

Richard B. Lee

**Politics, sexual and non-sexual in an
egalitarian society**

Among the !Kung San, hunter-gatherers of southern Africa, women play an important role in production, in fact providing a greater proportion of the subsistence than do the men (Marshall, 1960; Lee, 1968). The same predominance of female over male work productivity has been observed among many other tropical and warm-temperate hunter-gatherers (Woodburn, 1968; Lee and DeVore, 1968; McCarthy and McArthur, 1960). The economic importance of women has led observers to question the male-dominated 'patrilocal' model of hunting and gathering society and to revise and upgrade women's role in human prehistory (Friedl, 1975; Rohrllich-Leavitt, 1975; Slocum, 1975; Hiatt, 1974; E. Morgan, 1972; Tanner and Zihlman, 1976; Reed, 1975; Leacock, 1972). The counterposing of 'Woman the Gatherer' to 'Man the Hunter' has been part of a welcome and long overdue re-examination of the implicit and explicit male biases in an-

Paper presented at the Conference on "Hunting and Gathering Societies", Paris, Unesco, 27-30 June 1978.

Field research among the !Kung was conducted in 1963-1964, 1967-1969 and 1973, with support from the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Canada Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Parts of this paper have been adapted from Lee, in press.

Social Science Information (SAGE, London and Beverly Hills),
17, 6 (1978), pp. 871-895.

Scanned and added to the Peaceful Societies website with the permission of the International Social Science Council.

thropological theory (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Reiter, 1975, 1977; Golde, 1970; Martin and Voorhies, 1975; Gough, 1970, 1971; Lamphere, 1977).

The re-evaluation of women's status in hunter-gatherer society raises the more general issue of the nature of politics in egalitarian societies. Is there a baseline of non-exploitative social relations in the small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers, or is this postulate an error, arising out of a romantic Rousseauian image of the primitive (Diamond, 1975)? Recent writings have sought to discern status inequalities in even the simplest small-scale societies, with males lording it over women and controlling their labor power, and elder males controlling the labor power and access to resources of younger males as well as females (Tiger, 1969; Fox, 1967; Rose, 1968; Meillassoux, 1975; Rey, 1975). The issues raised are not simple and agreement has yet to be reached on even the question of what constitutes the data for resolving the questions.

Therefore the modest purpose of this paper is to examine male-female relations and the problem of equality and inequality in general in hunter-gatherer societies, by using data on the !Kung San as an illustrative starting point. Three groups of problems are addressed:

- 1) By what kinds of criteria — economic, social, ideological — can we evaluate the equality of the sexes or lack of it among the !Kung, so that the results can be cross-culturally applicable? How representative are the !Kung of other hunter-gatherers?
- 2) What forms of leadership exists in !Kung society, and how do the people handle the apparent paradox of leadership — followership in an egalitarian society?
- 3) How does the equality in the political sphere correspond to the relations of production in the economic sphere and what are the key contradictions between and within these spheres that give to !Kung society a dynamic quality?

In answering these questions the area of male-female relations is addressed first, followed by an ethnography of !Kung leadership in the foraging and sedentary contexts and finally the questions of relations of production and their contradictions are considered.

Men and women foragers: contemporary perspectives

Although debate continues on the question of the presence, absence

or degree of male dominance in foraging societies, happily the day is past when learned authorities could simply characterize hunter-gatherer societies as male-dominated and aggressive and contrast them with the female dominated, fertility-obsessed cultures of the Neolithic horticulturalists. It wasn't so long ago for example that Lewis Mumford could assert:

Paleolithic tools and weapons mainly were addressed to movements and muscular efforts: instruments of chipping, hacking, digging, burrowing, cleaving, dissecting, exerting force swiftly at a distance; in short every manner of aggressive activity. The bones and muscles of the male dominate his technical contributions. . . Under woman's dominance the neolithic period is pre-eminently one of containers: it is an age of stone and pottery utensils, of vases, jars, vats, cisterns, bins, barns, granaries, houses, not least the great collective containers like irrigation ditches and villages.

(Mumford, 1961, p. 25)

Schemes like these echo 19th and early 20th century sequences which equated hunters with patriarchy and horticulturalists with matriarchy (e.g., Bachofen, 1861; L. Morgan, 1877; Freud, 1919). However, given this long history of controversy we should be wary of formulas that simply invert the previous sequences and grant all political power to women in early society, or for that matter which postulate a perfect equality between males and females in the pre-agricultural past. Rather than give a global assessment of male-female relations in !Kung society I prefer to deal with the problem piece-meal by discussing in turn the various spheres in which men and women interact to show that dominance of one sex in one sphere does not necessarily lead to dominance in another.

Hunting vs gathering

!Kung men hunt and !Kung women gather; and gathering provides about two-thirds of the diet and hunting one-third. Behind this simple statement lie some not-so-simple qualifications. For example, there are at least three ways of calculating the relative contributions of hunting and gathering to the foraging diet: first by the weight or caloric content of food from each source, second by the amount of work effort and the productivity per person-hour, and third by the cultural evaluation the people themselves place upon the two kinds of subsistence. On the first count it is clear that gathered foods provide about twice the food value of hunted foods. In a July 1964

study of work vegetable products yielded 69 per cent by weight and 71 per cent of the calories of the Dobe camp. At other seasons of the year such as the late summer and fall camps in Mongongo groves or Tsin fields, the proportion of vegetable foods may go even higher, as high as 80 per cent. Is there ever a time when hunting predominates over gathering? In late spring and early summer hunting camps the proportion of meat may sharply rise. In one study, the four hunters of a small camp of 12 killed 29 animals in 17 days for a *per capita* consumption of almost two kilos of meat per day. These bursts of meat eating tend to be of short duration, however, and overall I estimate that meat comprises between 30 and 40 per cent of the diet and vegetables between 60 and 70 per cent. Of course not all the plant gathering is done by women. Men gather as well, and their work provides almost a fifth of all the gathered food. Therefore when we sum up the overall contribution of each sex, the disparity is reduced. Men produce about 44 per cent and women 56 per cent of the weight and calories of the food brought into the camp.

Considering work effort and productivity next adds a further dimension to the differences between the sexes. Men put in a longer subsistence work week than do women — about 2.7 days of work for men compared to 2.1 for women — but the productivity of women's work overall and per person-hour is higher than the productivity of men's. A man brings back one game animal for every four days of hunting for a success rate of 25 per cent, while the probability of a woman finding food during a day of gathering is one hundred per cent. It is true that a single game animal may provide a very large input of food, as many calories as *fifty* days of gathering in the case of a large kudu. But such kills are few and far between and for the most part men have to content themselves with smaller kills. Overall each man-day of hunting brought in about 7,230 calories, compared to 12,000 calories for each person-day of gathering. These differences in productivity account for the fact that women provide a larger share of the food even while they do less of the subsistence work.

In light of the greater importance of gathered food in the diet it is curious that all !Kung, both men and women, evaluate meat more highly than plant food. When meat is scarce in the camp all people express a craving for it even when vegetable foods are abundant. And the occasions when large animals are killed are usually marked by feasting, dancing and the giving of gifts of meat as well. Since.

game animals are scarce and unpredictable compared to plant foods it is perhaps not so surprising that hunting is invested with more symbolic significance than gathering; and one should not lose sight of the fact that hunting provides essential nutrients such as high quality protein, which are not as readily available from plant foods alone.

Women, men, and child care

The question of child care and how it should be divided between mother, father, and other caretakers is a key issue in the contemporary West. The saddling of the woman of the modern household with the great bulk of the child care responsibilities has come to be regarded as a key symbol of woman's oppression in the capitalist system. In arguing for a more equitable distribution of household labor, feminist anthropologists have turned to data on non-Western societies for evidence of a more just set of child care arrangements. In some ways the !Kung data offer little support for this point of view, since over 90 per cent of the work involved in caring for young children is borne by the mother aided by the other women (Draper, 1976). This is not to say that !Kung fathers ignore their children; they are attentive and loving and spend part of their leisure hours playing with and holding the young infants. But the !Kung father rarely takes sole responsibility for the child while the mother is absent, while the opposite occurs every day (Draper, 1975; West and Konner, in press).

For their part the women do not consider themselves to be oppressed by this state of affairs. They keenly desire children, are excellent mothers and often complain that they do not have as many children as they would like.

In interpreting these attitudes one should avoid projecting the negative features we associate with child care on an entirely different cultural situation. The !Kung women consider child birth and child care as their sphere of responsibility and they take steps to guard their prerogatives in this area. For example, the fact that women go to the bush to give birth and insist on excluding men from the childbirth site is justified by them in terms of pollution and taboos; but the underlying explanation may be that it simplifies matters if a decision in favor of infanticide is made. Since the woman will commit a considerable amount of her energy to raising each child, she examines the newborn carefully for evidence of

defects; if she finds any, the child is not allowed to live and is buried with the afterbirth. By excluding men from the childbed women can report back to the camp that the child was born dead without fear of contradiction. But if the child is healthy and wanted by the woman she accepts the major responsibility for raising it. In this way the women exercise control over their own reproduction.

Another important reason why the !Kung women's share of the child care is not oppressive is that she is not isolated from the community in the same way that modern urban mothers are. She is helped by all the other women in the camp and there is no necessity to divide her productive work from her child care work. Gathering and food processing is carried out with her child on her hip and not left at home with babysitters. Also men do participate in the non-child care aspects of housework: about 20-40 per cent of the housework of a four person household is done by men (Lee, in press, ch. 9). For these reasons it is inaccurate to say that !Kung women are oppressed by the burden of child care responsibilities.

Marriage, divorce and group structure

Their contribution to the food supply and their control over reproduction and child care gives !Kung women influence in other areas such as marriage and divorce. For a variety of reasons there is an imposed scarcity among the !Kung of women of marriageable age. Parents of a girl can afford to be selective about a prospective son-in-law. As a result men usually have to prove themselves worthy by demonstrating their competence in hunting and ritual activities. This task takes many years and men are often 7-15 years older than their wives at marriage. For example, the typical age of marriage for the Nyae Nyae !Kung during the 1950s was 14-15 for women and 22-25 for men (L. Marshall, 1959), while in the Dobe area a decade later it was 16-17 for women and 23-30 for men. At marriage, the girl's people insist that the young couple live with them. The reasons given are of three kinds: they say first, that it must be seen that the man treats the daughter well; second, that he must prove his hunting abilities by providing meat; and, third, that the female is too young to leave her mother. In the majority of cases, the husband leaves his own group and takes up residence with the wife's group, a stay that may last three, five or ten years, or even a lifetime. Bride service is found among many of the world's hunter-gatherers and occurs even in northern Australia, an

area usually regarded as the heartland of the patrilocal band (Shapiro, 1971).

Thus there is a central paradox in the idea of Levi-Strauss that in simple societies women are a 'scarce good' and that they may have functioned as the original medium of exchange between men in early society (1969, pp. 62-65). Their very scarcity makes women more desirable and allows them considerable scope to dictate their own terms of marriage. The result is that though among the !Kung most first marriages are arranged, many break up soon after, and the break-up is usually initiated by the wife, not the husband. Furthermore, there is a feedback relationship between the demography of marriage and its ideology. The fewer the women available for marriage, the greater the pressure to marry off girls at a younger age. However, the younger the girl, the longer will be the period of 'bride service' necessary for the husband. By the time his bride service is completed, the husband's own parents may be dead, and these men often decide to continue to stay with their wife's group.

The husband during the period of bride service is not exploited or treated as a menial by his wife's family (as was the daughter-in-law in the pre-revolutionary Chinese family). Precisely the opposite is the case. The atmosphere is made as congenial as possible to encourage the son-in-law to stay on after the period of bride service. Usually these men in fact form strong ties with other men in the group, especially brothers-in-law. Recruiting sons-in-law adds hunting strength to the group and means more meat for the members, a point to be discussed further below.

Bride service and age differences at marriage are two of the factors that explain why women comprise the core of !Kung living groups as frequently as do men (Lee, 1976). Statistically, mother-daughter bonds predominate followed by sister-sister and brother-sister, but father-son and brother-brother bonds are also found. Thus it would be an overstatement to say that the !Kung group structure is a simple inversion of the patrilocal band model with females replacing males at the group's core. Instead we see that the genealogical core consists of males *and* females, and no single rule of uxorilocal or virilocal postmarital residence will account for the arrangements actually observed.

Women and political power

Does women's predominant role in production, their leverage in

marriage, and their sharing of core group membership with men lead to power in the political arena as well? The answer in a broad sense is yes: !Kung women's participation in group discussions and decision making is probably greater than that of women in most tribal, peasant, and industrial societies. But the level of their participation is not equal to that of men. The latter appear to do about two-thirds of the talking in discussions involving both sexes, and men act as group spokespersons far more frequently than do women.

This disparity between men and women comes into sharper relief when discussions and arguments turn to violence. In 34 cases of fights occurring in the period 1963-69 a man attacked a woman 14 times, while a woman attacked a man only once (Lee, in press, ch. 13). Since 11 of these 15 cases involved husband and wife it is clear that in domestic scraps the wife is the victim in the great majority of cases. Similarly in cases of homicide there were twenty-five male and no female killers (though it is worth noting that 19 of the 22 victims were males as well).

Remarkably, one major form of violence against women, rape, is rare among the !Kung. This kind of sexual violence, so common in other societies (Brownmiller, 1975; Webster, 1976), has been reported for the !Kung in only a handful of cases.

In summarizing the evidence for male-female relations, we see that women predominate in some spheres of behavior and men in others, while the overall sense of the relations between the sexes is one of give and take. Both sexes work equally hard, with men working longer hours in subsistence and tool-making and women working longer hours in housework and child care. Women's subsistence work is more efficient and productive than men's so that they provide more of the food despite their shorter subsistence work week. In marriage arrangements women exercise some control and they initiate divorce far more frequently than men. On the other hand, because the men are so much older than their wives at marriage this factor may tip the balance of influence within the marriage in favor of the males (It should be noted that in about one out of five !Kung marriages the woman is older than the man — up to 20 years — and in these unions it is usually the woman's influence which predominates.)

In the political sphere men do more of the talking than women and it is my impression that their overall influence in 'public' matters is greater, though I cannot present any data to confirm this

point. Men exhibit more violent behavior than women, though women are rarely the victims in serious conflicts; and rape, a primary form of violence against women in many societies, is not common among the !Kung.

On balance the evidence shows a relatively equal role in society for the two sexes, and there is certainly no support in the !Kung data for a view of women in 'the state of nature' as oppressed or dominated by men or as subject to sexual exploitation at the hands of males. However the comparative evidence suggests that the status of !Kung women may be higher than that enjoyed by women in some other foraging societies such as the Eskimo (Friedl, 1975) and the Australian aborigines (Gale, 1974).

Leadership

How group and individual decisions are made in a society without formal political or judicial institutions is difficult to discern. In egalitarian societies such as the !Kung we see group activities unfolding, plans made and decisions arrived at all without a clear focus of authority or influence. Closer examination, however, reveals that patterns of leadership do exist. When a water hole is mentioned, a group living there is often referred to by the !Kung by a single man's or women's name, for example Bon!a's camp at !Kangwa, or Kxarun!a's camp at Bate. These individuals are often older people who have lived there the longest or who have married into the owner group, and who have some personal qualities worthy of note as a speaker, an arguer, a ritual specialist, or a hunter. In group discussions these people may speak out more than others, may be deferred to by others, and one gets the feeling that their opinions hold a bit more weight than the opinions of other participants. Whatever their skills, !Kung leaders have no formal authority. They can only persuade but never enforce their will on others. Even the !Kung vocabulary of leadership is limited. Their word for Chief "/Kaiha", derived from the word "/Kai (wealth)", is applied to Bantu headmen and chiefs, and even the English kings and queens but only rarely do the !Kung use it of other !Kung and then usually in a derisory manner. One /Xai/xai man nicknamed '/kaihan!a' meaning 'Big Chief' told us it was a joking name since when he was young he tended to put on airs; people called him Big Chief to take him down a peg.

The suffix '-n!a (old or big)' is added to any person's name after age forty. When one person of a camp is singled out as 'n!a' from other age mates it usually means that he or she is the leader of the camp. Marshall calls the camp leader the 'K"xaun!a' meaning 'Big owner' (1976, p. 191).

Paths to leadership

Analysing the attributes of the acknowledged leaders of the living groups of the Dobe area one finds a wide variety of skills, backgrounds and genealogical positions. Some people are powerful speakers, others say very little. Some leaders are genealogically central; others are outsiders who married a core woman. Some have many children and grandchildren in the living group, others have few or no offspring. The majority of leaders are males but females as well take leadership roles. At least four attributes can lead to leadership and most leaders have several of these in varying degrees: 1) seniority in a large family; 2) n!ore (land) ownership; 3) marriage to a n!ore owner; and 4) personal qualities.

Seniority. Being the oldest member or surviving member of a sibling group puts one in a position of respect within the family, and if the family is large enough the entire camp could be made up of your descendants, your siblings' descendants and their spouses. Seniority alone, however, does not make a leader, since many of the oldest people do not take leadership roles.

N!ore ownership. This is an important criterion; if you are the senior descendant of a long line of n!ore owners then your claim to leadership is very strong. For example, Sa/ /gain!a, who died in 1971, was a descendant of several generations of /Xai/xai owners and though she was a soft-spoken person she was the acknowledged leader of her camp, a position shared with her husband. Her niece Baun!a (d. 1966) had equal claim to n!ore ownership but since she was a strong, forceful woman as well she was doubly a leader of her /Xai/xai group. Her son Tsau later became the chief spokesperson for the /Xai/xai San in their relations with the Bantu.

Marriage to a n!ore owner. This was the most frequent route to leadership positions among the !Kung. It usually involved an energetic, capable man from another waterhole marrying a woman

of the n!ore-owning group. The best example of this kind of leader is ≠Toma n!wa, one of Lorna Marshall's main informants at /Gausha (Marshall, 1960, 1976). He married !U, a woman of the n!ore-owning sibling group, and he became the leader of the /Gausha camp, while !U's older brother Gao went to live in the Dobe Area. ≠Toma is known to students of anthropology as the senior of the four giraffe hunters in John Marshall's classic film 'The hunters' (1956). Another example of a leader who married in is ≠Toma//gwe at Dobe. He married //Koka of the n!ore-owning group and settled at Dobe to raise a family that by the 1970s had grown to consist of a group of four married children and their spouses and eight grandchildren. ≠Toma//gwe is considered gruff and unreasonable by other!Kung but his large family plus his connection to the owner group validates his leadership role.

Personal qualities. Some leaders like ≠Toma n!wa of /Gausha have obvious leadership qualities, being excellent speakers and diplomatic mediators. Others like ≠Toma//gwe are gruff and unreasonable but have strong personalities. ≠Toma Leopard the young leader of a group at /Xai/xai is charming, but also short-tempered, feisty, and fiercely independent, while Kxaurun!a of Bate and Sa//gain!a of /Xai/xai are mellow, grandmotherly, and soft spoken. No single personality type or personality trait dominates the ranks of leaders. If anything what the leaders share is *an absence of traits in common*. None are arrogant or overbearing, boastful or aloof. In !Kung terms these traits absolutely disqualify one as a leader and may lead to even stronger sanctions. Some extremely aggressive men have been killed by community agreement (Lee, in press, ch. 13).

Another trait emphatically not found among traditional camp leaders is a desire for wealth or acquisitiveness. The leaders of the fifteen or so living groups not closely tied to Black cattle posts live in huts no larger, or dress in clothing or ornaments no more lavish than that of the other camp members. Whatever their extravagances in speech, their personal style of living is modest and their accumulation of material goods is minimal. Whatever their personal influence over group decisions they never translate this into more wealth or more leisure time than other group members. !Kung leaders therefore adhere closely to the image of the 'egalitarian redistributor' noted by Harris (1975, p. 289) or the modest band leader noted by Fried (1967, p. 82ff.) as characteristic

of egalitarian societies.

San headmen?

The question of hereditary headmen or chiefs among the San has been a matter of dispute. The existence of San chiefs was stated clearly long ago by Fourie who wrote:

At the head of each group is a big man or chief. Though usually considered to be a chief in name only and without any authority over the members of the group, he in fact does exercise considerable influence in the life of the community because in him are vested certain functions, the performance of which are of vital importance to the welfare of his people. The family area with its food and water supply as well as the fire are all looked upon as belonging to him. Among the tribes of the Kalahari he is succeeded by a son or failing such, by the nearest male relative (Fourie, 1928, p. 86).

Lorna Marshall in her earlier writings also spoke of an hereditary headman in whom resided the ownership of the group's resources and who inherited his position patrilineally (1960, pp. 344-52), a view which Fried has questioned (1967, pp. 87-89). Marshall has subsequently altered her views and has more recently stated that "'headman' was a misleading and unfortunate paraphrase" for 'K"xaun!a' meaning 'big owner' (1976, p. 191). Her revised thinking on the subject of headman now brings the data on the Nyae Nyae !Kung into line with the data from the Dobe area, since in the latter case it is clear that the institution of the headman was completely absent among the pre-contact !Kung. Further there is good evidence that the concept of headmen only came into currency *after* the arrival of the Bantu.

After reading Marshall's 1960 article and the earlier writings of others, I made inquiries in the Dobe area in 1964 to find out who was the headman or chief (/kaiha) at each waterhole. The answers the people gave were almost entirely negative. The younger people didn't know who, if anyone, was the headman, and the older people were obviously puzzled by the question. Some people offered up a variety of names but most answered that the only headman they knew of was Isak, the Motswana headman appointed by the Paramount Chief. Finally I discussed the question with K"au, a senior /Xai/xai man originally from /Gam, "Before the Tswana came here," I asked, "did the San have chiefs?"

"No," he replied. "We had no one we set apart like a chief; we

all lived on the land."

"What about /Gaun!a? Was he a chief of /Xai/xai?" I asked, citing the name of a man who the Hereros had mentioned as a former San headman.

"That is not true," K"au responded. "They are mistaken. Because among the Bantu the Chief's village is fixed; you come to him, speak, and go away. Others come, speak, and go. But with us San, we are here today, tomorrow over there, and the next day still elsewhere. How can we have a chief leading a life like that?"

"If San have no chiefs," I asked "then how did /Gaun!a come to, be labelled as the chief here?"

"I can tell you that. /Gaun!a was living at /Twihaba east of /Xai/xai when the Bantu came. They saw evidence of his many old campsites and so they called him '//Kaiha'. But then named him something that no !Kung person recognizes."

"But even that is lies," the old man continued "because /Gaun!a was not even the real owner of /Twihaba! His proper n!ore is N!umtsa, east of /Gam, /Twihaba properly belongs to the people of a≠Toma whose descendants now live mostly in the east. "

Other !Kung informants corroborated K'au's statements about the absence of headmen among themselves, but the most striking confirmation of the point came from a conversation with K"au-Kasupe, a short, lively Dobe resident who had originally come from the Nyae Nyae area. In her detailed discussion of the headman (1960, pp. 344-52) Lorna Marshall had used the /Gausha waterhole as a prime example. The leader of her /Gausha Band 1 was ≠Toman!wa, discussed above, who had married into the core group. But the headman at /Gausha was not ≠Toma, but his wife's younger brother, a crippled man named Lame ≠Gao. The real headman, however, should have been one Gao, who, according to Marshall, "chose to renounce his headmanship and to live with his wife's people in Band 21 . . . However, should Gao change his plan and return to Band 1, the headmanship would automatically fall on him again, as he is the eldest son" (1960, p. 350).

Marshall's Gao turned out to be none other than Kasupe living at Dobe. When I asked him how it felt to be the absent headman of /Gausha he expressed surprise, shock, disbelief, and then laughter. With a keen sense of the irony of the situation, Kasupe insisted that he was in no way the headman of /Gausha; that his shrimp of a kid brother Lame ≠Gao certainly wasn't the headman; that the !Kung don't even have headmen; if they did he, Kasupe, would be the

headman of //Karu, not /Gausha since the latter was his father's true n!ore; and finally, asked Kasupe: if he was such a headman how did it happen that he, the boss, was living in rags at Dobe, while underlings like his brother and sisters were living in luxury at the South African settlement scheme at Chum!kwe?

Kasupe's genuine surprise at being named the headman of /Gausha along with the abundant corroborating evidence from other informants convinced me that indeed the !Kung have no headman. Years later I was speaking with /Twi!gum, one of the owners of !Kangwa, and I casually asked him whether the !Kung have headmen.

"Of course we have headmen!" he replied, to my surprise. "In fact we are all headmen," he continued slyly, "each one of us is headman over himself!"

!Kung leadership in the contact setting

Given the conflicting nature of the evidence on the headman question we may legitimately ask how the illusion of !Kung headmanship came into being. The answer must be sought in the contacts of the !Kung with Bantu and Europeans over the last 80 years. The Tswana were a hierarchically organized, expanding people who brought under their rule a number of tribally-based societies in western and northern Botswana. By the time they reached the Dobe area in the 1890s, the Tswana had already become part of the British colonial protectorate of Bechuanaland (Sillery, 1952; 1964). Like the British the Tswana employed a system that combined elements of direct and indirect rule. Around the turn of the century the Tswana Kubu and Mhapa clans were given stewardship of the Dobe area by the Tswana paramount chief, but because the area was vast and their numbers were few they tried to recruit local !Kung to be the spokespeople for the San camps at the various waterholes. Later when they moved their cattle up to /Xai/xai, /Gam and !Kangwa they put local !Kung men in charge of the livestock. Gradually a system of leaders came into being who were recognized as '/kaihas' by the Tswana but who had no equivalent standing among the !Kung themselves.

This contradiction between what we might call 'inside' leaders and 'outside' leaders continues up to the present day. Inside leaders achieve their status by being n!ore owners or spouses of n!ore

owners in combination with personal qualities of leadership. The outside leaders excel in their ability to deal with Bantu and Europeans, and in their entrepreneurial skills. Rarely are the two kinds of attributes combined in a single person. For example at Dobe in 1973 there were two camps, the one led by *!Tomal//gwe* who had lived there for many years, and a group led by Debe a vigorous and able man who had long worked for Bantu and Europeans but who had no claim to the ownership of Dobe. Because of his knowledge of and sensitivity to the outside world Debe was highly regarded by government people, anthropologists, and missionaries, but whenever the outsiders were absent, Debe's *!Kung* neighbors would express a great deal of hostility and resentment toward him.

This hostility came to a head in the mid-1970s over a government-sponsored project to dig a well at Dobe to improve and stabilize the water supply and thus make stockraising possible for the Dobe residents. When the time came to register the well in a leader's name, the outside agents favored Debe, who was fluent in Setswana and who could make a highly articulate case for the *!Kung* before the District Council's Land Board in Maun the district capital. To the dismay of the outsiders the Dobe *!Kung* chose as their leader a quiet and unaggressive man named *!Dau* whose main claim to the role was the fact that he was the descendant of *!Dauhwanadum* (*!Dau* licks the river bed) the senior owner of Dobe 50 years ago. At the long and contentious meetings held to discuss the issue of the well, *!Dau* would sit quietly to one side listening and only rarely would he interject a comment, compared to Debe who discoursed at length. The fact that the Dobe people chose the former man in preference to the latter indicated that they were not yet fully aware of the threats to the security of their land, and thus were not able to fully mobilize against it. Polly Wiessner has pointed out (personal communication) that at the Chum!*kwe* settlement across the border *!Toman!wa* (the */Gausha* leader) was initially elected as the 'foreman' to represent the *!Kung* in their dealings with the South African authorities, but he was defeated at the next election, a fate which has befallen many of his successors as well.

The changing patterns of leadership among the San reveal the existence of two contradictory systems of politics among them. The old system based on genealogy and *n!ore* ownership favored a

leader who was modest in demeanor, generous to a fault, egalitarian, and whose legitimacy arose from long-standing n!ore ownership. The new system required a man who had to deny most of the old virtues. The political arena of District Councils, Land Boards and nationalist politics required someone who was male, aggressive, articulate, and wise in the ways of the wider world. As antithetical as these characteristics are to !Kung traditional values, the dynamic of their rapid incorporation into the national capitalist system of Botswana will make it inevitable that these new leaders will have to come to the fore.

Social relations of production

Central to the hunting and gathering mode of production is a lack of wealth accumulation and the social differentiation that accompanies it. This lack of accumulation even though the means for it — free time and raw materials — are at hand, arises from the requirements of the nomadic life. For people who move around a lot and did not keep pack animals until very recently, it would be sheer folly to amass more goods than can be carried along when the group moves. Portability is the major design feature of the items themselves. The total weight of an individual's personal property is less than twenty-five pounds and can easily be carried from place to place.

The modest investment in capital goods and the lack of wealth disparities contribute to the distinctive style of San social relations. With personal property so easily portable, it is no problem for people to move as often as they do. There is a similar lack of investment in fixed facilities such as village sites, storage places, and fenced enclosures. When parties come into conflict it is simpler to part company than remain together and resolve differences through adjudication or fighting.

A dynamic of movement informs the daily life of individuals and groups. Land ownership is vested not in a single individual but in a collective of k"ausi, both males and females, who form the core of the resident camp and who must be approached for permission to use the resources of the area. Rights of reciprocal access to food resources is a fundamental principle of land use. If Group A visits Group B in one season, it is expected that Group B will repay the visit in the next. These visiting patterns tend to keep people in cir-

culcation from area to area providing a change of scene and change of company. An individual's primary kin and close affines are always distributed at several different waterholes, and through the far-reaching ties of the name relation he may establish close ties at a number of others. The outcome of these multiple options is that an individual may utilize the food resources of several waterholes as long as he observes the elementary good manners of sharing fully with the members of the local camp. Whether an individual will choose to join a given camp depends on the history of his relations with the long-term residents. Many men and women who have a reputation for good humor, industry, or curing skills have standing invitations at many different camps. Even less popular individuals nevertheless have strong primary kinship ties that make them welcome in at least two or three camps and tolerated in others.

This dynamic of movement, coupled with the fact that both males and females form the core of groups, leads to an emphasis in social relations on recruitment rather than exclusion. The older model of male-centred territorial bands (Service, 1962; Fox, 1967; Tiger, 1969) assumed that the primary requirement of the foraging living group was the maintenance of exclusive rights to land, a task that was best fulfilled by a core of male sibling defenders. In contrast, it is clear that the maintenance of *flexibility* to adapt to changing ecological circumstances is far more important in hunter-gatherer group structure than is the maintenance of exclusive rights to land. Flexibility favors a social policy of *bringing in* more personnel rather than keeping them out, hence the emphasis on the social principle of *recruitment* rather than *exclusion*. Because of the nature of production in hunter-gatherer society, the principal way to increase output is to add personnel; therefore, a primary social strategy of many hunter-gatherers is to recruit sons-in-law to augment the group's meat-getting capacity while at the same time trying to retain the sons. The net effect of this strategy is that many of the males in any group are outsiders and unrelated.

On the political level these characteristics of foraging life lead to a strong emphasis on egalitarian social relations. It is not simply a question of the *absence* of a headman and other authority figures but also a positive insistence on the essential equality of all people and the refusal to bow to the authority of others, a sentiment expressed in the statement: "Of course we have headmen. . . each one of us is headman over himself." Leaders do exist, but their influence is subtle and indirect. They never order or make demands

of others and their accumulation of material goods is never more, and is often much less, than the average accumulation of the other households in their camp.

The ideology of equality and its contradictions

Two remarkable cultural practices at the level of consciousness accompany the egalitarian political ideal. They occur among the !Kung and among many other hunter-gatherers. The most serious accusations that one !Kung can level against another are the charge of stinginess and the charge of arrogance. To be stingy or 'far-hearted' is to hoard one's goods jealously and secretively, guarding them 'like a hyena'. The corrective for this in the !Kung view is to make the hoarder give 'till it hurts', that is to make him give generously and without stint until everyone can see that he is truly cleaned out. In order to ensure compliance with this cardinal rule the !Kung browbeat each other constantly to be more generous and not to set themselves apart by hoarding a little nest-egg. The importance of sharing and giving has been ably documented by Lorna Marshall (1961; 1976, pp. 287-312).

But as serious as they regard the fault of stinginess, their most scathing criticisms are reserved for an even more serious shortcoming: the crime of arrogance (*≠twi*). While a stingy person is anti-social and irksome, an arrogant person is actually dangerous since according to the !Kung 'his pride will make him kill someone'. A boasting hunter who comes into camp announcing, 'I have killed a big animal in the bush' is being arrogant. A woman who gives a gift and announces to all her great generosity, is being arrogant. Even an anthropologist who claims to have chosen the biggest ox of the year to slaughter for Christmas is being arrogant. The !Kung perceive this behavior as a danger sign and they have evolved elaborate devices for puncturing the bubble of conceit and enforcing humility. These levelling devices are in constant daily use, minimizing the size of others' kills, downplaying the value of others' gifts, and treating one's own efforts in a self-deprecating way. 'Please' and 'thank you' are hardly ever found in their vocabulary; in their stead we find a vocabulary of rough humor, back-handed compliments, put-downs, and damning with faint praise. In fact the one area in which they are openly competitive is in recounting suffering. They try to outdo each other in tales of misfortune: cold, pain, thirst, hunger, hunting, failure, and other

hardships represent conversational gold, the obverse of the coin of arrogance, which they so strongly discourage.

To the outsider these cultural preoccupations are disconcerting. We admire the !Kung from afar, but when we are brought into closer contact with their daily concerns, we are alternately moved to pity by their tales of hardship, and repelled by their nagging demands for gifts, demands that grow more insistent the more we give.

These contradictions, generosity-stinginess, arrogance-humility, equality-hierarchy, sociability-withdrawal, are central themes in !Kung culture and they afford us a glimpse into the internal workings of a social existence very different from our own. The essence of this way of life is sharing, a practice that is extended more widely in the foraging mode of production than in any other. People share within the family and between families, and the unit of sharing extends to the boundaries of the face-to-face community and beyond. Visualize the kind of sharing that occurs around the dinner table in a western household but expanded in scale to include a group of 15 to 30 people, and you have some idea of the nature of sharing in a !Kung camp.

The principle of generalized reciprocity within the camp, the giving of something without an expectation of equivalent return, is almost universal among foraging peoples (Sahlins, 1965; 1972). In the case of the !Kung, food is shared in a generalized familistic way, while durable goods are changed according to the principle of balanced reciprocity; that is, transactions are expected to balance out in the long run. These kinds of reciprocities have their counterpoints in the political sphere. Egalitarian relations are a kind of balanced political reciprocity where giving orders and receiving them balances out. In the same way hierarchical relations correspond to a negative reciprocity at the level of exchange. To give orders from A to B but not from B to A is like taking goods from B to A but not giving anything in return. Conversely sharing of food and sharing of power seem to go hand in hand.

The fact that communal sharing of food resources and of power is a phenomenon that has been directly observed in recent years among the !Kung and dozens of other foraging groups is a finding that should not be glossed over lightly. Its universality among foragers lends strong support to the theory of Marx and Engels that a stage of primitive communism prevailed before the rise of the state and the breakup of society into classes (Engels, 1881 [1972]).

One should add the proviso, however, that this communism does not extend, as far as we know, to include sexual rights, as Marx and Engels, following L. H. Morgan (1877) originally believed.

Having declared that the foraging mode of production is a form of primitive communism, it would be a mistake to idealize the foraging peoples as noble savages who have solved all the basic problems of living. Like individuals in any society, the foragers have to struggle with their own internal contradictions, and living up to the demands of this strongly collective existence presents some particularly challenging problems. Sharing, for example, is not automatic; it has to be learned and reinforced by culture. Every human infant is born equipped with both the capacity to share and the capacity to be selfish. During the course of socialization each society channels these impulses into socially acceptable forms and every society expects some sort of balance between sharing and 'selfish' behavior — between the needs of self and the needs of others. Among the foragers, society demands a high level of sharing and tolerates a low level of personal accumulation compared to Western capitalist norms. And living up to these demands, while it has its rewards, also takes its toll. I doubt whether any !Kung ever completely gives up the selfish impulse, and the tension to conform continues through life. Elderly !Kung in particular give voice to the contradictions between sharing and keeping. On one occasion ≠Toma//gwe asked me for a blanket and said, "All my life I've been giving, giving; today I am old and want something for myself." And similar sentiments have been expressed by other oldsters. Perhaps because they are old their departures from the cultural norm are tolerated more than they would be coming from younger adults.

Sharing food is accompanied by sharing space and a second area of communal life that causes stress is the lack of privacy. Daily life goes on in full view of the camp. People rarely spend time alone and to seek solitude is regarded as a bizarre form of behavior. Even marital sex is carried on discretely under a light blanket shared with the younger children around the family fire. It is considered bad manners for others to look. Sullen withdrawn behavior is regarded with concern and not allowed to continue. The person showing it is pestered and goaded until he or she loses his temper and the anger that follows helps to clear the air and reintegrate the outsider. When people are depressed or their feelings are hurt, they express it by awaking at night to compose sad songs which they play for

themselves on the thumb piano. These poignant refrains form a counterpoint to the night sounds of the crackling sleeping fires and the calls of the night jars, and no one tells the players to pipe down or shut up.

So it is clear that the demands of the collective existence are not achieved effortlessly, but rather they require a continuing struggle with one's own selfish, arrogant and antisocial impulses. The fact that the !Kung and other foragers succeed as well as they do in communal living in spite of (or because of?) their material simplicity, offers us an important insight. A truly communal life is often dismissed as a utopian ideal, to be endorsed in theory but unattainable in practice. But the evidence for foraging peoples tells us otherwise. A sharing way of life is not only possible but has actually existed in many parts of the world and over long periods of time.

Richard B. Lee (born 1937), Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto, is mainly working on the !Kung San of the Kalahari Desert. He has published numerous articles and books and has co-edited with Irvén DeVore *Man the hunter* in 1968. *Author's address:* Dpt. of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Ont., Canada.

References

- Bachofen, J.
1861 *Das Mutterrecht*. Basel, Benno Schwabe.
- Brownmiller, S.
1975 *Against our will: Men, women and rape*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Diamond, S.
1975 *In search of the primitive*. New York, Dutton.
- Draper, P.
1975 "!Kung woman: Contrasts in sexual egalitarianism in the foraging and sedentary context", pp. 77-109 in: R. Reiter (ed.). *Toward an anthropology of women*. New York, Monthly Review Press.
1976 "Social and economic constraints on child life among the !Kung", pp.199-217 in: R. B. Lee; I. DeVore (eds.). *Kalahari hunter-gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- Engels, F.
1881 *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. New York, International Publishers. (Edited with an introduction by E. Leacock.)

- Fourie, L.
1928 "The Bushmen of South West Africa", in: Hahn; Fourie; Vedder (eds.).
The native tribes of South West Africa. Cape Town, Cape Times.
- Fox, R.
1967 *Kinship and marriage*. Baltimore, Md., Penguin.
- Freud, S.
1919 *Totem and taboo*. London, Routledge.
- Fried, M. H.
1967 *The evolution of political society*. New York, Random House.
- Friedl, E.
1975 *Women and men: An anthropologist's view*. New York, Holt, Rinehart
and Winston.
- Gale, F. (ed.)
1974 *Women in aboriginal society*. Canberra, Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Godelier, M.
1975 "Modes of production, kinship, and demographic structures", pp. 3-28 in:
M. Bloch (ed.). *Marxist analyses and social anthropology*. London,
Malaby Press. (AS A Monographs No.3.)
- Golde, P. (ed.)
1970 *Women in the field: Anthropological experiences*. Chicago, Ill., Aldine.
- Gough, K.
1970 *Women in evolution*. Boston, Mass., New England Free Press. (Pamphlet.)
1971 "The origin of the family", *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33: 760-
771.
- Harris, M.
1975 *Culture, people, nature: An introduction to general anthropology*. New
York, Thomas Crowell.
- Hiatt, B.
1974 "Woman the gatherer", pp. 4-15 in: F. Gale (ed.). *Woman's role in
aboriginal Society*. Canberra, Social Anthropology Series No. 6,
Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 36.
- Lamphere, L.
1977 "Anthropology", *Signs* 2(3): 612-627. (Review article).
- Leacock, E. (ed.)
1972 *Engels' "The origin of the family, private property and the state"*. New
York, International Publishers.

Lee, R. B.

1968 "What hunters do for a living, or, how to make out on scarce resources", pp. 30-48 in: R. B. Lee; I. DeVore (eds.). *Man the hunter*. Chicago, Ill., Aldine.

1976 "!Kung spatial organization: An ecological and historical perspective", in: R. B. Lee; I. DeVore (eds.). *Kalahari hunter-gatherers: Studies of the !Kung San and their neighbors*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

in *The !Kung San: Men, women, and work in a foraging society*. New press York/Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Lee, R. B. DeVore, I.

1968 *Man the hunter*. Chicago, Ill., Aldine.

Levi-Strauss, C.

1969 *The elementary structures of kinship*. Boston, Mass., Beacon Press.

Marshall, J.

1956 *The hunters*. Somerville, Mass., Center for documentary Anthropology. (Film)

Marshall, L.

1959 "Marriage among !Kung Bushmen". *Africa* 29: 355-365.

1960 "!Kung Bushmen bands", *Africa* 30: 325-355.

1961 "Sharing, talking, and giving: Relief of social tensions among !Kung Bushmen", *Africa* 31(3).

1976 *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

McCarthy, F.; McArthur, M.

1960 "The time factor in aboriginal society", pp. 145-190 in: C. Mountford (ed.). *The Australian-American scientific expedition to Arnhem Land*, Vol. 3: *Anthropology and nutrition*.

Meillassoux, C.

1973 "On the mode of production of the hunting band", pp. 187-203 in: P. Alexandre (ed.). *French perspectives in African studies*. London, Oxford University Press.

1975 *Femmes, grenier et capitaux*. Paris, Maspero.

Morgan, E.

1972 *The descent of woman*. New York, Stein and Day.

Morgan, L. H.

1877 *Ancient society*. New York, World Publishing.

Mumford, L.

1961 *The city in history: Its origin, its transformations, and its prospects*. London, Seeker and Warburg.

- Peterson, N.
1974 "Women's role in subsistence", in: F. Gale (ed.). *Women in aboriginal society*. Canberra, Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Reed, E.
1975 *Woman's evolution from matriarchal clan to patriarchal family*. New York, Pathfinder Press.
- Reiter, R.
1977 "Introduction to special issue on the anthropology of women", *Critique of Anthropology* 3(9/10): 5-24.
- Reiter, R. (ed.)
1975 *Toward an anthropology of women*. New York, Monthly Review Press.
- Rey, P.
1975 "The lineage mode of production", *Critique of Anthropology* 3.
- Rohrlich-Leavitt, R. (eds.)
1975 *Peacable primates and gentle people*. New York, Harper and Row.
- Rosaldo, M.; Lamphere, L.
1974 *Women, culture and society*. Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.
- Rose, F. G. G.
1968 "Australian marriage: Initiations and land-owning groups", in: R. B. Lee; I. DeVore (eds.). *Man the hunter*. Chicago, Ill., Aldine.
- Sahlins, M.
1965 "The sociology of primitive exchange", pp. 139-236 in: M. Banton (ed.). *The relevance of models in social anthropology*. London, Tavistock, ASA Monographs No.1.
1972 *Stone age economics*. Chicago, Ill., Aldine.
- Service, E. R.
1962 *Primitive social organization: An evolutionary perspective*. New York, Random House.
- Shapiro, W.
1971 "Wawilak: Ontogeny, phylogeny and sexuality in Miwyt ("Murngit") thought". Paper presented at 70th Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, New York.
- Sillery, A.
1952 *The Bechuanaland protectorate*. Cape Town, Oxford University Press.
1965 *Founding a protectorate: History of Bechuanaland 1885-1895*. The Hague, Mouton.
- Slocum, S.
1975 "Woman the gatherer", pp. 36-50 in: R. Reiter (ed.). *Toward an anthropology of women*. New York, Monthly Review Press.

Tanner, N.; Zihlman, A.

1976 "Women in evolution", Part I: "Innovation and selection in human origins", *Signs* 1: 585-608.

Tiger, L.

1969 *Men in groups*. New York, Random House.

Martin, K.; Voorhies, B.

1975 *Female of the species*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Webster, P.

1976 "The politics of rape in primitive society". Paper presented at 75th Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC.

West, M.; Konner, M.

In "The role of the father: An anthropological perspective", in: M. Lamb press (ed.). *The role of the father in child development*. New York, Wiley.

Woodburn, J.

1968 "An introduction to Hazda ecology", pp. 49-55 in: R. B. Lee; I. DeVore (eds.). *Man the hunter*. Chicago, Aldine.