

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Anthropology Faculty Publications

Anthropology, Department of

May 1978

The Learning Environment for Aggression and Anti-Social Behavior among the !Kung

Patricia Draper

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, pdraper1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/anthropologyfacpub>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Draper, Patricia, "The Learning Environment for Aggression and Anti-Social Behavior among the !Kung" (1978). *Anthropology Faculty Publications*. 12.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/anthropologyfacpub/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

[Chapter 3]

The Learning Environment for Aggression and Anti-Social Behavior among the !Kung

Patricia Draper

The !Kung, a hunter-gatherer people of the Kalahari Desert, are of interest to this collection of writings on the teaching of non-aggression for a variety of reasons. They have been described as a “harmless people” by Thomas (1958) in a book-length account of the social life and cultural values of !Kung who lived in South West Africa. An opposite characterization of !Kung emerges from an unpublished study by Richard Lee. This study, based on interviews and examination of genealogical records collected in the field, reports on incidents of homicide among !Kung. The murder rate, according to Lee, is rather frequent for a people purported to be harmless and unaggressive. Still other writers, dealing more generally with factors common to hunter-gathering and band-level peoples (Service, 1966; Hoesel, 1954, 1958; Lee and DeVore, eds., 1968) have pointed out that hunting and gathering groups possess few formal mechanisms for dealing with social conflict. Such peoples typically rely on informal mechanisms of social control such as gossip, ridicule, sorcery, shunning, ostracism, and public debating which lead to the formation of consensus. In discussing the problem of social control in such societies, anthropologists show how conflicts are resolved circuitously and in a lengthy fashion. They point out that the aim

of conflict resolution is not to place blame or necessarily to punish an offender, but rather to restore amicable relations among individuals.

The !Kung, therefore, are a provocative case study; a controversy exists as to whether they are harmless or, in fact, murderous. In addition, since the !Kung are by now well studied, one can use specific information about !Kung behavior to examine general propositions about social control and interpersonal conflict in hunting and gathering societies generally.

This paper will address the question of interpersonal conflict and aggression among !Kung, with particular emphasis on the learning environment of children and how it relates to the learning of aggressive behavior. Of concern here will be parental attitudes toward children's behavior and techniques for dealing with conflict. In the !Kung case there are many factors such as settlement pattern, economy, and the value of sharing which are less obviously related to values about child-rearing but which have substantial impact on the social and emotional climate in which children are reared. This paper will describe, therefore, not only some aspects of child socialization that bear on the teaching of non-aggression, but also these other dimensions of social organization which are relevant to the ability of !Kung to discourage interpersonal aggression and to encourage group cooperation. I will leave a discussion of the issue, "Are the !Kung unaggressive, aggressive, harmless, or murderous?" to the concluding section of this paper.

Before proceeding directly to the topic, there are a few caveats which should be laid before the reader. These concern the problems which an anthropologist faces in presenting and interpreting information.

When anthropologists describe the exotic peoples with whom they have lived and studied, they often organize their analyses around themes or preoccupations which are themselves central to the people's cultural life. This procedure can be a convenient and culturally sensitive vehicle for exposition; the pivotal institution or set of values becomes the basis for showing connections among superficially discrete and independent cultural processes. A disadvantage of this approach is that it necessarily underplays other customs which could legitimately achieve equal prominence given a

different starting point in the ethnographic analysis. There are many examples of the "central cultural theme" approach. A few of the best known are Malinowski's portrayal of reciprocity and exchange among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski, 1920, 1922), Chagnon's treatment of aggression and ritualized conflict in both film and written documents (Asch and Chagnon, 1970; Chagnon, 1977), and, of course, Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (Benedict, 1934).

The opposite approach, in which an anthropologist describes a culture by topic, treating different cultural systems in turn (e. g., religion, economics, socialization, and so forth), is currently out of fashion. For all the merits of this more exhaustive and balanced strategy, it can render the rough, crannied texture of social life into a flat, but admittedly easy to absorb, porridge.

In writing an essay on aggression in !Kung life, one encounters some of the problems outlined above. Aggression, conflict, and violence—none of these are culturally elaborated preoccupations. Nor could one argue that a central cultural theme is concerned with an opposite set of values—the enforcement of peace and the suppression of aggression. From this point of view, values about interpersonal aggression do not qualify as an especially auspicious position from which to view the cultural terrain. Nevertheless, the !Kung are a people who devalue aggression; they have explicit values against assaulting, losing control, and seeking to intimidate another person by sheer force of personality. Furthermore, on a daily basis and over months of fieldwork one finds that overt physical acts by one person against another are extremely rare. In two years I personally observed three instances in which people lost control and exchanged blows: two twelve-year-old girls who wrestled and fought with fists; two women who scratched and kicked each other over a man (the husband of one of the women); and two men who violently shoved each other back and forth, shouted and separated to gather weapons, only to be dissuaded by other people from their respective camps. In a fourth case I saw two women who had fought the night before. Lorna Marshall, an anthropologist with much experience among the !Kung, makes a similar report:

During seventeen and a half months of fieldwork with the Nyae Nyae !Kung . . . , I personally saw only four flare-ups of discord and heard about three others which occurred in neighboring bands during that period. All were resolved before they became serious quarrels. [Marshall, 1976, pp. 311-12]

If the !Kung succeed in avoiding direct physical confrontation in most instances, they clearly experience the same emotions which, in other societies, would lead more quickly to hostile acts. The !Kung harbor hatreds, jealousies, resentments, suspicions—the full panoply of negative emotions. In fact, their oral traditions are remarkably violent and fratricidal for a people who, on the surface, maintain the appearance of simple communal harmony (Biesele, 1972 a, 1972b, 1975, 1976). The difference between the !Kung and other peoples is that the circumstances of their life are such that they must dampen their passions to manageable levels or, that failing, separate themselves from the people whose society they cannot tolerate. Interestingly, the !Kung themselves take on an edgy irascibility when their life style changes away from that which one sees in small mobile groups living in the bush and depending on foraging and hunting for subsistence (Lee, 1972a). The discussion in this paper will concern a group of about 120 bush-living !Kung whom I studied in 1968 and 1969. At that time they were living along the international border between Botswana and South West Africa near the !Kung watering places known as ≠To//gana and /Du/ da. For readers not acquainted with the growing literature on the !Kung, a brief ethnographic description will be useful.

The literature on the !Kung has increased steadily in the last twenty years. The earlier work of Lorna Marshall, John Marshall, and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas give a general background to !Kung social organization and economy, although the publications of the Marshall family primarily concern !Kung living in South West Africa in the Nyae Nyae area. Since the early 1960's, another group of researchers has entered the field of !Kung studies.¹ This group has worked in western Botswana with populations of !Kung who overlap with those studied by the Marshall family.

The !Kung live today mostly on the western edge of the Kalahari sand

system in what is now southern Angola, Botswana, and South West Africa, and until recent times they subsisted by hunting and gathering. The great majority of !Kung-speaking people of today have abandoned their traditional foraging life style and are living in sedentary and semisquatter status in or near villages of Bantu pastoralists and European ranchers. A minority of !Kung, amounting to a few thousand people, are still living by traditional foraging techniques, and these are the people who are described in this paper.

The few remaining groups of still mobile !Kung subsist on wild vegetable foods and game meat. They are seminomadic, moving their camps at irregular intervals, from a few days to several weeks. They live in small groups, averaging about thirty-five people, but these bands vary from as few as fifteen to as many as sixty-five persons. The factors that affect group size are chiefly season and the availability of water. During the rainy season (October to March), group censuses are lower, owing to the fact that water and bush foods are widely available in most regions of the desert. Smaller numbers of people in the form of two and three family groups spread out over the bush. As the dry season nears and the temporary watering places dry up, the people begin to regroup and fall back on the remaining water sources which continue throughout the dry season. As there are few such sources in the heart of the drought, as many as two or three different camps may be found within one to three miles of the same water hole.

The rules governing the composition of these bands are extremely flexible; it appears that there is no such thing as "band membership." Close relatives move together over much of the year, although individuals as well as segments of large kin groups frequently make temporary separations to visit other relatives and affines.

The material technology of the !Kung is simple. Men hunt with small bows and arrows and metal-pointed spears. Women do the bulk of the gathering of wild foodstuffs and much of the food preparation. Their tools include a simple digging stick, a wooden mortar and pestle, and a heavy leather cape or kaross which doubles as an article of clothing as well as a carrying bag.

Child-Training and the Teaching of Non-Aggression

It is impossible to understand !Kung child socialization apart from the larger physical and social settings in which it takes place. For this reason a fuller discussion of these other features is provided to give a more comprehensive view of the lives of children. However, two factors—the public nature of family life and the omnipresence of adult supervision—are intimately related to the capacity of !Kung parents to control the learning environments of their children and in particular to discourage aggression. More detailed description of the physical setting of band life and the social use of space will appear in later portions of the paper.

A remarkable feature of camp life is the close physical and social interaction of adults and children. Children under the ages of six or seven years are rarely away from close supervision by adults.² The children living in the small bands have virtually no place where they can go to be by themselves. Once they step out of the camp, or even walk beyond earshot of camp, there is only the Kalahari bush stretching away for miles in every direction. From a child's vantage point the bush is not attractive; it is vast, undifferentiated, and unhumanized. Adults do not discourage older children from roaming out from camp, but these children seem to prefer staying at home.³

!Kung children, like children anywhere, will argue, tease, cry, lose their tempers, and strike out at each other. One can see the youngest toddler, with an angry face and clenched fists, straining from its mother's lap and trying to swat another child—or an adult for that matter. There are frustrations in this society for even the youngest age groups. The !Kung, however, have a special way of handling anger and physical assaults by one child against another. When two small children quarrel and begin to fight, adults don't punish them or lecture them; they separate them and physically carry each child off in an opposite direction. The adult tries to soothe and distract the child and to get him interested in other things. The strategy is to interrupt misbehavior before it gets out of hand. For older children, adults use the same interventionist technique. I was often surprised at the ability of adults to monitor the emotional states of children even when the

children were far enough away that the conversations could not be heard. When play gets too rough or arguments too intense, an adult will call one of the ringleaders away. Alternatively, one or more adults simply drift over to join the children, and the mere presence of the adult puts a damper on the action.

This way of disciplining children has important consequences for aggressiveness in childhood and later in adulthood. Since parents do not use physical punishment, and since aggressive postures are avoided by adults and devalued by the society at large, children have relatively little opportunity to observe or imitate overtly aggressive behavior. Not only are aggressive models scarce, but the adult technique of interfering at the earliest stages of discord means that a child usually doesn't have the opportunity to learn the satisfaction of striking and humiliating another child. This situation, of course, is made possible by the fact that children and adults occupy the same close living space and by the fact that on any typical day there will be many adults in camp who are keeping an informal watch on the children.

When asked about physical assaults by children, !Kung will state that this is bad and dangerous—that children can actually harm each other. If an adult sees an older child mistreating a younger child, he will respond quickly and with a harsh scolding. On the other hand, adults are completely tolerant of a child's temper tantrums and of aggression directed by a child at an adult. I have seen a seven-year-old crying and furious, hurling sticks, nut shells, and eventually burning embers at her mother. The mother sat at her fire talking with the child's grandmother and her own sister-in-law. Bau (the mother) put up her arm occasionally to ward off the thrown objects but carried on her conversation nonchalantly. The other women remained unperturbed despite the hail of missiles. The daughter raged ten feet away, but Bau did not turn a hair. When the rocks and nut shells came close Bau remarked, "That child has no brains."

This example is not an isolated case but a common practice. Adults consistently ignore a child's angry outburst when it does not inflict harm. A child's frustration at such times is acute, but he learns that anger does not cause an adult to change his treatment of the child, and the display of anger

does not get the adult's attention or sympathy. In these situations the reward to the child for hostile acts must be minimal. The child can rage until he is tired, but, in my observation, the tirade had little effect.

In the same way that the omnipresence of adult supervision protects children from mistreatment by each other, it also protects them from abuse by adults, particularly the child's own parents. As described above, children lose control and, particularly at the ages of about three to five years, they are capable of being persistently querulous and abusive toward their mothers. A common cause of the anger is the mother's decision to wean the child from the breast (breast feeding for three to four years is usual) or to wean the child from being carried on the back. In my experience, children found weaning from the back more traumatic than giving up the breast—perhaps because mothers were more inconsistent in discouraging carrying than in discouraging nursing. In some cases the two kinds of weaning occurred together and such children were especially distraught.

For these reasons and others I have seen several occasions when a child showed every sign of wishing to do real bodily damage to the mother. In such cases the mother remonstrates, ridicules, scolds, wards off the blows, and soon calls out to another woman or man sitting near her, "Hey! Come take this child away from me!" Someone responds by calmly and bodily carting the child away to another part of the camp, the mother now able to resume whatever activity the child had interrupted.

The ready accessibility of other people in the camp means that the mother is protected from being badgered by her child until she loses control of her own temper. This circumstance is unfortunately very common in our own society, with its nuclear family households and residence arrangements which confer what is probably an unhealthy degree of privacy on parents and children. In the !Kung case, parents are not likely to reach the point of abusing their children, but in the unlikely event that someone did abuse a child, other people would immediately step in.

For children who grow up in these isolated hunting and gathering bands, the socialization experience is continuous and consistent. As a result children have few opportunities to bully and fight with children of their

own camps or to acquire antisocial habits of other types. The parents seem to rely implicitly on the constraint of continuous supervision of themselves and other like-minded adults to ensure conformity in their children. They do not rely on moral indoctrination about the right and wrong way to do things or to deal with other people.

Another factor which may minimize the aggressive interactions between children may be the age composition of the typical play group. The usual situation is one in which the children of a camp have only a few children available for play and these are normally not the same age or necessarily close in age. The lack of peers probably discourages not only physical assault but competitiveness generally. The older child learns that he must be subtle in his domination of younger children, and the younger child may appreciate that the difference in size and competence between himself and the older child is so great that most challenges are not worthwhile.

Economy and Ecology

The !Kung live in an extremely dry area but one in which, given their technological competence and their low fertility, a reliable food supply can be found. The wild game and vegetable foods, while fairly plentiful, are scattered unevenly over wide areas. In order to exploit this type of patchy environment the !Kung live and move in small mobile bands. The bands themselves are not stable units in and of themselves, although on occasion an entire band or camp will relocate to a new site. More often, however, individuals or one or more family groups will detach themselves from their co-residents and join up with another group which may be nearby or as many as thirty or forty miles distant. Given this hodge-podge of group mobility, dissolution, and coalescence, the flow of information over large distances is remarkably fast and accurate, despite the fact that the !Kung live at population densities which are among the lowest in the world—about one person per ten square miles.

The mobility of individuals and groups is, of course, adaptive under these circumstances, but because this degree of mobility renders food storage virtually impossible, the !Kung have no insurance against hard times.

Whereas technologically more advanced peoples can look to filled grain bins or harvests ripening in the field, or to herds of domestic animals which may survive when crops fail, the !Kung have no stored surplus of a material sort. They cannot even look forward to periods of surfeit such as those enjoyed by hunters and gatherers whose ranges include migration routes of buffalo or caribou or the spawning runs of fish. !Kung can manage only if they keep moving and if they keep in contact with other groups similarly pursuing game and bush foods which appear randomly in both space and time.

The point here which has relevance to group solidarity and harmony is that the !Kung need each other. They are not unique in this respect, but the immediacy of this need on a day-to-day basis is unusual and not found to the same extent in most other cultures. For the !Kung, in this sense, the stored surplus is the group and the more distant groups scattered in the bush, with the social and economic insurance that they provide.

Under these circumstances one would expect to find cultural values against interpersonal aggression and in favor of regular sharing of temporary windfalls. This is exactly the case among the !Kung. They are extremely wary of persons known to have violent tempers or unpredictable behavior. Such people are openly criticized and censored and eventually shunned. In former times, before the national system of justice impinged on these remote hunter-gatherers, some of the infrequent homicides were in fact political assassinations of people who had proven to be incorrigible. To this day the !Kung fear irrational and hostile people; there are many reasons behind this, but at least two are central. A person who cannot control his behavior is dangerous to himself and his relatives. If people avoid living with such a person and those loyal to him, those persons lose both the resources of the group and the information available to the group. In addition, the !Kung, like most band-level peoples, lack institutionalized leadership roles and adjudicative processes. They have no means for bringing formal sanctions to bear on nonconformists.⁴ Therefore truly antisocial behavior has a greater potential for disrupting the social fabric and the economic balance than is true for people in other types of societies.

Although the !Kung lack a system of formal sanctions against wrongdoing, it appears that they have compensated with a host of informal controls which normally work to keep people in line. They have a varied and subtle armamentarium suitable for squelching a variety of infractions; their repertoire is especially well-developed for dealing with arrogance, bragging, and attempts to manipulate others.

Pride and boastfulness are especially devalued; for example, when a young hunter returns from a hunt and announces to no one in particular, "I killed an eland!" he is greeted by indifference. No one pauses in his activities. If the young man persists, an older person will remark in a voice designed to carry across the camp clearing, "Why only one?"

The approved mode of revealing a successful hunt is more like this: the hunter returns at dusk and goes to his own fire to rest. Sometime later one or two other men will join him. In a circuitous way they ask him,

"See anything in the bush today?"

"No, there is hardly any game. I shot a little something, but who knows?"

"Yes, one never knows."

"Perhaps you will go out with me tomorrow morning and we will see if anything is dead."

Some men have told me that under similar circumstances, when they have accompanied another hunter, they have not learned what animal they were searching for until the original hunter led them to the place where the tracks could be recognized and followed.⁵

Personal success, excellence, achievement, or sheer luck must be handled delicately in this society, for the potential put-down is everywhere. The !Kung must have members of their society who are motivated to socially useful ends, but the individual must achieve these ends in an innocuous, nonassertive way. This process of leveling is, of course, consonant with the equalitarian ethos of band-level societies, generally, but there is more to it than this. Years and years of this type of conditioning produce a person who is highly sensitive to the evaluations of himself by other people.

When an individual runs afoul of some norm and the sentiment of the

camp is against him, he reacts in a way that seems extreme to a Western observer. Further, the way the wrongdoer reacts to the frustration of criticism suggests that the social norms are very well internalized by the individual. For example, a young woman, N!uhka, about seventeen years old and unmarried, had insulted her father. Seventeen years of age is late to be still unmarried in this society, and her father often talked with her and with relatives about eligible men. She was rebellious and uninterested in the older men who were named. (She was also having a good time flirting with the youths in camp who were her age-mates but judged too young to make good husbands.) In a flippant way she cursed her father. He reprimanded her and immediately other tongues took up a shocked chorus. (There is no privacy in these small bands.)

N!uhka was furious but also shamed by the public outcry. Her reaction took this form: she grabbed her blanket, stomped out of the camp off to a lone tree about seventy yards from the circle of huts. There she sat all day, in the shade of the tree, with a blanket over her head and completely covering her body. This was full-scale Bushman sulk. She was angry but did not further release her anger apart from this gesture of withdrawal. She kept her anger inside, incidentally at some personal cost, for that day the temperature in the shade was 105 degrees Fahrenheit—without a blanket.

In another case, Tsebe, an aunt of the same adolescent, took on the role of matchmaker for N!uhka with one of the young men also living with the band. To play matchmaker is not necessarily wrong, but in no accidental way, Tsebe arranged the marriage when N!uhka's father was absent and the young man's parents also were away visiting. When the new in-laws returned they were not only amazed but outraged that the marriage had been so swiftly engineered behind their backs.

The talk began; soon the whole camp was in on the discussion. Some took the parents' side and agreed that Tsebe had been high-handed. Others thought that the marriage itself was good, but that Tsebe should have waited for the couple's parents to return. No matter which interpretation, Tsebe received much criticism. She took to her bed and refused to eat. Two days later she made a few superficial cuts in her thigh and rubbed arrow

poison into the wounds. She became quite sick and confessed that she had, in effect, attempted suicide. That evening and the following evening the people held a trance dance for her. All the medicine owners, the men who are capable of trance and healing in their trance state, worked on her. Everyone attended and joined in the singing and dancing on Tsebe's behalf. She recovered soon afterward, mainly because her suicide attempt had been essentially symbolic; only minuscule amounts of poison must have entered the wounds. In the days following a kind of reconciliation took place between the injured parties. More significantly, open talk against Tsebe and her behind-the-scenes manipulation had ceased.

In these examples there is a common and characteristic theme. When people are at odds and public opinion runs against one of the parties, the "wrongdoer" withdraws and turns the frustration and anger against the self. On the other hand, when arguments develop and there is no clear right and wrong side, the usual solution is for one of the parties to leave the group, moving off to another band where he and his sympathizers have friends and relatives. In time the disputes are not exactly forgotten, but they will be overlooked should the parties again find themselves camping together.

To say that the !Kung are unaggressive and capable of living harmoniously with their kind may or may not be true. That brawls and shouting matches are rare is true, both of adults and of children. The emotions which could fuel fights are clearly present; however, there are various reasons why most people contain their anger. The structure of camp life—the lack of privacy and the custom of camping with close relatives and affines—is such that loss of self-control will be recognized immediately. Other people will intervene before a person can act in a hot rage with possible serious injury to his enemy. Also, any other adult in camp is related to any would-be aggressor by dozens of overlapping ties of kinship and marriage. Once a person attacks his victim he is like a fly that attacks an insect already caught in a spider's web. Immediately both are caught. If the combatants forget the sticky web in the heat of their anger, the onlookers do not. Real anger frightens and sickens the !Kung, for it is so destructive of their web of re-

lationships. They have no real means for coping with the aftermath of violent aggression.

Sharing

The expectation that valuable items, such as meat or material goods, will be circulated effectively limits much of the jealousy and envy which even temporary inequality of wealth can bring. Game meat must be shared with all consanguines and affines with whom a hunter is living. An excellent description of these rules is provided by Lorna Marshall (Marshall, 1961). The tensions which accompany the formal distribution of meat from a large kill are well known, both to the !Kung themselves and to the anthropologists who have worked with !Kung.⁶ Many a young hunter will ask his father or an older male relative to distribute the meat from a kill he has made, because his heart quails at the prospect of facing his steely-eyed camp fellows. Every portion is watched by all as it is allocated to particular individuals. (Males and females are both allocated in the distribution.) During the proceedings people may openly abuse the distributor, saying such gracious things as, "Do you expect me to bother to stoop over and carry away such a miserable piece of carrion?"

Such comments are deflected by the toughened hides of seasoned hunters. They make caustic replies and proceed stoically, knowing that distributing meat is a thankless task. Not only are people often not satisfied with their portions, but they may feel that to complain is their role in the ritual. Although much bickering is routine, if a person feels that he has been severely slighted, it can be a serious matter, leading to arguments and eventually to the splitting of groups.

!Kung practice a formalized trade called "hxaro" with certain trading partners.⁷ Although some "hxaroing" is carefully planned in advance and enacted in a formal, solemn way, much hxaro is done because the person who finds himself the owner of a particularly attractive item is simply worn down by the mutterings and taunts of his relatives. For example, when a woman wears a particularly attractive bead necklace, or a colorful piece of

cloth, she does not receive compliments. She hears,

"How is it that you are a person whose neck is nearly broken with the weight of all those necklaces and I am here with only sweat on my own neck? Hxaro me!"

The implication, of course, is that the owner should hand over the necklace. The one who asks would be gratified if she did "hxaro," but she would be taken aback that it was given on the first request.

The give and take of tangibles and intangibles goes on in the midst of a high level of bickering. Until one learns the cultural meaning of this continual verbal assault, the outsider wonders how the !Kung can stand to live with each other. Most of us who have worked with !Kung have our own stories to tell about how we learned to deal with the high velocity !Kung vituperation. People continually dun the Europeans and especially the European anthropologists since, unlike most Europeans, the anthropologists speak !Kung. In the early months of my own fieldwork I despaired of ever getting away from continual harassment. As my knowledge of !Kung increased, I learned that the !Kung are equally merciless in dunning each other. In time I learned the properly melodramatic disclaimers with which to reply to the dunning. I blush now when I recall some of my own oratory,

"You expect *me*, one lonely European, a stranger in this territory, living away from my own kin, without even one spear or arrow or even a digging stick, and with no knowledge of the bush . . . you expect *me* to give *you* something to eat? You are a person whose hut is crammed full of good things to eat. Berries, billtong, sweet roots, stand shoulder high in your hut and you come to me saying you are hungry!"

Onlookers came to enjoy these exchanges as they did when they heard them in their own camps. Once these kind of speeches were delivered, then my visitor and I could go on to talk of other things. Europeans will talk idly about the weather or the state of the crops as conversational filler; the !Kung in part rely on dunning for the same purposes. But the dunning among themselves is not all idle form and no content. A person who does

not continually recirculate what is given to him is marked, indeed.

Verbal aggression is commonplace among !Kung. In fact, the reason that goods are shared equitably and more or less continuously is that the have-nots are so vociferous in pressing their demands. Are these a people who live in communal harmony, happily sharing all among all? Not exactly, but the interpretation of meaning in any culture inevitably founders on these kinds of ambiguities. At one level of analysis, one can show that goods circulate, that there are no inequalities of wealth and that peaceable relations characterize dealings within and between bands. At another level, however, with some of the anthropologist's etic conceptual categories put aside, one sees that social action is an ongoing scrimmage—often amicable but sometimes carried on in bitter earnest.

Lorna Marshall (1976) has captured much of this ambiance with the precision of all her writing about !Kung. In describing the high level of bickering, she writes,

All these ways of talking, I believe, aid the !Kung in maintaining their peaceful social relations. Getting things out in words keeps everyone in touch with what others are thinking and feeling, releases tensions, and prevents pressures from building up until they burst out in aggressive acts. [Marshall, 1976, p. 293]

I consider that the incidence of quarrels is low among the !Kung, that they manage very well to avoid physical violence when tensions are high and anger flares, and that they also manage well to keep tension from reaching the point of breaking into open hostility. They avoid arousing envy, jealousy, and ill will and, to a notable extent, they cohere and achieve the comfort and security which they so desire in human relations. [Marshall, 1976, p. 312]

Deciding how to depict the emotional climate of group life is like deciding whether a glass is half empty or half full. Individuals do strive to avoid angering their co-residents, but they do so because the rules about behavior have teeth in them. Furthermore, as they live in close, intimate camps, the chances of committing various sins and getting away with them are prac-

tically negligible. The !Kung, in their own way, are as constrained by their culture as we are by our own.

Settlement Pattern

It is much easier to understand why social norms are effective when one appreciates the spatial setting for camp life. The typical !Kung camp is an elliptical clearing in the bush, into which anywhere from thirty to sixty people settle for periods ranging from a week to several weeks. The way in which this space is utilized ensures that there is a minimum of privacy and a maximum of close interpersonal contact.⁸ The people themselves are closely packed in this (arbitrarily) limited space and, in addition, the organization of the interior space increases the exposure of each person to every other person. For example, each individual nuclear family has its own hut, built by the women of grass and branches. The huts are located at the outer edges of the circular village space. The inside area is systematically cleared of grass, bushes, saplings, anything, in fact, which might provide shade or privacy or screen one part of the village from another part. In this way, neither the huts nor natural features of the vegetation serve to break up the inner space or to create micro-neighborhoods. Surprisingly, even the huts are not actually occupied in the usual sense. People do not live in their huts or go into them for rest or privacy. Instead, the huts are used for dry storage of food, skins, and tools. The huts are so closely spaced that people sitting at different hearths can hand items back and forth without getting up. Often people sitting around various fires will carry on long discussions without raising their voices above normal conversational levels.

Whereas the average Western European would find this close press oppressive, !Kung clearly thrive on it. The circular arrangement of inward-facing huts means, effectively, that forty or so people are living in one large room. As a result, the earliest and subtlest acts of an antisocial nature can be perceived immediately and corrective measures can be taken. If a person is angry, someone, if not everyone, will soon know about it. Given their propensity for living in such close quarters, it seems that the !Kung readiness to air grievances

earlier rather than later is highly adaptive. When a person feels affronted, he or she can talk about it, usually at a time and in a way when practically everyone in camp will also hear the complaint. In this way a person's pique is publicized and in some measure vented. Other people become involved, and the weight of frustration does not lie with the individual alone.

In considering !Kung values and the social and economic constraints within which they operate, one needn't conclude that the !Kung are unusual because they avoid interpersonal conflict and achieve a degree of group harmony. Actual fights occur, and homicides have been known in the past. However, there are several factors which affect the expression of aggression in this society and in these respects the !Kung contrast markedly with other peoples. Physical aggression is not directly taught or subtly encouraged. Aggressive models are not readily available to inspire children or adults to violent display. Physical aggression and antisocial behavior are costly, given the social and economic interdependence of all people who live together. Furthermore, it is virtually impossible for a wrongdoer to escape detection. Unlike other societies in which an individual can brood in privacy or with the sympathy of a few supporters, among the !Kung an individual is always open to scrutiny and criticism. A person's complaint is rarely something that he or she can act on individually. Welcome or not, other people are always interposing themselves.

Are the !Kung aggressive or unaggressive? Are they more or less aggressive than certain other groups? Until the omnibus term, aggression, is refined and operationalized a comparison of !Kung and other people in aggressiveness will not be possible on an empirical and quantifiable basis. From my observation, the !Kung were extraordinarily successful in discouraging harmful and malicious behavior in young people. During the twelve months in which I lived with different camps in the ≠To//gana and /Du/da areas there were no conflicts between adults which led to serious injuries or homicides. Nor did such events occur among this population at camps at which I was not present.

Homicide and assault in recent times are no doubt discouraged by the fact that a government-appointed headman now lives in !Kung terri-

tory in western Botswana and by the fact that the South West African police now patrol the !Kung areas in adjacent parts of South West Africa. The !Kung realize that in the case of serious crime, word will spread and a wrongdoer will be hunted down by outside authorities. This no doubts acts as a restraint. Furthermore, in recent times the isolation of !Kung from other groups has decreased markedly. There are now many centers of Bantu occupation (and a few centers of European occupation) to which !Kung are attracted both by the change of paid work and by the opportunity of changing life style. In the past, such opportunities for individuals or family groups to opt out of !Kung society were not available. It is possible that serious crimes against persons were more frequent in the past in part due to the fact that deviants, outcasts, and fugitives had nowhere to go and still make a living. They had to be retained within the society and tolerated or eventually assassinated. Today the situation is different for two reasons. !Kung can leave the close pressures of the bush camps and move to Bantu or mixed !Kung-Bantu settlements where life is different. In addition the authority of external governments can now penetrate the remotest !Kung band, and punishment for criminal acts can be achieved.

Notes

1. See Biesele, Draper, Harpending, Howell, Katz, Konner, Lee, Lee and DeVore, Shostak, Yellen.
2. See Draper, 1976, for a discussion of factors in child life among foraging !Kung.
3. Though children avoid the distant bush, age and sex influence the extent to which children use the bush near the camp site.
4. See Lee, 1972a, for a discussion of the role played by Bantu headmen in settling the disputes of sedentary !Kung.
5. Among the people of /Du/da it was common for a hunter to wound an animal one day, only to leave it, return to camp for the night, and to begin tracking the next day. There are several reasons for the delay. The poison on the arrow may require an overnight period to weaken or kill the animal. Also, the hunter reasons that the animal may travel several miles before it dies. The hunter realizes that he will need other men to help carry the meat back to camp.
6. See Lee, 1969, for a fine illustration of !Kung vituperation in context.

7. Polly Weisner, a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, has made an exhaustive study of !xaro among the !Kung of the /Tai/tai and !Kangwa areas in Botswana.

8. See Draper, 1973, for a more complete description of settlement pattern, density of occupation, and their relation to the concept of crowding.

Bibliography

- Asch, Timothy, and Napoleon A. Chagnon 1970 *The Feast*. (19mm film) National Audiovisual Center, Washington, D.C.
- Benedict, Ruth 1934 *Patterns of Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bieseke, Megan 1972a "The Black-Backed Jackal and the Brown Hyena: A !Kung Bushman Folktale." *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 4.
- 1972b "Hunting in Semi-Arid Areas: The Kalahari Bushman Today." *Botswana Notes and Records*. Special Edition No. 1 (Proceedings of the Conference on Sustained Production from Semi-Arid Areas).
- 1975 "Folklore and Ritual of !Kung Hunter-Gatherers." Ph.D. Dissertation in Anthropology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- 1976 "Some Aspects of !Kung Folklore." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Chagnon, Napoleon 1977 *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*, 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- DeVore, Irven, and Melvin J. Konner 1974 "Infancy in Hunter-Gatherer Life: An Ethological Perspective." *Ethology and Psychiatry*, Norman F. White, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Draper, Patricia 1973 "Crowding among Hunter-Gatherers: The !Kung Bushmen." *Science*, October, vol. 182, No. 4109, pp. 301–3.
- 1975 "!Kung Women: Contrasts in Sex Role Egalitarianism in the Foraging and Sedentary Contexts." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna Reiter, ed. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 77–109.
- Draper, Patricia 1976 "Social and Economic Constraints on Child Life among the !Kung." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 199–217.
- Harpending, Henry C., and Trevor Jenkins 1974 " !Kung Population Structure." *Genetic Distance*, James F. Crow, ed. New York: Plenum Publishing, pp. 137–65.
- Harpending, Henry C. 1976 "Genetic and demographic variation in !Kung populations." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 152–65.
- Hoebel, E. Adamson 1954 *The Law of Primitive Man*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- 1958 *Man in the Primitive World*, 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Howell, Nancy 1976 "The Population of the Dobe Area !Kung." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 137–51.
- Howell, Nancy 1973 "The Feasibility of Demographic Studies of Anthropological Populations." *Method and Theory in Anthropological Genetics*, Michael Crawford and Peter Workman, eds. Albuquerque, N.M.: University of New Mexico Press.
- Katz, Richard 1976 "Education for Transcendence: Trance-curing with the Zhun/twasi." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Konner, Melvin J. 1972 "Aspects of the Developmental Ethology of a Foraging People." *Ethological Studies of Child Behaviour*, N. G. Blurton Jones, ed. London: Cambridge University Press, pp. 285–304.
- 1976 "Maternal Care, Infant Behavior and Development among the Zhun/twa (!Kung) Bushman." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 218–45.
- Lee, Richard B. 1968 "What Hunters Do for a Living, or, How to Make out on Scarce Resources." *Man the Hunter*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, pp. 30–48.
- 1969 "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari." *Natural History* 78 (December).
- 1972a "Population Growth and the Beginnings of Sedentary Life among the !Kung Bushmen." *Population Growth: Anthropological Implications*, Brian Spooner, ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- 1972b "!Kung Spatial Organization: An Ecological and Historical Perspective." *Human Ecology*, vol. I, pp. 125–47.

- 1973 "Mongongo: The Ethnography of a Major Wild Food Resource." *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, vol. I, pp. 1–15
- Lee, Richard B., and Irven DeVore, eds. 1968 *Man the Hunter*. Chicago : Aldine Publishing.
- 1976 *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Malinowski, B. 1920 "Kula: The Circulating Exchange of Valuables in the Archipelagoes of Eastern New Guinea." *Man*, no. 51, pp. 97–105.
- 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Marshall, Lorna 1957 "The Kin Terminology System of the !Kung Bushmen." *Africa*, vol. 27, pp. 1–25.
- 1959 "Marriage among !Kung Bushmen." *Africa*, vol. 29, pp. 335–65.
- 1957 "N!ow." *Africa*, vol. 27, pp. 232–40.
- 1960 "!Kung Bushman Bands." *Africa*, vol. 30, pp. 325–55.
- 1961 "Sharing, Talking and Giving: The Relief of Social Tensions among the !Kung Bushmen." *Africa*, vol. 31, pp. 231–49.
- 1962 "!Kung Bushman Religious Beliefs." *Africa*, vol. 32, pp. 221–52.
- 1976 "Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions among the !Kung." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 350–71.
- 1976 *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Service, E. R. 1966 *The Hunters*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Shostak, Marjorie J. 1976 "A Zhun/twa Woman's Memories of Childhood." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 246–77.
- Thomas, Elizabeth Marshall 1958 *The Harmless People*, New York: Random House.
- Yellen, John E. 1971 Archaeological Investigations in Western Ngamiland, Botswana. *Botswana Notes and Records*, vol. 3.
- 1976 "Settlement Pattern of the !Kung: An Archaeological Perspective." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 47–72.

- Yellen, John E., and Richard B. Lee 1976 "The Dobe'/Du/da Environment: Considerations for a Hunting and Gathering Way of Life." *Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers*, Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 28–46.