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978-0-521-29561-1 - The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society

Richard Borshay Lee

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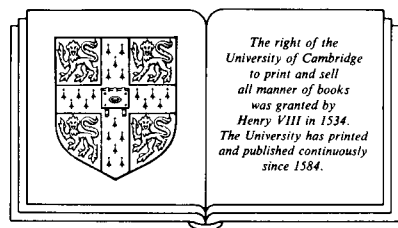
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# THE !KUNG SAN

Men, Women, and Work  
in a Foraging Society

RICHARD BORSHAY LEE

*University of Toronto*



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*Why should we plant,  
when there are so many mongongos in the world?*  
/Xashe, a !Kung man from Mahopa

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# Preface

THE origin of this study of the !Kung San dates back to 1961, when I was a student at the University of California. With Desmond Clark, Sherwood Washburn, and Irvén DeVore, my teachers at Berkeley, I began discussing the possibility of looking at a contemporary hunting and gathering society from an evolutionary perspective. We agreed that such a study could yield valuable insights, but that at the same time the undertaking faced some formidable difficulties of theory and methods. First, how were we to avoid the implicit racism and biological reductionism of earlier anthropological work on this subject? Many nineteenth-century writers had treated contemporary “savages” as “living fossils” or “missing links,” an approach that had become thoroughly discredited. Second, how could the hunters of 10,000 years ago living in a world of their own making be compared with the hunters of today living in vastly altered circumstances?

To the first problem I argued that the ecological approach was essential, because through it we could explore comparatively the continuities and discontinuities in subsistence, energetics, spatial organization, group structure, and demography without doing violence to the absolutely crucial recognition of the uniqueness of human culture. By contrast, the more conventional social anthropological categories—kinship, marriage, ritual, descent, and ideology—would be much more difficult to deal with from a long-term evolutionary perspective.

To the second problem the answer seemed to be the making of a candid and detailed assessment of the historical circumstances of each case study. The effects of outside contact had to be fully accounted for before we attempted to draw the evolutionary implications of the data.

What finally tipped the balance in favor of undertaking the !Kung fieldwork was the conviction that detailed ecological and demographic data on a hunting gathering people would provide valuable records in their own right, useful for testing a variety of current hypotheses about

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society and economy, whether or not the evolutionary record could be enhanced. And there was the factor of urgency. The hunting and gathering way of life was disappearing rapidly, and many valuable research opportunities had already been lost by failure to collect concrete data on the material existence of these peoples.

Fieldwork was carried out in 1963–4, 1967–9, and 1973; the project that started out with a two-person research team ( DeVore and Lee) grew to include over a dozen long- and short-term investigators. The larger multidisciplinary project has been published in *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers* (Lee and DeVore 1976), along with a number of articles, but the bulk of my own research on !Kung ecology and society has yet to appear in a unified account. The present volume provides such an account by drawing together material published elsewhere plus a substantial body of previously unpublished data; the latter forms by far the larger proportion of the book.

Previously published have been Chapters 7 and 9, along with parts of Chapters 3, 4, 11, 12, and 15. Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 14 consist in the main of new material.

The main elements of theory and method are set out in the Introduction. Chapter 1 is an informal history of the project and of the impact of anthropologists and !Kung on each others' lives.

Chapter 2 briefly introduces the major language and cultural divisions of the contemporary San, reviews the names they are known by, and attempts to plot their current numbers and economic statuses.

Chapter 3 introduces the Dobe area in the northwest corner of Botswana and presents a detailed analysis of the numbers and distribution of the San and non-San population during the period 1963–73. The second part of the chapter describes the two kinds of San living groups in the area—*camps* based mainly on hunting and gathering, and *client groups* associated with the black cattle posts—and documents the size, kinship structure, and age composition of these groups, and the dynamics of their variation through time. The third part of Chapter 3 is a history of the San peoples of the Dobe area, covering their archeological origins and, in particular, the period from their initial contacts with whites and blacks in the 1870s and 1880s to the early post-Independence era of the 1960s. A preliminary assessment is made of the effects of black presence and European contact on Dobe !Kung diet, seasonal movements, settlement history, political organization, and management of conflict. An account of more recent changes and a more detailed historical assessment are reserved for Chapter 14.

Chapter 4 draws a picture of the natural world of the !Kung. We start with geology and topography and their effect on the patterning of soils and vegetation in the dune and molapo system. Certain aspects of Dobe area relief may be accounted for by the recent discovery that the Oka-

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vango swamps are undergoing a process of rifting related to the Rift Valley system of Eastern Africa. The major vegetation associations are described, and their main constituents are listed. Fauna—especially mammals, birds, and reptiles—are discussed next, with particular emphasis on the economically utilized species. The problem of game diminution produced by destruction of habitat and fencing by non-San is also considered. Because the shortage of rainfall and groundwater is one of the key limiting factors in the Dobe area, the discussion of climate receives detailed attention. Rainfall is examined from dual points of view: first, as it is perceived by the !Kung and used as a basis for decision making about their seasonal subsistence round; and second, as a climatologist would view it, with measurements of seasonal and annual fall and plots of long-term rainfall fluctuations. This latter topic is considered further in Chapter 12.

Chapters 5 through 8 are core descriptions of the hunting and gathering subsistence economy. Chapter 5 defines the main characteristics of the foraging mode of production in terms of division of labor, sharing, reciprocity, and work organization. It then goes on to take a detailed look at the technology of subsistence under four headings: tools used for getting water, tools used for gathering and carrying, tools used for hunting, and tools used for food processing. Particular attention is given to carrying devices, an important category of tool that deserves closer examination by evolutionists than it has so far received.

Chapter 6 presents an inventory of the 105 plant species used by the !Kung as food. Because these vegetable foods provide 60 to 70 percent of the !Kung diet, the dozens of fruits, nuts, berries, gums, roots, bulbs, and leafy greens lie at the very heart of the successful long-term adaptation the Dobe area !Kung have achieved. A concluding section documents the regional differences in the strengths of the major food species.

The mongongo fruit and nut (*Ricinodendron rautanenii* Schinz) stands in a class by itself. Alone it provides up to half the !Kung vegetable diet, and in its reliability, abundance, and caloric returns it rivals or exceeds the value of the cultivated staple crops of many agricultural peoples. Chapter 7 discusses the botany, ecology, and nutrition of the mongongo; plots its geographical distribution; and traces it through the !Kung system of production from collecting, transporting, processing, and cooking to its distribution and consumption within the camp. The documentation of the richness, abundance, and variety of the !Kung major plant foods serves to bring home to the reader that the foraging mode of production is no haphazard catch-as-catch-can existence, but rather a stable and successful adaptation built on a firmly based food supply.

Chapter 8, the longest in the book, is about hunting. Much attention pro and con has been given to the importance of hunting in human history: Some regard it as the master mechanism of human evolution



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(Laughlin 1968); others, struck by the primacy of plants and other non-meat foods in the diets of recent hunter-gatherers, downplay its importance to a recreation for men while the women do the real work of subsistence (e.g., Morgan 1972; Tanner and Zihlman 1976). Here I try to place the role of hunting among the !Kung in proper perspective. Hunting activities though less productive than gathering, are the major preoccupation of the men and are a central ritual, social, and emotional focus for !Kung camp life. And the nutritional returns from hunting are by no means negligible: Game animals provide between 30 and 40 percent of the total calories of the !Kung. The first half of Chapter 8 details the hunting process—the way men actually hunt large and small game above and below the ground. Special attention is paid to the men's remarkable tracking abilities as they read out a whole range of crucial information about a prey animal by studying a few indistinct marks in the sand.

Another important aspect of hunting is the hunter's demeanor during and after the hunt. Arrogance and boasting are strongly disapproved of by the !Kung; humility is the proper stance, and the society has devised an array of humility-enforcing devices for bringing people into line. Despite a strong egalitarian ethic, some men are much more successful at hunting than others, and a minority of good hunters provides the bulk of the meat supply. How the !Kung manage success and failure in this key area offers a real clue to the underlying principles of their collective existence.

Chapters 9 through 11 take up a series of special problems by bringing to bear very fine-grained quantitative data on critical systems of hunter-gatherer life. Each studies an aspect of the cultural core's interface with biological systems, and each attempts to anchor social and economic processes in the energetic quanta of the natural sciences. Chapter 9 presents in considerably expanded form the results of a 28-day work diary of a Dobe camp originally published a decade ago (Lee 1968a, 1969a). Three kinds of !Kung work are identified: subsistence work, manufacture and maintenance of tools, and housework (in the original study only subsistence work was considered). An estimate is made of the per capita work effort for males and females in terms of hours per week and caloric units.

The results show that during the study period the !Kung had a more than adequate diet achieved by a subsistence work effort of only 2 or 3 days per week, a far lower level than that required of wage workers in our own industrial society. The distribution of work effort between males and females, as well as between aged and young and residents and visitors, reveals some interesting patterns. The impact of the recently introduced iron tools on work effort is also evaluated.

The data of Chapter 9 refer to the work of a single !Kung camp in a single month (July 1964). To determine whether these results were repre-

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sentative of the levels of work and consumption of the Dobe population as a whole, we took weight and fatness measurements on hundreds of !Kung throughout the Dobe area at different times of the year. Chapter 10 reports on the height, weight, and skinfold thickness measurements of 641 !Kung adults and children over a 19-month period in 1967–9. The main question asked is: Is there a hungry season among the !Kung, and if so when does it fall and who bears the brunt of it in terms of weight loss? By dividing the population by age and sex and by geographic region, it was possible to make a fine-grained analysis of the allocation of nutritional stress among the members of the population. The results show a basic maintenance of growth for children and of fitness for adults throughout the year, with some minor but significant weight loss for one period, followed by a rapid recovery. The utility of the method of internal analysis of variance is demonstrated here. The fact that the nutritional stress fell more heavily at one water hole than at the others enables us to pinpoint the probable explanation for this weight loss with some precision. Given the circumstances, it seems likely that the weight loss arose out of cash economy penetration and not as a result of some failure of the hunting and gathering adaptation.

The articulation between the systems of production (getting food) and reproduction (having babies) is explored in Chapter 11. Foraging requires mobility: Both men and women have to travel far afield to find food. Women carry their babies for the first few years of life wherever they go. A premium exists, therefore, for women to space their pregnancies well apart, because too frequent births will give a woman, in the !Kung phrase, “a permanent backache.” For nomadic women, births are spaced almost 4 years apart, but this changes rapidly with sedentarization. When the people settle down to village life, the spacing of births falls rapidly, causing a boom in population and some surprising dislocations in the culture of children and in child rearing. The causes and consequences of birth spacing are examined using a combination of Marxist and systems theory analysis.

Ownership, leadership, and the use of space are covered in Chapter 12. The question of ownership of the means of production is a crucial one, and it is necessary to examine the !Kung case in detail because there is much confusion about the nature—collective or individual—of ownership of land among hunter-gatherers. Among the !Kung, land is a collective resource owned by both men and women and inherited by a complex number of pathways from generation to generation. Examples are given of the ways land resources are successfully managed without resort to territorial defense.

The subtleties of leadership in an egalitarian society without hereditary offices are also explored. We look at the principles of landownership in actual practice by studying the spatial organization of a block of land

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south of the Aha Hills involving 12 living groups during the period 1920–70. The use of long-term rainfall statistics for the Kalahari helps to reveal the underlying principles of !Kung adaptation, and we come to realize that the events a fieldworker observes in a year or two of fieldwork are but a small segment of social patterns and processes that take years and generations to unfold.

Chapter 13 examines conflict and violence among the !Kung. Living at low population densities, with adequate food supply and an absence of territorial defense, the !Kung would appear at first glance to be a people for whom the major sources of conflict are removed. Yet the !Kung do fight each other and sometimes with fatal results. Some 22 cases of homicide in the period 1920–55 came to light during my fieldwork, and I recorded as well dozens of nonfatal arguments in which people came to blows. The !Kung distinguish three levels of conflict: talking, fighting, and killing. The characteristics of each kind of conflict are described in detail and illustrated with case histories. Despite the absence of authority figures responsible for maintaining order, the !Kung are not without resources for avoiding, limiting, and resolving serious conflict. The resulting picture clearly contradicts the Hobbesian notion that life in the simpler societies is a state of “war of all against all”; yet at the same time neither do the !Kung conform to the romantic image of them as the “harmless people.”

The bulk of the monograph is devoted to the !Kung as hunters and gatherers, the still-dominant mode of subsistence during the 1960s. Chapter 14 considers the other facets of !Kung economic life. Some !Kung play a role in the pastoral economy of their black neighbors; others are attempting agriculture and stock raising on their own; still others work for wages as migrant laborers. In addition, inputs from the blacks affect hunting and gathering itself. A few !Kung men hunt and kill game with borrowed guns; some women use donkeys to haul mongongo nuts from distant groves. A Marxist framework of analysis is used to make sense of the complex transformations !Kung society is currently undergoing. The contradictions experienced by the !Kung in trying to move from the foraging mode of production to a mode of production based on farming and herding help to bring out the underlying dynamic of each mode. The important implications for the future of the San of capitalist development in Botswana and of the armed liberation struggle in Namibia are assessed in the concluding section of the chapter.

In Chapter 15 the major results of the study are recapitulated in order to draw their implications for anthropological and evolutionary theory. Two kinds of methods—uniformitarian and Marxist—are proposed for reconstructing the foraging societies and evolutionary stages of the human past. The uniformitarian approach starts from the postulate that the same kinds of processes that mold the ecological adaptation of contempo-

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rary foraging societies were also at work in the foraging societies of the past. This method draws upon the tight articulation between the demographic, energetic, nutritional, and spatial subsystems of !Kung ecology to show how a change in one of the parameters triggers changes in the other parameters as well. These findings are applied to a consideration of the evolutionary significance of !Kung subsistence, technology, work effort, and nutritional status, and to an analysis of the dynamic of movement that underlies their social ecology.

For problems that involve the level of consciousness and ideology, a uniformitarian approach is not sufficient. To reach a deeper understanding of !Kung foragers and their role in theory, we have to account for a much wider range of cultural and social variables. The Marxist framework of historical materialism is used to throw light on the complex issues of the evolution of male-female relations and the social relations of foraging production. A final section touches on the universal themes and contradictions of human nature as they are reflected in the lives of the contemporary !Kung foragers of the Dobe area.

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Finally, the !Kung. This book is part of our bargain: to tell the world of your life, good and bad, with clarity and with honesty. You shared your life with me; you taught me much; may you live well, in peace and plenty, always.

Zhuo, i !ha weyshi //kau ge.

Batho bothe, tsamaya senthle.

R.B.L.

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# Note on orthography

THE San languages are characterized by click sounds produced with an ingressive air stream when the tongue is drawn sharply away from various points of articulation on the roof of the mouth. The four clicks used in !Kung appear as follows:

- / Dental click as in /Xai/xai, /Du/da (in spoken English this sound denotes a mild reproach, written *tsk*, *tsk*)
- ≠ Alveolar click as in ≠To//gana, ≠Toma
- ! Alveopalatal click as in !Kung, /Ti!kai
- // Lateral click as in ≠To//gana, //wama (in spoken English this sound is used in some dialects to urge on a horse)

Other features of the San orthography that should be noted include:

- ˘ Nasalization as in /twā
  - Pressing as in *maḡ*
  - ’ Glottal stop as in *ts’i*
  - ” Glottal flap as in //“xa (mongongo)
- Tone markers; low as in !gwe<sub>ˉ</sub>; high as in !gu<sup>ˀ</sup>

For the nonlinguist, San words may be pronounced by simply dropping the click. For example, for ≠To//gana read *Togana* and for /Ti!kai read *Tikai*.