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Room to Maneuver: !Kung Women Cope with Men

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INTRODUCTION

Among the !Kung San of Botswana, women are sometimes beaten by their husbands and coerced by other men, particularly their fathers. The factors that contribute to this form of aggression are various and are changing in recent years as a consequence of new economic and residential practices now seen among the !Kung as they have transformed themselves from mobile foragers to primarily sedentary food producers. The responses of women and their supporters to incidents of wife abuse are also changing. In this paper several episodes of wife-beating that came to my attention during recent field work among the !Kung will be reported and discussed in terms of the cultural values relevant to their former nomadic life and in terms of the realities of current life styles in the 1980s.¹ In a concluding section, the prospects for future patterns in wife abuse will be discussed. Before proceeding, a few words are in order regarding the general phenomenon of wife-beating in society and regarding the particular subject of wife-beating among the !Kung.

THE BIOSOCIAL BACKGROUND OF SEXUAL ASYMMETRY

The reality is that in human societies all women must face at least the prospect of being beaten by their husbands. This unhappy circumstance is not a simple matter of social or political inequality (Burgess and Draper 1989). The human male is larger and more aggressive than the female; around the world positions of authority are almost exclusively monopolized by men (Martin and Voorhies 1975). The tools of force are overwhelmingly the province of male interest and training, a situation which exacerbates the inequality between the sexes. The fact that sometimes individual women, by virtue of their kinship position or inherited power, come to stand in posi-

tions of power normally allocated to males only does not discredit the empirical association between male physiological sex and masculine gender role, on the one hand, and the use of force, whether legitimately conferred by the group or illegitimately seized by the individual, on the other hand.

The size difference between men and women is observed generally among mammals (with a few interesting exceptions) and is an outcome of mammalian reproductive physiology (Alexander et al. 1979). The "reasons" why dimorphisms of size and behavior run deep in our phylogeny have to do with the reproductive specializations of the sexes. Many aeons ago, when our primitive reptilian ancestors developed the capacity to retain fertilized eggs, the stage was set for the reproductive asymmetry now seen in mammals, one which is carried out in extreme form among the primates. This transformation required a long time to reach its current stage of elaboration and involved not only retained fertilized eggs but also lengthy internal gestation and postnatal nourishment and prolonged maternal care. In this way, some populations of organisms developed an alternate means of reproducing, one in which the sexes contributed unequally to the nurturing of the young.

Once a female developmental specialization in reproduction and parenting was established, the way was opened for males to become more specialized in directing effort toward finding access to mates and toward somatic developments that would favor successful competition with other males also seeking mating opportunity with the reproductive monopolists — females (Clutton-Brock et al. 1981; Trivers 1972). In non-social species in which males play no parental role in provisioning the mother or in defending the young, the reproductive specialization of the sexes and the dimorphism in size has no necessary implications for the ability of one sex to coerce the other. However, in humans and in the few other mammalian species in which the male parental role is critical to the survival of young, the "price" that females pay for gaining the economic cooperation of their mates is male sexual jealousy (Daly and Wilson 1988).

Humans carry the mammalian specialization to an extreme by producing only a few offspring who mature slowly and who require large amounts of parental care in order to survive. Women are committed to a disproportionate amount of this parental work since, unlike males, they cannot recoup one or a few infant or child deaths by finding another mate (Lancaster 1985). A woman who loses a child has lost not only that individual with whom she has personal ties, but she has lost irreplaceable reproductive time. A man who loses even all his children may experience an acute sense of personal loss, but he can replace them by establishing one or more additional mating relationships with other women. The reproductive inequality between the sexes gives rise, of course, both to the behavioral and

somatic dimorphisms between the sexes and to the differing reproductive potentials of the sexes.²

There are at least three elements to consider in understanding the unique encumbrance of the human female. These elements play a central role in her victimization.

1. Because of the extremely dependent state in which young are born and because of their slow development, any roles that conflict with her reproductive ones are generally avoided by her as an individual or denied her by other interested parties, especially her kin and her mates.
2. Unlike other primate females who terminate care of the next oldest offspring when a new infant is born, a woman maintains not one but several dependent offspring, albeit at different stages of dependence (Lancaster 1985). With each new child she adds to her encumbrance and goes farther and farther into "debt" in the sense that her dependents multiply but her own physical reservoir of energies remain the same.
3. In order to rear offspring a woman must have help. Some aid comes from her kin but nearly all human groups attempt to regulate access to the reproductive capabilities of women by designating a mate (husband) and making him share in the work of rearing or defending the children.

Unlike most non-human social species, humans live in groups that include numerous other individuals who are eligible as mates. As a result, the sexual contract (paternal certainty in exchange for protection and economic resources) has consequences for other male-female relationships besides marital ones. Daughters and sisters of men, for example, have a vested interest in maintaining alliances with their male consanguines, not only because they benefit from men's labor but because these men protect them from other men. A woman's mate, if she has children by him, is also more likely to benefit her and her children than are foreign, unrelated men. It is probably true to say that in the past environments of evolutionary adaptation in which human social, psychological and sexual behavior has been molded by natural selection, a woman has had few degrees of freedom. The fitness penalties for a woman's error in judging economic or social support have been too severe. This fundamental and rather dismal picture (from the point of view of modern individualistic and humanitarian values) should be kept in mind by those who claim not to understand why so many women remain for so long in abusive environments.

An extremely interesting aspect of cultural variability is the extent to which the underlying reproductive asymmetry of men and women is institutional-

ized. Any circumstance in which fertility is low and monogamy is imposed, either as a result of ecological constraints or social conventions, is a good place to look for restraints on the ability of males to coerce females. The reason is that in this situation, the reproductive interests of the sexes are the same (Alexander et al. 1979:256-259; Alexander 1987:71-73) or more nearly identical than in other human groups (as, for example, among the !Kung). In technologically more advanced societies that have surpluses in the form of stored grains or herds of domestic animals, the fitness interests of the sexes are not the same. Men can advance their own fitness at the expense of other men by competing for access to more than one mate. Under the ecological conditions in which most (but not all) recent hunter gatherers have lived, the requirements for male labor are sufficiently high that most men can only support one mate and her children at a time. Where resources are potentially abundant and can be disproportionately controlled by a single man or alliances of men, male-male competition has direct consequences for male fitness (Dickemann 1979). In such social systems the variance in male reproductive success is high.

THE CASE OF THE !KUNG BUSHMEN: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The !Kung of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia and Botswana, particularly when they were living as hunter gatherers, provided valuable data enabling scholars to look at relationships between ecological factors, mating behavior and male-female relationships. The !Kung have been well described in the anthropological literature and numerous field researchers have worked among them (Howell 1979; Lee and DeVore 1976; Marshall 1976). Until recent decades the !Kung have lived primarily as hunter gatherers.³

By the late 1980s when the field research for this chapter was conducted, all the !Kung of Western Botswana were settled around permanent sources of water. They were no longer full-time hunter-gathers; instead they lived in villages ranging in size from twenty to forty people. They kept small stock, a few cattle, and tended gardens while continuing to obtain a portion of their livelihood from the bush supplemented by a periodic government dole of maize meal and cooking oil.⁴

Hunter Gatherer Days: Prospects for the Coercion of Women

In the past, there were undoubtedly times when women were physically compelled and beaten by their husbands and others.⁵ Yet there would have been many economic and practical restraints on the intimidations of women. Because of the arid and harsh environment in which they lived, and the simple technology, and probably also due to competition from numerous

other predatory species in the environment, the ability of men to compete with other men was limited. Resources in the form of game and wild vegetable food were widely scattered and unpredictable in a terrain only sparsely inhabited. Regular and daily work by husband and wife was necessary to support their children. Further, more efficient forms of labor organization (involving larger, cooperative groups) were apparently not feasible because during most times of the year, local food and water supplies would not support large aggregates of people. In this sense there were strong ecological inhibitions on various forms of more hierarchical social relations and more highly rationalized forms of economy.

Polygyny was rare, chiefly because both men and women had to work regularly to provide enough food for themselves and the numbers of old and young who also lived in the bands. Polygyny remains common elsewhere in Africa in agricultural and pastoral communities largely because of the disproportionate subsistence load carried by women (Boserup 1970; Burton and White 1984; White et al. 1981). In this case, given the agricultural technology, women can work to feed themselves and their children without compromising the welfare of their children. Men, especially middle-aged and older men, are relieved of the necessity of producing food (Draper 1989) and can turn their attention to acquiring multiple wives, whose labor underwrites their high levels of leisure.

In subsistence-level societies women are valuable not only for their economic labor but for their reproductive labor. !Kung women, when they were living in hunting and gathering groups, were no exception. However, it appears that women were shielded from exploitation by a number of factors. The work of women was sufficiently taxing and incompatible with child care that increased work by women was harmful to their children (Blurton Jones et al. 1978) and therefore harmful to the fitness interests of their husbands. For example, gathering required that women travel so far from base camp that it was impractical for them to carry children as well as the gathered food (Draper 1978; Draper and Cashdan 1988). As a consequence, all children but nursing infants and toddlers were left at the base camp, under the care of other women and men. Hierarchical relations did not appear among !Kung men, apparently because the continuous economic need for cooperation undermined the expression of most forms of male-male competition. Kinship was bilateral and reports by various scholars confirm a long tradition of bilateral post-marital residence practices (Harpending and Wandsnider 1982:42; Lee 1982:43). The availability of kin, together with the small size of the foraging groups, meant there were few if any occasions when women were outside the ubiquitous, if informal, influence of public surveillance (Draper 1975).

Perhaps one of the most important safeguards against the physical harm of women came from the pervasive !Kung values condemning aggression.

!Kung strongly discouraged physical aggression as well as milder forms of interpersonal dominance. !Kung values opposed physical punishment for children and, indeed, any form of harsh treatment more severe than an occasional scolding (Draper 1976, 1978; Konner 1976). Husbands had no social entitlement to physically chastise wives; when spouses fought it was looked upon as shameful and stopped as quickly as possible.

During my recent field work, I talked to elderly !Kung in the context of collecting life history narratives. In the men's narratives, the theme of masculine anger, and particularly the poorly controlled anger of young men, was mentioned frequently.

Gau, a man in his late 60s, while deploring an episode of recent wife-beating by a young man in a nearby village said, "These young men have too much anger. They don't know how to hold themselves back. In the old days, young men like this one (the wife beater) would never have been given a wife. In those days there were no Bantu and no police. When a man beat a woman her kinsmen would jump up and go at him with spears. They would even come from far away. People knew about this and were afraid of the anger and fighting that would follow. They wouldn't give a woman to such men."

While in former times women enjoyed the protection of their kin from abuse by husbands, it is interesting to note that many elderly women's recollections of their girlhood stressed the trauma they felt at their first marriages. In the past, when !Kung spent months at a time in the bush and had no regular contact with cattle people, !Kung parents arranged for their daughters to marry young, at around the age of menarche but sometimes before. Parents believed it was essential for a daughter to have a husband who would hunt and provide meat for her and her kin. Girls typically married men about ten years older than themselves (Howell 1979).

By being married at a young age and to men much older than themselves, and in circumstances in which the elders were making the decisions for them, !Kung women began their marital careers with little power in the relationship. Given the physical mobility of bands in the hunting and gathering days, together with the frequent movement of families in and out of bands, young brides could expect to be separated from their parents and siblings at least some of the time. Of the eight elderly women I interviewed, half indicated that one of their parents had already died by the time they married. These women stated that the death of one parent was used by their remaining elders as a reason for hastening negotiations for their husbands.

Many elderly women depicted their early years of marriage as stressful and coercive, more often blaming their parents than their husbands. Women stated that their fathers were severe and sometimes physically coercive in insisting that they stay with their husbands (Shostak 1981). Women claimed that as girls they were afraid of their husbands, whom they regarded as

foreign, unwelcome interlopers. Not all women recall being physically beaten by their husbands or fathers, but their recollections emphasize their insecurity and their fearfulness and dread of being separated from their own families. The intensity of these emotions about separation from their parents is somewhat surprising, given that the !Kung custom of groom service meant that !Kung husbands often joined their brides as live-in sons-in-law.

N!uhka, aged fifty-five, and old enough herself to have grown up living near Bantu, remembered from her childhood the terrible ordeal of her older sister whom their father insisted should marry a Bantu man. The father (without support from his wife, the mother of the girl) forced the girl to stay in the Bantu village with her mother-in-law and, according to the informant, beat her when she returned to her mother. One night the girl ran away, intending to find sanctuary in a distant village. The next morning she was discovered missing and a search party was launched. In this case, as she had been staying at a cattle post, her tracks were destroyed by the hooves of domestic stock as they left the kraals in the morning. Though search parties sought her for days she was never found. N!uhka flatly stated that her sister must have been eaten by wild animals.

This story clearly illustrates coercion of young !Kung women, not in this case by the husband, but by the wife's kin, on behalf of the husband. =/ isa, a woman in her fifties, remembers her marriage to her husband (fifteen years her senior) with a story that is both humorous and stark.

My mother and father wanted me to marry Bo (her present husband). But I refused all talk of this marriage. The trouble went on for months and months. My parents insisted that I was married to him and that I must stay at the hut I had with my husband. I couldn't bear it. I kept coming back to where my mother and father lived but they drove me back. I wouldn't do anything for my husband ! I didn't look at him, I didn't cook for him. When he brought me food I wouldn't eat it. If he gave me food, I just threw it around in the dirt. I sneaked away at night and slept in the bush. Even though I was so scared I wouldn't stay with that man. I searched in the bush for guinea fowl eggs and smeared them all over my body to make myself ugly and so I would smell bad. But it had no effect. He became angry that I wouldn't live peacefully with him and wouldn't prepare food but he didn't give up. One day he grabbed me and pushed me in the hut and forced me to have intercourse with him.

The !Kung of Today: Transition to Settled Life and Food Producing

In the last twenty years, the !Kung of western Botswana have settled around sources of permanent water and are becoming food producers. This

transformation is extremely interesting on a number of grounds but particularly for the opportunity it offers for studying the dynamic interaction between changes in resources and technology and the social and sexual relations between men and women.

Although the economic practices have changed dramatically, and the continual reshuffling of people by inter-band mobility has ceased, in other ways the everyday tenor of social and emotional life of people does not seem drastically different. The local residential unit is a small village composed of about 15-30 people related to each other by bilateral ties of kinship and marriage. Most !Kung are monogamous, and marriages tend to be durable once they are well established. Fertility remains low, although there is some indication that younger cohorts of women have somewhat higher fertility.⁶ Cohorts of women aged 60 years and over, 45-59 years, 30-44 years and 19-29 years average 3.6, 4.9, 3.8, and 2.5 live births, respectively.

These data suggest that whatever combination of nutritional, environmental, epidemiological and hormonal influences may have operated in the past to keep !Kung fertility low, they are still influential for sedentary !Kung in recent times (Harpending and Draper 1990; Harpending and Wandsnider 1982; Konner and Worthman 1980).

One might predict that the position of !Kung women has worsened along with the recent shift to sedentism and that they have become more vulnerable to domination by their husbands. This prediction would be based on other social structural factors that are often associated with food-producing techniques such as increased material wealth (especially in the form of livestock), the increased division of labor by sex, and the increased tendency for production to be organized in multi-generational family units with authority vested in senior males. Contemporary !Kung explicitly model themselves after the economic practices of nearby Bantu-speaking peoples (Tswana and Herero) and it would not be unusual to find that !Kung have also adopted Bantu cultural values which stress patriarchal authority and explicitly give men control over women. In fact, in the late 1980s it was not evident that recent economic changes had unambiguously worsened the position of women.

When a people experience cultural change, some customs change markedly, whereas other practices persist in the new setting. In the !Kung case, there are elements of their former life style (such as availability of kin) which are preserved in the modern, sedentary setting and which continue to offer a degree of protection of women from physical assaults by their husbands. Other practices, such as the early marriage of girls, are no longer followed so scrupulously. As a consequence adolescent girls are less subject to manipulation by kin and husbands. On the negative side, other changes, such as consumption of alcoholic drinks and the ability of people to gather in social settings that are beyond the influence of close kin, lead to increased incidents of violence.⁷

In spite of their changed economy, !Kung have retained many of their former customs which gave women some immunity from coercion their husbands when they lived as hunter gatherers. In other cultures women can be subject to mistreatment, not only from their husbands, but from their husband's kin, particularly when they come as wives from outside their husband's community (Brown, Chapter 1 this volume; Burgess and Draper 1989; Levinson 1989). Contemporary !Kung adults continue to stress bilateral ties in choosing with whom to reside and cooperate. For example, 59 percent of !Kung women lived with a father, 52 percent with a mother. Of !Kung men, 54 percent lived with a father, 59 percent lived with a mother. These data collected in 1987-1988 replicate findings based on !Kung residence patterns in 1968 (Harpending and Wandsnider 1982). The traditional practice whereby girls married in their early teens (or younger) is disappearing. Increasingly girls in the 15-20 year age range remain unmarried and continue to live with their parents. They frequently have children, sometimes with Herero and Tswana men, but these are informal liaisons, not marriages. The inter-ethnic children are retained by the mother and her kin (Draper and Kranichfeld 1990; Draper and Buchanan, in press). Whereas women aged 60 years and over report 6 percent of their children as fathered by Bantu, the percentages of mixed ethnicity children rise with younger cohorts of women: 45-59 years (18 percent); 30-44 years (16 percent) and 19-29 years (27 percent).

The delayed age of marriage and increased numbers of out-matings are related to at least two new conditions of modern life. First, the value of young men as hunters is much reduced due to the scarcity of game. These youths, who earlier would have been sought as sons-in-law, are now less essential. Many men of the 25-35 year age range are unmarried and without good prospects for finding wives. Some of these men are a concern for their elders as they get into fights and drink excessively. Second, young women marry later and spend more of their adult years as free agents. In the new settled economy, parents do not believe that early marriages for daughters are essential; they do not seem to think that sons-in-law are critical sources of labor.

Especially if they have cattle and goats, the parents or grandparents of young women willingly keep them at home. Their work is useful in the settled villages where labor is more intensive than among the foragers. Their children are also welcomed. Many middle-aged !Kung parents appear to find daughters and grandchildren more readily incorporated into the new economy than sons-in-law. Of course, the sedentary economy requires work from men: watering stock from deep wells, driving cattle to distant grazing, cutting thorn brush for stock enclosures, and hunting are key masculine tasks. However, it appears that for routine purposes these activities can be done relatively efficiently by a few conscientious men. Even though women's

time is more or less co-opted by child care and they combine gardening, milking, water and fuel collecting with their maternal roles, some young men do not accommodate themselves to the new subsistence routines. They are idle and restless and are resented by older, harder working men.

In this transitional setting it is easy to understand how the marriage age of girls is delayed, how unmarried daughters and their children are readily absorbed into what is becoming a residentially localized, multi-generational, extended family, and how increasingly these young women form informal unions — not with young men of their own age and ethnic group — but with Tswana or Herero men whose superior social status and wealth gives them an advantage over !Kung youths. In sum, and at this particular point in the !Kung transition to sedentary, food producing economy, young !Kung women appear to be free of coercion at the hands of parents who formerly insisted on the early marriages of daughters to men in their twenties. Those girls who today remain unmarried in the settled villages are likewise not subject to potential mistreatment by inexperienced and poorly self-controlled husbands.

In an earlier paper, based on research in the late 1960s among those !Kung who were already sedentary, I described trends that I predicted would lead to decreased autonomy for !Kung women (Draper 1975). At that time my field work included two populations of !Kung, some who hunted and gathered, others who were settled. I was struck by a number of contrasting practices in the two groups. In comparison with the foraging !Kung, sedentary villages were smaller and less heterogeneous in their groupings of kin. !Kung of the settled villages accumulated more material wealth in the form of stock, larger and more durable houses, more clothing, and household implements. In comparison with women of the mobile groups who were frequently out of camp, ranging far on their own in their gathering expeditions, settled women appeared home-bound, concerned only with local domestic tasks and more deferent to men.

In terms of settlement pattern and architectural features, it seemed that a number of steps were being taken in the settled villages (erecting of fences around homesteads and visual barriers around individual houses, more distant spacing of houses) that taken together would lead to women spending more time alone, isolated from potential supporters and unable to protect themselves from abusive husbands. In other respects, the egalitarian style of interaction between the sexes that existed in the foraging groups appeared to be on the wane among the settled !Kung. Men were named as household heads; men, not women, were learning Bantu languages and entering into contractual relations with Bantu cattle owners. Whereas in the bush setting men and women exchanged tasks normally associated with one or the other sex, the sedentary people had a narrower tolerance for crossing

sex roles. In particular, women's tasks, such as collecting water and cutting thatching grasses were scorned by men.

In fact, twenty years later, these tendencies have not coalesced in ways that promote violence against women. There are episodes of violence against women living in the settled groups (as there were undoubtedly among the foraging !Kung) and these will be detailed below. The precipitating circumstances and the social settings of violence have changed somewhat as have the types of responses women and their supporters can make.

In their new life style, !Kung continue to live in small villages in which individual household buildings associated with different families are placed close together. While the placement of individual huts is no longer as close as has been reported for !Kung living in mobile camps (Draper 1973), the various structures are within easy sight and sound of the residents. Further, the !Kung continue their habit of living primarily out of doors in the full view of other village residents and visitors. True, !Kung no longer live in temporary grass shelters; instead they build the more typical southern African mud hut or rondavel. However, few !Kung structures match those of the neighboring Herero. Their mudded rondavels are comparatively insubstantial and have poorly fitted doors that cannot be locked or barred from the inside. This means that a violent man cannot isolate his wife and beat her while holding outside people who would help her. The lack of visual privacy, coupled with the physical proximity of others, means that an attack upon a woman by her husband will be observed and stopped.

FOUR CASE HISTORIES: WIFE-BEATING IN THE MODERN SETTING

Four episodes of wife-beating came to my attention during 1987-1988. While I did not observe any of these events personally, I was able to interview close kin of the victims in the days following the events and these discussions revealed some common patterns. The episodes differ in such factors as the setting of the violence, the ages and childbearing histories of the victims, the decisions by the wives whether to remain with the husbands, and the role of the wife's kin as interveners following the attacks.

Two of the beatings took place at !Angwa, the administrative center of western Ngamiland. !Angwa, a village of about 180 people, is unusual for having several discrete "neighborhoods." Other villages in !Kung territory are not only much smaller in total area but more homogeneous being, essentially, the linked compounds of closely related families. At the center of !Angwa are several small government-built structures, a clinic, a small store, a police station and the headman's office. Nearby are several compounds where beer is brewed and sold for about five cents per cup. Radiating out in various directions from !Angwa center, at a distance of one-half to one

kilometre, are separate compounds where Tswana, Herero and !Kung live in family groupings.

Two of the four wife-beatings took place in !Angwa and not at the domestic, residential compounds of the principals.

In the first case, N/ahka, a middle aged woman, was attacked by her husband. His assault resulted in injuries to her face, head and lips. Her husband accused her of sleeping with another man, in this case a Tswana. N/ahka and her husband had been married for many years but had no children together. Her only child was a girl of about fourteen years whose father was a Herero, and to whom N/ahka had not been married. The father had never contributed to his daughter's support, and for many years the child had been reared by N/ahka's parents who lived at a different village. When N/ahka's parents heard about the beating, they made plans to lodge a formal complaint with the headman at !Angwa against their son-in-law. Other people, not close relatives of N/ahka or her husband, claimed that the couple had a long history of discord, allegedly because the wife liked to sleep with Bantu men.

In another case, also at !Angwa, Kwoba, a woman aged about forty-five years, was beaten by her husband. Kwoba and her husband had a home village elsewhere but had come to !Angwa to visit relatives who lived there. One evening the husband and wife were drinking at one of the open air taverns. On the way home they began to argue, and her husband beat Kwoba with his fists and a walking cane. People said later they had heard screaming, but they claimed that because the crowds at the tavern were often raucous, no one paid attention. I saw Kwoba two days following the beating. Both her eyes were blackened and swollen nearly shut; her lips were raised with scabs; her upper arm bore long, linear bruises, presumably from being struck by the husband with his cane.

The beatings of N/ahka and Kwoba occurred at locations that, compared to other villages, were comparatively free of the restraints of kin and long-term village mates. Informal social controls are also weakened at !Angwa due to the ethnic heterogeneity of the population and the availability of alcohol. Another factor undoubtedly exacerbates sexual tensions at !Angwa and that is the attractions, described above, that !Kung women find in Tswana and Herero men. When !Kung men and women mix with other ethnic groups in the context of the disinhibiting effects of alcohol, flirtations between !Kung women and Bantu men will be resented by !Kung men who have claims on particular women. Being not only physically smaller but judged socially inferior to Bantu as well, a !Kung man, faced with direct sexual competition by Bantu men and "emboldened" by alcohol, will probably retaliate violently against a woman he perceives to be straying, rather than attack her Bantu suitor.

After being beaten, neither N/ahka nor Kwoba left her husband, perhaps because neither of these middle-aged women had adult children who maintained independent households. Although N/ahka's parents threatened to take their son-in-law to the headman and to lodge formal charges against him, they spoke of winning damage payments from the husband, not of ending the marriage. N/ahka did not try to join her parents following the beating, though they lived less than a day's walk away from !Angwa. Her parents were among the more impoverished !Kung of the area and were already supporting N/ahka's daughter (mentioned above) and her aged and decrepit grandmother.

When I saw the second victim, Kwoba, two days after her beating, she was sitting at her home village in an apparently harmonious family grouping composed of her husband, her co-wife, and her co-wife's children and grandchildren. Kwoba herself had no surviving children. More than twenty years earlier her only child had died as an infant. Both of Kwoba's parents were dead. Her adult half-siblings already lived in the same village and so could not (or did not) give her sanctuary in the usual sense of the term. Like N/ahka, Kwoba was middle-aged and without grown children to whom she might turn. It is likely that the decisions by N/ahka and Kwoba to remain with their husbands were influenced by the fact that they had no where else to go.

The two remaining cases of wife-beating concern young women, both in their late teens.

Kxaru, about sixteen years, had been married for two years to a man, Kumsa, about thirty-three years old. As yet Kxaru had no children. Her husband, Kumsa, had a reputation for being sullen and angry and given to drink. The second time he beat his young wife while in a drunken state, he bruised her face and split her lip, making a scar still visible many months later. At that time Kxaru had been living with her husband and his family, whereas her own parents and adult siblings lived about fifty kilometres away. Kxaru's maternal grandparents, however, lived in a nearby village and were well acquainted with her husband and his kin. Upon hearing about the attack, the grandmother went to Kxaru's hut and led her away. She kept Kxaru at her own village until she recovered, later sending her back to her parents. Kxaru's parents were economically better off than many !Kung. They owned cattle and also herded cattle belonging to a wealthy Herero family. Therefore they had a better and more predictable supply of milk than many !Kung. Even months later, the grandmother and grandfather were visibly indignant about the beating of Kxaru and declared that they personally had annulled the marriage. The union, in fact, appeared to be over; Kxaru remained living with her parents and was being sought by another suitor. Kumsa continued to live at home with his parents, sleeping frequently during the daytime and generally behaving like a lout.

/Asa, aged nineteen, had been living at Chum!kwe, Namibia, a regional administrative center about seventy kilometres from where her parents lived in Botswana. Her husband was a man about twenty-seven years old and who was unusual among !Kung men for being literate and having a regular wage-earning job at Chum!kwe. /Asa's husband beat her, striking her on the head and laying open her scalp. Fortunately for /Asa, there was a medical clinic at Chum!kwe where the laceration was stitched together. I saw the wound several weeks later; the scar was about three inches long across the top of her head. /Asa's father arranged for his nephew (also living at Chum!kwe) to bring /Asa and her year-old child back to her parents' village. They declared the marriage ended and helped her build a permanent mud hut in their own village. The father said he expected her to stay with them. He pointed to the nearby huts of his other grown children and the kraals that held the family's goats and few cattle as evidence of material wealth and kin support sufficient to incorporate his returned daughter.

The cases of Kxaru and /Asa (but not the cases of N/ahka and Kwoba) illustrate the continued power of a woman's kin group and the willingness of people to unilaterally intervene on behalf of the injured wife. Whereas in former times assaults on women reputedly led to counter violence directed at the husband or some one in his kin group, no such action was taken in the case of any of the four victimized women. !Kung know that the old days of self-help and blood feud are over since the Tswana have imposed their own system of law on the area.

Implicit in the contrast between the first and second pair of cases are the ages of the wives. Both Kxaru and /Asa were young and had their full reproductive careers ahead of them. Their youth benefited them in several ways. Because they were young, they stood a better probability of having two living parents and living siblings to act on their behalf. In addition their parents were prosperous enough to take them back.

In the cases of the two older abuse victims, several factors appear to be implicated in the lack of action being taken by the victims themselves: their age, their numbers of children, their ability to call on their parents and the economic resources available to their kin. N/ahka and Kwoba were at least twenty-five years older than the younger women. As such their reproductive value to their husbands and to their kin was diminished. Further, both were of low proven fertility (both had one child in the young adult years but no further births in the last fifteen years). Not only did they have no grown children to act on their behalf, they had no support group of descendant kin whose existence as tacit symbols of support might hold aggression by the husband in check. Although N/ahka had two younger, adult brothers of marriageable age, neither had found wives, nor were they living in independent

households, both circumstances a testament to the family's poor prospects. Kwoba, as stated above, had adult half-siblings but they were already living in her village. Presumably, had she been beaten by her husband while in her own compound, they would have intervened.

Finally, as older women, the probability was small that either of them had living parents who could take their part. Kwoba's parents were long dead, and N/ahka's parents were alive but in such poor economic straits that they were apparently unable to act. Among the !Kung, generally, mortality rates are high with the result that as adults age there is a steep decline in the probability a person will have a living parent. For example, the percentages of adults of varying cohorts whose fathers and mothers were alive are: 60 years and over (2 percent fathers, 5 percent mothers) 45-59 (13 percent fathers, 25 percent mothers); 30-44 (41 percent fathers, 47 percent mothers); 19-29 years (73 percent fathers, 72 percent mothers).

A sample of four cases is insufficient to speak to the issue of wife-beating in !Kung society. These few case histories suggest that future, more ambitious studies of violence against wives should pay close attention to the woman's age and reproductive status, the numbers, ages and availability of her kin, as well as to the economic resources of her potential supporters.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described the social and economic conditions that influence the coercion of women by husbands in !Kung society. Past and contemporary lifestyles of !Kung have been contrasted. The transition from a foraging and hunting economy to a subsistence based on settled food producing has not led, in any simple fashion, to increased physical coercion of women. The cultural changes !Kung have experienced in the last two decades have not transformed all areas of life equally. Economic practices and former patterns of spatial mobility have changed drastically, as have the marriage customs in favor of early marriages for girls. On the other hand, the bilateral residence arrangements, the physical and social intimacy of everyday village life and the strong ties maintained between a woman and her kin group have been brought from the bush and installed in the permanent settlements with little if any change.

The fact that !Kung are not only changing their subsistence base, but entering into regular association with other ethnic groups of Botswana, must also be taken into account. The accumulation of external stresses are known in other cultural settings to promote pathological behaviors within families. The Bantu speakers constitute an economic threat as they and their domestic stock move in increasing numbers into an area of western Botswana that was previously occupied primarily by !Kung. Many !Kung are as yet inex-

perienced with the demands of a more complex economy and are struggling simultaneously to make a livelihood and to win political recognition of their claims to land and water rights in what they conceive to be their traditional territory.

An added irritant to fundamental conflicts of interest that affect !Kung men and women in the modern setting is the increased frequency with which Bushmen women make informal unions with non-!Kung men. A consequence has been an increased number of half-Bantu children born to !Kung mothers. At present it appears that the children themselves are not disadvantaged. On the other hand, each half-Bantu child represents lost mating opportunity to !Kung men. Perhaps young !Kung men who succeed in finding wives will be less willing to invest in women who already have children by other men (particularly if they are half-Bantu) and in women whose behavior suggests poor certainty of paternity. It will be ironic if the temporary gains realized by women (delayed age of marriage and reduced dependence upon husbands) turn out to be the flip side of family disorganization and increasingly hostile relations between the sexes.

In future decades, if !Kung succeed in increasing their ownership of stock, they may adopt more patriarchal values and patrilocal forms of residence as is common among the neighboring Bantu groups of Botswana. These developments could undermine women's autonomy and make them more vulnerable to coercion by husbands. In the meantime, !Kung retain many customs that in the mobile economy promoted the welfare of wives. At this point in their transition to stable food production, there are numerous possible outcomes and many suggestions that their cultural transformation will carry the strong stamp of their former traditions.

NOTES

1. I have done field work with !Kung in 1968-1969, 1975, 1978, 1987-1988. The most recent research was supported by the National Institute of Aging Grant No. P01AG03110.

2. For alternate views see Leacock (1978); Maccoby and Jacklin (1974:368-369); Mukhopadhyay and Higgins (1988:469).

3. See Yellen (1977) contrasted with Denbow and Wilmsen (1986) and Wilmsen (1989) on !Kung culture history.

4. About eight years ago, in response to a severe drought that lasted until 1987, the Botswana government began a food distribution program directed at poor people living in remote areas.

5. See reports by Howell (1979); Lee (1982:44, 1979); Marshall(1976:282); Shostak (1981:231-233).

6. Data are based on reproductive interviews with over 300 !Kung collected in 1987 and 1988.

7. See Colson and Scudder (1988).

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