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Remembering the Past: 
!Kung Life History Narratives

Patricia Draper

Introduction and Statement of Purpose

This chapter will examine the social and economic changes that !Kung women have experienced in the last seventy or so years by means of life history narratives collected from five older !Kung or "Zhun/wa" women, as the !Kung call themselves. The women whose stories form the basis of this report were all living in the western Kalahari Desert of Ngamiland, Botswana in 1987-88 when the author was carrying out anthropological field work. Many changes have affected the !Kung in the last several decades. A brief discussion of these changes is given below to provide a background for the interpretation of the women’s narratives. The main purpose of the paper is to give the women's accounts the foreground and to let their own stories reveal how some of these events felt personally to women living through an historical period of great change.

Economic and Social Change

The single largest source of change in the western Kalahari has been the arrival of Bantu-speaking pastoralists into areas previously occupied primarily by !Kung. The Bantu are represented in the western Kalahari by people of the Tswana and Herero groups. These people, with their different lifestyle and superior subsistence technology based on pastoralism and gardening, have constituted a powerful magnet to the !Kung, drawing them away from the nomadic bush life and offering them an opportunity for another type of subsistence based on a more or less voluntary service to the cattle keepers.
If the arrival of Bantu created opportunities for the Zhun/wasi, the multiplying domestic stock have closed down other options. At a certain level, cattle, goats, donkeys and horses create serious ecological pressure on limited resources of water and vegetation. With the opening of more and better water wells, more stock moved into the area and the vicinity around human settlement became hammered and denuded of most plant species save inedible thorn bush. Hunting prospects are also weakened by the pastoralists who bring guns and the possibility of mounted hunting with their westward expansion. Thus, many game species who found the grazing poor near human habitation have been further discouraged from the area by hunting activity. Consequently, over time, it has become less and less possible for Zhun/wasi living in proximity to Bantu to maintain or even supplement their diet by hunting and gathering as indigenous plants are either trampled or eaten by the herbivores. Relatively unpressured regions of bush remain at distances of 25 to 30 kilometers from permanent water, but these distances are too great to allow !Kung to pursue their traditional economy while also working for Bantu. At present, some !Kung own small herds of stock on their own. The herding of these animals, together with the more diverse labor requirements of sedentary life, keep the Zhun/wasi close to their villages. Zhun/wasi continue to value hunting and gathering, but practically, only modest efforts are made to forage for wild foods in the traditional manner.

One of the most significant aspects of the cultural change Zhun/wasi have experienced in recent decades is the increased frequency of marriage and informal liaisons between Zhun/wasi women and Bantu men. A recent study shows that as much as one-quarter of the children being born to Zhun/wa women who were 18-29 years of age in 1988 were half-Bantu (Draper and Buchanan in press; Draper and Kranichfeld in press; Kranichfeld 1991). This compares with only 6% half-Bantu births reported by Zhun/wa women who were 60 years or older in 1988. The percentages of inter-ethnic births are increasing, though the increase in mixed births has been apparent since the mid-1950s when there was a large influx of Bantu (primarily Herero) who took up permanent residence in the better watered areas of the western Kalahari (Kranichfeld 1991). Although there are surely exceptions, in general Zhun/wasi do not see these marriages as beneficial. The main problem, from the Zhun/wa point of view, is that when a woman marries a Bantu man, no cattle are paid in bride price by the groom's kin to the wife's kin, as would be customary if a Herero or Tswana man were marrying a woman of his own group (Schapera 1938; Gibson 1962). The absence of bride price creates permanent inequity. The wife has a status inferior to that of her Bantu co-wives as she is not legally married in the customary manner. Her children are not likely to have full inheritance rights vis-a-vis the children of wives married in the traditional manner. Further, the Zhun/wa woman's own kinsmen resent the fact that they are not recompensed in this most valuable currency, cattle.
In the past, Zhun/wasi would not have been good managers and breeders of any cattle they might have been awarded as bride wealth. Those days are now past; many men and women understand cattle and stock management and the technology of milking because they have performed these chores during years of service to Bantu. Zhun/wasi resent the fact that, though they have worked for years, they have not been paid enough to enable them to build up their own herds. Men are doubly resentful. They oppose the loss of marriageable women from their group because it means there are fewer wives for them; and they resent the fact that Zhun/wa women go to Bantu men, essentially as concubines, for whom cattle are not paid.

Methods

The life history interviews on which this paper is based were collected in 1987-1988 during fifteen months of field work in Ngamiland, the northwestern province of Botswana. The interviews were all conducted by the author in the !Kung language and took place in two to three sessions for each interviewee with each session lasting three to four hours. Informants told their life stories in an open air setting, often at the informant’s own village, or at the author’s camp. Observers were discouraged from sitting within hearing distance while the interview was in progress, thus assuring reasonable privacy.

In general each person was encouraged to reflect on her life, starting with the earliest memories and moving to the present. A few specific questions were put to each informant over the course of the interview in order to insure some comparability among narratives. These questions were: Do you remember living in the bush away from Bantu and their cattle? What age were you when you and your kin began living among the Bantu? How do you compare the foraging life with the settled life? What memories do you associate with the different stages of your life such as, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age, etc.? How did your age affect your experience or outlook? In what ways has life for the Zhun/wasi changed or not changed?

The women’s commentary is organized into four separate sections dealing with the topics that received the most elaboration by the informants. The themes of the sections are: 1, recollections about life in the bush and comparisons of then with now; 2, first contacts with Bantu; 3, intermarriage with Bantu; and 4, changed customs of today. A short introduction is provided for each section, together with summarizing comments at the conclusion of each section.

Biographies of Five !Kung Women

The five women, Bau, Chulko, N!uhka, Karu and Kun/a, are long term residents of the general vicinity in which they were interviewed. Most of these
women have spent the last fifty or more years living at the same water hole or moving seasonally among different watering places within a thirty mile radius. One pair of informants are sisters, but all have known each other for decades of their lives and all can point to numerous examples of intermarried relatives. The women range in age from their midfifties to late seventies. All are old enough to have spent their earliest years living in the bush as hunter-gatherers. All were born in what is now Namibia (then South West Africa) and have since settled in Botswana. Except for the youngest woman, all were in adolescence or early adulthood when they and their families took up more or less regular association with Bantu. Even the youngest, who was perhaps seven or eight years old when her parents joined the Bantu, remembered bush life vividly and commented freely on the way the wandering life contrasted with the life she knew as they settled among the cattle-keepers.

At the time of the interviews, the informants lived in separate villages located around the permanent water holes of Dobe, !Xabi and /Ai/ai. Three of the women lived in villages composed of Zhun/wasi only. The other two lived in mixed ethnic villages in which the senior male was a Tswana man. In both these latter cases, the numbers of Zhun/wasi living at the villages greatly outnumbered the ethnic Bantu. All the women have living grandchildren; three have great grandchildren. Three of the women are married, two have been widowed for twenty or more years without remarrying.

Bau

Bau, aged 62, is an unusually vital, talkative and purposeful woman. She has the movements and facial expressions of a much younger woman. Always well informed and hard-working, she wields considerable influence. She has lived among the Bantu since adolescence and thinks of the training she got from a particular Herero woman, Namti, as having given her the most valuable start in life. She has had one life long husband, Kxau, who also has lived among Bantu for most of his life. His command of the Tswana language is unusually good for Zhun/wa men and he is often called upon by other Zhun/wasi to speak for them in their negotiations with Bantu. Bau and Kxau had one daughter who died in middle age. The daughter left several children but, unfortunately from Bau’s point of view, they all live in Namibia with their father and his kin. Nevertheless, Bau and her husband have gathered about them relatives on both sides sufficient to form a large village composed of Bau’s brother, his wife and child, two of Kxau’s adult cousins and their spouses and numerous children.

Although Bau herself has no living children, as a child she was a member of a large polygynous family. In addition to her full brother, Bo, she has several surviving half-siblings with whom she maintains good relations. Over the last thirty years she has spent most of her time in the same small region of Botswana.
though periodically she returns to /Ai/ai (a distance of about thirty miles) where many of her half-siblings still live.

Chu!ko

Chu!ko, aged 69, has been married since middle age to a Tswana man, who has also lived in the area for many decades. She is a plump, handsome woman, now somewhat handicapped by arthritic knees. She lives comfortably in a small village composed of her husband, her young adult, unmarried son by another marriage to a Zhun/wa, and her husband's grown daughter by his previous marriage to a Zhun/wa woman. Chu!ko's step daughter has not married but has three young children who are being reared with her father's and step mother's help. Another single woman, half Zhun/wa and half Herero, and this woman's child by a deceased Herero husband also live with Chu!ko. Chu!ko's husband has sufficient cattle and goats that the basic needs of people in the village are met. He is, in fact, much more prosperous than any Zhun/wa man of the area. The two other adult women of the village help with milking chores. Chu!ko's son, about twenty years old, can help with the heavy work of watering cattle and Chu!ko hopes he will eventually show more initiative than he has yet demonstrated.

Chu!ko had two previous marriages to Zhun/wa men, before her marriage in middle age to her current Tswana husband. Her first marriage was an arranged one and took place well before she first menstruated. According to Chu!ko, her older sister and mother broke up this marriage, because they didn't want her living so far away from them. This sister, Kun//a, arranged for Chu!ko to become her co-wife and the two lived together amicably for many years until their husband died.

Chu!ko's girlhood and young womanhood were spent mostly in Namibia where her parents and later her two husbands lived. In later years, Chu!ko's older sister's daughter married a Tswana man living in Botswana. As a result, Chu!ko and her sister, Kun//a, had an additional home base in Botswana. Once their co-husband died, they spent more time in Botswana visiting their kinswoman. Chu!ko eventually remarried a third time, to the Tswana man mentioned above. For the last twenty or twenty five years she has lived at the same water hole where she has frequent contact with her older sister and former co-wife.

N!uhka

N!uhka, aged 55, is younger than the other interviewed women. Slender, graceful and exotic looking, she has a quiet manner with an unusual sense of humor and irony. Like the others she remembers an early childhood of living in the bush, not in association with cattle keepers, but these memories are not
prominent. Her stories dwell mostly on issues of intermarriage with Bantu, her recollections of the care of her elderly parents, and the types of economic changes that she has seen in her life as a result of contact with Bantu and European outsiders. Her cousin is Kxau, the husband of Bau (mentioned above). Much of her adult life has been spent living with Kxau and Bau and working with them to establish a viable settlement. Her own husband is quiet and withdrawn and does not take an active part in village life. N!uhka has three adult children, two of whom live in her village along with their father. Other village members include her two male cousins, their wives, grown children and grandchildren. The other of N!uhka’s children, a son, is married with one child, and lives in another village at the same water hole. N!uhka’s grown daughter, N ≠ isa, is the wife of Bau’s brother, Bo, (mentioned above). Although N!uhka’s own husband has not helped her get ahead in life, she has maintained good relations with her cousins, one of whom is an influential Zhun/wa elder. The fact that her daughter has married the brother of Bau solidifies her connections with an important and progressive family in the area.

N!uhka’s narratives are unusually vivid, as can be seen in her accounts of her father’s long ago attempts to marry her and her sister to Bantu men, and in her descriptions of the hazards of attacks by lions when Zhun/wasi lived in the bush. N!uhka grew up at /Ai/ai and its environs but since middle adulthood has lived in the !Angwa valley, in close association with her brother and cousins.

Karu

Karu is probably the oldest of the five informants, aged 78. Widowed for many years, Karu was the most infirm of the elderly women interviewed. Her mind was very sharp but her eyesight had failed seriously in recent years. She claimed that she could still see shadows and by constant use of her walking stick could avoid walking into things and losing her balance. Physically she is small and shriveled, yet she is completely alert and knowledgeable about all that goes on around her.

She lives in a village with two grown daughters, both married to the same man. Her grown son lives in a different village, located no more than a ten minute walk away. Another daughter lives far to the north in Namibia. Many of Karu’s grandchildren are grown with children of their own. Karu’s earliest memories were of living with Zhun/wasi in the bush. She was married before menarche to an older man who had already had a period of employment with cattle-keepers elsewhere by the time he returned to /Ai/ai and married Karu. As is true of the other four informants, there has been a great deal of stability in her life. She has spent recent decades living in the /Ai/ai region of Botswana and in the same village with some of the people who figure in her earliest memories.
Kun//a

Kun//a, age 76, is tall for a Zhun/wa woman and is known for the substantial amount of beaded jewelry that she wears. She was married young to a Zhun/wa man by whom she had several children, most of whom are still living. After her marriage was well established and some of her children were born she arranged to bring her younger sister into the marriage as co-wife. This woman is Chu!ko (described above). Kun//a is unlike the other four informants in that for many years she has maintained dual residency, sometimes living in the Chum!kwe region of Namibia (60 kilometers from her current village), where she has two grown sons, sometimes living in the Dobe area of Botswana where she had two married daughters. One of these daughters, /Asa, died in middle age but left three grandchildren, now all adult with children of their own. These grandchildren and their families live nearby. The other daughter married a Tswana man, a relative of Isak Utuhile, the first Tswana headman of the area. When Kun//a is in Botswana, as she is for about half of each year, she lives with her daughter, now in her mid-fifties. This daughter had no children, but by virtue of her husband’s cattle and goats, she and her mother have enough to eat and can frequently host extended visits from their Namibian relatives. Kun//a’s sister and former co-wife, Chu!ko, lives no more than five kilometers away. This means that during the time Kun//a is living in Botswana, she can maintain frequent contact.

Themes from the Narratives

Theme 1: Comparisons of Bush Versus Settled Life

Most of the informants state matter-of-factly that, from the beginning, Zhun/wasi thought that settled life and living by stock and gardening was preferable to the nomadic bush life. All but one of the informants stated that the transition to settled life brought about positive changes in their lives. Informants mention the arduousness of frequent moves, always being on the lookout for a new place to hunt or gather.

Bau, on Then Versus Now. Like nearly all of the informants Bau stresses the hardness of the early life that she remembers when she and her family were living in the bush. In the following excerpt from the beginning of the life history interview, I asked the question, "When you think about your earliest memories what do you remember?"

When I was about 10 or 12 years old I had sense and could cook and gather. I had a younger brother then. I was still a girl when my mother died. I fed and supported my younger brother and my father. Because then, among
us Zhun/wasi, we had no cattle and life was hard. We were still moving around and looking for food in those days. We spent only a few days in each place. I fed my younger brother. I carried him and we gathered together. I even carried him to the mongongo groves. When I came back with a lot of nuts my father cooked the nuts and fed us. In those days I had no breasts but I was doing that kind of work, gathering and feeding the people in my family.

Sometimes there was no water in the wells or standing in the pans. Then we lived on water root (lxwa) only. That was the only source of our moisture. I gave my younger brother, Bo, a lot of it. My mother’s co-wife also fed us. She and my mother were not relatives. Di//au, in the village next door, is my half-sister by my mother’s co-wife.

Time passed and I grew up. But we were impoverished. In the rains we ate various foods but in the dry season we ate mongongoes, marula, n/a oranges, and a/a root. It was a hard and painful life but we grew up. Today we are living with the Blacks and our children don’t know the life that we had. They don’t know the pain that we knew. Our children eat. For them the water is close and everyday they drink actual, liquid water. Today’s children don’t live like we did. In the old days we ate water root for two weeks at a time. We children even then cried and said, "Mother, Father, give me real water! I am thirsty!" That was a hard life. I lived it. I lived in the bush and I saw it.

Today, if children cry people give them water. If they cry people give them milk. Before we knew real hardship. If you gathered food you ate it up and then had to go out the next morning to get more. When we lived in the bush we took turns with the work. Some people stayed in the camp, some people gathered. The next day the people who stayed in the camp the day before would go gathering, and the people who gathered stayed in and rested. The men killed game. Sometimes the meat would last two weeks. This was when they killed an eland. An eland is a big animal and has a lot of meat.

Chu!ko, on Then Versus Now. Another interviewee, Chu!ko, has similar comments to make in comparing life in the bush with life on the cattle posts. Probably because of her more varied experience (having lived among Zhun/wasi for the first part of her life and then marrying a Tswana man in her middle age) she gives more a more detailed account of life at the cattle post and does not portray settled life in an exaggeratedly positive manner. In asking her to reflect on the two kinds of lives she had led, I asked her, "When you think about your life and customs of today, is it better or worse than when you lived with Zhun/wasi in the bush?"

Now is better. Before life was precarious. Whereas today our life is assured. Of course, today you can find a poor person. But that is usually someone who doesn’t do much or doesn’t work hard and who has only a little food. That is the way the people of long ago were. The difference is that today if a person works hard he has a fuller life and eats better. Today life is better.
"Tell me about the kind of life you had in the bush and what it was like later when you lived at a cattle post."

Sometimes life in the bush was good but sometimes it was bad. Today I live with the non-Zhum/wasi and today I live by cow's milk. That is a "long" life. In the hot season (October and November) the milk is gone and life is not so good but in the winter, like now, we still have milk. But life in the hot season is not good. You need something else to help you. If you have money or something you can buy food like sugar. If you have something to help you out, like mealie meal or sugar, you can get past the hot dry season into the rains. But ahead of time you must churn milk and collect butter and store it against the hard times. If you do those things you will have a life.

If you have other people living with you they can walk around and scout for things. If you have boys or young men who will hunt then you may have meat in the winter. The boys are important because they kill meat and that will support you in the dry season. If you have a child, maybe your boy will go out with another person's child. They ride together and kill game. Anyway, you just try to keep going until winter and the rains bring milk to the cattle. But I have no child like that. My husband is old now and doesn't ride, at least he doesn't ride on the hunt.

In the old days we would live at one place and then move off to another kind of food. If we found a place with a lot of food we stayed there and ate it. When that food was gone we moved off again. But if you live with cattle you can't do that. You live in one place and just stay there a long time. Before people moved around and separated themselves out into different bands. Everyone didn't stay together for a long time. People used to tell each other about where the good food was to be found. That way we didn't have to stay in one place. We could go to a new place where there was food and we didn't have to stay in a bad place.

Today we don't do that. Today we just live in one place and sit. We move our villages and make new houses and new corrals but we don't change the place. We follow the Bantu custom now. The Bantu move and make a new corral and make new houses but they don't move off to a completely different place.

In the bush if there was food, especially honey, people were happy. But if there was not enough food, no one was happy. You see the same thing with the Bantu. Sometimes they suffer, too. As I said before, in the hot season we don't have enough food or we don't have the foods we like. So there is good and bad about living with cattle. Maybe one way of life was not better than the other... Some meat is thin, some meat is fat. In the bush we had honey, at the cattle posts we have sugar.

In the bush life, the tough ones were all right but the weak ones did not do well.

_N'uhka, on Then Versus Now_. Bau and Chu!ko are older women, both in their sixties, whereas N'uhka is ten to fifteen years younger in her midfifties.
When the two older women reminisce about the foraging life they are more specific about its shortcomings. Bau for example remembers how hard it was to live without standing water. Chulko says bush life was uncertain. The next informant, N!uhka, has spent most of her life since middle childhood living in association with Bantu. In her middle adult years (the 1960s and 1970s) American anthropologists and another European, a Belgian lay priest, who lived among the !Kung made a lasting impression on her life.

The first two informants talked about the poverty and uncertainty of bush life as contrasted with the greater comforts of settled life. N!uhka, perhaps because she spent less time in the bush, differentiates explicitly between her earlier years living in association with Bantu and the later years, post 1960s, when, she believes, circumstances for Zhun/wasi improved. She cites the coming of the anthropologists and the increased attention paid to them by the Botswana government as positive changes. I asked her, "If you think about your life as a child, and your life now that you are older, how would you compare them?"

Then was no good. Then we just wandered around and looked for food. That way was weak. But now is better. We have a strong life now. In the past there was no food and we died. When I was a child my family and I lived at \( /\text{Ai/ai} \). I remember that we left \( /\text{Ai/ai} \) now and again and went to live in the bush. We kept moving around to the game, looking for game tracks. If the men killed game we went to where it was. Moving around was bad. Today we just sit in one place and it is better. The only thing that is bad now is sickness. But sometimes we were sick when we lived in the bush, too.

Now we have one village and we stay there. We have water and we have a good life. N\( /\text{ami} \) (a European lay priest who lived among the !Kung for a few years in the 1970s) gave us cattle and helped us a lot. I myself had a cow and that cow had lots of calves which have grown up and we have since sold them. I now have one cow and it is in milk and has a calf. I have another cow that is pregnant. We milk regularly at my village. Many of us know how to milk, such as my daughter, N\( !\text{uhka} \), and her husband, Bo. My son-in-law and my brother, Kxau, have goats. I used to have goats but my own have died.

When I think of the old days I don't remember anything good. We had no possessions and we had no life. Now we have a good life. People like you Europeans help a lot. You Europeans have made all the difference. Now the place is good. People like you and \( /=\text{Oma} \) the(n) (anthropologist John Yellen) bring medicine and employment when you come and stay with us. It is good. \( /\text{Oma} \) the(n) and Chulo (anthropologist Alison Brooks) have come several times and when they come they give people work and pay them in real money. I worked for them making buildings. \( /\text{Oma} \) made his own village not too far from where we are living now. I worked on the buildings and did the plastering. I plastered a shelf inside for them to put their dishes on.
"Twenty years ago (1968), when I first knew you, you lived with the Herero at Mahopa (a village about sixty kilometers from where she lived at the time of the interview). Your children were still small. Tell me about what it was like when you were that age."

That was not much of a life then. It was a small life, not big. At that time we had only goats and no other stock. We begged the Herero villages for handouts. Sometimes they gave us the sour milk that is left after the butter is churned and taken off. That milk had no fat and was not good food.

Later the government helped the Zhun/wasi by putting in a well, just for us at Dobe. That was when we began to see a good life. After that we Zhun/wasi came together in our own villages and used our own well. Then later the government began distributing food (as a part of a drought relief program). Sometime after that the government sent people to us who would buy the things we made like beaded bags, arrows and quivers, necklaces and things like that. We could sell our things and have money.

With the money we bought things like blankets and cattle and shoes. Now the sun doesn't burn our feet when we walk on the hot sand. We have shoes and it is better. Today is better. You Americans have helped us. And N/ami gave us cattle and helped us with the well.

Karu, on Then Versus Now. Like the other women interviewed, Karu was prepubertal when she and her family began to live with the cattle-keeping people. She remembered the earlier life of eating bush foods and making frequent moves but was not nostalgic for life in the bush.

When I was a child we lived at /Gam (in Namibia). I lived with my mother and father and other Zhun/wasi. My older brother was there and there were many men who were doing the hunting. I was a grown person by the time I came to live with the Tswana. I was already married by that time but I had not yet menstruated. I was still small with no breasts. I lived with my husband and menstruated long after we were married. But later the Tswana came to us at /Gam and we, my husband and I, lived together with the Tswana there.

"How was that life with the Tswana? Were you forced by the Tswana to live with them?"

We were not forced. We agreed to living with them. It was a good life. We had cow's milk and we had bush foods. Two kinds of food. We lived well. My father died when I was a child and my mothers (female relatives) reared me up. My mother didn't marry another man after my father died. She died years later after I was an adult and already had children.

We were at different places with the Herero. Sometimes at N/=ema, then we'd go to /Ai/ai, then we went to /Gam. We were following the Herero
around. We were not people who were forced to work. We ourselves joined them.

"What are the things you remember well from the years when you were young?"

I remember that we were just eating bush food and those are not memories of good times. I didn’t like just eating bush foods. I liked being able to eat the food of the bush as well as the food of the big village.

"Were you hungry when you were just living in the bush?"

No, we were not. We had nuts, roots and berries. We went from one place to the next and ate these foods. It was good enough. We were not hungry.

"Why did your people come in from the bush?"

We thought that it was not good just to live in the bush. We should live at the big village and eat the food of the big village. We wanted these different foods like cow’s milk, corn, melons and sorghum. Once we were living with the Tswana, we Zhun/wasi had our own gardens. Halangisi, the man who was the head of the Tswana village, also had his own gardens. We gardened with ploughs and yoked cattle or donkeys. In those days there was a lot of rain and we had gardens. In the recent years there has been practically no rain and people haven’t made gardens.

Kun//a, on Then Versus Now. Kun//a is the only one of the five informants who remembers life in the bush with satisfaction. She cites the constant availability of food, the variety of different things to eat and the fact that the hunters could provide meat as the basis for happy memories. Listening to her account, however, it seems that some of her evaluation of then vs. now is influenced by her current poor health. At the time of the interview her health was failing and she was being treated for tuberculosis. During the interviews she was frequently interrupted by violent spasms of coughing that required several minutes of rest before she could carry on with her narrative.

When I was still a child we were living with Zhun/wasi only. There were no Bantu around then. I remember those times as good times. My father and, later, my husband were not harsh with me. We all lived together for a very long time. We walked around looking for food. We had a good time. We were eating bush foods like sha, lgwa(n), ’ore, ooroo. We also ate mongongo. All the foods of our people is what we ate.

My husband and my father were the hunters. They fed us well. We weren’t hungry in those days. We ate good foods of all kinds. They were
different kinds of foods and they had good tastes. We were not hungry. We lived near the water and the men hunted and the women gathered. By the time my son, /Wi, was born we were still living in the bush near N//wa !'e. My mother and father were with us then.

By then we still did not know the Bantu. We lived among ourselves. In those days we ate different things. Some foods in the rains, some in the winter, some in the hot season. When the men were killing meat we would stay in one place. We ate and ate and ate and when the meat was finished we went to another place. We went around looking for all kinds of little things. Tree resin was one of the things we picked.

"Thinking back over your life, is your life better now or was it better then when you were living in the bush?"

When I think about the way my body feels, I have to say that then was better. My own flesh tells me that now is not good. Now I’m old and T.B. is in my chest. I think the old days were better. In the old days the men hunted and we fed ourselves on bush food.

But today, even though I am living in the midst of the Bantu, I don’t see that I am well off. They don’t give me anything. I mean all of them. Look at me: my sister is married to a Tswana man; my daughter married another Tswana man. But these men don’t help me. In the old days it was better and they took better care of me. That was because the father of these men (Isak) was different. He told his sons to help me and provide for me because I was the mother of one of their wives. But, once the old man died, there was no one left to tell his sons how to act. After that I quit getting help from the Tswana family.

A common theme in the comments on the foraging life is food and the constant moving and searching for different kinds of things to eat. Bau repeats, "We were impoverished," meaning that they had no possessions, nothing like cattle to provide a measure of security. Chu!ko echoes the same theme saying "bush life was precarious, sometimes good, sometimes bad." She implies that living with cattle made it possible to even out the hard times by using butter fat stored from the rainy season. N!uhka speaks with pride of her cattle (acquired in the last ten or fifteen years) and the fact that several people in her village know how to milk. She seems to be deeply appreciative of the fact that, with cattle, access to a well, and cash earnings, the people of her village have some control over their lives. Reading between the lines, most of these women are saying that living as foragers was a hard way to get enough to eat. The big draw of the cattle camps was the new complement of foods that, at least in these narratives, was more reliable than the food supply in the bush.
Theme 2: First Contacts with Bantu

The cattle keeping people have had contact with the Zhun/wasi for many decades, though the pace of this contact has accelerated in the last thirty of so years. In some areas Zhun/wasi and other Khoisan groups have been treated coercively and forcibly kidnapped or impressed into labor. In the !Angwa and /Ai/ai areas the cultural contact was apparently gradual and not traumatic for most Zhun/wasi, at least as reported by these five female informants. It appears that the early period of contact was voluntary; their families chose to live in association with Bantu. Interestingly enough, some of the old men whose life histories were also collected (but are not reported here) give different accounts of early contact. They state with some bitterness that they and people they knew were impressed into forced labor by the Bantu and their lives disrupted for some time. Bau mentions the arrival of the first Tswana headman of the area as a key event in bringing about regular contact between !Kung and Bantu. In about 1948 the word went out from the Bechuanaland administration to the headmen in remote areas to call in the Zhun/wasi. Isak, the first headman of the region, sent out a call to the Zhun/wasi living in the bush. He asked them to come in to the permanent water holes where he had established a village and was keeping his cattle. He wanted to inform the Zhun/wasi of the tribal government to which they were subject (Lee 1979:28). None of the informants describes Isak as a cruel or coercive patron. By all reports he was a true friend of the Zhun/wasi.

Bau, on First Contacts. "Why did you go to live with Namti, the Herero woman with whom you spent so many years?"

The first Tswana who came among us as headman was Isak Utuhile. He knew my father. He said to my father, "You are my age mate, come and live with me at !xabi."

Later we all, including my older sister, Di/au, moved up from !Ubi to !Xabi. By then I had small breasts. I lived with my father. My father wasn't working for Isak but living with him. But Namti, Isak's Herero wife, began to teach me about Herero customs, about such things as milking cows and making mud houses. Namti and I went together to cut sticks for houses and she taught me how to place the grasses on the hut roof and to make a thatch roof that would not let the rain come in.

"Was that a good life as you remember it?"

Yes, we had a lot to eat. Especially meat. Isak would lend the young men his gun and his horses and they would kill a lot of game and we ate a lot. Isak loaned his gun to the Zhun/wa men, like Kumsa / = Dwi (a man now 78 years old and still living in the area) and /Gau, my father. Isak also went on the hunts. Sometimes he would take along other Herero with him and they all went together, Zhun/wasi, Tswana and some Herero.
"In those days were other Zhun/wasi living in the bush?"

By then the people I knew were all living at the Herero villages. There were other Zhun/wasi living in the bush. Some were up around /Dwi!a(n) and there were others living around /Ai/ai. Sometimes they came in from the bush to get water from the wells and to trade for tobacco. Other Zhun/wasi were up in the north. These were people who lived on water from water root and from melons. They had no standing water. When they wanted real water they came in to the wells. We didn't always see these bush people in person. From !Xabi we used to look north to the horizon and see smoke from distant bush fires. The old people said, "That is the northern Zhun/wasi. They are setting the fires."

Some of the people I knew stayed mostly in the bush. Others lived with the Herero sometimes and at other times lived in the mongongo groves. But Isak wanted to bring the Zhun/wasi in. He wanted them to settle down and live with him at !Xabi.

"What if the Zhun/wasi refused Isak and didn't want to go with him?"

Nothing happened. He just said, "They don't want to come." Look, now Isak is dead and there are no Zhun/wasi at what used to be his village. But in the old days his compound was full of Zhun/wasi. He said he liked the Bushmen and that they were his people. Remember, Isak's own mother was a Zhun/wa. Her name was /oishe.

"When Isak called to the Zhun/wasi to come in and hear about the law of the Tswana, did the Zhun/wasi agree to come in from the bush?"

Yes, they all agreed and came in and lived there.

"How did people live once they left the bush and lived with Isak? Did they work for Isak?"

The young people helped with the cattle, giving them water, but the elders just sat and didn't work.

_Chu!ko, on First Contacts._ "How did you learn to milk and to prepare sour milk and to churn the butter?"

When you first come to the Bantu villages you first think about the milk and begin to taste it and to learn whether this is something that you can eat. Even before I was middle aged and married to my Tswana husband, I had learned about milk. I first learned about milk at !Angwa. I was living with Herero then, and I learned there. We weren't working for the Herero but we put our villages near theirs and visited the Herero during the day. That is how
we learned to drink milk. We just lived nearby. This was when my father was still living.

"Did the Herero just give the milk to you or did you help the Herero out with something?"

Sometimes the Zhun/wa women helped the Herero by shaking the milk gourd (a way of churning butter). The Zhun/wa men helped the Herero by cutting poles for the kraals. The Herero would call on them for help. At another time perhaps the wells would fail and the Herero would call on the Zhun/wasi for help in digging out the well. At other times Zhun/wa and Herero men hunted together.

*N!uhka, on First Contacts.* "Where were you living before you menstruated?"

At N/=ema (Namibia) with my mother and my father. I came from there and lived at /Ai/ai for a long time. Later my father died at /Ai/ai. At first there were only Zhun/wasi when I was growing up. Many of my relatives lived there. But later the Herero came to us at N/=ema. They came over from /Ai/ai. They saw it was a good place.

When the Herero first came I was about five or six years old. My older brother worked for the Herero and we lived with them in the same village. The man my brother worked for was Kachinicho and he's still living at /Ai/ai today. He is now headman at /Ai/ai. Later we Zhun/wasi followed these Herero back to /Ai/ai and lived there with them in the same village.

*Karu, on First Contacts.* At first we were at N/=ema with the Herero and their cattle. The Herero brought the cattle to us at N/=ema. Then we went to /"ai/ai and then we went to /Gam. We were following the Herero around. We were not people who were forced.

*Kun//a, on First Contacts.* "When did you become acquainted with Bantu customs?"

It was at Dobe that we first met up with the Bantu. There were Tswana there. It was Isak, the Tswana man who we learned was to be our headman. He was with his wife, Namti, and two sons. Later my daughter, Hwan//a, married one of his sons. Isak had just killed a giraffe that day we first saw him. In those days there was no fence between Namibia and Botswana. There was also no road along the fence. At this time there were lots of cattle. Many of them were Isak's cattle. The Tswana and their cattle strayed far into Namibia.
In describing their early contacts with Bantu, these women remember a time when association with the Blacks offered new options but did not close off old ones. Bau has lived among Blacks most of her life, yet she remembers when there were some Zhun/wasi living fully in the bush and others who were alternating between foraging and some kind of symbiosis with Bantu. Chu!ko’s recollection captures the earlier period as one of untroubled accommodation between Zhun/wasi and Herero.\(^5\) She explains that visiting Zhun/wasi put their villages near the Herero cattle posts and visited the Herero during the day to ask for handouts of milk. In return Zhun/wasi performed chores for the Bantu such as helping dig water wells, cutting brush for corrals, and churning butter. She uses the verb !xoi kxam which translates as "help" to describe the work that Zhun/wasi did for Bantu. N!uhka and Karu remember that a more permanent association by their families with the Blacks grew out of the fact that one or more young men had "hired on" as employee or servant to a Bantu family. Afterward, other family members settled with the Blacks, attaching themselves via the link of the employed relative. In other contexts, when Zhun/wasi (women as well as men) talk about the work they have done for Bantu, they speak with great disillusionment, claiming that after long years of service they have been paid "nothing". In fact, Zhun/wasi received milk, corn meal and meat (on occasion) in return for their work. What the Zhun/wasi mean is that they were not paid enough or in the form of cows (or other breeding stock), so that they could begin to build up their own herds and establish economic independence from the Bantu. As mentioned earlier, men in the course of giving life history interviews were far more likely than women to describe relations between Zhun/wa and Bantu as exploitative.

**Theme 3: Intermarriage with Bantu**

Several interviewees mention tensions over sex and marriage negotiations arising out of increased contact with the Bantu. The stories range from comic, to tragic, to practical. In many cases the stories that are told date back thirty to forty or more years and involve specific Bantu individuals who were still living in the same general region with the narrator. A striking feature of these interviews is their testimony to the stability of personal relationships, both among !Kung and between !Kung and their Bantu neighbors. Some excerpts are below.

*N!uhka, on Intermarriage.* "Tell me about your childhood. What did you think about, what did you do then?"

When you are a child you don’t think. Later I had sense and knew how to do things, like sewing. We used to play, make play houses in the bush. The little boys would want to play with us but we would refuse them, because the
boys are no good. When I was small we used to play together and pretend to be parents.

One time we were playing in the bush and there were some older kids nearby. In fact, they were Ohabile and Setulu (young Tswana men living at Isak's, the headman's village). They were with two Zhun/wa girls, both of whom were named Bau. We came across them by accident and they were actually having intercourse! We were amazed! We didn't know what to think!

We ran back to the village and told the grownups. Even Isak (a relative of one the two boys) was there. My father was angry when he heard us. He grabbed me and hit me and said "What do you think you are doing going off there and following the older girls? Are you crazy?" We children had come running into the village and just blurted out what we saw. We told them all. Even Isak was there and heard it. My father hit me with a stick and said, "Don't play over there." He didn't like it because that kind of thing is embarrassing and insulting to elders when they hear about it.

"Was what the girls did bad?"

Yes, it was a big offense. Those girls still had small breasts and they weren't supposed to be doing that. After that we were not supposed to follow those older girls. My father said "Those older girls will bring about insults."

Isak scolded the young boys and said, "What do you think you are doing? Leave those girls alone."

Ohabile still remembers that incident. Even now when he sees me and jokes with me he reminds me and scolds me for seeing him and Setulu with those two girls.

N!uhka tells another story, this one with much more serious consequences.

My father arranged for my sister to marry a Herero man. But my sister refused and refused the marriage. She ran away that night that they married her. She ran off into the bush because she was afraid and didn't want the marriage. My parents agreed to the marriage but not my sister! She ran into the bush and was lost. We never saw her again.

At that time we were living at the same water hole and at the same village with the Herero. It was Kabethe who was her husband. They put her in the hut with him but she wouldn't sleep with him but instead slept on her own side of the hut. She waited until he went to sleep. Then she ran away and people never saw her again.

People tried to track her but they couldn't see her tracks. The cattle were many and they ruined her tracks. People looked and looked for her but failed. They looked all over, /Ai/ai, !Ubi and didn't find her. Her husband looked also. Everyone knows that the animals ate her.

My mother cried and cried and ranted. She said, "My husband gave this child away in marriage and she ran away into the bush and was lost!" She
hated my father for arranging this marriage. But my grandmother said this to her: "You alone did not birth this child, it is your husband's child also." My grandmother, N!uhka N!a, told my mother, "You must not hate your husband. He gave you the child and now she's dead. You must just stay with your husband and have another child." This N!uhka N!a was my old name; I was named for her. Later my mother recovered and accepted that my sister was gone.

At this time I was still a child and had no breasts. My sister had not previously been married but she was tall, like my daughter is today. It was my father's doing. He wanted all his daughters to marry Bantu.

Like with my sister, my father arranged for me to marry Buhetsi (a Tswana man who still lives in the area, in fact the current husband of Chulko). It was all arranged with the elders. The marriage hadn't taken place but we were promised. At that time Buhetsi was away at Maun in school. His mother agreed to it. She sewed clothing for me and I was staying at her village. It is the custom of the Blacks to take the intended bride in and rear her at the bride groom's village. When she is old enough she marries. But at the time I'm talking about, Buhetsi was still away at Maun and we never really married.

My mother-in-law was living at /Gam (in Namibia) at that time. My elders took me to her village and wanted me to live with her. But I ran away from there and went to Chum!kwe (a distance of about fifty miles). Like my sister, I didn't want this marriage. One morning, early, when the rooster just began to crow, my other sister and I snuck away from my future mother-in-law's village. We sneaked out of there, took an ostrich egg shell for water, and we went to Chum!kwe. From there we met up with other people and continued on to Cho/ana (a locale another seventy kilometers to the north of Chum!kwe).

That morning when we sneaked away my mother saw us. But my mother didn't say anything and she didn't let the Herero woman know either. She kept it a secret. My mother always hated the idea of us marrying the Bantu even though my father over-ruled her. When my father died my mother was glad. She said, "Here will be an end of my daughters marrying the Bantu."

As N!uhka tells this story, her intended Herero mother-in-law from long ago, is still living nearby and this same morning came by and greeted both of us as we began the interview. I asked, "Was your mother-in-law angry when you ran away?"

Yes, she was very angry. Much later I came back from the north. By then I had married Debe, my present husband. When my Herero mother-in-law saw me and Debe she scolded us. She was mad! But my older sister took all the beads and things that my mother-in-law had given me and gave them back. That made her feel better. But my intended father-in-law was still angry long after that and scolded my mother and said "You have killed my son and ruined this marriage." My mother agreed with him and said,"That's right. I never wanted N!uhka to marry a Bantu."
Later Debe and I had our daughter Nuhka. When my would-be-father-in-law saw her he said to me, "You daughter is like you and she is still my child. When she is grown up I am going to marry her to my son. When she is older she must come and live at my village and begin to do helpful things." Later, when my girl was older she did go to his village and lived with this Herero woman for a few months. But it did not lead to marriage. She married a Zhun/wa man, not a Black.

**Kun/la, on Intermarriage.** Kun/la’s daughter and sister both married Bantu men. Her daughter, though married young, proved to be infertile. Her sister, Chu!ko, married her Tswana husband later in life and there were no children of this marriage. Kun/la, although she has more Bantu in-laws than many Zhun/wasi, does not have grandchildren of mixed ethnicity. She has spent most of her adult years visiting freely and for long periods at the places where her kinswomen lived.

At that time, when we first met Isak and his kin, my daughter Hwan/la was married to Gau, a Zhun/wa man. But he didn’t take care of her. He hit her and mistreated her so she left him. She was married to him before she menstruated. Later she menstruated but was still married to him. She was a teenager then. They had no children. She refused her husband and said he mistreated her. The divorce was her idea. At this time we were still traveling back and forth between !Angwa and N/wa(n) le (in Namibia). We were not going to Chum!kwe in those days.

"Later your daughter, Hwan/la, married a relative of Isak, the headman. Did you approve of her marrying him?"

At first I didn’t like it. But I wasn’t there at the time. Hwan/la and her older brother were here in Botswana, visiting. When I heard the news I cried and disapproved and didn’t agree. But other people said, "No, wait. It is not a bad thing." People said, "No, Isak is the chief. If his kinsman marries your daughter, why should you object?" Even Isak himself said, "Agree. I am your owner. Now agree!" Even Namti, the groom’s mother, agreed to the marriage. So I just shut up and quit objecting.

"Was this a proper/real marriage?"

I am not sure. If Hwan/la and her husband had birthed many children and if those children had grown up, maybe we would say it was a marriage. But there were no children inside Hwan/la.
Bau, on Intermarriage. Contrasting with the other interviewees who talk about events of intermarriage in the past, Bau recalls a recent situation in her husband’s family in which the wife of a young Zhun/wa couple conceived a child by a Bantu father.

/Asa was married to Kaeshe. They already had one child, a boy. Kaeshe, the husband, went away to work for Europeans in another part of Namibia, leaving /Asa and the boy behind at Chum!kwe. While her husband was away she had an affair and when the baby was born he was very black. It didn’t look at all like a Zhun/wa child. When Kaeshe returned to Chum!kwe, the baby was still small. The husband looked at this child and his heart leapt up and he was fierce! He said, "This child is black and it can’t be mine. I am going to kill it!" But other people were there. They seized him and held him back and said, "No, you can’t do this. This child is yours. You are married to the woman and therefore you must keep the child."

I wasn’t living with Kaeshe and /Asa at the time. I was here at Dobe and they were in Namibia. But we here at Dobe heard the news and we sent back the word, "Don’t kill the child." And now Kaeshe still has the child and they get along. The boy goes with his "father" and they work together.

Then there is N!eisi (a boy about 14 years old). His mother was already married at the time to a Zhun/wa but she conceived N!eisi by a Bantu lover. Today N!eisi and his Zhun/wa father get along. See, the father has even named the boy, "N!eisi" after his own father, N!eisi. This is the Zhun/wa custom. N!eisi’s mother and step-father reared him until he was three or four years old. But later the mother’s mother asked to have N!eisi for herself. The grandmother has reared up this boy, not the mother.

The anecdotes on intermarriage and sexual contact between the Zhun/wa and Bantu were more diverse than those on other themes. There was a degree of unanimity among the women on the comparison of bush life vs. settled life, and on early contacts with Bantu. This agreement is lacking in the stories about marriage and matings that involve Bantu. N!uhka told a risqué story about the youthful escapades of some Zhun/wa girls with Bantu men. She recalled the incident with mirth and good humor. Yet this same informant later told how her own sister died in flight from an unwelcome arranged marriage with a Bantu husband. Some time later (in her narrative) she, herself, ran away and faced a dangerous journey in the bush to escape a similar marriage. Kun//a remembered a time 35 to 40 years previously when her daughter married a Tswana man and how many people of both ethnic groups overcame her reluctance and persuaded her to agree to this union. These stories have as their centerpiece ethnic boundaries and the unease that the narrators felt about themselves or others marrying across ethnic lines. The fact that the Zhun/wasi still feel keenly about their own ethnic distinctiveness is borne out by Bau when she related a modern
story of sexual jealousy and infanticidal rage felt by a Zhun/wa husband when
cuckolded by his wife's Bantu lover.

Today it is not unusual to find half-Bantu children being reared in Zhun/wa
villages. Often they stay with their mother’s parents, though sometimes they are
accepted by Zhun/wa husbands. With the increased rate of inter-ethnic matings
by women, the men are facing a shrinking pool of ideal marriageable women,
those who are young and who have not previously had children. Some men must
make the best of a bad situation and accept or overlook a half-Bantu child as the
price for having a wife at all (Draper and Kranichfeld in press).

Although the narratives that form the focus of this paper are provided by
women only, a remark on this topic by an old man during his own life history
interview will be instructive. Kxau was in his eighties at the time of the
interview. When the subject of inter ethnic matings came up he commented
freely:

Once in a while in the old days, it happened that a Zhun/wa woman had
a black baby. But the mother or the other women would kill it when it was
born. They knew that no one would take the baby in. The husband wouldn’t
accept a baby like that—one that didn’t look like a Zhun/wa. In those days there
weren’t any half-Bantu babies in our villages.

In former times the problems of intermarriage and out-of-wedlock children
were forestalled by the early marriage of Zhun/wa women and by the scarcity,
in comparison with today, of Bantu men. Early marriage was the rule in former
times (Marshall 1976; Shostak 1981) as can be seen below in the informants’
narratives. Several of the informants mention their unease at being married in
early adolescence to men five to ten years their senior. Still, the Zhun/wa
custom of bride service, in which the husband moved in with his wife’s parents
for the first few years of their marriage must have softened the transition
considerably for the young bride. The informants who mention the topic of early
marriage and their own anxiety also stress their own belief and that of their
parents that a husband was absolutely necessary.

*Chu'ko, on Early Marriage.* "What do you remember from those times,
when you were of an age to marry?"

Once I had reached the age of sense I thought, "How shall I live? How
shall I support myself?" This was when I got my first husband. His name also
was //'ow(r). At first I refused to be married. I cried and cried. My father beat
me and I finally married him.

"Did you father really beat you when you first refused the marriage? Did
he hit you with his hand or with a stick?"
No, he just told me by mouth. He said, "Look, I will be dead someday and someone must take care of you. You must take a husband." This is the way he spoke to me. I didn't refuse the marriage for very long because I respected my father. I changed my mind and accepted my husband.

He was a good husband and he was good to me. He did not beat me. We lived together many years but then my father died. My father died and my mother and older sister came and got me and we went to live at !Angwa. We were there for one rainy season. After a while they said, "We will take you back to your husband." And we went back to Namibia to a place west of Chum!kwe where only Zhun/wasi were living. I went off with my husband and my maternal relatives returned to !Angwa. My husband and I went to N//o_!De(n)_ and I was living then with my husband's relatives. They went to a Herero place and then we returned back to the vicinity of Chum!kwe.

_Karu, on Early Marriage._ "Tell me about what it was like when you got married. Did you agree to marrying your husband?"

Yes, because I needed a man to work for me. I needed his hands (his capabilities). My husband was older. He had been away to the East working on cattle and he came back. I was still immature and he helped rear me up from childhood (did brideservice) and then married me when I was bigger. It was a good marriage. My father was already dead by then.

"Did you not resist that marriage? Many Zhun/wa women tell me how they hated to be married and how they cried and ran away."

Why should I refuse a good man who would feed me?

"But some women do just that."

Yes, some do but I didn't. At first my elders tried to marry me to a man who already had a wife and I refused that marriage. I ran off and did not agree. But later this man (my husband) came from the East and we lived together well.

"How did your husband support you?"

He left his work in the East where he was working for the Tswana. He came back and married me here at /Ai/ai. He supported me by hunting and killing meat. But he was also working for the Herero here at /Ai/ai. In those days I also worked for the Herero. I shook the milk gourd (churned butter) for the Herero women.

"Once your father died, how did your mother support you if she had no husband?"
She gathered food like mongongo, sha(n) and !gwa and reared me up on that food.

"Did you and your husband live with your mother?"

Yes. My husband lived with me and my mother. But it was some years before I married and after my father died.

*Kun//a, on Early Marriage.* At first I was little and my husband married me and reared me. I grew up in his house and grew and grew and finally I had breasts. We lived and lived and lived. Later I menstruated. We continued to live together. We lived and lived and time passed. My breasts went from standing up to having fallen. I became pregnant with my first child, and I knew I was a woman. /Wi grew up, time passed and we lived on and on.

"Were your parents with you in those years when you were early in your marriage?"

Yes, we all lived together. I never knew my parents-in-law. I almost saw my father-in-law but I was small and he died.

**Theme 4: The Changed Customs of Today**

When commenting specifically on new practices and customs, Zhun/wa informants mention a series of innovations. The fact that they now have access to western style medicine gets frequent mention as can be seen in Bau’s account of epidemic disease during her childhood.

Living in settled camps has important implications for changes in customs having to do with care of the sick and elderly and for changes in burial practices. Several informants remember that some years ago when they were themselves middle aged, they had responsibility for an old person, usually a parent. They remember that they were able to take good care of their parents precisely because they were then living in a permanent location and had daily access to water and food. Informants stress that in modern times, old people are not abandoned.

Two informants give lengthy accounts of how the care of elderly is affected by sedentism and both mention past episodes of senilicide that they had personally witnessed. The women told the stories matter-of-factly but also regretfully. In the same vein, several women mentioned changes in burial practices that now copy Bantu customs.

Informants often remember the threats from wild animals that were a constant source of menace in the old days of living in the bush. Several stories about attacks from animals were collected; only one is presented below. They feel relief that though predators are still common, they take mainly domestic
stock these days and leave the people alone. Not all informants mention each topic but where more than one speaker mentions the same theme, all accounts are included.

**Bau, on Disease Then and Now.** In the old days there were times of terrible sickness when we didn’t know if anyone would survive. I remember one very bad time when I was still a girl. I was living with my family near /Ausha. Several people in my same camp died from this sickness, all in the same month. Other relatives of mine died at the same time, though they were living at different water holes. It killed people close and people far away. Some at Dobe died, others at Tsisui N/um died. You remember my cousin Sau, the man who now lives at /Ai/ai? He was still a nursing baby when the sickness came. All of his older brothers and sisters died in the epidemic. He was the only one of his mother’s children who was left. This all happened in one month.

It was a time of terrible sickness. Many people were sick at the same time. Children were especially likely to die but also adults, both the middle aged and the very old people. It was a sickness that made people terribly thin. I, too, was sick but I survived it. The ones who were sick were hardly able to walk and other people carried them. We wanted to move off someplace else but we couldn’t go far. We’d move a short distance and people who were well would gather food around that place. We would have gone farther but we had to stop because it was the farthest the sick people could go. Then the people would try to move off again, just a short distance. What ever that sickness was, it made your limbs just like sticks and when you tried to walk your legs wobbled and shook.

It was a terrible sickness. I myself was sick with it for days. My father and other medicine men cured me and my mother held me and pressed me and rubbed me and I lived. In those days people said that if you got that sickness and lived long enough for your hair to fall out, you would survive. Many people died before their hair fell out. I myself saw that. All my hair fell out. We called it "shakoba" but who knows what it was? In those days there was nothing to do when a big sickness came among us. We didn’t know anything. Nowadays if a big sickness like that comes along we hear the news on the radio. We hear that disease has come and that people should bring their children and themselves to the clinics and get injections.

The old man, Sau, who I told you about, the one who was abandoned in the bush, he was also sick with that disease. He was recovered from the disease but he was still thin and weak. He was just skin and bones and his voice was faint. The sickness itself had left him but his body was ruined. He told his daughters, "Look at me. I am dead. I am finished. I am thin and I can’t walk. You people go on and leave me." And that is what they did. They walked away and left him.

In former times when a death occurred, the burial ceremonies were brief. The body was not buried in the ground. Instead, it was put in the deceased’s hut
and the hut torn down and piled on the body, presumably to deter scavenging animals. If a death occurred away from camp, rocks (if available) and branches were laid on the body. In any case, people broke camp and moved away as soon as possible. There was no prohibition against grieving or using the name of the deceased, but there was little institutional elaboration of death and mourning.

Now that the Zhun/wasi are settled, they have more material wealth and they devote more time and expense to mourning the dead. The deceased is now encased in a shroud and buried below ground. The grave is located in the vicinity of the villages, but is unmarked. Many of the modern Zhun/wa burial practices are copied from the Herero, particularly the killing of domestic animals and the distribution of meat to people who pay death visits.

**Bau, on Burial Customs.** Here is another way that things are different.

In those days when someone died, that same day we buried him and the next day we moved off to another place. We buried him and all his things with him. These people of the old days had no sense. They still didn’t know that when a person died you should stay there a few days. Today when a person dies, we stay in the same village and don’t move. For example, my child, N!ai, died and we stayed on in the same village. We lived there for two years and only afterward moved to a new location. But we still remained at the same waterhole.

We lived three years in that next village and now we are here where you see us now, in yet another new village.

"Do you like the life that you have now?"

Yes. Nowadays we kill an animal when a person dies. We pass out money, sugar, food. Even the Herero come and give us things. They come and sit with us when we mourn. The Herero donate money. When my daughter, //Oka died, many Herero men and women came to my village. Israel (a local lay minister) came to our village and led a Christian prayer service.

When my daughter died, I was crazy. I threw myself on the ground and cried and rolled and tore at my skin and my clothing. I grieved. I was thin with grief. My heart killed me and I was thin. My grandson was then working in Namibia at the Chum!kwé hospital. He arranged for a truck to come and get me and take me to the hospital. They gave me medicine and I got better. When they let me out of the hospital I collected up all of my daughter’s things both from Chum!kwé and from Dobe. Those from Chum!kwé I brought back to Dobe by truck. They were things like beads, blankets, clothing, trunks, buckets. N!uhka (informant quoted previously) helped me and we washed all the things one morning. (This is the custom before the distribution of the deceased’s goods.)

My husband, Kxau, called people together. They all came and sat and my husband did the distribution of her belongings. My older half sister, Dil/au, got a blanket and some beads. N!uhka, my husband’s younger sister, got a blanket
and things like skirts and underwear. N!ai got a jerry can. My husband's brother got beads and clothing. Another brother got clothing, a jerry can and a cup. Kxaru n!a got a blanket. Chulo n!a got skirts and beads. My younger brother, Bo, and his wife got other things like blankets and beads and carrying bags. Debe !Gusi got a blanket, beads and a knife. My daughter had a lot of things and this is how they were distributed. The person who distributed things was my husband, Kxau. He spread them on the ground and told people, "This is yours, this is someone else's."

As you can see, today we are no longer poor and we do things well. Before our elders didn't have this kind of life. When I was a girl it was different. My mother died down south of here, near /Du/da. It was in the afternoon. We slept with her but the next morning we buried her and went off from the camp. We never went back there again.

The night before we buried her here is what we did. The custom was to put the dead person in her hut. We laid her like this in the back of the hut and wrapped her in blankets. (Bau draws a sketch of this in the sand where she is sitting.) The rest of us slept outside the hut and around the fire. My father slept across the doorway of the hut, between the fire and my mother who was inside the hut. Bau n!a, Bo, my younger brother and I slept just to the right (as you face the hut) of the hut door. On the other side, to the left of the hut slept /Ishe n!a, the father of Debe !Gusi, N!isa n!a, /Ushe and Chwa. Across from my father and on the other side of the fire slept other people, such as N!u n!a and others. The night she died all these people slept at our fire.

Bau lists all these people and indicates where each slept in terms of the hut the fire and the body of her mother. Her reconstruction of how people slept and in what positions at that camp fire of long ago is remarkable but I don't doubt that she remembers the event in this detail.

Now all these people are dead. They are long gone except for /Ushe who is living at Kam_ (a village in Namibia but close to where she now lives.)

Nowadays when a person dies the dead person is put in the house and several other people sleep in there with him/her. We can do it this way because today our houses are large. Today we have learned. Today we have adopted the customs of the black people. We don't put the dead person in his hut and tear the hut down around him and walk away. We don't destroy the house. People like me have seen the changes.

_!uhka, on Burial Customs_. Today it is different. If a person dies we feel pain for weeks at a time. Today if a person dies, such as an adult or a child, we grieve for days. We kill a cow and a goat. The relatives of the dead person don’t eat the cow but the others do. The people stay around the dead person’s village for a long time.

Like when my older cousin, Kxau's daughter, /Oka, died (same woman described above by Bau). She died at noon and the next day I killed one of my own cattle and other people came and ate the meat. We grieved for weeks.
Kxau, the father of Oka, killed three goats and other people came and ate the goats. But family members don't eat the meat. We didn't kill the animals all at once. First we killed my cow, then later a few days apart we killed the goats. You see, people do not come all at once to the place of death. Some people come one time, stay a while. Later other people come. But now the family of the dead person tries to provide food for the visitors.

It was very hard on the parents of Oka because she was their only child.

The strong theme in these narratives is how permanent residence, greater material wealth and proximity to Bantu is changing the death and burial customs. The intensity of grief felt by survivors cannot be missed. They seem to be taking grim pride in their ability to formally mourn their dead by receiving visits from fellow grievers and by providing the many visitors with food -- something that would have been beyond anyone's ability in former times.

**Bau, on Senilicide.** In those other days old people were just abandoned. For example, Old Sau. Sa/gai was his wife. She had been carrying him. They had two daughters, /ushe and Bau. One day the mother told the daughters, "Tomorrow we are going to go off. I am tired. I can't keep carrying your father around. Tomorrow we will go off and get food and we will leave your father and we won't come back." Bau and /Ushe were grown at the time and had children of their own. They said, "Yes, this is what we must do. He is old and can't walk. He can't unbend his legs and he can't walk." They agreed with their mother that this is what had to be done.

I was there. This is how I know this story and can tell it to you.

"Did Old Sau know what they were going to do?"

Yes, he knew and he said, "I am old and have no use. If you leave me behind I have no objection. Just get me some firewood and leave it. Go off and gather food and leave me." This is the way he spoke to them. I heard it.

"Did people cry? How did his wife and daughters feel about this?"

Yes, his daughters cried. The whole camp left Sau. But during the day they cried. Those people of long ago were senseless and without right thinking. But it was because of how we lived and that we were poor. They had to do it that way because if they stayed in one place there would be no food. People had to go where the food was. People get tired of carrying a crippled old person. They said, "If we keep carrying this person we will be slow, we can't hurry and get to where the food is." We saw great poverty. Today we stay with the old people. Even if they are crippled we feed them.

Sau N!a was completely crippled. His legs were just bones and shriveled up. His legs were permanently drawn up in a flexed position. (She demonstrates with her own legs.) He had a sickness which did that to his legs.
The wife and daughters of Sau carried him for four months during the rainy season. But in the month the rains finished, then they abandoned him. It was that season when the mongongoes are ripe and have fallen. They had heard that there was a lot of honey in the mongongoes. So the people with Sau heard that and wanted to go to where there was all that honey and mongongo food. So they abandoned him. They carried him around for months after he got that sickness but in the end they abandoned him.

*N!uhka, on Senilicide.* In the time of long ago it was not a good life. We moved around and were thirsty. Now we stay at the water. The old life was hard. In those days an old man or woman was left behind by people. They just left him or her in the road and he just died there. The younger people couldn't keep up the carrying of the old person for long. Old people were abandoned.

"I remember you told me another time that your grandfather, Kxau N!a, was abandoned in that way."

Yes, my grandfather saw that. He was abandoned and died. My father's grandmother was also abandoned. She was Chu!o, my father's mother's younger sister. My father's younger sister, Di//au, was coming to visit him and the old woman, Chu!o, was also in her group. But the road was long and she, Di//au, left her behind. That afternoon late she came to my father's village and he said to her, "Where is Chu!o?" Di//au said, "We were tired and thirsty and we left her."

My father heard that news and he was upset. When he heard that he scolded and said, "You could have sent word ahead. You could have done something and we could have helped."

But by that time it was night and he slept. The next morning he went back and tried to track back to where Chu!o had been left. But he couldn't find her. My father tried and tried but the grasses were tall and the bush was thick and he had to return. He called and called out to Chu!o n!a but he heard nothing. He never even found their tracks.

When he returned to the village he said, "She must have died. That's the end of it." My father said, "I'm not going back there to look because I couldn't find anything if I went."

"Who went to look for Chu!o N!a?"

There were two of them looking. My father and his son-in-law, Kan//a, married to my older sister, //Ushe.

"How long did they look?"
They looked for one day only. I've told you before, Pat, in those days people had no sense. If a person died they paid little attention. They grieved for one day and then they were finished. Today it is not like that.

**Bau, on Care of Old People.** There was also N!ai N!a, the mother of my husband, Kxau. She lived with us for a long time while we were at Bate and working for the Herero. Pat, you knew /Asa N!a when you lived with us at Mahopa in 1969. Both these old women lived with my husband and me at Bate. N!ai and her younger sister, /Asa, shared the same hut. At first /Asa helped N!ai and carried her to the bush so she could relieve herself. But later /Asa herself was old and couldn't do that. Later, N!ai was too feeble to move and /Asa too old to carry her. N!ai would just urinate and defecate in the hut and someone else would clean her up. At first it was /Asa who would clean N!ai up when she urinated on her self. Later N!ai died at Bate and /Asa was the only one who stayed in the hut after that.

**N!uhka, on Care of Old People.** My mother died at Mahopa. I took very good care of her. Every day I brought her water and took care of her. She was old and weak and thin for a long time but we cared for her and fed her. The day that she died it was quick and sudden. She had not been sick. It was as if bullets had killed her. She just died suddenly. Something like bloody froth came out of her mouth. And her teeth were clenched together hard. I tried to open her mouth to get rid of the stuff in her mouth but I couldn't.

That night I spread our her blankets and I put her body like this on the blankets. (N!uhka draws a diagram in the sand and arranges sticks to represent where she laid and where she put her mother's body, where the fire was, etc.). Then I laid down beside her and covered us up with blankets. I slept with her that night and cried all night. My son, /Gau, was still young then and usually slept with me. But that night I told /Gau, "Go sleep tonight with your father. Tonight I sleep with my mother."

The next morning we prepared her for burial. But people said I shouldn't sew her shroud because I was the daughter. So /Wa, N!eisi's wife, sewed the shroud. (The custom is to bury the dead person in her blankets. The person is completely encased from head to foot in the blankets and the blankets are stitched together.) People told me that I should not sew the blankets because it would give me more pain. "All that pain and grief will kill you," they said. People sewed my mother's body into the shroud in the hut and told me to stay outside the hut. They told me to stay off at a little distance. They said, "We will clothe her and fix her and you stay off to the side."

The Herero women came to make death visits also. They brought me butter to give to the people who came to the death. They still live at Mahopa (a nearby village) today. One of them, Shupe said, "I feel pain because my age mate, /Asa, has died." Shupe and my mother, /Asa, were friends. My mother took good care of me and taught me how to do things and how to take care of my husband.
Nlukka, on Attack by Wild Animals. Another thing that happened in the old days. One time a lion came and got my aunt, took her off and killed her. My aunt was also named /Asa, just like my mother. Her older sister was Di/au. /Asa and Di/au were visiting us and they had two small huts. My crippled aunt was sleeping alone alongside the fire by her own hut. Di/au and others were sitting up at their own fire, but right next to where /Asa was sleeping. They had been sitting up and smoking and talking.

Another couple, Chulo n!a and Kaeshe, slept at their fireside and /Asa slept to the other side. That night there were many lions. One of them crept up and grabbed my aunt. It picked her up off the ground as she slept, all wrapped up in her blankets. The lion carried her off and gave her to another lion. That lion carried her off and another lion took her farther away. My aunt knew what was happening. She cried out and said, "The lions have taken me!" She cried and said, "Father help me. The lion has me!"

Everyone jumped up and grabbed burning sticks from the fire. They grabbed up spears and ran after her into the night where they could hear her calling. People ran after her and their feet made noises like the hooves of running horses. They ran off and searched for her. But the lions ran off and it was too late. The bush was thick and that night there was no moon and they couldn't see.

That was at N/=ema (in Namibia). The next morning they looked for her and followed the tracks but could only find the tiny pieces of skin that were left of her clothing and a few beads. In those days people wore only skins and beads. People found her pubic apron only and brought it back. People returned to the village and cried.

"Were you there that night the lions took your aunt?"

Yes, we heard the lions roaring. We all heard it, we children heard it that night and we trembled. I heard my aunt cry out and say, "The lions have taken me!" There were four lions that night. Two were at a distance; two came close. My aunt was sleeping by the fire. The others, /Asa, Chulo and Kaeshe, were nearby but at the hut, talking and smoking. Two lions crept up close. One grabbed my aunt and carried her off in her blankets and passed her on to another lion. That was how we lost my aunt.

The next morning all the people at that camp moved off away from where there were lions like that. We were afraid that if we stayed there the lions would come back and get another person. So we moved off and the lions didn't come to us again. We built up a thorn brush fence around our next camp and slept inside it. My father and Kan//a, and Kxau, my father's younger brother were the ones who built up the fence.

I was the age then of /Asama (a girl about 13 years old). I was of an age to have sense but I had not yet menstruated. The lions didn't return to us.

"Was that a common occurrence in those day to have lions come and kill a person from a camp?"
It wasn't common but it used to happen. Nowadays it is not so bad. The lions are still here but they eat the cattle and the donkeys and the horses. In this way the domestic stock help us. But one bad thing that is still with us is leopards.

Conclusion

Life history narratives, like other types of ethnographic data, have their advantages and disadvantages. These texts provided unusually detailed accounts of events in the lives of five women. The stories, for all their limitations, provide totally legitimate insight into past events and ways in which Zhun/wasi use old experience in evaluating the present. There are many caveats to be kept in mind about these (or any other) life history materials. Elderly speakers take a long view on past events and there are many opportunities for failing memories to obscure the reality that is called up after so many years. Furthermore, informants, who live in the present, can continually reevaluate and reprocess their experiences in the light of how they wish things had been or in terms of how they need to portray events at the time of telling. These accounts, therefore, may or may not be factual and truthful; in a certain sense the truth is unrecoverable. In another sense, the factual nature of these stories is less important than what the telling of the stories says about how old Zhun/wasi of today see their past and their present lives.

The narratives are often surprisingly rich, no doubt because the interviewees were speaking from their own perspectives, choosing events and experiences that stood out in the speakers' minds. Because the narration went on over a period of days, the interviewer herself became drawn into the unfolding stories and could ask, at appropriate junctures, for clarification and elaboration. These careful probes did not appear to disrupt the narration but definitely contributed to the fullness of the reports on the various topics. The five narrators became caught up in their own stories and often seemed to be musing to themselves as well as to their listener. They responded sympathetically to the listeners questions, seeming to want to make their stories intelligible to outsiders.

The strongest impression left by these speakers is that the old life of hunting and gathering was hard and unrelenting in its demands. The women spoke frankly about the thirst, the stress of continual mobility and the inability of people to buffer themselves from disease or the frailty of old age. They remember some features of the old life with pleasure—old relationships and friendships and old, familiar locales that were visited and revisited stood out in people's memories. Most informants commented with nostalgia on the old bush foods and the rich variety of different things that people had to eat. None of these women, however, said that she, or anyone else she knew, wanted to return to the old way of living.
These Zhun/wasi (and others interviewed less intensively by the author) are persuaded that the future lies with access to permanent water and the ownership of cattle and other domestic stock. They are eager and hopeful, yet pessimistic at the same time. As the 1980s drew to a close, the Zhun/wasi of Botswana were all living around permanent water, some in independent villages but with Bantu neighbors, many in the same villages with Bantu. The challenge of the next decades for Zhun/wasi will be in their ability to borrow technologies and customs from the Bantu without losing their own communities and ethnic distinctiveness.

Notes


2. Field work was sponsored by Grant No. P01 AG03110 from the National Institute of Aging to Christine Fry (Loyola University) and Jennie Keith (Swarthmore College).

3. No more than one session was conducted on a given day. After each session the author returned to her camp and on the same day entered the interview into a portable computer. The transcribed interviews are not, therefore, verbatim accounts but the translations were kept as close to the original narrator's content and style as possible. The next session in the life history interview began with the author summarizing what had been said the day before and asking questions to clarify ambiguous or contradictory material.


5. This view of Zhun/wasi as having a recent history of economic independence from cattle herders is not shared by all scholars of Khoisan culture history. See Biesele et al. 1989; Denbow and Wilmsen 1983, 1986; Gordon 1984; Schrire 1980, 1984; Solway and Lee 1990; Wilmsen 1990.

6. Namti is the same woman whom Bau names as her benefactress.

References


