

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

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.)

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.

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.

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—*voilà!*—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."