have been sad in retrospect. . . . At first I thought, “Oh, I’ll go back and fill up that last half inch of tape,” and then realized that I’d be happier leaving it empty and knowing he felt like going on alone.

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All along, I had been asking myself exactly *how* individuals’ experiences could be presented to “tradition,” be accepted, and become part of a living tradition. As I learned more about the long social apprenticeship of young men and women for the frightening, dangerous, and valued roles of daring death in healing that some of them chose to take on, I began to see that their experiences were, from an early age, already deeply culturally informed and mediated. Those learning have certain experiences in trance partly because they expect to do so, based on what they have heard in older people’s accounts. They encounter expected signposts (like the skein of beckoning light they recognize as the threads of the sky) and are reassured that, though they may be frightened of the unknown, they are traveling a known path, one traversed many times before by their elders and ancestors.

Although experiences beyond one's earthly self are unique to each traveler, certain common elements link the accounts made of them. The Ju/'hoansi treat these accounts as unique messages from the beyond, accessible in no other way save through trance, and they regard narratives of their experiences as valuable to share. The narratives are thus pre-constrained by tradition but also add to it. Powerfully, the assimilation of new material takes place simultaneously with reinforcement of the old.

I began to regard this process as a constant looping back of individuals' experiences (which are based to some extent, but not completely, upon those of their predecessors) into the shared tradition, where they become available to individuals again as part of a cultural repertoire they themselves have helped to build. The fact of individuals being dynamic parts of the looping process cements their allegiance to the tradition. The power of their healing religion may lie largely in its having provided an amendable, growing form to which individuals, working idiosyncratic experience into concerted social understanding, can meaningfully add.

Both the religious ideas and the folklore of the Ju/'hoansi seemed to be characterized by this sort of sharing process. I came to think that both should be seen as evolving, ongoing systems of expression of meaning and experience. I thought of them as a kind of language, continually discoursing through dramatic representation—of resolving conflicts, of journeys, of transcendence—on valued ideas in the structure of humans' relationships to each other and to the other world.

I saw that both the healing narratives and the folktales, far from codifying a single version of dogma, were carrying on a dialogue among themselves about what is to be valued and believed. That belief was not enshrined somewhere beyond the stories but was rather in the stories themselves, in the intertextual repartee between them—and even, powerfully, in occasional apparent contradiction. “Different people just have different thoughts,” as !Unn/obe said with her memorable shrug.

In retrospect, I realize how very fortunate my timing was, that I had a chance to observe at close hand the workings of this still exclusively oral tradition. In oral traditions, I learned, the “truth” is in the ever-growing repertoire of variants as well as in the individual tales and narratives. It lies in the involvement of tellers and listeners with all the variants, much more than in supposed ur-versions or immutable principles.

This realization went hand-in-hand with one about oral traditions in general: there is a very different attitude in oral cultures toward what scribal (written) traditions perceive as “contradiction.” It is only when,

in cultural history, the absorption in a succession of dramatic oral narratives gives way to written texts, which may be laid side by side for comparison, that contradiction becomes salient and problematical.

As these realizations came to me, I finally began to settle on the theme of my thesis. Ju/'hoan oral lore provides good illustration of a tradition allowing high variability in its performed versions. I wanted to focus on this tolerance of variability. I thought I could draw parallel examples from three main genres: folktales; accounts of individual journeys to the otherworld in trance; and medicine songs, *n/om* songs, created by individuals, whose use becomes widespread through routine processes of social sharing. I was also finding that the "repartee" I noted among folktale variants was in fact active among all three of these genres. I was witnessing a cultural tapestry of these (and even other genres, like beadwork and rock paintings) fairly spangled with meanings gleaned from the experiences and cultural ruminations of individuals through foregoing time.

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Many of these meanings gleamed out from the Ju/'hoan cultural "tapestry" for me because they took the form of complex sets of metaphoric ideas that were idiosyncratic to Ju/'hoan culture and thus completely unfamiliar to me. They included ideas about control and luck involving weather, hunting, childbirth, dangerous carnivores, and healing. I began to see that I could center my thesis around these "folk concepts" that tied the Ju/'hoan people's various expressive genres together. These were concepts that "worked for" the culture in long-standing, adaptive ways.

When I first settled down to work at Kauri and talked to the people about religion, about their relationships with their departed kin, and about their life stories, I more and more frequently was struck by references to the beliefs of the healing complex. These beliefs were endlessly present in the folktales, too, in the form of very subtle metaphors. The stories about the trickster god G!ara or Kaoxa, as we saw in chapter 4, specifically point to the origin of healing powers in the dance context through the use of animal abilities, substances, or surrogates (such as tortoise shells, eland fat and horns, information provided by bird familiars, etc.). G!ara's characteristics and use of such magical animal powers resemble those of tricksters in many indigenous traditions.

Trickster tales are often closely associated with themes of origin. Paul Radin's *The Trickster*, however, points out that the trickster is not a conscious benefactor as a culture hero might be, a figure setting out to



seek good things for mankind. Instead he discovers the necessities of life in the course of serving his own selfish, appetitive, and often hypersexual desires. Trickster stories, too, had adaptive strength in identifying the necessities of life and in making their acquisition memorable and valued.

The tale of the trickster G!ara and his sons provided me a good introduction to the use of a metaphor of transformation basic to all the Ju/'hoan tales, the concept of *n!ao*. *N!ao* is a complex of ideas, a "folk concept" relating men, the weather, and the hunting of the great meat animals—and women, the weather, and the children they bear. I first learned about *n!ao* from the writings of Lorna Marshall and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, whose pioneering work on this set of ideas I was able to replicate in detail and also to extend a bit. I learned that the relations among the items in the complex involve two transitive verbs, *kxani* and *//xui*, whose actions, respectively, have favorable and unfavorable results. I came to translate the two concepts into "being lucky, or fitting well with" and "being unlucky, or not fitting well with." These two concepts assured me of the structural duality (à la Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss) of the comprehensively dualistic action of the *n!ao* complex as a whole.

Lorna and Elizabeth, working with the superb Tswana translator Kernel Ledimo, laid the groundwork for our anthropological understanding of the Ju/'hoan *n!ow* (or *n!ao*) complex. Good luck in the *n!ao* complex results in good weather—the Kalahari summer, the fruitful rainy season. To it is opposed the dry season, which unites painful nighttime cold at its beginning with the dryness and hunger that continue into the sudden, scorching heat of springtime. Mothers and hunters cause either rain or drought when bearing children or hunting because the *n!ao* they possess interacts with the *n!ao* of the newborn or the hunted animal. If a hunter is "lucky" about an animal he kills, there will be rainy, cool weather. If he is unlucky, the sun will parch the land. Working without translators, but with my language teacher !Xuma and others, I was able to replicate every single item of belief about *n!ao* (and many other Ju/'hoan concepts and practices), about which I had first read in Lorna's and Elizabeth's work.

I also learned that *n!ao* itself can be used as a transitive verb: if a person (male or female) is "lucky," they can *n!ao g!a*, "bring rain with their *n!ao*." If they are unlucky, they can *n!ao !am*, "bring sun." The means by which these transformations are accomplished include, according to Lorna Marshall, burning horns or hair, urinating in the fire, or cutting the throat of an animal with a predictable *n!ao* reaction and allowing the blood to flow onto the ground.

Clouds are called by the Ju/'hoansi "rain's hair." In their *n!ao* beliefs and those of other San peoples, putting one's hair in the fire can change the weather. Old //Xukxa at Dobe told me that if she puts her hair in the fire the sun is so hot it kills people. Her husband, though, she said, "is rain, *g!a*. If he puts his hair in the fire, it rains. It will also rain when he dies." It all depends on the kind of *n!ao* the person has. Both men and women can be either rain or sun. Their type is determined at the moment of birth, by the weather at that time.

*N!ao* is active at one's birth and death, and occasionally in between when one seeks to change the weather by using it, or when a woman gives birth or a man kills an animal. The great meat animals like giraffe, eland, gemsbok, kudu, and hartebeest are *n!ao* animals and have an effect on the weather. Smaller meat animals like steenbok and duiker generally do not possess *n!ao* (a fact I later realized may account for their low frequency in another San symbol system, the southern African rock paintings).

*!Am* and *g!a*, sun and rain, are the oppositions the Ju/'hoansi connect with *n!ao*. If a hunter or a mother is "unlucky" with a hunted antelope or with childbearing, *!am khui*, they say, "the sun will burn." The opposite, "good luck," brings *g!a*, rain, and =*a'u*, coolness. Due to the seasonal peculiarities of their area, the hot sun of spring is associated with the cold nights of winter; both fall within the dry and hungry time of the year. To this pair of unpleasant atmospheric conditions is opposed the ideal of coolness, =*a'u*, associated with rain. One man told me that if a child is born and the day is one of searing heat, Ju/'hoansi might rhetorically say, "What kind of child is this who gets born and the sun is so hot?" The implied answer is "a child with an unlucky *n!ao*."

*N!ao* was associated by some Ju/'hoansi with a certain part of the body, the skin of the upper back at the base of the neck. This area is called the *n//ao* or *n//aosi* (plural)—note the different click from the one in *n!ao*. It is explicitly designated as the spot from which sickness, drawn from the body of an ill person, is expelled from the body of a *n/omkxao*, a "master of *n/om*" or working curer. (Only a *n/omkxao*, however, can see sickness leave this spot on another healer.)

A person (healer or nonhealer) with a foul or bad *n//ao* (*n//ao !kau*) will keep rain from falling. Also, a lion may come to bite him. One person told me that the lion would bite him precisely on the *n//ao* spot. But a person whose *n//ao* was good, *!'hom* (fine or beautiful), would not die "even if the person were cursed." Special feelings are attributed to the *n//ao* spot: it "tingles" if a person with whom one has a kin avoidance relationship sits behind one. If a young man is being given the power to trance and cure by an experienced curer who is sitting behind him,

he might feel his *n//ao* tingle, as well. In the story of G!ara and his sons, echoes of the beliefs about the sensitive *n//ao* spot and the *n!ao* complex regarding weather are prominent.

Recall that we saw in the tale that G!ara tries to resuscitate his sons after they have been killed by lions. He calls a dance for rain, then uses eland horns to summon lightning or a meteor to strike the lions dead. To cleanse himself of the killing, he makes a tortoise-shell medicine box, sniffs smoke from it, then goes into a trance for the first time.

Sigrid Schmidt, the consummate cataloguer of Khoi and San tales and beliefs, told me later that the tortoise and the trickster are linked with rain in many San groups. Lions, she said, “are the anti-rain forces.”

In our story, the trickster G!ara wants rain so he can have lightning. Lightning, called “God’s fire,” will do his bidding. To get rain and lightning, he hangs eland horns in a tree. In a similar story from the G/ui San further east in Botswana that also involves eland hunting (Lorna Marshall, unpublished story, collected July 22, 1955), the trickster throws his own hair into the sky to make rain. Hair and horns, as we saw, are two of the instruments for changing weather within the *n!ao* complex.

Though the hair and horns are not burned in our story, the way they are used as instruments of transformation is suggestive. At least one of the storytellers connected the lightning thus invoked with the *n//ao* spot at the back of the neck, which we have seen is connected with weather and *n!ao*. The lightning descends directly into the *n//aos*i (plural) of the lions, this storyteller said. A young woman chimed in and said, “N//ao is that you fear things [e.g., dangerous predators] when you are walking alone. Your *n//ao tsau* [hackles rise] when you are afraid.”

The fear of dangerous predators like lions and hyenas is extended to include fear of people whom the Ju’hoansi in Botswana also refer to as “carnivores.” The Ju’hoansi, with lighter skin than most Africans, refer to themselves as “red people.” “Carnivores,” in contrast, include black people (mostly Bantus) and “angry whites.” Ju’hoansi use the word *!xoma* (or *!xomh*, plural) to refer to this group of people as well as to animal carnivores in general, including the smaller ones. Another word they use for both carnivores and these groups of people is *jom* (or *jomh*, plural), which means “pawed creatures.” The silent hand sign for a lion is a clenched fist bent at an angle, as if walking on the ground, from a dangling lower arm. To *jom* is for a person to turn himself into a lion and kill people by magical means—a practice never attributed to a person in one’s own group but rather to other groups, usually far away, who are thought to be practicing the power with ill intent.

“The great *n/omkxaosi* of long ago used to do that,” people said. When a person says “lions are walking,” he does not ordinarily mean

animal lions. Such an expression is used at an eerie or strange time. For instance, I heard it in late 1971 when I was with the musician Jimmy /Ai!ae during the near-total lunar eclipse. Bantu people living nearby still say that, if they wish, San people like the Ju//hoansi can turn themselves into vengeful big cats and stalk human beings. The Ju//hoansi in turn call the Bantu people and ill-disposed whites “carnivores.” And so the negotiated neighborly balance continues.

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Lorna Marshall wrote of a small group of Ju//hoansi who were traveling and camped for the night with nothing but a fire to keep predators from them. A lion arrived and kept circling the terrified people until dawn. Toward morning, one of the men, a healer named Bo, went into a trance and began shouting at the lion. It finally left at dawn, and the people said the healer’s spirit followed it and chased it far away. When Bo’s spirit returned to his body and he came out of the trance, his nose bled severely. The power that allowed Bo’s spirit to go out to chase the lion was *n/om*. *N/om* boiled up in him, perhaps from prolonged stress and fear, and he went into a trance.

In trance, Bo “died” to this world temporarily (*!aia*, the cognate of *!ai*, to die) so that he could perform the supernatural feat of chasing the lion away. In our folktale about G!ara and his sons, the trickster uses dancing, trancing, and their appurtenances on a number of occasions to cure or cleanse himself. He says, “How will I powder myself with *sa* [the fragrant magical powder I’ve mentioned in the dance context] so that my brains won’t be spoiled by this killing I’ve done?” In another tale, this same trickster, whose mouth has, tragically but temporarily, disappeared so that his face is smooth and he cannot eat, says he wants to dance so he can get his mouth back. Which he then proceeds to do.

So dancing and going into *!aia* (a kind of death) is what G!ara uses to cleanse himself of the killing of the lions. The lightning he calls makes a deadly attack on the *n//ao* spots of the lions, those places on the back of the neck lions themselves would go for on men. He calls the lightning by using eland horns stuck in a tree. One storyteller told me that his two boys, Kha//an and !Xuma, “are an animal’s horn; they are an eland’s horn. They taught G!ara to dance around under an eland’s horns in a tree.” Thus was healing power discovered.

There are parallel discoveries in the stories whose heroic protagonist is a woman. Though there is controversy about using the word “heroine” for these figures, which in some Western contexts has come to connote the charming, helpless female who has to be rescued by the male

hero, the word is completely appropriate in the gender-egalitarian San world. As will be seen below, the heroine-protagonists in the Ju//hoan tales are fiercely protective of their own rights and those of their children and communities, and they even cause meat to become available for the first time to human society through acts of will. I've chosen to use the word "heroine" for these figures and emphasize that this usage has nothing whatsoever to do with helplessness (as in the hapless heroines of Western movies, for instance), though it may have something to do with charm.

Many of the heroine stories involve dramatic confrontations between the heroine wife and her in-laws. Often they end in a magical flight across the landscape in which the heroine strews ever-larger thorns to foil her pursuers, or calls down clouds and lightning so that rain beats upon her male affines, breaking the strings of their loincloths, cooling their anger, and thus ending the pursuit. Sometimes she blows upon a magical gemsbok horn that causes the village of her in-laws to be blown down and "ground into powder." The same verb, *xai* (to grind), is used for grinding the heroine's magical, visually transforming substance, her characteristic cosmetic—ochre. (You will see the longest, most complex and beautiful version of the heroine's story that I recorded, one told me by !Unn/obe, at the end of chapter 9).

In one of the shorter versions I recorded, the final adventure of the heroine, often called G!kun//homdima, doesn't end with the mere vanquishing of yet another husband and his treacherous people. After being hounded and harassed by a series of male adversaries, tricked, bereaved, killed, eaten, sought against her will in marriage, and pursued like wild game, the virtuous heroine has her final triumph by actually turning into a meat animal. Old /Asa's version ended this way: "Then G!kun//homdima changed herself into something else, and became a steenbok. Her heart became a steenbok, the steenbok that the Ju//hoansi shoot and take home to cook and eat. The first steenbok was once a person's heart, G!kun//homdima's heart."

The metaphor has come full circle. A woman pursued as meat becomes meat by her own will, and since then people have had game to eat.

Taken together, the ideas about healing power, about human relationships with weather and carnivores and food, and the events of the stories of transformation add up to a complex of belief that enables trance and the community healing on which the San's ancestors have relied for millennia. One could indeed, I thought, regard this vast web or network of meaning, like the egalitarianism whose values it so faithfully reflected, as an example of the most important achievements of humankind.

Yet importantly, I saw, these beliefs were always alluded to only indirectly, through the intricately interwoven metaphors of dance, song, and story—and therein lay their power. The Ju/'hoan expressive forms fairly glittered with powerful—but only briefly and delicately phrased—allusions. I saw the whole as a panoply we might liken, rather than to simpler symbolic models, to a vast, fine, deeply interconnected literature.

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Many years later, when I was back in the United States, an energetic middle school student in Cleveland, Ohio, named Aaron Kohn contacted me with a plan to bring a few Ju/'hoan leaders to Cleveland to speak to schools and colleges and to the media. He raised the finances for this as donations to the Kalahari Peoples Fund, the nonprofit I had founded with my HKRG colleagues in 1973, at the end of my first fieldwork. He arranged the visit and set up talks for the Ju/'hoan speakers for several days at TV studios and in various educational institutions. One of the Ju/'hoansi who came was /'Angn!ao /'Kun, a tiny man known by the Afrikaans name of Kiewiet, a small, bright, active bird (one of the many kinds of plovers that inhabit the Kalahari). Kiewiet was known for his eloquence in speaking in his areas of expertise, which were politics, storytelling, and healing. In Cleveland he was to speak one evening at a historically black college, and his topic was the intersection of these three domains. I felt privileged to stand with him at the podium as his translator. The venue was the gymnasium of the college, with the audience seated on risers.

Kiewiet was much smaller (and lighter skinned) than almost anyone in the audience. The podium dwarfed him and the microphone took a while to get arranged effectively. But he riveted the listeners with his account of the Ju/'hoan people's participation in the recent independence process South West Africa had gone through in becoming Namibia. He also talked about the practices and values of their healing religion, with its sharing ethic and tolerance for all, and he spoke of the process of traveling to God's village on the threads of the sky. He explained how these ideas had underwritten and supported all that the Ju/'hoansi had accomplished in terms of community organizing and communication with the new government during the independence process. Many in the audience could be seen taking out Kleenexes and wiping their eyes before the end of this story.

After his speech Kiewiet took a few questions. The last question came from a large black woman on the third row of the risers. She stood up

and remarked, “You said that you travel to God when you are in trance and are healing. Please tell us what God looks like.”

Kiewiet chuckled. “I have never seen God. Nobody can see God. All that human beings have is stories.”



## BRIGHT NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Ju//hoan healers recount stories to each other afterward of the experiences they have had while traveling out of their bodies. They travel on the threads of the sky in trance to heal people, and they also travel in dreams, at night, to check on faraway relatives and friends. From the many travel experiences of many healers over time, a structure of belief about what that other realm is like—the realm of spirit travel—comes into being. Yet this structure built of stories remains alive, open to additions from each healer’s new experience. It is a story belonging to no one and to all, an endless story about human ways to access the power that lies beyond human understanding.

This never-ending story is full of particulars and of concrete details, but it is devoid of dogma. It is always open to ambiguity, to mystery, and to change. It involves the *n/om* substance in people’s bodies, its ability to boil up their spines, its arrows of sickness and arrows of healing, its threads to the sky—and how people, working together, can use all of these to do things that in everyday life are beyond human power. It is a story of seeing inside the bodies of sick people to know what is troubling them, of the touching of skin to skin to sense what is within, of healing by laying on of hands, and of healing and communicating from afar.

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Men and women healers alike routinely share their stories of healing travel in the days after a dance. In this chapter I describe three memorable healing dances I took part in over the years during and after my first fieldwork, each of them involving both men and women healers. At an outsider’s first glance, men healers can seem dominant at Ju//hoan dances. A longer look, though, can be very revealing. Women too are fully salient participants in healing dances. They use their strengths and their imaginations, as men do, to create joint beauty and bring about healing. The chapter ends with a long episodic story about the strong Ju//hoan heroine, G!kun//homdima. Like men, and working with men, Ju//hoan women have the power and the responsibility to effect community healing and transformation.



My language teacher !Xuma's younger brother, G=kao, had an ordinary Ju/'hoan name, but he was also known by the Herero name Karembuka, given him by the cattle herding family he worked for. He was frail and suffered from tremors. I wondered whether he might have a neuromuscular illness: there was no way to know. He was shy and self-effacing, with a sweetness to his nature that stayed in my mind even when I did not see him for long periods of time.

Once, arriving at night at his village, Mahopa, we found a dance in progress. It was not at all affected by our truck's noisy arrival. We could see from the Land Rover that Karembuka was dancing and already in a trance.

He stood in the center of a circle of women, standing inches or less from the fire. As we approached from the edge of the clearing, I stopped to watch from a distance. Karembuka dancing was barely recognizable as his daytime self. Usually a wobbly and insubstantial presence, he appeared this night like a resolute flame, a pure, yellow, upward-flowing column of power and joy. His body in the firelight was itself a fire, one fed from a boundless source seeming to lie deep in the earth below. His flame flickered to the exact rhythm of the music. I saw this slight, delicate person take on energy from the music of the singing, clapping, stamping, and staccato rattling of the other men and women, and concentrate it in his own body as he assumed for a time the central position of healing. After some time had gone by, other healers stepped inside the circle to join him in healing. The power then grew palpably bigger from Karembuka's sharing it with the others. The bodies, hands, and voices of everyone there moved in unison. I moved closer. I and the group I had been traveling with were absorbed into the flow of the evening as if we had been there from the start.

The dance went on for many hours. I sang and watched, thinking of the fine synchrony of bird flocks I had seen in Botswana. I often waited alone near wells and waterholes, for instance, watching *g/ui*, the red-billed quelea, small, nervous birds that travel in huge flocks and are compelled to drink water at least once every day. Predators in the Kalahari, including human ones, know this water necessity of the quelea and lie in wait near water sources to kill them in large numbers. Their flocks move in vast but narrow horizontal columns, inscribing what look like sine curves on the air, flashing in circles of fright and changing course in a fraction of an instant when disturbed. Then they rise as one organism, their thousands of tiny wings catching the air and causing the atmosphere in the immediate neighborhood to vibrate. I found that watching them, as they thus "stopped time," gave my mind a chance to breathe. I found almost identical succor in watching and



**Figure 9.1.** Nighttime dance at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

participating in the Ju/'hoansi's healing dances. As the dances repeated, and innovated upon, old patterns of movement and mind, the bodies of the dancers became exquisitely attuned to each other and went into synchrony, creating the power for them—and even sometimes for me—to get beyond ourselves.

The morning after Karembuka's dance, we left Mahopa and proceeded to G!o'oce, east of !Aoan. Hoping to fulfill my responsibilities to the National Institutes of Mental Health, I had planned a special subsection of work there with women healers. Women as well as men healed at most of the Ju/'hoan camps I visited, but I knew that at G!o'oce there was a concentration of young women, who aspired to be healers, learning from several elderly women healers. G!o'oce was where Richard Katz had worked with /Xoan N!a'an, the woman with thrown-back head and open mouth on the cover of his wonderful book, *Boiling Energy*. I learned that /Xoan N!a'an, now dead, had been the teacher of a woman named Tcoq'a N!a'an, Old Tcoq'a, herself in turn now teaching the large group of young women there. People told me that if I went to G!o'oce, I would see plenty of women's dances and could ask Tcoq'a N!a'an any questions I had about them. Tcoq'a and the young women she was teaching specialized in the Elephant dance, different from the Giraffe dance. Elephant was also known as the drum dance or the *g!oa* dance (*g!oa*, an aromatic shrub said to cause fluttering in the midriff, was chewed by women dancers to help them on the road to trance). Tcoq'a N!a'an was also a well-known storyteller, so I resolved to ask for

her versions of as many of the folktales I had been collecting as possible, chief among them the stories of the python or elephant or aardvark heroine that so intrigued me. I planned for the visit to last a week or two or more, depending on how things worked out.

The first time I had been to G!o'oce, in mid-1971, I was surprised at how different it was from the more Bantu-aculturated Ju/'hoan lifestyle in the east, at Kauri. G!o'oce had an archaic quality compared to Kauri, where there was a much closer association, and more intermarriage, with agricultural and cattle-owning people; where more store-bought or hand-me-down cloth clothing was worn; and where "town" goods in general were more available. Though I was actually on my way from Kauri to Dobe, not planning to stop at that time in G!o'oce but to drop Tcoq'a Matse there (a young woman who was traveling with us), I found the place irresistible.

JUNE 20, 1971

It was so . . . sort of wild, on the hillside over the !Aoandom valley, and [the people] so unknown to me—I hardly recognized a soul from up Dobe way. . . . I became very interested in pinpointing the combination of smells there that took me back to dark, wild afternoons in the Dobe rainy season. Suddenly here were [bare] breasts again and intricate beads, the smell of *sa*, and skin clothing, women's wild heads full of head ornaments, shaking [as they danced]. I remember being struck by the bright yellowness of the faces of some of the women—at first I thought they were jaundiced, then I realized I had gotten quite used to a darker skin tone at Kauri, [and many of the G!o'oce women had also powdered their faces with bright yellow *sa*, lending a festive air to our arrival].

G!o'oce is a village composed largely, it seems, of women, many of them quite old. As such it is very interesting, especially because of the vibrant women's drum dance tradition which has grown up there. This tradition is famous all over Ngamiland. I had been planning to stay some time at G!o'oce to look into this tradition, see who were the originators of it, how it came about and developed. . . . I'd like to interview all the women there on how it got started, what the songs are, who trances, and how they feel about it.

Amazingly, there was a dance the very night we got there. We had camped a little ways beyond G!o'oce, intending to go to the !Aoan store for supplies first thing in the morning. But the stars came out bright and frosty over the ridge, and we heard first the usual dance-clapping and then the drum, and decided to go over. There was a large group of women standing around a fire, clapping the *g!oa* song I had heard about, and *tara*-ing [shaking in trance]. Almost as soon as I got there, N!hunkxa . . . went into

a trance and fell down on the cold sand, shivering and moaning. (I had seen her do this once before, at Dobe.) Everyone seemed excited and very happy and sure. I didn't see any curing, however—but then soon the men wanted to dance, and so the women's dance turned gracefully into a men's [Giraffe] dance: the women who had been standing in a circle sank down and sat on the sand, and the man who had been playing the drum (was it a black pot upside-down?) retired. Men came one by one and started to dance around the women. It was exciting to see again men dancing in *coanasi* [loincloths]—I realized I hadn't seen that since leaving Dobe. I am amazed at the number of changes from here that are evident in Kauri, that I hadn't really consciously made note of. The most intriguing thing though was the smell, compounded of *sa*, I think, and skin clothing—a musty, archaic odor which brought back to me the wet, weird afternoons when I first got to Ngamiland and everything was new and very strange. When we dropped Tcoq'a Matse ["Little Tcoq'a," a namesake of Tcoq'a N!a'an] at G!o'oce, the women crossed her face with yellow *sa* from tortoise-shell powder boxes, that she might be welcome. It made her look gay, and be the center of the group that was receiving her.

On that visit Tcoq'a N!a'an told me some of her stories of the heroine, who in her elephant-focused milieu always appeared as an elephant. She also described nights when elephants came to G!o'oce, drawn by the sweet sound of the people's singing and drumming. Once, she said, an elephant lifted her and cradled her gently in his tusks as the singing and dancing went on below. I was so drawn in by her account that it took me a few seconds to realize she was describing spirit elephants she saw in trance. One of the mournful, impossibly sweet songs of the dance was called "Da'ama N//obo," or Orphan Child, and that child was a baby elephant.

The second time I went to G!o'oce, some months later, I interviewed all the women, old and young, who were dancing, learning, and healing. I learned that there was much less emphasis on active trancing and healing than there seemed to be among male dancers, and more on just dancing for its own beautiful sake. I learned that the tight constriction of the abdomen that accompanies trance is thought to be dangerous for women of child-bearing age. This constriction is conceptualized by the Ju//hoansi as small, potent, invisible arrows of *n/om* shot from the fingers of expert healers into the solar plexus area of a novice. Once inside the novice, the arrows are thought to multiply, causing the pain and constriction of trance. I learned that Ju//hoan women could dance and sing all they wanted in their younger years, but after menarche should wait until menopause before seeking *n/om*, for which they might have

been preparing years beforehand. I realized that all the women I knew who were healers were older women, and I was told that women, once past bearing children, could awaken in themselves immense *n/om* that was respected by men and women alike.

So that second time I stayed at G!o'oce for some weeks, at her invitation pitching my tent near Tcoq'a N!a'an's hut, and did a lot of dancing myself. It was during that visit that I became aware what an overwhelming feat of athleticism each all-night dance was for a seeker of *n/om* and of healing power. I knew that not only was I not brave enough, but I was not in the physical shape needed to become a healer. Also, I had missed out on spending decades of my early life immersed in the dance and its music with adults as wise guides, as Ju/'hoan children did. I had already missed my chance of absorbing its rhythms by osmosis and developing a complete belief in the transforming power of *n/om*.

Because I was far from fit enough, and had not been participating in the dances since birth, I was actually a bit relieved to learn that Ju/'hoansi felt women of child-bearing age should not try to develop their *n/om* but should bide their time until later. I was also told by Tcoq'a N!a'an's husband that people who wanted to learn to heal—men as well as women—should remain in one place, with the same group of people, while learning. "People need to play together (*kui*) for a long time in order to learn to heal," he said. "But if you travel around as much as you do . . ." Before he finished his sentence, I knew he was right about my chances. Again I came up against the reality of being an arbitrary transient in their community. I had to content myself with being an ordinary person, a nonhealer. But I resolved to bear witness to the deep power of the trancing and dancing among people who clearly had depended on it, for health and happiness, for millennia.

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The communally built Ju/'hoan story of the ways and power of *n/om* is but one of what must have been thousands of such stories told in human prehistory and into today. The *n/om* story of the Ju/'hoansi is an example of the skeins of meaning generated about the unknown and tried out for efficacy by every culture. These are all well-honed artifacts built of the imaginings of generations of people sharing their ideas and experimenting with them on one another. These ideas grew and became embedded in the consciousness of various cultures as people performed acts related to them, and as they saw—and valued—what achievements came out of their mysterious networks of meaning. Healing, peace, social harmony, ecstasy? Millions of us human beings around the world

still live by such stories today—or want to. Each such story is a cultural jump beyond human limitations in the direction of what some call God. Each culture uses its own contemporary catapult of meaning to make its jumps. Not every jump succeeds, but those that do can become part of a specific canon, at least for a while.

As in biological evolution, each story, each idea is a random existential experiment. Stories that work, that enable social cohesion, are among the most important intellectual achievements of humankind. The story the Ju/'hoansi told themselves over and over about their dance—ringing the changes on its basic theme of healing—remains, by constant renewal, the powerful engine that made it possible for them to get along with each other. They told and danced and sang the story, incorporating the flashes of insight that occurred to different individuals in the process. The story lived in its never-ceasing variants, born of its enfranchisement of each participant, of each new generation. It was always contemporary—or it was nothing.

Westerners of the late twentieth century have largely lost their connection to such powerful, jointly lived, and jointly constructed stories. Thus I felt deeply privileged to witness, and even to participate in, this still-living, still-breathing, ancient human process of meaning. It was a means of social control, through shared joy, that stayed ever contemporary because it valued each person's contribution. It contributed to the unspoken, as well as the spoken, consensus that made a reliable fabric out of the contentions and contradictions of their lives. Even my watchful outside-observer's presence could not interrupt the flow of this powerful synchrony; its strength tossed me aside like a twig washed up on the banks by a river torrent.

The synchrony had at its core the excitement of improvisation. Anything, anything could happen as the people took up the tools, each time, of their voices and their hands, their legs and their feet, their knowledge of each other, and of their reliable power to create, with each other, a force for health and peace. As the voices blended in a polyphony of endless incremental variation, as the powerful stamping of the men's feet took them in measured, inexorable progress around and around the dance circle, I felt the waves of energy linking the bodies through my own body: it was impossible not to become linked to the process myself. As the process took over at each dance, people seemed with each movement, each note of singing, to call out to each other and to receive instantaneous response. As I mentioned before, people said that at its start a dance was *cui* ("light" or insubstantial), and only later, when each person in his or her improvising became synchronized with the others, became *tih* ("heavy" or powerful). Once "heavy" in this

way, every dance would reliably culminate in healing. Every dark night could become a bright night of the soul.

After the healing overtook a dance, many sorts of sounds would begin emanating from the mouths of the healers and mingling with the singing and clapping. These sounds ran the whole gamut from a low, deep, harmonic rumbling in the chest to discernible words that were either conventional, such as “I am imitating my father!” or “Aiye gu mi!” (Mother, lift me in your arms!), or spectacularly inventive, created for the occasion. Sometimes they went into a light glossolalia, explained for me later, when I asked, as “the unknowable speech of God.”

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Most of the dances I took part in during those years (and indeed over the nearly fifty years that followed) were said to be Giraffe dances. The Giraffe dance had its own songs, all stemming as I said from the original inspiration of Be N!a’an, who received the first song while watching giraffes running in a thunderstorm. Kxao Giraffe of !Aoaan was an inheritor and further innovator of this tradition. There was a sense in which Giraffe was seen as the classic healing dance of all the places it had traveled to and touched. “Anyone with sense would know” the healing power of its songs, as !Unn/obe said to me, and as Lorna Marshall’s informants also had said.

In some ways, Giraffe dances seemed to foreground the male dancers: their precise steps were mesmerizing to watch, they did most of the active healing, and women only jumped up to dance briefly or to sprinkle the men with *sa* in praise. Every so often, a woman would rise in an access of enthusiasm to dance a few delicate steps with the men, sometimes throwing fragrant *sa* towards them from the tortoise-shell box hanging on a thong or from a string of beads around her neck. But mostly the women sang, and clapped joyously and resolutely, to enable the men to dance. The men said often that the song could not rise to the sky, could not help the men’s *n/om* to boil in their bodies, unless the women sang it. The men encouraged the women by singing with them for a time, and by praising them in turn, with the result that the women’s voices came through louder and longer, more expertly ringing the changes on each cadence, than I could have believed possible. And the foregrounding of men in the Giraffe dance I sometimes thought I saw? It was dissolved out of existence over and over again by the ways the women—especially the older women—were clearly essential to the dance, and were appreciated by all.

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One night I saw a Giraffe dance taken over completely by a young woman dancer. This dance was being held in a special clearing the community had made, some way from their own village. Drooping =*angg=oa* trees (“wild coffee” *Bauhinias*) made the spot into a secluded grove. The moon rose just as the dance began and soon was flickering through the branches overhead.

Children ran about, chasing each other, and some of them eventually started a fire in the center of the clearing. A few little girls plonked themselves down around the fire to clap and sing, drawing their raggedy skirts carefully between their legs for modesty. They looked toward where the adults were lounging on the sand, singing out in their high little voices and calling them to join the dance. Gradually, unhurriedly, casually sharing tobacco and matches and puffs from glowing pipes, women and a few men came to sit down with the children by their fire and began to sing softly. Over the next half hour or so, men sitting on the sand away from the fire shook out their dance rattles, long strings of braided fibers holding dried cocoons filled with pebbles or seeds or bits of broken ostrich eggshell, and tied them onto their legs. They fastened the strings just below their knees and above the bulges of their calf muscles so that the rattles, descending and then ascending, caduceus-like, on their strings, were secured. Then they rose, one by one, and, joking and calling to each other, came to the fire.

A young woman at the dance shared my name, Baq’u, and so we had a special relationship. Sometimes when I went to town I brought her back some token of our name relationship—a scarf or some beads—and she in turn sewed a pretty duiker-skin bag for me and ornamented it with ostrich-eggshell beads. This night I noticed she was wearing a bright white sleeveless undershirt, so clean it must have just come out of its town wrappings. I chuckled inwardly, wondering if the new lover she had told me about had anything to do with her having a new undershirt. Baq’u sat in the circle of women around the fire, her legs intertwined with theirs, her head, like theirs, inclined to one side so she could hear the singing of her neighbor and join in the polyphony.

Hours went by as the women sang with consummate skill. Baq’u’s ramrod-straight grandfather, taller than most Ju/’hoan men, was there, dancing as the women of his family and other families sang the Giraffe songs. He didn’t dance very long before he showed the familiar signs of approaching trance. Sweat appeared on his torso, he bent forward at the hips, and his eyes were focused on a middle distance that



was . . . elsewhere. There was absolutely no sign of fear or hesitation in his embrace of the transformation of consciousness. His was a commanding physical presence and at first dominated the healing, but just as Karembuka had, he shared its power immediately when other men fell into trance behind him in the circle. There was a heady sense in the air that anything could happen at any time, that one could do whatever one felt like doing: there was an atmosphere of complete equality. Old and young, men and women, the firm and the infirm, were united in purpose and rhythm.

Suddenly Baq'u sprang up and began to dance in place. Her white undershirt flashed rhythmically one way and then the other in the light of the fire. Her dance was like no other dance I had seen, at either the Giraffe dance or any of the women's dances. It was entirely her own, entirely inspired, entirely of the moment. It took everyone's breath away.

Baq'u had no spare meat on her body anywhere: she seemed in fighting trim to combat death—and indeed she soon began to die in *!aia* herself, all the while continuing to dance her stunning, mesmerizing whole-body dance. Sweat shone on her collarbone and her muscled brown chest above the neckline of the white undershirt. She trembled rhythmically and began to move around the circle of women, laying fluttering hands on each of them, caressing their babies' heads, then jumping back into her dance without losing a beat. Like Karembuka had, she seemed to flare upward like an eternal flame.

At one point I saw her grandfather step back from the dance circle and watch her in what seemed complete concentration. Her action had been assertive, quite beyond what I had seen from women, especially young women of reproductive age, for many months of dances. I wondered if it had seemed as daring, as edgy, to her grandfather and all her family as it seemed to me. I wondered especially whether it had been seen as a challenge to authority, or had perhaps gone too far beyond the bounds of tradition.

When the dance ended, some time later, Baqu's grandfather was sitting at ease among his family at the "watching fire" a little away from the dance circle. I went to join the group sitting around him. As Baq'u walked past, he spoke firmly but quietly to her. "Thank you for your dance, Granddaughter," he said. "That was the most beautiful dance I have ever seen."

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In dancing, and in life in general, Ju'hoan women seemed to me to have what American women of that time period fought for and are still fight-

ing for: an unassailable sense of their own strength, and recognition by men of their unquestioned value and power. I thought about the many stories I had collected about the protean Ju/'hoan heroine, she who could appear at different times as a beautiful python, an aardvark, or an elephant but remain “the same” heroine; could command the weather; and could, by the power of her will, transform her own heart into meat for the people.

The stories were those of the intriguing Ju/'hoan heroine G!kun/'hondima, over whom Mel Konner and I had marveled at the beginning of my fieldwork. The longest, most elaborate version I recorded, one about an elephant girl, came from !Unn/obe and ran to over thirty transcribed pages. I worked on the translation, details, and implications of this story off and on for many years. I arrived at what I regarded as its definitive transcription, English translation, and full comprehension only thirty-five years later, in 2006, after the fine *Ju/'hoan-English, English-Ju/'hoan Dictionary* had been written by linguist Patrick Dickens with the participation of the young Ju/'hoan speakers who later formed the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group in Tsumkwe, Namibia. Here is the English summary of !Unn/obe's story as I and the Transcription Group published it in 2009 (story title added by me):

### *The Elephant Girl*

The elephant girl's husband's younger brother was still in his mother's stomach when his older brother married the elephant girl. After the marriage, the elephant girl's husband brought her to his mother's village to live, and she gave birth to a daughter there. But there were no elderly people living at that village, so the elephant girl and her husband planned to visit his older relatives at other villages to ask for gifts for the child. The elephant girl planned to leave her daughter with a woman there while she and her husband went visiting. The night before they were to leave, the elephant girl and her husband slept at his mother's village.

The mother's stomach grew, and she was about to give birth. In the morning, her older son, the elephant girl's husband, was packing to leave. His mother was grinding ochre and rubbing her stomach with it. Her newborn son jumped straight up out of her stomach, saying, “Mother, rub your hands on my head so that I can go with my older brother.” Everyone was astonished, but one of them said, “This is a sky's thing, so just do what he says: let him go on the journey with his older brother.” So his mother rubbed him with ochre and fat and he left with his older brother.

At one of the villages of the old people, the husband was requested to bring his daughter so they could see her. He agreed, and they were walking to fetch the child at the other village. As they were walking past a termite

mound, the younger brother stepped on a thorn and cried, “Ouch, ouch, ouch!” Then he took off his shoes and threw them away, saying they should go off and become vultures that drop down on meat. Then the younger brother said, “Run, older brother, go see what those vultures are dropping on, and get meat for us to eat.”

Meanwhile, the older brother’s wife, the elephant girl, was wearing a skin apron with a metal awl stuck in its waistband. The younger brother asked his brother’s wife to use the awl to pull out the thorn from his foot. The elephant girl believed what he said and came close. He took the awl and killed her.

The elephant girl had already told her grandmother that she didn’t trust her husband’s younger brother. She had said, “My thoughts don’t agree with a thing that jumps out of its mother’s stomach saying it wants to accompany its older brother. So watch well: a little wind will come to you with droplets of my blood, and will stick to your groin. Take the bit of blood and put it into something like a little bowl or a jar.” And indeed the little wind with the blood came to the grandmother and stuck to her. The grandmother said in her heart, “Isn’t this just what the child said would happen?” She took the blood and put it in a jar, and lived and thought. She said to herself, “If they’ve already completed what she told me, there’s nothing to be done.”

Meanwhile, the elephant girl’s brothers went to follow her husband and his younger brother, to see if they had arrived safely at the village with their sister. In fact, the older brother had gone off and had not found the vultures, and was returning to where his younger brother was. The younger brother had killed and skinned his older brother’s wife, the elephant girl, and had roasted her and was cutting up and eating her fat. The older brother arrived and, not seeing his wife, asked what kind of meat it was. The younger brother told him not to ask so many questions, but just to come and taste the meat. “Why do you call that which is meat, a woman?” asked the younger brother.

The older brother was greatly upset and asked his younger brother how he would manage to remain alive if he ate a piece of his own wife. “Stick with me!” said the younger brother, insisting again that it was plain meat. Finally the older brother took a piece and ate it. At that moment the brothers of the elephant girl, having tracked the two, were seen approaching. The younger brother told the termite mound to break open so his brother could enter and avoid the anger that was coming his way. The termite mound obeyed, and the older brother stepped inside. The mound closed. The younger brother stood alone outside, and when the elephant girl’s brothers tried to stab him, he perched on the points of their spears like the little bird called *//omhaya* [a kind of sparrow]. He dodged

their spears, perching on their heads, perching on their noses, and perching on their other body parts, and eventually defeated them completely. They left him and went off.

The older brother jumped out of the termite mound and the two of them took the meat and went home to their village. The people asked, "What have you done with the woman whose child is standing over there? What kind of meat is that you are walking around with your stomachs full of? You two have done something very wrong."

Meanwhile the bit of blood stayed in the grandmother's jar and grew. The grandmother put it into a skin bag and it grew some more. It split the bag so she put it into something larger. It grew and split that too. Only the grandmother knew what she was doing and kept her intention, growing the blood into a regular big woman again. Finally the elephant girl was the size of a sack.

One day the women of that village said they would go gathering raisin berries, and they took the child along with them. The grandmother spent the day alone at the village. When the sun was getting low, she spread a reed mat in the shade and took out the elephant girl and set her on the mat. She ground ochre and spread it on her, fixed her and dressed her and hung her with ornaments, and fastened copper rings into her hair. She was the beautiful elephant girl again.

When the women were coming back from gathering, they heard the old woman speaking to someone, and that someone was laughing in response. The child asked, "Who is laughing in the village that sounds just like my dead mother?" The other women thought the child was crazy, but then the elephant girl laughed again and they all began to wonder. They arrived in the village and saw her sitting there. Her daughter cried, "It's my mother!" and dropped down and began to nurse. The other women asked, "Who has done this?" The elephant girl replied, "Granny, of course, Granny alone. The old people give you life."

Another day, the two who had killed her came back to the village, and, seeing her, got a fright. But they still wanted to take the elephant girl to visit her in-laws. The grandmother secretly gave her a magical gemsbok horn and told her how to use it when she arrived at the in-laws' village. The elephant girl then left with her husband and his younger brother and they traveled a long distance. As they traveled, the elephant girl kept asking them to let her know before they arrived at the village. She asked about mountains, and riverbeds with water, and what the distance was between where they were and the village they would be visiting. Finally they passed a hill, then a valley of soft sand, and another hill, and came to a village beyond, where small children with clean tummies were playing around and laughing. The brothers told her this was the place.

The elephant girl told them to go ahead of her into the village, that she wanted to powder herself and then follow them in. When the two brothers had entered the village, she took out her magical gemsbok horn and blew on it, saying, “These two brothers and their village shall be broken apart and ruined!” The horn blew down the village, flattened it to the ground. Then the beautiful elephant girl walked home. (Biesele et al 2009: 69–72)

The heroine tales, as we’ve seen, feature the journey of a newly married woman caught in the conflict between her family of birth and her new in-laws. They explore the strengths of women by pitting a virtuous heroine against male assailants. The stories center around a marvelous girl usually named G!kun//homdima, who sometimes, as in this story, appears in the form of an elephant. The elements of the name G!kun//homdima are complex. *G!kun* means “termites,” but it is also the respect word for “aardvark” (anteater, or antbear). This association makes sense when you think of what aardvarks eat, and when you know that the English (and Afrikaner) colonists of southern Africa usually referred to termites as “ants.” //Hom means “young woman,” and *dima* is a reduplication, using other words, of the young woman concept, meaning “young or little female.” *Dima* is a diminutive that also functions as a term of endearment. The G!kun//homdima name is often applied as well to the beautiful python heroine of the somewhat different story in which a heroine is tricked into falling into a well. However, instead of dying and being reborn like the elephant does, she gives birth while in the water and is rescued by cooperating animals.

Ju//hoansi make a close symbolic association between pythons and elephants. I found that one of the respect words for python is, in fact, “elephant.” I was never able to learn precisely why this is the case, beyond the fairly obvious observation that as meat animals both are remarkable for their delicious fat. But emotional attitudes taken toward the heroines of both sets of tales are also strikingly similar. They are always described as courageous young married women, often with a young child or children, who are beautiful and resourceful and the pride of their kin and in-laws. Portrayed as admirable and above reproach, these heroines are tricked by envious little sisters or uncanny younger brothers-in-law. They call on animal aid and supernatural recourse, and no matter what trials they are put through they get off scot-free and come up shining. Specifically, they shine with well-being and abundant fat, and they are also often anointed with oil or have animal grease rubbed into their skin—a delightful cosmetic procedure in a dry desert. In many heroine stories I heard, the girl G!kun//homdima was



**Figure 9.2.** Baby with “digging stick.” © Megan Biesele.

specifically identified as an armadillo (anteater, antbear), another animal with abundant fat.

No matter how the heroine appears in her stories, the battle lines are drawn between a) the heroine wife and her people and b) her husband and his people. The tale uses the issues of the in-law relationship to probe themes of bride service, marriage, and residence, of insults, murder, and blood vengeance, of sex, giving birth, and the problem of eating meat, which involves the pain and death of sentient beings. The heroine’s answer to the unexplained aggression she experiences at the hands of her in-laws, especially her husband’s younger brother, takes three main forms: escaping, being magically reconstituted, and destroying her assailant and his people by magical means (*n/om*). Her actions are characteristically transformative and assertive: her blood escapes murder and grows in a bag to become the full-sized woman she was before. Cared for by her nurturing grandmother, she goes through a second period of time “in the womb.” The elephant girl’s regrowth in a bag or other container parallels the python heroine’s fruitful seclusion in the spring. In some versions much is made of the charming babyhood of the girl as she is growing secretly in the bag and is occasionally taken out to crawl and play.

Much is also made of the beauty of the full-grown woman when she emerges from the bag. In a sense, both child and woman emerge from seclusion, as from the python's spring in chapter 4, and make a life-enhancing return to their people. The rescued heroine is washed, wafted with *sa*, rubbed with ochre and fat, dressed freshly, hung with ornaments, and placed upon a skin mat, as a bride would be, or a girl freshly emerged from menarcheal seclusion. In the elephant girl story, G!kun//homdima is celebrated by doting kin when she emerges from her grandmother's skin bag. Happiness reigns in the camp. The grandparental generation has passed on its powers of regeneration to the young. "The old people," says the heroine, "give you life."

These girls' stories, like the stories about the two boys who are the sons of the trickster, all center around healing and transformation. All of them are stories about the ability of ordinary humans, women as well as men, to access superhuman powers akin to the powers of shamans and healers the world over. These include the ability to return "from the dead," out-of-body travel, X-ray vision, prophecy, control of weather, and healing of others. I began to see the central message of these stories, like other Ju//hoan stories, as *the ubiquity, and the very possibility, of transformation*. There is transformation by magic, transformation by community effort, and transformation by hard work and determination, but the import of them all is that growth, amelioration, and change are possible in the world by the practice of known human means. The heroine's journey on earth, and the journey on the threads of the sky undertaken by the healers in trance, is in a sense the same kind of journey, supported by the same unshakeable set of beliefs in *n/om* and its ability to allow transformation and transcendence.

!Unn/obe told me that dancing *n/om* was not just a Ju//hoan thing but "a human thing." When I next have a chance to ask a Ju//hoan man whether being a healer is a men's thing, the answer may well be, "It's not a men's thing, it's a *human* thing."

## LIFE IN DEATH AND DEATH IN LIFE

I finally worked out that the focus of my thesis should be the oral processes by which profound messages about transformation and healing were communicated by the Ju/'hoan people. I would write about the processes, the messages, and the metaphors that tied the Ju/'hoan people's different expressive forms together into a mutually reinforcing system. After I established this focus, my fieldwork was charged with clarity of purpose. Things began to move more smoothly, both at Kauri and Toothbrush Tree, and when I traveled from village to village. Somehow people seemed to know when I wanted to interview them and what I wanted to know about. There was a wonderful sense of being engaged on a joint enterprise with a group of people who seemed as excited about my project as I was. It was clear, and often expressed in so many words, that the Ju/'hoansi felt they had something inexpressibly valuable to share with the world, and they wanted me to help them do that.

I had long observed that the Ju/'hoansi were among the most garrulous talkers I had met in my life up to then. I gradually understood that their talkativeness might account, at least in part, for the famous "Jungle Telegraph" cliché one heard about from travelers in Africa. Everybody knew what I was doing because everybody was talking, sometimes many of them all at once (!) about what I was doing. They were also moving around a lot, visiting their relatives' villages and talking some more when they got there. Most delightful for me was almost always having a reassuring sense of people knowing what I needed to hear next—the sense that they were following along with my learning process and trying to fill in gaps in my education. That socializing a young person "takes a village" seemed a natural baseline assumption of the Ju/'hoansi, and they appeared to participate in this for me, even as a visitor who arrived out of nowhere, as easily as they breathed.

Of course, people were happy when I shared meals or gifts with them to facilitate their spending talking time or storytelling with me. But reimbursement motivations always seemed separate, somehow, from the joy they took in sharing their knowledge and fun. Very occasionally I paid someone for a special, commissioned recording project,



but usually not. Most often the people spared both me and themselves the indignity of “so much for a story, so much for a song” — the question simply never came up. To be part of an enjoyable artistic experience that was also a correct communication to my world seemed, in itself, important to them.

July 28–29, 1971, was an example of a time period when fieldwork merged almost seamlessly with my fulfilling social life at Toothbrush Tree.

It was quite a day. We all stayed in our blankets awhile and chatted across the camp as the sun rose. There was a big joke about the donkey that came running through last night, pursued by the village dogs . . . and then there were a lot of nice little things to do like cuddling up to the fire, playing with puppies, going to return the burlap sack to [its owner] and coming back with a delicious bowl of sour milk, passing out *kaq'amakoq* [berries] I had been *hxaro'*ed [given], etc. . . . At the other village I went with N=emce into the bush to see the tusks he got off a dead elephant and has hidden buried in the sand. He has been offered five cows apiece for them by the black people [in this case Kavangos, I believe] but needs help buying the elephant license so he can sell them. I offered to do this for him and he will pay me back when he sells one cow to Alec at Sehitwa. So he will bring the tusks in gunny sacks by night to my camp, and we will go to see the chief. [This was long before the Botswana government took away all hunting and many resource rights from the San.] . . .

Came home to my little lovely house and did pleasant things for a while: hemmed a skirt, washed my face, baked bread in a Dutch oven over the fire, walked to the well [that people were digging] and saw how horribly deep and still no water. Started a language lesson with !Xuma which turned into a warm, pleasant discussion about =Oma's future. He is going to go to school as soon as possible, and I am going to pay [his fees]. I may get him to teach someone else how to drive. I also told him and !Xuma about the Americans on the moon. !Xuma said, “Why is it that Americans can do something even God can't do?” It was an exciting talk because it was about someone's [=Oma's] *real future*, not about some old dry vocabulary words.

So much has changed about my life here in the last few days. Currents of real, not spurious, excitement now run together and run strong. I've hardly slept for four days because there has been so much going on, and yet I feel on top of things, able to deal with people, and as if I am at last getting somewhere. There is so much!

It seems to me Bushmen practice humanism every day, whereas we just talk about it. . . . The day became ever more marvelous as it wore on. The old people had arrived to stay [again] . . . and we moved smoothly into

being together. I did a short interview with Kha//’an N!a’an, then over lunch together a good talk developed about Bushmen cooperating among themselves. They are very practical about humans getting along with each other: I asked why didn’t huge groups come together and get something accomplished, and people said if too large a village, people fight. [I had noticed that most villages did not go above about thirty inhabitants before some part of them fissured off, going their own way to reduce the possibility of conflict.] We also talked about schools and fields and hospitals, etc. Also about learning that other people are people. . . .

Next I went into the kitchen to do a language lesson with !Xuma, and it turned right away into a fabulous dialogue between him and Dahm Ti about the old ways versus the new ways. Mostly it centered on artifacts and apparel, and it convinced me that [though they love cloth clothing] Bushmen do have a quick and lively pride in their own traditional things. !Xuma insisted that Bushmen would never discard completely the things of the old people. The *coana* [skin loincloth], he said, you have to have when you want to dance real medicine; it also makes you run faster when you’re chasing an animal. They talked with obvious interest in returns to skins by Herero and Kgalagadi women, occasions they had heard of. And of the virtues of skin blankets over wool.

But the most interesting thing of all, and what made the day come full circle, was that !Xuma and =Oma said they both wanted to learn about Europeans’ religion [this was in reference to a visit to their area by missionaries]. But !Xuma said even if they did they wouldn’t ever stop dancing. . . .

I slept awhile in the late afternoon, then got up and stalked some quail in the sunset in my bare feet. I think the reason I didn’t get one was I was of my usual two minds about killing. . . . Then I washed my hair and put on clean clothes and powdered myself with *sa*, and joined the old men around the campfire. Then began one of the most rewarding evenings I have spent in a long time, especially welcome because I desired it but didn’t have to organize or push or pull for it to happen. A good, spontaneous evening of folktales and other stories began. I had to keep reminding myself I wasn’t dreaming, it was all so perfect. Old !Unn/obe was a fund of new stories, Old Kha//’an volunteered information about the stars, I found out a world of unsuspected things just by sitting and doing nothing. They were so inspired I didn’t even have to ask questions.

While the origin of guinea fowl was being told, a pot of same was simmering before us. One dish, so simply served. No jumping up to get another dessertspoon from the sideboard! Such a dignity and concentration in simple meals. And the tales lasted just long enough. When the talk tapered off into a long personal reminiscence I was too tired to follow. I said goodnight and went to my house, feeling amazed and gratified by the day.

I kept on recording stories, not just from the older people but from anyone who wanted to tell them. Younger people often seemed to know the details of the stories, but they regularly deferred to older people as those who knew them best. Older people showed immense gusto in telling the stories, and everyone acknowledged and enjoyed that too. I continued to feel my work was somehow on the edge of adventure, of learning: everything was being created anew, in a way, all the time, because each storyteller told tales differently each time, as well as differently from the ways others told them. I was entranced by the individualism, and the excitingly variant styles I was collecting, and I increased my attempts to record as many versions of each story as I could.

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In stories and bead motifs and healing dances and so many other areas, evidence of interpenetration of meanings in the different cultural media was becoming overwhelming. The time I spent in fieldwork was turning out to be an exercise in transcending or erasing a myriad of boundaries—ones I had assumed, from the rules of my own culture, to be unbreachable. This discovery was intellectually and personally exciting, but how could I bundle it into a package that Harvard's Anthropology Department would recognize as a thesis? In particular, I needed to fulfill the rash promises I had made to Irvén DeVore and Richard Lee about demonstrating the adaptive value of narrative. I felt that I was seeing, many times each day, proof of that early conviction of mine, but how could I stuff all this variability, all this interpenetrating richness of symbolism, into the so-called adaptationist paradigm? I couldn't shake the feeling that the material I had was too big for any of the theoretical tools for thinking about it I had yet been offered. This question remained a drone note in my mind as the last few months of my fieldwork raced toward their close. I knew that I would somehow come up with an acceptable synthesis once I got home behind a desk and had a chance to explore options with colleagues. For now, while still in the field, I doubled down on efforts to record as much verbal material as possible—and to get my reel tapes home in decent enough shape to work with.

As it has turned out, I recorded enough that at this writing, more than fifty years since I first arrived in Botswana, a number of tales still remain to be transcribed and translated. That work is going forward both in my office in Texas and in the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group's office, with its new, high-speed internet connection, in Tsumkwe, Namibia. All of the sound files have been safely digitized, though, and

are available in open-access at the Endangered Languages Archive at the University of London. And I have had ample opportunity to interact with colleagues who were asking some of the same questions as I had been, such as the questions about variability and ambiguity in the Ju/'hoan and other San stories and belief systems as related to the concept of adaptation. Some of the many colleagues whose work stands out for me in this regard are Roger Hewitt, Mathias Guenther, David Lewis-Williams, Brian Boyd, and the late Michael Wessels.

Though I focused on making recordings as I was going into my last half year of fieldwork, the theoretical deliberations, mainly about the value of evolutionary approaches, remained prominent in my mind. Many of them were only resolved once I got back to the US, dusted myself off, and began to write. I drew insight from concepts developed in a wonderful paper by Nicholas Blurton Jones and Mel Konner, “!Kung Knowledge of Animal Behavior (or: The Proper Study of Mankind is Animals).” Documenting the series of “seminars” they had been holding in Dobe with the Ju/'hoansi shortly before I arrived in 1970, Nick and Mel carefully described the meticulous attention the Ju/'hoan hunters paid to making sure of the truth of any observations they offered about animals or their environment. Often a question the anthropologists posed to the Ju/'hoansi was answered with a personally observed story about animal behavior—and this made it memorable for both the teller and those to whom such a story was told. The adaptive value of narrative as a mnemonic device in learning survival skills was becoming clearer to me! That paper also made me aware of different learning styles—particularly between oral cultures and scribal cultures. It let me see I was right that the Ju/'hoan learning style was efficient for a Ju/'hoan person due to, as Nick and Mel wrote, the “‘filing’ and retrieval of information stored in a system of the subject’s own construction” (Blurton Jones and Konner 1976: 345). I was enthusiastic about the support these ideas gave to the high value I observed among the Ju/'hoansi of tolerance for individual perspectives and creativity.

I spent three years writing my thesis after I left the field, and I owe an immense debt to many other predecessor writers and colleagues in that process. These included most prominently Lorna Marshall, with whom I lived and continued to work as a research assistant during those years. I was deeply influenced by Lorna’s wonderful article “Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among the !Kung,” in her first book *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*. Lorna’s daughter, the writer Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, in her book *The Old Way*, helped me to see that the Ju/'hoansi rightly regarded their relationships with their relatives, both living and dead, as their most valued resource.

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I was also inspired by Richard Lee, whose work added meticulous detail to Lorna's demonstration that the economic lives of the Ju/'hoansi were inseparable from their social lives, especially because of their egalitarian sharing and their high degree of environmental knowledge. I owe an important debt to Richard for sharing a document that helped me focus my thoughts about my recordings along evolutionary lines. After I returned to the US in 1972, he gave me something I have carried around with me since, a marked-up first draft of his landmark contribution to Carl Sagan's edited volume, *Communication with Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence* (1973). In Richard's chapter, originally titled "On the Origin of Intelligent Life on Earth," he recounts a lively panel discussion among Sagan, Gunther Stent, Francis Crick, Kent Flannery, and himself. Richard's contribution was to bring together for the other scientists the mechanisms of cultural evolution to shed light on the development of human intelligence as a general process. He explained that the main area that offers scope for complex behavior is the social field, where experimentation can take place without immediately endangering the survival chances of the organism. After going through the physical prerequisites for the development of the modern human brain, he focused on the *behavior* of our primate antecedents as our source for understanding the emergence of intelligent life on the planet.

Citing lessons from his own teacher, Sherwood L. Washburn, Richard brought together three related explanations for the origin of human intelligence: tool making, the transition to hunting and gathering as a mode of production, and the emergence of language. Though there's a sentence of his that today, almost five decades later, is unnecessary to include (I have italicized it below), a paragraph of the draft has remained for me a talismanic statement:

The late Irving Hallowell argued that consciousness represents the true dawn of humanity, but how we are to pinpoint this event in the fossil record is an extremely difficult problem. One point is clear: once language becomes established, it has its own logic of development. In fact, language becomes elaborated far beyond the adaptive need of the organism. This problem has puzzled me. *The !Kung bushmen of southern Africa, with whom I lived for several years, exhibit an intelligence entirely comparable to our own.* However, they exist with a total material culture of less than one hundred named items. On the other hand, their communicating abilities are truly impressive. At night they sit around the campfire telling stories that are full of complex metaphor, humor, and all the innuendo, a mode of expression that we have come to associate with the literature of an advanced civilization; yet these are people who practice no agriculture

and have no domesticated animals except for the dog. Are we to conclude from this that the tremendous growth of human intelligence was largely for social and recreational purposes? . . . [L]anguage may have originated to make man a more perfect hunter but . . . the unanticipated consequences of this event were very great. (Lee 1973: 85–94)

I first read these words as a former English major just returned from a tumultuous period of anthropological fieldwork and beginning to organize her PhD materials. I felt they gave me a shiny interdisciplinary key to the thesis I would eventually write, and to my whole career thereafter. I focused on the phrase “social and recreational purposes.” After all, I had seen that when Ju/hoansi got together, most often at night, to do the truly hard work of healing, with the immense cognitive and physical labor it involved, they never called it work, and always called it “play.”

I had noticed during my fieldwork that when the sun went down, Ju/hoansi completely stopped asking me for things, and instead focused on talk and stories and dancing and having a good time. Not only was I able to relax after dark and simply enjoy being where I was, but it seemed the Ju/hoansi did as well, and almost always spent pleasant evenings with each other talking and smoking, or dancing around fires. Years later, in her marvelous 2014 paper, “Embers of Society: Firelight Talk among the Ju/hoansi Bushmen,” Polly Wiessner succinctly stated the differences between day and night talk and activities. “Day talk centered on practicalities and sanctioning gossip; firelit activities centered on conversations that evoked the imagination, helped people remember and understand others in their external networks, healed rifts of the day, and conveyed information about cultural institutions that generate regularity of behavior and corresponding trust. Appetites for firelit settings for intimate conversations and for evening stories remain with us today” (Wiessner 2014: 14,027).

I had seen that key to the efficacy of the healing play (the Ju/hoansi’s premier nighttime, firelit activity) was that it was not just creativity—it was *joint* creativity, social creativity. Putting on a dance that led to healing entailed ensemble work, improvisational work, of the highest order. Built on tradition, it was tradition enhanced and made anew each time by the participants who happened to be there, consisting of the states of mind—some of them purposefully “altered states of mind”—of everyone at that moment. It was as if tradition itself didn’t exist: ideas and experiences of the past were important, but their magic needed to be constantly made afresh by the combined energies of fully engaged people. In that, the dance was much like jazz.

I felt that conveying this aspect of the healing dance in my writing was perhaps the most important task I could call on myself to do. The

power of this communal activity was extremely hard to describe adequately. I knew, though, what I had somehow to make known to people I would speak to when I went home, to people who would read what I wrote. I needed to tell them that the healing dance was a brilliant, communal art form enabled equally by the disciplined, altered state purposefully achieved by the healers, by the ever-changing polyphonic music of the singers, by the clapping and the stamping and the percussive rattling of the singers and the dancers, by those who watched, those who built up the fire when it died down, and those who were healed.

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In the last months of my fieldwork, therefore, I was earnestly asking myself how I could write a thesis that would not only satisfy my academic advisors and colleagues but communicate to a wider public. Ever more keenly, I felt responsibility to share the privilege of the marvelous, perhaps soon to be unrepeatable, experiences I was having. I wondered whether I could extend the boundaries of academic writing so that what I wrote could not only speak to anyone who was interested but could provide a channel for the actual words of the Ju/'hoan people I had recorded, words that would be filtered as little as possible through my own consciousness. I wanted other Westerners to hear voices of people today living lives that preserve some important links to those of our most ancient human ancestors. Key among those links are that the narrative imagination is in fact an evolutionary tool for survival, and that meaning must be made anew by each group of storytellers and listeners, and by each group of dancers and singers and community members being healed.

To communicate well about these things I had seen, I knew that I must preserve at all costs the mysteries at the heart of the healing and of the transformative ideas in the folklore. Richard Katz wrote that the Ju/'hoan dance has "... conceptual clarity [but] experiential mystery ..." (Katz 1982: 45). I knew that the mysteries behind the power to change, which were so celebrated by the people, must not be lost in translation. Neither in verbal nor cultural translation should I take over-literal or reductive shortcuts when trying to convey the powerful human truths that had been shared with me. I began to see that translation at its finest, especially when dealing with spiritual truths, is itself a spiritual exercise. I said to myself that once one knows what mysteries are contained in words, one can never skate without concern over the surface of things in mere literal translation. The "answers" to what to say are

found in translation only if the mystery (and the nuance, and the layering of meanings) remains.

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I knew it wasn't going to be easy, once back at Harvard, to convey the spiritual mystery and cultural intricacy I had experienced. In fact, once I got there and began to describe to my professors how deeply the complexity went, and how much I myself had been changed in the process of learning about it, one of them, not a Kalahari specialist, flatly said, "Megan, you're *lost*." He meant that I had "gone bush," implying I would never manage a thesis or, likely, an anthropological career. Luckily, I had already realized that I had *needed* to be lost: my experience had been such that I knew myself to be, by that time, quite "found," and I went forward undeterred.

So, though the thought was daunting, I pondered the best ways to convey the richness of what I had learned. I thought about writing books and participating in visual media to provide chances for many Westerners, even without exotic travel, to make common cause with our indigenous contemporaries. I reflected that there are ways of erasing the photographer in photography so that the subjects speak with their own eyes. There are ways of presentation in prose that humanize people who even today can be dismissed as "primitive" by some and put behind a screen as if unable to speak for themselves.

There are ways for facilitators, as I aspired to be, to get themselves out of the way so that indigenous voices can use the communicative space—or not—as they choose.

I reflected that the best mediations would bring public attention to the strengths, as well as the needs, of contemporaries like the Ju/'hoansi. They would bring dignity because they would allow personal discovery of a relationship of equality—doing this through activating the imagination, using the questing of the viewer's own mind. This would be the opposite of the frozen, "one-down" position imposed on people such as these by characterizing them as victims, as people known mostly by their "plights," or people who are somehow "disappearing." Correctly used cameras and sound recorders, I realized, are uniquely positioned among the tools of media to capture the immediacy of the humanizing slice of time.

Bad writing and bad photography can essentialize or romanticize indigenous peoples beyond our knowledge of them as contemporaries, I thought: good writing and good photography can bring us into an approximation of their current world, warts and all. The people can



emerge from the pages as the real human beings they are, sometimes wonderful, sometimes infuriating, always themselves. Setting things up logistically but then *getting out of the way* so that people can speak for themselves seemed to me the most important task for any who would want to promote the self-determination of these peoples.

“Self-presentational energy” is what sociologist Erving Goffman called the powerful, transformative quality of communication thus enabled. Unmediated, or when necessary mediated skillfully, this energy travels straight from one heart to the heart that needs to take it in. Isn’t this what, after all, we all look for in our lives: the chance to say what matters in a way that makes a difference? Because of what we stand to learn from them—tolerance, sharing, sustainable ways with the world, and so much else—we owe our indigenous contemporaries the respect of listening to them on every channel we can. As I went into the last third of my fieldwork, I wanted to say to my fellow anthropologists and to my fellow Americans: “Let’s pay much more than lip service to the idea of cultural and intellectual diversity on earth. Survival—humane survival of us all—may depend on it.”

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Thinking about all this, I resolved to play my part in educational efforts to spread valuable cross-cultural awareness to a public beyond academia. I knew that other colleagues shared my commitment to do this, as well. Prior to my fieldwork, I had been impressed by discussion, in one of the anthropology core courses taught by the late Dr. Evan Z. Vogt, of the quest “to make anthropology a policy science.” I also knew that John Marshall had made ground-breaking strides in shooting and disseminating high-quality ethnographic film for educational purposes at high-school and college levels. Quite a bit before my return to Cambridge in 1972, he and others in the Marshall family as well as some of my colleagues in the Harvard Kalahari Research Group were also casting about for ways to make anthropological knowledge responsibly available to a wider public.

One of the first ways they found was with the Educational Development Corporation (EDC) in Cambridge, by contributing field materials like life histories of individual informants to EDC’s pioneering anthropological curriculum for high schools, “Man: A Course of Study.” Pat Draper and John Yellen furnished biographies of Dobe people I had also come to know, and I found this immediacy of presenting nuanced profiles of contemporary individuals a promising approach to making anthropology work for US students younger than college age.

I also reflected on the practical value of facilitating peoples' own documentation of their cultural and linguistic heritage, so as to use it for their own purposes. Local oral history projects in southern Africa today, for instance, are providing the materials for people to draw attention to—and legislate against—land dispossession, loss of control over traditional resources and sources of livelihood, and loss of indigenous languages through shortsighted “mainstreaming” educational systems. These projects are also foregrounding the positive, resilient, creative responses indigenous peoples are making to turn these losses upside down into many sorts of gains—for their communities and for the world.

Of course, the conundrum that culture has a way of isolating people within silos is by its nature never completely solvable, for anthropologists or for anybody else. We have to work with this conundrum every day, as we are finding to our chagrin in the US now. (I wrote these chapters in the turbulent time before and after the 2020 presidential election: it is also the time of COVID, of Black Lives Matter demonstrations against police brutality, of school shootings, and of the hoped-for beginnings of massive cultural reexamination.) Doing this work is coterminous with the necessary peeling away of thick layers of ethnocentrism. Many Americans have come tragically late to participating in a world learning process paralleling growth of the individual beyond egocentrism to balanced appreciation of, and empathy with, Others. Instead, as Mel Konner said to me recently, “The opposite happened; we discovered that there are two very different American cultures, and we deepened the chasm between them.”

Some anthropologists have come up with one solution to becoming part of public discourse, and some have come up with others, depending on our situations and inclinations. These have ranged from distant or hands-on philanthropy, activism, or publicity for issues being faced, to finding ways to ameliorate the situation of communities fragmented by land expropriation or war, to bearing witness, documentation, or providing tools—media as well as other sorts of tools—requested by communities that wanted them and were soon to know how to use them. I saw that individuals in some situations managed to combine several of these approaches effectively, and I began to learn from the models they provided.

Thinking through and testing some of these models for myself, I planned a way to go forward as an anthropologist that I thought I could live with—and that might provide substantial help. I knew that the process of erasing ethnocentricity would never end, but I felt we as anthropologists should realize we have important choices to make in

how we present ourselves, position ourselves, account for ourselves, in our slice of time in the world. I resolved to speak to my Harvard Kalahari colleagues about these issues as soon as I returned to Cambridge. From our eventual conversations came the founding of one of the first anthropologist-based advocacy groups—the Kalahari Peoples Fund. We transformed our research group into an activist group, using its research to work on behalf of the indigenous people we had lived with—and from whom we had learned so much.

I have written elsewhere about the formation of the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF), its San-initiated community projects in southern Africa, and the Namibian independence process we in KPF participated in as consultants to the Ju/'hoan people's organization, then called the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative. More and more my own work, both in research and for KPF, became not just trying to understand or contextualize the utterances of Ju/'hoan people but facilitating their direct entry into world dialogues. This kind of work involved authoritative transcription (linguistically correct written renderings of sound recordings) and translation of many kinds of verbal material, including political speeches and consensus-based community meetings. Thus the Ju/'hoan Transcription Group, formed of native Ju/'hoan speakers, has become my focus in later years, and the primacy I have felt for the concept of "found in translation" is now underlain, for me, by the authority of what is "found in transcription." Transcription in close concert with native speakers, that is, who can provide the layers of meanings in words in such a way that they do not leave out the mysteries contained within words.

Responsible cultural translation was facilitated by ongoing attention to what both Richard Lee and I came to call "the lessons of the Ju/'hoansi." These lessons included many of the precepts of egalitarian group living we had seen operating so well in the times we both lived with the Ju/'hoansi. They also included attention to the important social tasks of honoring and fulfilling responsibilities to our forebears. One of my later article titles, "The Old People Give You Life," was a direct quote from !Unn/obe's story of the elephant girl. I recorded this quote at the time the story was told and began to reflect on it. To it I added my own thought that we the living give the departed life in return, by continuing our relationships with them and doing the things we know they are asking of us. We try to treat them well; we demand to be treated well by them in return. We honor their memories and the creations they were responsible for during life, creations and performances that have formed an irreplaceable part of our complex world's heritage. In this way life and death intermingle. There is life in death and death in life.

If people like the Ju/'hoansi had been our forebears, I thought, we owed them, just as we owed our own elders and immediate ancestors, both honor and help with the things they asked of us.

In the early months of 1972 I was finishing my work in Ngamiland and planning what I would do when I got back to the US. I realized that I had to some extent replaced my sense of obligation to Harvard with the need to fulfill my social obligations to the Ju/'hoan people, with whom I had lived and from whom I had learned so much. I realized, too, that I had in fact undergone a socialization experience that would continue to inform the values underlying my decisions going forward. Thoughts like this gradually brought me the realization that I had, at least in part, fulfilled very basic social duties to my Ju/'hoan friends. I began to feel I could now in good conscience begin to go home to my own people. It was time to check back in with, and check on, my own elders.

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Though I was making important decisions about my future activities, my last few months in Botswana were still full of challenges. I was feeling more and more overwhelmed by the number of generalized reciprocity obligations I had acquired. In visiting the large number of Ju/'hoan communities I worked with in Ngamiland, I was taking on a much larger set of acquaintances and personal expectations than any local people ever had to. I also remained a target of desire for goods and services. There was literally no place for me to go to be alone, to take downtime, as it was hard to delineate any place in my camp, including my own house, as off limits to people who wanted to see me. And leaving camp alone posed actual physical dangers that could not be denied: I had been lost or too close to snakes and predators too many times to risk going off on my own without knowledgeable Ju/'hoansi to protect me.

So I began to experience some truly difficult days, some of them seeming eerily like days I saw Mel and Marjorie live through in early 1971, just before they left Dobe to go home. I seemed to be experiencing many of the same pressures, nearing the end of my allotted eighteen months, as I'd seen them experiencing near the end of their even longer initial fieldwork in Botswana—nearly two full years. The strongest source of stress we had in common may have been the ambivalence of fearing, on the one hand, that we had not fulfilled (and could never fulfill) the social expectations of these people from whom we had learned so much, but on the other hand fearing that we had done ourselves irreparable damage in the process of trying. There was for me a great

feeling of vulnerability in that I had strained myself past my social limits but might not manage to produce work that would justify having done so.

FEBRUARY 17, 1972

Realized recently I have a hang-up about “toughness.” I am always putting myself in situations which require more strength than I’ve actually got. I want to do by sheer willpower and force of mind what I haven’t really the emotional (or physical?) foundation to do. . . . I feel more and more recently that I have now gotten myself into a position which does me real violence. The loneliness, the incredible demands and difficulties, the moratorium on joy or, often, on contact at all with other people. A progressive deadening, inevitably. . . . These mornings I am waking up in dread. . . . I fear never getting all this work done because I will be too snowed under by busywork relating to my overcommitments. The clincher on this dread is that I don’t think, personally, I should stay much longer. The joy that is released in me by a brief strain of Western music is a key to what I am missing, a clue to a rich life I had perhaps almost forgotten. I might as well acknowledge that, except for a few months here, it has been a constant fight to keep my head above water. Physically as well as emotionally, I am greedy for strength.

I have a series of black and white pictures I took of myself at this time; in most of them I seem to be thrusting my jaw out, and I have an expression of gritty determination on my face.

FEBRUARY 19, 1972

I don’t know quite why I stopped writing for several months previous to the last few days. . . . Partly it is my lack of energy, which sometimes seems to be getting worse instead of better. . . . My physical energy is so dependent on the emotions generated by the course of events in any one day that it is hard to say anything about it abstracted from that context. . . . [Sometimes] the energy flows well and I work all day fairly well (like yesterday) but if the volume of contacts becomes too confusing, if I try to do too much, things turn in upon themselves, and the inside of my head feels like a grey whirlpool. I can feel my body as an empty shell, no life left in it to respond to people with. . . .

Sometimes I’m shocked, when I play back tapes of interviews, to hear how faint and exhausted and reedy my voice sounds. Considering that I feel this badly about a third of the day here, this seems an unhealthy life I have chosen for myself. I am beginning to have definite stirrings of the mind towards leaving. Whenever I wake up in the night now, I know I ought to be at home with my own people. It is only with the return of the rationalizations

and mental constructs of daytime that I can (emotionally) justify staying [these] last few months. Then at times of high euphoria it still seems like I want to stay here forever. Can I bear to leave this dancing now?

In the States, I'll never find a place to sleep that's free of the sound of cars. Anyplace. Even dawns will be tainted, back home, by fumes. (I've forgotten what fumes are!) I'll miss running my own whole outrageous show, too. I know I must have gotten good and used to being the boss. I woke up from a nap this afternoon and remembered my fears of a year ago that I would never have enough "presence" to run a camp, have employees, etc. Today I looked at the (relatively) well-oiled establishment I have running here, so far out in the bush. I take care of or direct every last detail myself (medicine, repairing the Land Rover, groceries, cooking, accounting, salaries, *and* anthropology), employ and deal with adults of a very strange culture, maintain fair and equable relationships with hundreds of people at one time, do my work, and still manage to be involved heavily in philanthropic projects. I am amazed that I have managed this. It is really so far from anything I had previously imagined myself doing. I used to think fieldwork was a lonely, simple (if arduous) affair.

MARCH 2, 1972

I am wretched. I feel torn in so many unwanted directions. . . . I just can't handle things anymore. It has suddenly become too much for me. . . . By all odds I should be having fun. But I'm miserable instead, laden down with a pile of responsibilities that have simply gotten out of hand. I can't settle down to anything, am so paranoid I can hardly go out of the house. When will this end? . . . I can't get any work done . . . aagh, I can't even read a book. Where is solace? No water for even tea, and my toothbrush is broken too.

Looking back at how small things like a broken toothbrush upset me, it's clear I was in "final fieldwork phase." Days of wretchedness alternated unpredictably with days of philosophical peace.

APRIL 10, 1972

I think one of the reasons I have often gotten into strange situations with improbable people is that I am always trying to keep the door open for possible spiritual guides. I think I have always known that supernatural helpers may pop up unexpectedly at any time, in the guise of a crone, a cripple, a beggar. . . . Perhaps it was all those fairy tales I used to read. But I reflect now that I have been mesmerized with expectation in encounters with such people, even before I read anything like Joseph Campbell.

Ixuma is coming to be one of these people for me. He is so calm in himself, so self-contained, so sure of his own needs and impressions. In this he

is much like Lovina. . . . Our relationship has deepened, and he is like a father to me. This has happened *very* slowly. We have been together for much longer than a year. But it is only in the last few months that I have felt close to him at all. He is just amazingly calm, centered down, and very sweet.

I thought about the nineteenth-century stereotypes of unexpectedly wise and powerful people (pejoratively called “crones,” “cripples,” and “beggars”) I had from reading folktale collections from that period. I reflected that even as these dated words had been used to marginalize people like older women, the disabled, and the poor, they prepared the ground for readers or listeners to be surprised by the lessons and unexpected help available from such people in stories. I had indeed learned most of the important things in my life up to that point from marginalized people, who must, of necessity, become keen observers (and, if possible, manipulators) of the mainstream. Yet another reason for Westerners to heed what indigenous peoples have to say while yet we may.

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By May 1972, good days and bad days were alternating rapidly, especially if I had outside visitors. This occasionally happened, often without forewarning due to the complete lack of communication with other Westerners I knew. Often these visits were very welcome indeed, bringing news, delicacies like fruit or chocolate, and the chance for companionable conversations in English. But sometimes I didn’t know the visitors at all—however, they had heard of *me*, usually through Peace Corps friends in Maun or Botswana government channels in Gaborone, and they just decided to visit me unannounced. Because travel on Botswana roads was then so arduous, they regarded themselves as heroes for simply reaching my camp. Sometimes they didn’t even bring enough provisions to last their entire intended stay. I often regarded these kinds of visits, especially as my field time was diminishing, as inconvenient distractions from my work.

I also found it extremely hard to code-switch between cultures at that time (though in later years I gained some facility with that). It had taken a lot of energy to get a smooth-running camp established so I and my Ju/’hoan employees and friends could have reasonable expectations of what was going to happen on a given day. So I often felt terribly torn psychically when visitors came. I felt keenly my responsibility to translate, not just between languages but also between cultural expectations. Sometimes I just couldn’t bridge the yawning gaps. Such visits were es-

pecially hard for me at that time because it was already getting harder and harder for me, personally, just to be there. I felt deeply stressed and exhausted, like I had been doing way too much, and had been way too alone while doing it.

One painful episode when I couldn't seem to code-switch at all, couldn't be a bridge, occurred when a Swedish film team came out from the Botswana National Museum in Gaborone to make a documentary for the national information service. I could have been with the Ju/'hoansi just fine, or I could have been with the handsome, informed, articulate, and enthusiastic men of the Swedish team just fine, but at that moment I simply couldn't be with both at once. I genuinely thought I would lose my mind. I had an experience of what madness must be like on one day that was never repeated but haunts me even now.

But strangely, after [the Swedish film team] left, the relative peace and freedom once again gave me the illusion for a while that I could like it in the bush a little longer. This feeling lasted all day. I was amazed at it, I got work done, appreciated people. . . . Good feeling persisted until I went to the village to fetch some goats, then paranoia again, the incredible realization that I've hardly spent a calm hour ever in Zaog!u [Kauri], hardly know it, don't know where all the people's houses are, don't know the children's names—the ineffable sadness of seeing the kids play at sunset, and know[ing] how I've never let myself get close to any of them, for fear it would interrupt my work, for Christ's sake. . . . Everyone seemed very beautiful and very far away from me. I couldn't feel myself really inside my body, it was as if I were a shade looking on, forbidden to get vitally interested. I have to leave, my vitals are dying.

MAY 7, 1972

This is the second time recently this has happened—a day of absolute misery and incapacity followed by a day in which the situation had not really changed but I was somehow able to cope. Yesterday was ghastly—the surety that I could no longer endure being here and must get out quickly at all costs.

Another up, another down, another down, another up. I found myself writing smugly the next day:

MAY 8, 1972

But I have really fantastic material, though. There is enough to last for years of analysis and publishing texts. . . . And there's no point in my teaching right away when I get home. . . . I must wait for the right setup, a com-



munity school where teachers and students are in true partnership, before I get institutionally involved. I have the say, now, and must not give it up.

In May 1972, as I prepared to leave Botswana, my journal entries got shorter, even staccato. On May 23, on a farewell trip to !Xabe, I wrote, “Arriving, and sitting around cooking and eating and drinking *maire* (Herero name for buttermilk). Then dancing under a freezing moon, and loving it.”

Back at G!o’oce for a last dance on May 25, I wrote about finally experiencing *tara*, the involuntary shaking that accompanies the altered state. I speak of the spiritual “arrows” of *n/om*, believed to transfer the healing power into the body of a novice healer.

Last night the dance, and being shot with an arrow [of *n/om*] that felled me. [It was shot by] N!uhnkxa . . . unexpectedly. Just ran into her at !Aoan, almost didn’t let her come along, but—spiritual guides! Have made a mistake, I think, of overglorifying the master-apprentice relationship. It is [sometimes] a much more casual thing, I think, and perhaps [it can be] this way with men healers, too.

*Tara* became possible, anyway: I could shake. And people thought it was the real thing, so perhaps it was. I realized in the middle of it that a trance should not be regarded as something that “happens” to a person. It is rather, like all good things, something creative you go into actively. The conscious going into it does not nullify it. This thought liberated me to go on and do as I felt like. It would be an uncomfortable restraint to try *not* to *tara*—and would eventually prevent it, I think. So I tried my wings, moving into it as I felt like.

So after all my early questions about whether it could ever be possible for someone to find transport—transcendence—in another culture, I had in fact experienced that. (And it has stayed with me.)

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The “lessons of the Ju/’hoansi” by now included for me a firm understanding that the details of the habits of mind, the “mental technology” by which they understood and carried out their lives, were as much characterized by sharing processes as were their handling of physical resources. Transparency and good communication, making decisions by consensus, keeping everyone “in the loop,” were keys to the necessary social acrobatics by which they kept their balance with each other. In saying to myself that they “practiced humanism every day,” I meant to

cement my understanding that their focus on the concrete, practical, reliable, human-level array of daily problems and ways to deal with them, rather than on abstractions or unreachable spiritual goals, had stood them in good stead for a very long time. It made the utmost in sense, I thought, to learn from and emulate people like these if we could, as they presented us living examples of the most long-tenured of human social arrangements—those of hunting and gathering in small groups of families, more egalitarian than any other form of social organization. The lives of the forebears of the Ju/'hoansi had of course changed over the millennia, but much of the practical social technology of the hunting/gathering adaptation was still reflected in their ideas and practices. The ways to survive and to avoid division, in other words, were based on long-honed rules. Yet these rules were as simple and obvious and humane as freely lending a hammer to a neighbor.

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In early June 1972, I wrote about my last few days in the Kauri area, which for me were a roller coaster of ups and downs. When it came time for our final dance there, I was nauseated from badly cooked mealie meal, but I was healed at the dance and then fine until I left for Maun and headed for home.

Wednesday, perfect day in Kha//an's village. Sweet.

Thursday, nauseated, in quiet despair. Unable to stand people. Tired from staying up late the night before watching a *tcoqma* dance [a young men's initiation dance on this occasion performed for my benefit], the dust rising [from their stamping] and filling nose and hair. But Philippus had warmed water for me the night before, and brought tea in the AM. I was mainly just sick to my tummy from the raw mealie meal.

People made preparations for the dance off at a new dance place. Just after sunset I dragged myself down there, feeling ill and very out of sorts. Found the place by the glow in the sky and sound of voices, and stumbled through brambles and bushes to get there, having given away my flashlight. If I hadn't been feeling so bad, a wonderful scene. My friends all around new little fires on the side of a new hill, their separate camps dotted in and out among bushes, closer together than they would have chosen to live, normally. A camp for the dance.

The pots all boiled and newly pulled off the fire. I hadn't eaten anything all day, and was glad of some hot goat. But it made me sick again soon after, so I lay down by the watching fire Philippus had made for us and wondered how I was ever going to get into this wonderful dance. Finally decided to go

with the flow, and fell asleep deliciously by the fire. When I woke up, I began to feel I might be able to join them. And I did, and danced, and clapped, and sat by the fire again, and slept a little, and got up again, and stoked the fire, and danced, and slept again until just before dawn and got up and clapped the cold sunrise in with the others. From then on until I left Kauri I was never out of it.

From viewing Kauri as the middle of nowhere I realized I had passed somehow into seeing it as the middle of everywhere. Buoyed by this last dance, I sailed through my goodbyes. I gave away the rest of my clothes and supplies, made arrangements for !Xuma and =Oma !Oma to get back to Dobe, and packed up my tapes and notes for shipping back to the US. Some people from Tsau wanted a one-way trip to Maun. They helped me get the Land Rover, rattling and squeaking and seemingly on its last legs, its fuel pump nonfunctional and thus drinking petrol by gravity feed from a plastic jerry can lashed to the roof, through the heavy sand west of Sehitwa, onto the gravel road, and into Maun.

A few days after arriving in Maun, I signed, with Irven DeVore's written blessing, a barely legible carbon-copied legal form. This form documented the sale, for a very fair price, of what the buyer described as "The Land Rover Primitiv aber" (the line on the form didn't have room for "Glücklich"). My departure route from Botswana featured a ten-ton transport truck to Ghanzi, then another truck from there to Gobabis in South West Africa, and thence via the railway to Windhoek, where I would briefly stay with friends. In Windhoek I could arrange to ship my boxes via Walvis Bay to Boston, letting me travel light, with just a knapsack, the rest of the way home.

I knew I would need some adjustment time between the Kalahari and the United States. My plan was to spend about a month hitchhiking from Windhoek up the west coast of Africa and to eventually meet my sister Boppy in Athens, where she was to be traveling with a friend. The beginning and end points of that mad plan actually came to pass, though the adventure at its middle was, as they say, another story. By the time I got on the road outside of Windhoek and stuck out my arm for my hike north, I was already in a panic that I might never make it back to the Kalahari.

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Before the first transport truck picked me up in Maun, though, I had a few days to sit on the banks of the Thamalakane River, reflecting and writing a bit more in my journal. Though still asking myself what ex-

actly I had been doing there, though still unsure whether I could ever bring publishable order to the flood of experiences I had had in my 550 days in Botswana, I found myself preparing to depart in relative equanimity. I seemed to have learned at least a little bit about trusting time to heal and to reveal.

Sitting by the river, I had glorious flashbacks to earlier times in my fieldwork, when I had a growing sense of mastery and was still feeling the delicious interpenetration of work and life. I treasured the memory of a walk I took with a group of Ju/'hoan men further north in Ngamiland than I had yet been, up in the wide sand spaces where the land seems just perceptibly to lift toward the gigantic rise it makes into distant central Africa. We were on an expedition to get honey from the hives of ground-dwelling bees. I had been given a taste of this delicious, dark-orange honey once, and I had expressed a wish to see the underground hives of these bees and to taste the honey again. "M!a ka u-o!" (Let's go!) said several middle-aged men, including !Xuma, with whom I was sitting around in the shade at a village.

We walked along a dune valley in a straight line for literally kilometers. The weather was perfect, dry and cool and bracing, and we all seemed to fall into synchrony with each other's paces as the sandy distances slid easily by. I marveled that I was keeping up, then reflected that the men's casual pace on this trip reflected its being a kind of extra, optional jaunt, one that was not business but a flight of fancy undertaken on the slightest of pretenses. The golden afternoon seemed to go on and on forever.

We came to the place of the underground bees at the edge of a dune where the sand was clumpy, its particles sticking together rather than sifting easily apart. Where the dune lifted, I saw a number of holes in the ground about the size of small snake holes. I wondered whether the men were going to smoke the bees as I had seen them do with bees' nests that were high up in trees. This time, however, I watched the men deftly enlarge the holes' entrances and extract chunks of honeycomb from underground without getting stung: each man who did this made himself absolutely silent and calm first, almost like entering an altered state. The chunks of comb emerged dripping with dark orange honey and were laid close together in a flat piece of tree bark whose edges were then folded in upon themselves to make a carrying container. We backed away quietly and walked to another dune, one with a shade tree, and sat down to enjoy the honey.

It was like ambrosia. We ate, and then out came the metal pipes, and the men crumbled tobacco leaves and shared a good, long smoke. They began telling stories. I felt myself, too, to be on holiday and so

just enjoyed the shade and allowed their voices and their words to become a jumble in my mind. I mused on the unexpected pleasure of this whole day, wondering why I was so easily incorporated by these men into a time of what clearly seemed to be for them enjoyable leisure. Though I was an economic resource because I was employing them, I was also insignificant as any kind of barrier to their centered enjoyment of this outing. Suddenly I realized that these Ju/'hoan men, who usually seemed so small in stature compared to me, had grown bigger. They seemed as tall and broad as anyone I had ever known, these men on this casually celebratory afternoon, laughing with each other, cosmically unbothered by my presence. For a second time in a year, the world seemed to shift on its axis, the membrane between me and them seemed again to thin. I recognized these people for what they were: mature men taking their pleasure on a sandy hillside, not as Others in a timeless world, but as my contemporaries.

Also, as I sat by the river, I thought about the sand, knowing I would miss it in many ways. Like the drying, curing, preserving sun, the Kalahari sand is a nurturing, reliable resource for human beings. The sand is a reservoir for valuable tubers that grow back year after year, providing food and moisture. Burrows within it shelter fat, delicious animals like springhares, aardvarks, and porcupines that provide people with protein. It gives people fabulously useful artifacts such as the hunting quivers they make from the cylindrical bark rinds of *kokerboom* roots. Sand allows people to take down from trees the huge *n!o* fruits, "Kalahari oranges," and bury them in its depths to cure into delicious delicacies. Dig them up after a few months and—*voila!*—their hard shells can be broken open to reveal grapefruit-sized, lusciously lobed fruits tasting, improbably enough, like maraschino cherries. The sand also cools and preserves water saved in ostrich-egg canteens, so that people on the move can stash a life-saving drink against a thirsty day. From the sand of water pans there also emerge, in the dry season, huge, beautiful rosy-colored lilies. I remembered that Mel said, "Being in the Kalahari with the Ju/'hoansi is like an endless beach party, only you never get to the ocean."

I wrote,

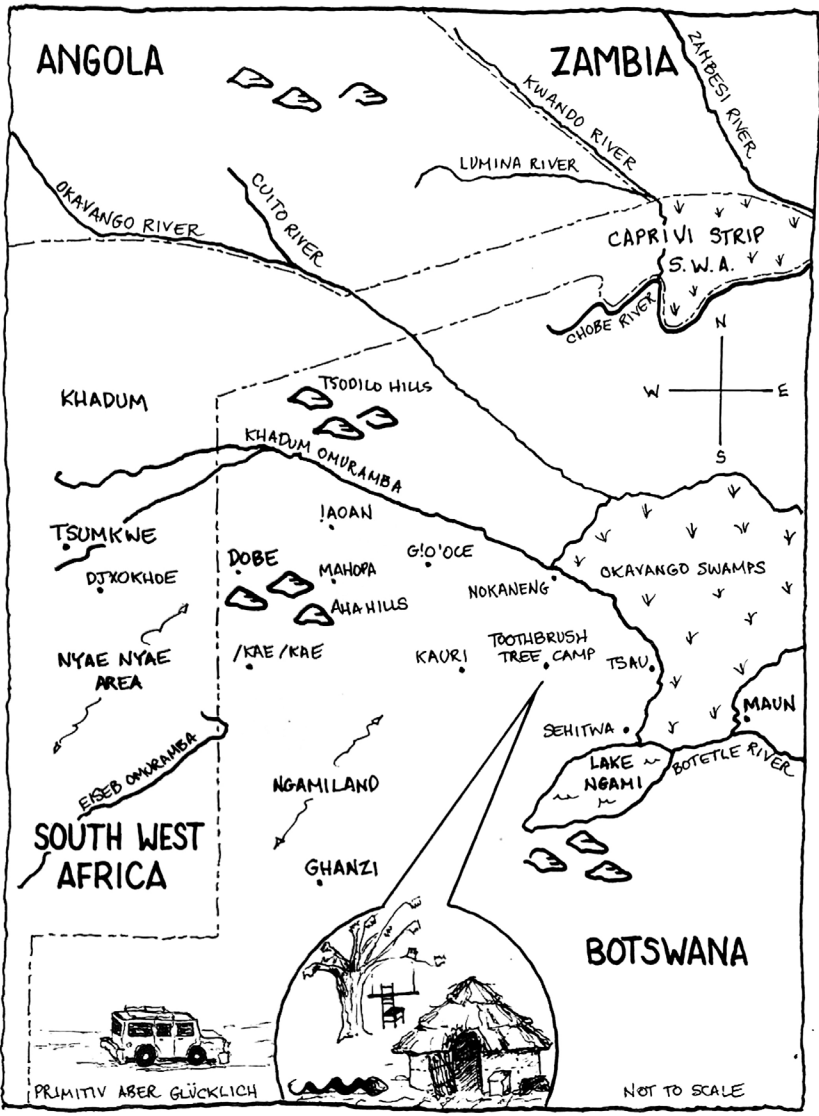
Try as I might, I have yet to find anything about Bushman culture that repels me, save those facets of it which are painful to me only as the possessor of superior wealth. Everything here seems to move toward health, catharsis, joy. . . . An amazing culture. If only I had a way to demonstrate the lesser degree of rigidity [than in US culture] I see here in everything, just everything. . . .

I'm leaving with the feeling I am only beginning to appreciate the depths to which this whole culture is permeated with festival. The slight sand rise behind /Koce's house where we made the special place for the last dance gave me that feeling of an endless beach party, where sand and everything become background for the dance, and all obstacles can be overcome.

I felt I was beginning at last to understand the close connection between *!ai*, death, and *!aia*, trance. The existence of trance—and transformation—ended contradictions and caused the fear of death to disappear, at least for a time. I thought I could—just barely—graze with the tips of my fingers, for the first time, the ends of the threads of the sky.

All is made possible by knowing that a song one hears is a *n/om* song: as !Unn/obe said, "Anyone with sense would know." I remembered another long, powerful dance, one with many dancers and singers and much trancing and healing that lasted all night. Kiewiet, the healer who later traveled to the US and spoke in the school gym in Cleveland, had been particularly satisfied with the way the dancing and singing came together that night.

During a brief break from dancing, he came to one of the watching fires for a smoke. Gazing at those still singing and dancing, and shaking his head in admiration, he said simply, to no one in particular, "You can die from such beauty."



Camp Location in Botswana. Map by Jane Hinchliffe.



## EPILOGUE

Since the time of the experiences in this book, I have been able to pursue many of the intentions that were set in my life between December 1970 and June 1972. I wrote my thesis, got my degree, and have returned to the same Ju//hoan area of northwestern Botswana—and nearby north-eastern Namibia—at least twenty-five times, sometimes for years at a time. I returned for more fieldwork and also for practical advocacy work in projects requested by Ju//hoan communities. The advocacy work was done under the auspices of the Kalahari Peoples Fund I cofounded with colleagues in the Harvard Kalahari Research Group.

In my biggest adventure of the intervening years, I was with the Namibian Ju//hoansi as they founded their community organization, the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative (NNFC), in 1988. As a nationally recognized cooperative, they were able to participate in their country's independence process in 1990. I worked as a translator and facilitator for the NNFC leadership at that time and afterward, assisting them as they took part in Namibia's First National Land Conference in 1991. That conference was the enabling event for the eventual transformation of their cooperative into the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, the first nationally recognized land conservancy in Namibia, through which they have held onto a portion of their ancestral land and its resources.

During this work I learned much more of the Ju//hoan language, becoming conversant enough in it to found mother-tongue education projects and the Ju//hoan Transcription Group (JTG). These projects have not only allowed researchers to collaborate with native speakers in person and via the internet but have made it possible for Ju//hoansi to document important meetings and heritage materials for their community. Using an orthography (a linguistically standardized way of writing) developed by the late linguist Patrick Dickens and native speakers in the early 1990s, newly computer-literate Ju//hoan speakers of the JTG have worked in ELAN, a powerful transcription-software program developed in the Netherlands. They have been processing the oral materials I started collecting in Botswana in the early 1970s and continued to collect across the border in Namibia until 2018, the last year I did fieldwork. They have also done years of professional



transcription, putting into orthographically correct written form and translating many sorts of Ju/'hoan oral materials recorded by other colleagues and by governmental agencies, filmmakers, and educators.

The cultural heritage and language documentation projects are still ongoing now, in 2022. They have led to, among other things, a digital deposit of nearly twenty thousand Ju/'hoan-language text and sound documents in the Endangered Languages Archive at the School of Oriental and African Languages, University of London. Many of these documents address environmental knowledge, hunting and gathering techniques, and the ways group survival is enabled by social sharing. Others illuminate strong themes at the heart of what made their long-tenured adaptation successful, among them the efficacious and apparently ancient dance of psychic healing they still practice, and the surprisingly strong relationship of their postmenopausal women to power.

A “mirror archive” of all the materials is planned for the Ju/'hoan community in Namibia, to be housed at the office of Tsamkxao =Oma, the first chairman of the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative, who is now the Ju/'hoan Traditional Authority recognized by the Namibian Government. Already the political subsection of the archive, containing hundreds of hours of political speeches and deliberative processes recorded in the late 1980s, during the run-up to Namibian independence, is in use by the present Ju/'hoan leadership. It serves as both recorded history and rhetorical resource as they continue to fight for their land rights and confront governmental, industrial, and tourism entities over issues of appropriation.

While the independence process was going on in Namibia, the Kalahari Peoples Fund was also pursuing San community initiatives in Botswana and South Africa. In addition to educational and cultural heritage documentation efforts, KPF has through the years supported land and resource conservation, water source provision and protection, and general human rights efforts on behalf of San and other Kalahari communities in southern Africa. Since 2020, among other ongoing projects, it has used its available resources to provide covid guidance information, translated into Ju/'hoansi and a dozen other Kalahari languages, to remote communities.

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After my fieldwork in 1972, I returned in 1975 to western Ngamiland, Botswana, to take up a newly created position with the Botswana government as research liaison for Basarwa (Bushmen) development under

Liz Wily of the Basarwa Development Office. In 1987 I started working just across the international fence in the Ju/'hoan area of South West Africa. At /Aotcha, where Lorna Marshall had done most of her fine ethnographic work, I began as project director for a new foundation started by John Marshall and Claire Ritchie. I learned that many of the Kauri people I had known in Botswana had moved to South West Africa and joined their relatives at a place near /Aotcha called Djxokhoe. I went to visit them there, and we danced. I was delighted to find that the old bonds were still there—the bonds we created by dancing together fifteen years before. Now, in the time of the coronavirus, I have been thinking a lot about how such powerful bonds between human beings can persist across distance and time.

I spent most of 2020, all of 2021, and most of 2022 self-isolating at home in Austin, Texas. I finished this book during that time. Shortly after writing the final chapter, I received a cellphone call from /Kae/kae, Botswana. A Ju/'hoan man named =Oma greeted me, “Baq'u-o! A re ge'e?" (Megan, are you well, are you alive?), and he said that his father wanted to speak to me. Kxao Tjimburu, about whom I wrote in chapter 6, came on the line, sounding as clear as if he had been calling from downtown Austin.

I had last seen Kxao decades ago, at one of the /Kae/kae dances when I heard him cry out, “I am imitating my father!” From an associate of the Kalahari Peoples Fund who passes regularly through /Kae/kae, I knew that he had been dancing and healing there ever since.

I was electrified to be in communication with Kxao, and not just because I had recently finished writing about him in the story of my first fieldwork. I was elated to learn that, though he is elderly now, he is still keen to train members of his family and other young people in the healing practice.

The problem, outlined to me by Kxao and others on the phone call, is that his waning healing strength is so much in demand by outsiders (tourists and people from other ethnic groups) that he is often sapped of energy when it comes to healing and mentoring his own people. Though the road through /Kae/kae is still the deep fissure in the sand it was when I was last there, it has been resurfaced into a rutted calcrete track by local people on cash-for-work programs to improve access to tourists and services. I was told that Kxao, who lives near the resurfaced road, is often now approached by outsiders who thoughtlessly do not wear masks or observe social distancing. His family members were worried for his health and advocated transferring him from /Kae/kae to a much more remote area. There he could live with his extended family,

get his strength back, and go on teaching and conveying the healing power to the young Ju/'hoan people who want to work with him.

Accordingly, I arranged for private donations and some funding from the Kalahari Peoples Fund and other organizations to facilitate the relocation of Kxao, his family, and the young people who were already learning from him or wanted to learn from him. I continue to work with other concerned friends to make Kxao's move to safety permanent, and to support this community-based project to continue the healing tradition.

I was very moved by the timeliness of Kxao's people's project, given that the coronavirus has been problematic even in carefully locked-down, sparsely populated countries like Botswana and Namibia. Community healing continues to be greatly needed, not only in the event of outbreaks in remote areas with few medical facilities but also to allay the fear that is gripping those countries just as it has ours.

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I was also moved by Kxao Tjimburu's phone call because of the (non-coronavirus) death in June 2020 of the Namibian Ju/'hoan healer /Kunta Boo. I first met /Kunta when he was visiting Dobe, Botswana, in 1971, and I have worked with him in Nyae Nyae, Namibia, over the years since then. /Kunta, you will remember, was one of the healer/innovators of the Giraffe dance, through whom Be N!a'an's powerful song passed on its way from then South West Africa through western Ngamiland, where /Kae/kae is located, and eventually deep into southern Botswana.

From personal observation of /Kunta as recently as 2018, I feel strongly that his overwork as a healer to outsiders was part of what led to his untimely death. Perhaps due to safari companies' exploitative employment of healers on the Namibian side of the international fence, /Kunta was training no apprentices except one middle-aged daughter. When he was dying, according to his nephew, there was no one present to sing the Giraffe songs that were so dear to him: the few people who were there knew only the Elephant songs. I would have given anything to know /Kunta had departed this world with the Giraffe songs sounding in his ears. To me it is comforting that Kxao Tjimburu will be carrying on in Botswana the teaching of the powerful Giraffe tradition he shared with both /Kunta and Kxao =Oah. As Tsamkxao =Oma, the first chairman of the Ju/'hoan people's organization, which became the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, said, "People have died, but the teaching has always continued."

Kxao and /Kunta and their people knew immediately when a dance became “heavy” and full of *n/om*, the power to heal. This happened when people became attuned to each other, all in the community focused at the same time on the same goal. I think that Westerners, too, sense right away when *communitas* asserts itself, even when it comes after a long time of painful division in our societies. In this time of the coronavirus and the resurgence of white supremacy, our time of dire need and deep divisions, we have seen attempts to recreate community over and over again in myriad ways. I think that this is the thing humans may be most sensitive to in all the world: harmony or disharmony with the others who matter to us. Creating community by joint effort may be the basic moral action for which we have all been yearning.

I learned from the Ju/'hoansi that dancing together—or doing something creative together that is meaningful and has deep symbolic reference—is one of the enabling features of human adaptation. It allows us, at least for a stretch of time that can be repeated as needed, to be fearless enough to go on living in the face of the real adversities of our world. I saw it enable the Ju/'hoansi, with few possessions, with no pharmacopeia for disease but a handful of plant-based remedies, with no larder but the land, no mind-numbing substances like alcohol, to dwell on the surface of the earth in frequent delight and without making violent projections upon others. It allowed them to live face-to-face and to heal skin-to-skin, but also, through an ancient technology of consciousness, to minister to loved ones from afar.

The world is now facing, at enormous scale, the conundrum of how to maintain human contact at a safe distance. In this time of distanced connections enabled by our new technologies, the Ju/'hoan healing and maintenance of relationships from afar allow us to wonder: mightn't these mysterious, powerful, remote connections be strong enough to sustain us until we can be skin-to-skin again?

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The main goal of this book has been to present the lessons that anthropology—and I as both a person and an anthropologist—learned from the Ju/'hoan people. Lessons, they taught me, can often be best learned from stories. I had chosen anthropology partly because it contained the potential to increase understanding about what it means to be human. As I shifted my major from English to anthropology during my progress from undergraduate to grad school, I learned an immense number of impressive new things about anthropology's ability to increase this understanding. Yet as a humanist, I distrusted the seemingly “scientis-

tic” claims and methods of the field as a whole. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was on a quest for a different model of anthropological scholarship from the ones presented to me in my first semesters at Harvard. A friend said to me later that I probably wanted a model that was consonant with the personal spiritual quest I seemed to be on at the same time.

This observation rang true for me. It was, after all, the 1960s when I was in grad school. There was dawning awareness at that time that youth in America were lacking the social, initiatory experiences that guided youth in other cultures through the perilous limbo of adolescence. I was not up on the psychological literature of adolescence at the time, but I somehow knew that to resolve the complexities of my own growing up I would have to work hard—very hard—in some way that did not come easy to me. In retrospect, as readers may have seen, I seem to have ended up designing the perfect initiatory ordeal and learning experience for myself. My adventures were an ordeal of my own choosing. I am inordinately grateful for having had this opportunity for further growing up.

Of course, I did not grow up all at once in the early 1970s. I still spent decades processing my experiences in the course of further research, teaching, translating, and writing. Writing was one of the main ways I managed to internalize the most important lessons I had learned. Like any field-worker, I had to bring order to a welter of experiences. This book is my story of how I solved problems of order and meaning through the painstaking accretion of participation and observations, vocabulary and idioms, symbolic connections and folk concepts. I set myself to present through my writing the way the arts of the Ju/’hoan people, especially their narrative and healing arts, both constitute the intricate symbolic mechanisms of their egalitarian culture and drive it forward.

Most of all I wanted to make the expressive art and lessons of the Ju/’hoansi more available to the world beyond the Kalahari. Though not a linguist, I have made close transcription and translation of their language my life’s work. I regard the hard spiritual work of translation as the most important job I can do. I wanted this book to bring readers closer to both the clarity of Ju/’hoan thought and to the mystery, especially in the healing dance, of what the Ju/’hoansi themselves say is beyond knowing.

I had had an unparalleled chance to live closely with a group of people whose survival depended not only on rigorous sharing but on functioning as a creative collective. I was compelled to write about this not just for myself but for my own friends and community. I believe that,

like all those who have had extraordinary experiences, I have a responsibility to share them. I believe they can matter to my peers, to students, to colleagues, to those in other fields, and to young readers casting about for ways to engage responsibly with a complex, multiethnic, multiracial world. What I learned from the Ju/'hoansi suggests civility and creativity options for many Western communities' very survival.

As I've said, the experiences I had in those first months of fieldwork set the stage for my lifetime intention. I have spent the ensuing half century advocating on behalf of the Ju/'hoansi and other San peoples, largely to foster awareness of the intricate symbolic mechanisms of their egalitarian culture. Wanting to make the expressive art and lessons of the Ju/'hoansi more available to the world beyond the Kalahari, I have mostly tried to use, not paraphrase or my own interpretation, but careful transcription and translation of their own recorded voices. To do this well I have needed to return often to both Botswana and Namibia. I would have been in Africa again these last few years, were it not for the coronavirus. In short, I am trying to share the many practical tools of thought I learned in the Kalahari. I believe we are going to need something like these tools to build, once we are through the current crises and their many associated challenges, the very different world that must lie beyond. We are lucky to have the tools and wisdom of our forebears to inform our own creativity as we go forward. Indeed, once upon a time is *now*.

A portion of royalties from this book will be donated to the Kalahari Peoples Fund, a United States 501(c)(3) nonprofit ([www.kalaharipeoples.org](http://www.kalaharipeoples.org)).



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