

## "The Old People Give You Life": Aging Among !Kung Hunter-Gatherers

---

MEGAN BIESELE AND NANCY HOWELL

Now the Elephant Girl had already warned her grandmother that something might happen to her. She had said "Watch well: a little wind will come to you. The little wind will come to you with something in it. It will bring you some droplets of blood. The blood will come to lodge inside your groin. Take that bit of blood and put it into a container. Don't let on what you're doing—just take it and put it into something. Something like a little dish or a little bottle." It happened just as the girl had said. A little wind came back to her grandmother. The bit of blood came to lodge in her groin. The grandmother saw it and said "Didn't the child tell me something like this would happen?" She didn't speak aloud, she just said this in her heart. She took the drops of blood and put them in a bottle. Then she sat and thought, and asked herself "Should I go to see what has happened to my granddaughter? No, it has already happened just as she said it would, so he must have killed her already and there's no help for it." She turned it over and over in her mind; meanwhile the bit of blood was growing. It grew and grew until it was too big for the bottle. Then the grandmother took it out and put it in a skin bag. It grew again and burst the bag, so the grandmother put it into something bigger. Then it grew some more and broke that. Only the grandmother knew about it. No one else knew that she had the Elephant Girl and was restoring her to life. She kept it a secret. She had the bit of blood and it grew, and she fixed it, and it grew some more and she fixed it. When it had grown completely it was a woman again! She looked just like she had before.

One morning when the camp awoke, the women decided to go gathering *n/n*. They got up and went off picking *n/n*. The Elephant Girl's little daughter went with them, saying "Today I'll accompany my aunts and eat *n/n*." The old grandmother said "Go ahead, go with them." So the Elephant Girl's mother and all the other women went gathering. The old woman stayed home alone. She spent the day quietly. In the afternoon she took a skin and spread it in the shade, spread it in the late afternoon shad-

---

From Pamela T. Amoss and Stevan Harrell, editors, *Other Ways of Growing Old: Anthropological Perspectives*. Copyright © 1981 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. Scanned for the Peaceful Societies website with the permission of Stanford University Press, [www.sup.org](http://www.sup.org). No further use, reproduction or distribution is allowed without the written permission of the publishers, [www.sup.org](http://www.sup.org).

ows. Then she took out the Elephant Girl and sat her upon the skin. She ground ocher and spread it upon the young woman's face. She replaced her old rags with soft new skin clothing and hung her all over with ornaments. Then the old woman tied copper rings in her granddaughter's hair the way people used to tie them long ago. She fixed her up so that she was the beautiful Elephant Girl again.

Later the women came back from gathering. Toward sunset they returned. The old woman was telling funny stories and the Elephant Girl was laughing "/eh-/eh-/eh-/eh-o!" As the women came near the village, the Elephant Girl's little daughter said to the others "Who's that laughing just like my mother in the village?"

Her aunt said "How can you be so crazy? My older sister died a long time ago. Don't go saying you hear her laughing someplace."

Another girl said "My aunt is certainly dead: this child is crazy."

So they came closer, listening. The Elephant Girl laughed again. This time they said "Can it be? Whose laughter is this? When we left there was nobody but the old woman in the camp; we had all gone gathering. What young girl can that be whose laughter sounds just like our sister's?" When they came into the camp they saw the Elephant Girl sitting there with her grandmother. Her daughter cried "Mother, mother, mother!" and ran to her, flopped down, and began to nurse. The others cried out and said "Yo! Who has accomplished this?"

The Elephant Girl answered softly "Granny, of course. Granny lifted me up. Granny spoke the word and I sat up and was alive. If it had been up to you others alone, I wouldn't be here. Long ago Granny took me and sheltered me in a skin pouch and now I am alive again. That's how it was. The old people give you life."

This extract from a !Kung San folktale told in 1972 provides a fitting introduction to the consideration of the place of old people in !Kung life.\* As the story from the Elephant Girl heroine cycle suggests, old people are highly valued and respected among these

\* The story of the Elephant Girl was collected by Megan Bieseles from !Kun/obe n!a at Kauri, Botswana, in 1972. The language of the !Kung San ("San" is increasingly being used by scholars in place of the term "Bushmen," which has negative connotations in Southern Africa) is a tonal one, with four distinct "click" sounds that serve as consonants: /, the dental click, is produced by pulling the tongue off the back of the top front teeth; =/, the alveolar click, is produced by "popping" the tongue off the middle of the roof of the mouth; !, the palatal or alveopalatal click, is produced by "popping" the tongue off the back of the roof of the mouth; //, the lateral click, is produced by pulling the side of the tongue from the teeth on one or both sides. For the nonlinguist, the first two symbols may be approximated by "t," the second two by "k." The symbol ", as in *k"xau* (owner), is a glottal flap.

hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa. In this paper we will consider, first, the demographic patterns that determine survival into old age, and the proportion of the population that can be called "old"; second, the household, family, and kinship patterns of !Kung society, which determine to such a large extent the conditions of day-to-day life for the old; and third, the economic patterns of subsistence work and the "ownership" of valued items in !Kung culture. All these factors contribute to the honored position of old people we have observed among the !Kung.

*The Aging Process: How Old Is "Old"?*

The !Kung people have little interest in numbers not of immediate practical value, and do not know their own ages or year of birth. They do, however, show a great concern with relative age in their relationships, which is reflected in the terms of address and reference used in conversation between any two people: no matter how close in age two people are, they always determine who is the elder and who the younger, and the elder has small but real prerogatives in the relationship. Hence the older one becomes, the greater the number of relationships in which one is the elder and the more respect one is accorded. The !Kung also distinguish linguistically the stages of life, which are basically (with some differences between the sexes) infancy, childhood, young adulthood, full adulthood (with parenthood), old adulthood (when childbearing has ended and the work of childrearing is slowing down), and old age. The respectful suffix *n!a*, which can be translated as "big" or "old," is added to the names of people in their forties or fifties who are no longer bearing or begetting children, but who may still be at the height of their abilities. There is a special description for the extremely old, *=/ da !i*, which means "nearly dead." This is sometimes used to describe people who seem indeed to be near death; but it is also used to emphasize the great age of people who are still vigorous, and it may be used in a joking, self-deprecating way by middle-aged people to describe themselves when they are tired or unwell.

To single out the people who are old in !Kung society, then, we

might choose to talk about all those who are *n/a* (which would include some people as young as 45), we might focus on the *=/ da !i* (most of whom are over 70), or we might go outside !Kung linguistic categories to talk about those whom we have estimated as being over a particular chronological age, such as 60. In the demographic sections of this paper it will be most convenient to use the last of these means of distinguishing "the old," whereas elsewhere we will follow the less precise but more appropriate !Kung categories.

One of the possibilities considered when demographic studies of the !Kung were first undertaken was that the !Kung might age more quickly than other people, attaining the status and physical appearance of "old age" at a younger chronological age than in other societies (see Howell 1976). But careful studies of absolute and relative age in the population have demonstrated that this is not true. Although the rigors of the hunting and gathering life and the continual exposure to the Kalahari sun and wind have some tendency to dry the skin prematurely and make people look older, this is balanced by the absence of obesity among the !Kung, which is often an indication of aging in other societies. All in all, guesses of age made on the basis of appearance were rarely as much as ten years off the ages arrived at by the use of careful and systematic procedures (see Howell 1979).

The oldest person in the group of about 500 !Kung San in the Dobe area of northwest Botswana in 1967 was a woman estimated to be about 81 years old. By 1972 she had died, and the oldest person was a man slightly younger than she had been, who was then about 86. These extreme ages, however, are those most insecure in the estimation process, since there is very little basis for corroboration of dates of birth from other people.

#### *Surviving into old age*

The probability of surviving into old age can only be known approximately for the !Kung, among whom no records of births and deaths are kept. From the analysis of deaths within the past decade, however, and from the study of the survival of children born to liv-

ing adult women, we can obtain some idea of the probability of dying over the life span. The life table calculated for the !Kung for the period 1920-50 can be matched by the Coale-Demeny model life table (1966) with an expectation of life at birth of 30 years (MW5). For the period 1950-70, a table with an expectation of life of 40 years provides a closer fit to the data (MW9), which suggests that the effects of contact with the BaTswana, Herero, and European peoples have eased the conditions of life somewhat in recent decades. The public health service of Botswana incorporated the Dobe area into its inoculation and treatment programs in the mid-1970'S, which is likely to improve the probabilities of survival still more.

A life expectancy at birth of 30 years, which seems to have characterized the !Kung before 1950, may be judged very low by Western standards. Yet the !Kung have established a secure basis for the continuation of their people, despite the obvious hardships involved in living in a harsh desert environment in small, undifferentiated groups dependent upon wild animals and uncultivated vegetables for food, in moving often, and in being without access to modern medical care or even to stored supplies of food to tide them over difficult periods of bad weather, epidemics, or bad luck. The !Kung have not been forced to engage either in a continuous struggle for survival or in the exhausting production of babies in order to keep their groups alive. Fertility levels needed to compensate for their level of mortality are not particularly high (an average of about 4.6 children per woman who survives to the end of the childbearing period), and the !Kung pattern of fertility tends to start relatively late (around age 19 for women), and to be characterized by long intervals between one birth and another (an average of more than three years between surviving children).

Of every 100 babies born, only about 54 will survive to age 15; about 45 will survive to age 30; about 33 will survive to age 45; and about 21 will survive to age 60. These probabilities suggest several implications about old age among the !Kung. First, though a 21 percent survival rate to age 60 is low in comparison to modern societies (in which 75 — 80 percent of those born are likely to survive

to 60), it is high enough to guarantee a steady supply of old people to fill the roles associated with old age in the society: old age is and has always been a regular and unremarkable phenomenon in !Kung life. Second, the fact that some 79 percent of people die before reaching 60 means that death is not particularly associated with the old alone; and indeed, we found that people who reached 60 could expect to live about another ten years.

#### *The Proportion of Old People*

The proportion of the population over age 60 at a point in time is a function not only of the probabilities of survival but also of the balance of births and immigration with deaths and emigration. When the population is growing, the proportion of young people increases more rapidly than that of older people, so the proportion of persons 60 and over will decline even if the probability of surviving to 60 is increasing at the same time. Among the !Kung, who had a very slow rate of population growth until the 1960's, about 8 percent of the population overall would be expected to be 60 years old and older owing to the balance of births and deaths. Censuses taken on several occasions during the late 1960's indicated that migration of adults out of the area had increased the proportion of persons over age 60 to approximately 10 percent of the total population.

#### *Health and handicaps of the aged*

Many old people among the !Kung are vigorous and independent. Howell arrived unexpectedly at a !Kung camp one day to find four females playing jump rope. Their ages were 8, 11, 15, and 66, and the old woman was at least as active and enthusiastic as the children. Playfulness and exertion are commonly seen among !Kung old people in good health. Old women run and play games with children and adolescents, and old people of both sexes engage in bawdy joking and teasing with young people while middle-aged adults are busy with tasks.

When old people are hurt or sick, however, they often require

special care and consideration from the younger members of their group. In a survey of health and handicaps taken in 1968, Howell estimated that about 6 percent of the population under 15 had a physical problem that required special help from others, that about 15 percent of those between 15 and 60 had some sort of a physical limitation, and that about 60 percent of those over 60 were similarly limited. Vision problems were the most common handicap. Four of 40 old people were totally blind and required constant assistance from others, and another twelve were blind in one eye or had some loss of vision. Eleven old people walked with difficulty or used a stick. Other handicaps recorded among the old included respiratory diseases (tuberculosis, chronic bronchitis, and emphysema). Truswell and Hansen (1976) reported that "some degree of lens opacity (cataract) is the rule in older San," that "teeth rarely show caries or fluorosis but with age become worn down to the gums" (no doubt owing to the abrasion of the !Kung diet and the continuous effects of small amounts of sand in the food), and that "mild osteoarthritis" afflicted many elderly San. Most remarkable, however, were the physical debilities they did not observe: they found hearing well preserved even into extreme old age; they found that mean blood pressures did not rise with age; and they did not observe anyone, at any age, with hypertension or with coronary heart disease. Some common degenerative diseases of industrial society, then, play a small role among the !Kung, whereas infectious diseases and accidents play a much larger role.

The !Kung treat illness by an elaborate and interesting method of medical care involving trance dances (Katz 1976; Lee 1967). When a person of any age is ill or injured, family members provide food, water, and psychological support, and relatives and nonrelatives alike provide dramatic psychological support through the trance dance. Senicide has not been observed among the Dobe !Kung. In principle all !Kung support the efforts of old and sick people to recover from temporary illnesses, yet it is probably true that there are significant differences in the quality and quantity of care provided for those temporarily incapacitated. Old people who have close family members present probably are given more solic-

itous care in crises, have more allowances made for them in group moves, and enjoy a better diet when they can no longer provide for themselves. The death of a spouse and the lack of children or other close relatives to provide care may make it unlikely for a person to survive into old age.

*!Kung Social Structure and the Old*

*Group structure and the management of resources*

!Kung hunter-gatherers live in camps of individuals bound together by close bilateral kinship ties. Each camp has a "core" composed of older men and women, cousins and siblings of one another who through long tenure at a particular water hole are seen as its owners, or *k"xausi*. The oldest man or woman, the *k"xau n!a*, or "big owner," represents the core group as host to visitors who want to use the water. Similarly, the old maintain stewardlike control over specific food resources in the subsistence region (*n!ore*) around the water hole-again through long tenure in the area (see Lee 1972a, 1979; and Marshall 1960, 1976).

Familiarity with the local seasonal resources as they have fluctuated over the years is the real criterion for membership in the "core." As part of their stewardship of gathering locales and hunting grounds, the old pass on their accumulated knowledge on how best to use them. For this reason, the status of the old can be seen as directly related to their economic contribution. To exploit this environment with the technology available to them, the San need the detailed knowledge of local flora and fauna possessed fully only by the old.

The core system organizes camp membership and resource rights, and it also organizes sharing patterns within camps. It keeps conflict over scarce resources from arising both between and within camps. The old people know from years of experience how best to maintain community life: they are repositories of genealogical information and interpreters of the kinship system. Also, the large part they play in resource management is another indication of their economic importance.



A case in point is the "hosting" of the local water source by the oldest person. The !Kung live in an area where water sources can and do run dry, and where contingency plans must exist. It is important that some one person know *all* demands on the water source likely to occur in a given period so that available water can be fairly apportioned to all who have rights in it. The !Kung do not like to be caught unawares, without time to plan for emergencies.

The old *k"xausi* and their spouses provide genealogical stability over time to each water hole and resource area. Kin ties to these older people—as their siblings, offspring, or cousins—are the basis for younger people's camp membership. Younger members are expected to respect the old peoples' decisions regarding the food and water resources of the *n!ore*. The old people do not, however, act without regard for the opinions of the younger men and women. The vigorous hunters and gatherers participate along with the old in the process of arriving at group consensus, the !Kung way of making decisions.

#### *Household composition*

Among the !Kung, the smallest social unit is the nuclear family household, those who build a common hut to mark their place in the group, and eat and sleep together at the same fire. Groups of such households make up the "camp" or "village" (*chu/o*), which functions as the principal economic unit of production and consumption. The largest households among the !Kung are made up of mature adults in their thirties and forties and their dependent children. As the children reach puberty and set up their own households with marriage partners or temporarily with friends, the parents' household size is reduced, until only the couple remains.

The ideal household arrangement for older adults is probably that of living in couples, and about 60 percent of people over age 60 live with their spouses. When the death of one partner ends the marriage, the surviving spouse may live alone, as 30 percent of those over 60 do. Although the mean household size for the whole population is about four persons, only 6 percent of people over age 60 live in households with more than two members. These excep-

tional households may be made up of the partners of a polygamous marriage, of several persons of the same sex, or of an old woman with one or more of her teenage grandchildren (those who have reached the age when they should leave their parents' hearth).

### *Marriage*

Rates of marriage dissolution and remarriage are high for the !Kung at all ages, as divorce is common and a spouse may die at any age. It is rare for a !Kung to have been married only once over a long lifetime, although most !Kung adults have had the experience of a long-term marriage at some point in their lives. Up to the age of about 50, widowed and divorced people almost inevitably remarry within a year or so of the end of the previous marriage. After this age, it seems to be a matter of personal preference and convenience whether the surviving spouse remarries. In some cases, the widowed person prefers to remain alone, taking advantage of the freedom of the single state to go wherever his or her closest relative (usually an adult child) is living. Others, and particularly those who happen to have no surviving children, are anxious to remarry. Old people sometimes seem to lower their standards in selection of a spouse; for example, a woman may be glad to enter a polygamous marriage, perhaps joining one of her sisters as a "junior wife," even if she was one of those who would have been too jealous and possessive for polygamy in her younger days.

The !Kung custom that the husband is usually five to fifteen years older than the wife makes it likely that the husband will die first. About 40 percent of !Kung women but only 13 percent of !Kung men over 60 are unmarried widows or widowers.

Although the continuation of marriage into old age may have an important psychological effect in providing old people with a sense of security, more important is the presence of surviving children and other close kin, as an aged spouse may not be able to provide food on a regular basis. Old people are supported by the group in which they are members, but the presence of particular close kin who can be called upon to meet specific needs for food or care in-

creases their security. Unfortunately, it can easily happen that the relatively high rates of mortality at all ages leave old people isolated, with no surviving spouse or children: about 5 percent of the men, and about 20 percent of the women, are expected to be isolated in their old age in this way, under the probabilities of birth and death among the !Kung.

*Kinship connections*

Old people find that their inventory of living kin changes as they get older, in ways that may be either advantageous or difficult for them. Despite the fact that they are the ones who formulate the answers to the question *Msa re o kuri?* ("Where—what—are we to each other?"), this inventory is finally not under their control. As their children marry and have families, some old people find themselves becoming the focal point of large groups of related people—in some cases far too many for all to live in the same camp at the same time. Other old people, through no fault of their own, may find that their children, if any, have few or no surviving children, so that their kin ties to younger generations are impaired. (In such cases, however, old people use the !Kung knack for plugging into the kinship system wherever they can [Richard Lee, personal communication].) Although three surviving lineal generations are commonly seen among the !Kung (and four generations, as illustrated in the story of the Elephant Girl, may occur), probably the majority of the !Kung at any point in time are not members of a group that has three surviving generations, because the grandparents have died prematurely or because the offspring failed to have children.

An important link for the old to future generations is forged through the custom of namesakes. Children are never named for their parents; rather, they are named for their grandparents or others in the first or second ascending generation above the parents. The !Kung feel that if one person is named for another, their identities mingle in important ways. For an old person, this seems to bring a feeling of continuity, whereas for the young, it gives a sense of unquestioned belonging to a line of forebears. Kinship terms

used between old and young to indicate this relationship ("my big-name" and "my little-name") contain much implicit affection and a sense of special connectedness between the two persons.

*Contributions from the Aged*

Gathering for women and hunting for men may persist as regular activities throughout the life span, though they usually taper off in the older years. Because gathering demands none of the dramatic spurts of energy that hunting does, more old women gather regularly late into their lives than old men hunt (except for such mild forms as snaring birds). There is no restriction on men of any age gathering plant foods, and some older men may gradually substitute it for strenuous hunting. But past age 60, old people contribute relatively little to the subsistence of the group as a whole (Lee in preparation, chap. 3).

As the work load is lightened, however, other activities begin to absorb the energies of the old and account for the respect they continue to receive. Never do they really become "useless" (though some old people may talk of themselves this way), because, for one thing, as they age they are seen as the repositories of knowledge—both practical information and lore—accumulated over a lifetime.

*Special activities of the old*

Storytelling, for instance, is in large part the province of the old. Most men and women over about age 45 (i.e., those whose names have come to have the suffix *n!a* appended to them), are reasonable if not expert storytellers. Older people seem to take as great delight in hearing the stories as in telling them, and younger people, even if they are able to tell the stories themselves, tend to defer politely to older people when they are present. So it is with other items of cultural lore as well: "Ask /asa n!a," someone will say; "she is an old person and knows everything." The satisfaction older people derive from knowing and retelling the familiar tales—by turns bawdy, ridiculous, and amazing—is evident. They have heard these stories in all their myriad variations so often and for so long that they

know them in the marrow of their bones and are proud of it. They delight in telling the stories again to make a new generation laugh. Storytelling is gladly undertaken as a valued skill to be exercised with interest and pride when one is old.

Old people form important parts of some of the various multiage groups with which children spend their time. Caring for small children while their mothers are off gathering is one function of such groups, which typically include older people, especially women. The companionable time grandparents spend with the young contributes to children's warm and relaxed feelings toward them. Young children easily and confidently demand food from their grandparents; they seem to regard them as a secure resource that they unquestionably possess. Also much important learning of skills, traditions, and social attitudes takes place as the children—who among the !Kung begin subsistence work rather late in life, between fourteen and sixteen—spend time with the old people. From interviews and observation, as well as from projective forms such as the folktale quoted earlier, it is evident that in children's minds the grandparental generation is pictured as loving, educative, and nurturant.

The tapering off of their work load enables old people to begin to spend more time in spiritual exploration. They also have more time for healing—though people in their thirties and forties can also be very active in this way. Healing is seen as an extremely important contribution to group life, and younger members are grateful to those elders who can draw upon supernatural resources to cure. Furthermore, released from prohibitions that constrain younger people, the old can control and manipulate ritual substances and powers thought to be dangerous earlier in life. In the exercise of this ritual power the old serve as the initiators of younger people into the successive stages of life. The verb used for what the old do to the young in several such initiation rites is *n=um*, "to create" (see Biesele 1972 for further discussion of this many-faceted verb). The old are seen as symbolically responsible for the "creation" of new adults out of what were once children. They are seen as old

enough and strong enough to handle the powerful *n/um*, or spiritual energy, generated at such times.

Food avoidances that apply to younger people in the various stages of reproductive life are often relaxed after the childbearing years. Young adults, for instance, must not eat steenbok meat. There is also a prohibition concerning ostrich eggs: these must not be eaten by men or women from the age of puberty until they are old enough to have had five children. Believed to make these reproductively active people crazy if they eat them, the eggs are relished by children and by older people, who are felt to be past the danger of having their minds affected by the rich food.\*

Since some food avoidances do not apply either to children below the age of puberty or to elders past childbearing, freedom from ritual constraints applying to the reproductively active is one link between the very young and the very old in !Kung society. There is another link in that passing childbearing age appears to be an achievement that prepares both older men and older women to take an active part in the transitional rituals involving the young. The grandparent for whom a child is named gives him a handsome gift at the rite of the child's first haircut (Marshall 1976: 309). Old men serve as the initiators of the boys in the *tshoma*, a month-long male initiation ritual held in a bush camp far from other people, where young men endure cold, hunger, thirst, and prolonged dancing. During this month, the old men impart to the young secrets about the animals (Blurton-Jones & Konner 1976). Old women beat axes together for sound and bare their buttocks as they dance for a girl's first menstruation. It is an old woman, generally her grandmother, who is with the girl in her seclusion hut and who teaches her the things she must learn at that time. Old people may handle ritual substances and the powerful ritual fires burned at the hunting and initiation rites accompanying the entry of boys and girls into adult

\* Though the !Kung in general observe these precautions, they are not above playing with their system of food avoidances. An old woman, having fun at the expense of her husband one day, said that he was too old to be chasing young women. With a straight face he responded by saying to a third party that one should not take seriously anything his wife said, because she was only "an old woman who eats ostrich eggs."

life. The ritual division in !Kung society between childrearsers and those past the reproductive years, which confers on the latter a special access to the young at their time of transition to maturity, is a strong factor in the social position of the elderly.

Partly because of their privileged position as handlers of ritual power, and partly because of their freedom from subsistence duties, older !Kung men and women are able to concentrate upon trance medicine and develop their healing powers. In his paper "Education for Transcendence," Richard Katz (1976) described the careers of trance healers as they worked through the years to gain control of this powerful psychic resource in order to be able to use it for curing others. In the Dobe area of Botswana today, just under half the adult men in !Kung society and perhaps a third of the women become *n/um k"xausi*, or owners of *n/um* (psychic power), during their lives. (Among precontact !Kung in Namibia in the 1950's, however, women healers were not a highly developed feature of the culture: the later Botswana figures may reflect changing times [Loma Marshall, personal communication].) Even leaving the number of women healers aside, however, we see that this expertise is found in a substantial portion of the population. The interest of women in making music by singing and clapping, and of men in dancing, appears to be sustained into old age. Dancing is a serious pursuit of mature people and may become increasingly important in very advanced age.

Some old curers, of course, say that the *n/um* they had in strength in their mature lives has weakened or been taken from them by God in their infirm old age. They lament that they have become too thin, or feeble, or blind to go on curing. But there are others whose involvement with *n/um* seems to increase greatly in intensity with their advancing age. One old woman described by Katz (1976 and in press) had become so powerful and so completely taken up with the opportunity of healing and of altering her consciousness that she was in and out of trance continually. People came and sang and danced with her every day to accompany her trances, and she was known and respected far and wide for her power to heal. Sometimes such persons receive payment (clothing, tobacco, a goat)

from the neighboring Bantu and even from San for curing, unlike the traditional *n/um k"xausi*.\*

Another old person, a man this time, was also a dance specialist in his old age. But it was as an artist of fun and a specially zany, gifted clown that he excelled, rather than as a curer (though he did curing as well). People came from all over to make a dance so that they could watch him hunch his shoulders and warble like a besotted bird on a branch, all the while shooting his legs forward at unexpected but somehow perfectly hilarious angles and shaking his dance rattles in joyful mock ferocity. He lived for dancing and for entertaining people, did practically no subsistence work, and was provided for as a matter of course by his amused relatives. There is great tolerance for individuals' differing relationships to the *n/um* of the trance dance: these propensities are considered God-given.

Similarly, there is tolerance in !Kung society toward idiosyncrasies and quirks in general, especially in old people. Like leisure, this tolerance is another manifestation of a kind of "surplus" these people have. The way subsistence is organized by the !Kung provides a degree of "fat" in their economic system, one of whose uses is to support playfulness, individualism, and "noneconomic" behavior among the old. The outspokenness and sense of self of many of the old people is a delight to the young.

Of course, it is readily admitted by !Kung that with old age sometimes comes not inspired madness but real foolishness and lack of sense. But they mention this frankly and kindly, just as they speak of other kinds of remarkable behavior.

#### *Economic leveling and the old*

Economic accumulation as we know it is not a source of power for aging !Kung. This egalitarian society keeps individuals of all ages from hoarding goods, largely through the rules of generalized reciprocity and the *hxaro*, or gift-giving, system, which militate against accumulation of wealth. Older people do not generally own

\* Bantus like to use San medicine in addition to their own, and most often can pay for it—far more often than the San can.



more goods than people in other age groups. If they have become dependent upon few or improvident offspring, they may often own less. Also, as we have seen, though they form "cores" around which group membership and water rights are organized, the old also derive their authority from their roles as controllers of knowledge, skill, and ritual power.

Furthermore, restraints against individual self-aggrandizement discourage the assumption of "political" power over the course of a lifetime. Thus older people are not likely to have accumulated power in this way either, except in terms of mutual-help relationships and gift-giving relationships they may have built up. All his life a !Kung remains dependent on the web of mutual kin obligations expressed by reciprocal visiting and gift-giving (*hxaro*). In this system, kinship itself must be looked upon as a resource. Older people who have carefully tended their kin-based webs of trading and mutual-aid relationships have ensured that favors and gifts are owed to them as they grow old and can no longer provide for themselves.

*Hxaro* itself decreases with old age (Wiessner 1977). As a person matures and settles his or her children in secure marriages, he or she may pass on *hxaro* relationships to them or may let them drop. Some relationships become unnecessary as a person's needs lessen with age; others become hard to sustain as failing eyesight or infirmity make craftwork on items to be given as gifts difficult. Old people do keep up some old and strong relationships, but they also begin new *hxaro* ties with grandchildren and nieces and nephews. If old people become incapacitated and cannot make or procure *hxaro* goods for themselves, children and grandchildren may supply them.

Grandparents play a key role in the instruction of very young children with regard to *hxaro*. Periodically, they cut off and redistribute gift beads they have given the child, thus introducing the concept of continuous passing on of goods. For older young people, adolescents, and young adults, *hxaro* ties with the aged are connected with access to land and resources. If young people are using an area frequently, they seem to feel more secure in their claims if

they can maintain *hxaro* ties to the aged of the area. Most often, however, these ties are with their own grandparents: it is not fruitful for young people to begin very many relationships with old people, because they will necessarily be short-lived.

Do the !Kung become more acquisitive as they grow older? There does exist a certain material standard accepted as right for mature people. "I'm an old (big) person, and I have things," is an expression often heard. Younger people, say those just starting a marriage, do not have all the implements they need, and must often borrow. Gradually, through receiving gifts, they accumulate what is necessary. Beyond a certain point, however, accumulation stops. Partly it is the necessity of carrying all one's belongings on the frequent moves in traditional life that keeps the inventory low. But it is also the desire not to stand out from others or to appear stingy. Few can resist the constant requests from kin for any items that appear to be surplus, or the life-long admonitions to be generous in sharing. "Share today and you will be shared with when you are in need tomorrow" is a way to phrase an adaptation that has stood these people in good stead in the sparse Kalahari environment. Unlike their neighbors, the BaTswana, who marry so as to keep the cows in the family and who accumulate wealth with age, the !Kung have organized their subsistence around the systematic avoidance of accumulation. The environment itself (instead of a granary or kraal) is their storehouse. Reaping food from it is reliable when the group of sharing individuals is taken as a whole, but is unreliable for any individual. Variations in rainfall, fires, animal migrations, the energies and inclinations of group members, and a wealth of other factors dictate the necessity of reliance on different individuals in turn as they chance to bring in food. For this privilege, one must also be relied *upon*, in turn. Old people have paid for the consideration they receive in their time of infirmity by a lifetime of gifts and services to others.

*A Typical Day in the Life of an Old Couple*

/ /Koka n!a (77 years old in 1972) and =/Toma / /gwe (70) are a core couple at Dobe, Botswana. They have been married over fifty

years.\* Their three married sons and married daughter built their huts in a cluster around the old people's hut, and this group of families, with occasional visitors, constitutes a camp. From time to time this extended family moves camp to another site within the Dobe area. / /Koka n!a is feeble and rarely gathers anymore, but she is recognized as having rights, through her age and long residence in the Dobe area, over certain / *tosi*, or gathering locations. Permission to gather in them is asked of her. Her continued good appetite is satisfied, now that she rarely goes gathering herself, by a more or less steady stream of mongongo nuts, marula nuts and fruit, mor-ethlwa berries, and many other plant foods gathered in the various / *tosi* by her daughter, her son's wives, and their offspring. / /Koka n!a sits by her fire with her fire paddle for roasting nuts, a stone for cracking them, and a pot or two. Her small wooden mortar and pestle are there also, and with them she pounds for herself and her husband any food that is brought to them. (Their teeth are worn down and the mortar has become their constant companion.) The old woman and her husband snack on and off all day as foodstuffs come in, constantly muttering that their offspring never bring them anything. (Generally these mutterings surprise no one and create no special resentment. People of all ages voice such moment-to-moment pique in what seems to outsiders high relish for hyperbole.)

=/Toma / /gwe, a man of fewer words than his wife, sits on his side of the fire and smokes, when he has a supply of tobacco. Sometimes he will peg out and scrape the skin of an antelope one of the younger men has killed. A young boy may be alternately watching and helping him, or perhaps only eating the scrapings. At other times the old man will disappear from the family circle abruptly, to reappear a few hours later with a guinea fowl or korhaan he has snared. When he snares a bird his eyes sparkle. In his youth he so loved sour plums that he was named for them, =/Toma / /gwe, "=/Toma Sour Plum." Now people often call him "//gwe n!a," "The Old Sour Plum." He says to his sons often that he is old and cannot help himself, and that he should therefore be given things.

\* The ages of this couple are somewhat unusual, since as we noted earlier !Kung custom is for the husband to be five to fifteen years older than the wife.

He and his wife are well provided for. Children are sent from their parents' fires with dishes of nuts, a double handful of small fruits, several big tubers, or a joint of fresh or strips of dried meat for the old couple. Once or twice a day a child will be asked by its parents, or by the grandparents themselves, to bring the old people a bucket of water from the water hole. Though some children refuse, and are not pressed, most of the time the water arrives with fairly little fuss, with leafy branches stuck in it to keep it from splashing out of the bucket and being lost.

Even if their parents are in the camp, children often sit and share what their grandparents are cooking. Older children, approaching puberty, spend more and more time at their grandparents' fires and less at their parents'. It is clear that the role of the older generation in bringing boys and girls through the transition into adulthood has everyday as well as specifically ritual implications.

During the morning and afternoon, //Koka n!a and =/Toma //gwe nap intermittently, in the shade of their small grass hut or of a nearby tree if it is hot, or in the sun next to the fire if it is cold. //Koka n!a often gets out her little skin bag containing the beads she is working on and strings glass trade beads she has received as *hxaro* presents from her trading partners on twisted threads made from the long back muscles of a kudu or gemsbok. If she runs out of sinew, she will send a child to its mother for some more. She sits and sews, and fusses that no one ever gives her any beads. People fuss back conversationally, barely needing to raise their voices to be heard from where they sit at their own fires.

//Koka n!a reaches into her bag for one of a few copper ornaments her husband has given her, takes it out, and ties it into her hair. Copper hair rings are worn only by women beyond "a certain age" and are signs of that age and of status. //Koka n!a enjoys the rings and feels she ought to have more, to tie all over her head.

As the sun begins to tilt toward the horizon, the sons of the old couple visit with their father at his fire, discussing plans and gossiping about local events. //Koka n!a gets up and goes into the bush. She is gone for perhaps half an hour. When the sun has just slipped down she appears, walking slowly, a tiny, bent figure under an enor-

mous load of firewood. Arrived at the fire, she dumps the wood unceremoniously. She complains "/eh, /eh, /eh, my back!" as she lowers herself to the ground and begins to build up the fire for the night.

If people are lively, there will be an evening's visiting by the fire, perhaps with other people coming to talk from the nearby Dobe camps. A welcome gift of fresh meat may unexpectedly arrive in the dark. / /Koka n!a or her husband will take it from the giver wordlessly and cook and consume it, sharing it with anyone sitting at their fire. There may be stories told, or news of a hunt, or a marriage to discuss. In the middle of the talk, / /Koka n!a may decide she is ready to bed down for the night. She curls up under blankets next to the fire, her head covered too, and is soon asleep, though / /gwe goes on talking right next to her. The conversation may be uproarious or very low and quiet, depending on who is there. Gradually, the old man's sons and the other visitors go back to their own fires. =/Toma / /gwe sits smoking and watches the moon rise from behind an enormous white termite mound. Some nights he may play his musical hunting bow for hours; he is a *n/um k"xau* and can talk in this way to those who are gone. Some nights he will feel old and weary, and will just go to sleep like the others.

*Conclusion: The Roles and Status of the Old*

To conclude, let us review the basic facts about the social position of the aged in !Kung society. Older people act as (1) stewards of rights to water and resources of an area, (2) repositories of knowledge, skills, and lore, (3) teachers and minders of children, (4) spiritual specialists and healers, and (5) ritually privileged figures. None of these roles is based on the hoarding or accumulation of power or goods, except in terms of the building up of reciprocal obligations over a lifetime.

Young people learn these roles through direct imitation of old people, as they spend time with them in a variety of contexts. Since the aged are valued for their contributions, they serve as models for the younger generation, supplementing the models that their parents provide. The young see that the elderly move into a satisfying

old age, and, in the traditional context, they see no reason not to copy them. Young people are not insulated from the enjoyable social pursuits of the old, whether these be dancing, ribald joking, or reminiscing. (This is one of the continuities of !Kung life that is quickly being disrupted, however, with changing times. Now the generations are beginning to see their destinies—and take their pleasures—in separation from each other.)

Roles of old men and women differ in !Kung society along the same lines that differentiate men and women in the society in general. Adult men are hunters and many of them are *n/um k"xausi*, or healers: aging men perpetuate these roles as long as they can and then replace them with less strenuous pursuits such as trapping, gathering, making artifacts, telling stories, and visiting. Women are gatherers, and some of them are healers; old women continue these roles and gradually vary them with more and more child care, handicrafts work, and other less physically demanding pursuits as they age. Both sexes continue to participate in the repeated, unifying trance dances, as singers, dancers, or involved spectators.

The status of the old is related to their social contribution in that the core system, acknowledging the aged and their tenure in an area, militates against conflict over resources. Moreover, the transmission of skills and lore to younger people is recognized and honored by the !Kung as an important part of the socialization of competent group members. Child care by the old frees the vigorous women and men for unhindered gathering and hunting, which have direct economic results. Spiritual discipline and healing powers, which often become highly developed in aging people, are universally respected among the !Kung, who practice very little other medicine. A class of ritually immune individuals is needed by the society to assist in transitional rites involving the young: considered as such, the old are valued for the role they play in "creating" mature men and women to carry on the work of the society.

### References Cited

- Bieseke, M. 1972. "The Black-Backed Jackal and the Brown Hyena: A !Kung Bushman Folktale," *Botswana Notes and Records*, no. 4: 133 - 34.
- . 1976. "Aspects of !Kung Folklore," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Blurton-Jones, N., and M.J. Konner. 1976. "!Kung Knowledge of Animal Behavior," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Cambridge, Mass.
- Coale, A. J., and P. Demeny. 1966. *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*. Princeton, N.J.
- Howell, N. 1976. "The Population of the Dobe Area !Kung," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass.
- . 1979. *Demography of the Dobe !Kung*. New York.
- Katz, R. 1976. "Education for Transcendence: !Kia Healing with the Kalahari !Kung," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass.
- . In press. *Boiling Energy!* New Haven, Conn.
- Lee, R. 1967. "Trance Cure of the !Kung Bushmen," *Natural History* (Nov.): 30-37.
- . 1972a. "!Kung Spatial Organization: An Ecological and Historical Perspective," *Human Ecology*, I, no. 2: 125 - 47.
- . 1972b. "Work Effort, Group Structure, and Land Use in Contemporary Hunter-Gatherers," in P. J. Ucko et al., eds., *Man, Settlement, and Urbanism*. London.
- . 1979. *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society*. Cambridge, England.
- Marshall, L. 1960. "!Kung Bushman Bands," *Africa*, no. 30: 325 - 55.
- . 1976. *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Truswell, A. S., and J. D. L. Hansen. 1976. "Medical Research Among the !Kung," in R. B. Lee and I. DeVore, eds., *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass.
- Wiessner, P. 1977. "*Hxaro*: A Regional System of Reciprocity for Reducing Risk Among the !Kung San." Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan.