

Marjorie Shostak

NISA

The Life and
Words of a !Kung Woman



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NISA



*To Nisa and her people in the hope that
their struggle to survive will be
as successful in the future as
it has been in the past*

*I'll break open the story and
tell you what is there. Then, like
the others that have fallen out
onto the sand, I will finish with it,
and the wind will take it away.*

Nisa





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Introduction

I lay there and felt the pains as they came, over and over again. Then I felt something wet, the beginning of the childbirth. I thought, “Eh hey, maybe it is the child.” I got up, took a blanket and covered Tashay with it; he was still sleeping. Then I took another blanket and my smaller duiker skin covering and I left. Was I not the only one? The only other woman was Tashay’s grandmother, and she was asleep in her hut. So, just as I was, I left.

I walked a short distance from the village and sat down beside a tree. I sat there and waited; she wasn’t ready to be born. I lay down, but she still didn’t come out. I sat up again. I leaned against the tree and began to feel the labor. The pains came over and over, again and again. It felt as though the baby was trying to jump right out! Then the pains stopped. I said, “Why doesn’t it hurry up and come out? Why doesn’t it come out so I can rest? What does it want inside me that it just stays in there? Won’t God help me to have it come out quickly?”

As I said that, the baby started to be born. I thought, “I won’t cry out. I’ll just sit here. Look, it’s already being born and I’ll be fine.” But it really hurt! I cried out, but only to myself. I thought, “Oh, I almost cried out in my in-laws’ village.” Then I thought, “Has my child already been born?” Because I wasn’t really sure; I thought I might only have been sick. That’s why I hadn’t told anyone when I left the village.

After she was born, I sat there; I didn’t know what to do. I had no sense. She lay there, moving her arms about, trying to suck on her fingers. She started to cry. I just sat there, looking at her. I thought, “Is this my child? Who gave birth to this child?” Then I thought, “A big thing like that? How could it possibly have come out from my genitals?” I sat there and looked at her, looked and looked and looked.

The cold started to grab me. I covered her with my duiker skin that had been covering my stomach and pulled the larger kaross over myself. Soon, the afterbirth came down and I buried it. I started to shiver. I just sat there, trembling with the cold. I still hadn't tied the umbilical cord. I looked at her and thought, "She's no longer crying. I'll leave her here and go to the village to bring back some coals for a fire."

I left her, covered with leather skins. (What did I know about how to do things?) I took a small skin covering, tied it around my stomach, and went back to the village. While I was on the way, she started to cry, then she stopped. I was rushing and was out of breath. Wasn't my genital area hurting? I told myself to run, but my judgment was gone; my senses had left me.

My heart was pounding and throbbing when I arrived. I sat down by the fire outside my hut to rest and to warm myself. Tashay woke up. He saw me with my little stomach, and he saw the blood on my legs. He asked how I was. I told him everything was all right. He asked, "Where is that which I thought I heard crying?" I told him the baby was lying covered where I had given birth. He asked if it was a boy. I said she was a girl. He said, "Oh! Does a little girl like you give birth to a baby all alone? There wasn't even another woman to help!"

He called to his grandmother, still asleep, and yelled, "What happened to you that you, a woman, stayed here while a little girl went out by herself to give birth? What if the childbirth had killed her? Would you have just left her there for her mother to help, her mother who isn't even here? You don't know that the pain of childbirth is fire and that a child's birth is like an anger so great that it sometimes kills? Yet, you didn't help! She's just a little girl. She could have been so afraid that the childbirth might have killed her or the child. You, an adult, what were you asking of her?"

Just then, the baby started to cry. I was afraid that maybe a jackal had come and hurt her. I grabbed some burning wood and ran back to her. I made a fire and sat. Tashay continued to yell, "Find her. Go over there and cut the baby's umbilical cord. What happened to you that you let my wife give birth by herself?"

His grandmother got up and followed Tashay to where I was sitting with the baby. She arrived and called out softly to me, "My daughter-in-law . . . my daughter-in-law . . ." She talked to the infant and greeted her with lovely names. She cut her umbilical cord, picked her

up, and carried her as we all walked back to the village. Then they laid me down inside the hut.

The next day, my husband went gathering and came back with sha roots and mongongo nuts, which he cracked for me to eat. But my insides were still sore and I was in pain. He went out again and killed a springhare. When he came back, he cooked it and I drank the gravy. That was supposed to help the milk come into my breasts, but my milk didn't come down.

We lived in the bush and there was no one else to help feed her. She just lay there and didn't eat for three nights. Then milk started to fill one breast, and the same night the other one filled. I spilled out the colostrum, the bad thing, and when my chest filled with good milk, she nursed and nursed and nursed. When she was full, she went to sleep.



This story was told to me in the !Kung language by Nisa, an African woman of about fifty years of age, living in a remote corner of Botswana, on the northern fringe of the Kalahari desert. It was March 1971, the last month of my twenty-month field stay among the !Kung San, a people who had recently started to leave their traditional means of subsistence—gathering and hunting. But Nisa, her family, and the people she knew had spent most of their lives as their ancestors had before them—gathering wild plant foods and hunting wild animals in their semi-arid savannah environment.¹

Gathering and hunting as a way of life has now almost disappeared, but it was the way people lived for nearly 90 percent of the estimated one hundred thousand years of human existence. Adding to this the evolutionary history of our prehuman ancestors would give a period of nearly three million years and a figure closer to 99 percent. Thus this form of human society has been a much more universal human experience than agriculture, which has been practiced for only about ten thousand years, or industrial manufacture, which has existed for only about two hundred years. The uniqueness of the human species was patterned—and the human personality was formed—in a gathering and hunting setting.

This should in no way suggest that the !Kung San or other contem-

porary gatherer-hunters are less modern as human beings than anyone else. People everywhere are, in a biological sense, fundamentally similar, and have been so for tens of thousands of years. Gatherer-hunters today exhibit the same range of emotional and intellectual potential as can be found in other human societies. What they represent is a way of life that succeeded; in terms of duration, at least, it is the most successful adaptation people have yet made to their environment.

Nisa is a member of one of the last remaining traditional gatherer-hunter societies, a group calling themselves the Zhun/twasi, “the real people,” who currently live in isolated areas of Botswana, Angola, and Namibia. Referred to in the past as the Sonquas and in Botswana as the Basarwa, they are also known as the !Kung Bushmen, the !Kung San, or simply the !Kung. They are short—averaging about five feet in height—lean, muscular, and, for Africa, light-skinned. They have high cheekbones and rather Oriental-looking eyes. Along with their pastoral neighbors, the Khoi-Khoi, they are distinguished in these and other physical details from the Black African peoples immediately surrounding them, and are considered by population biologists to be part of a separate racial group called Khoisan. (It is from this term that the words currently used to refer to them are derived: “Khoi” for Hottentots; “San” for Bushmen. The terms “Hottentot” and “Bushmen,” used for more than three hundred years, although more familiar, are also more derogatory.)

In 1963, Irven DeVore and Richard Lee, anthropologists from Harvard University, first made contact with Nisa’s people, a traditional group of !Kung San in the Dobe area of northwestern Botswana.² They had in mind a long-term research expedition in which scientists representing a wide range of disciplines would carry out specialized studies of !Kung life. A composite picture would result, including information on health and nutrition, demography, archaeology, infant growth and development, childrearing practices, population genetics, the ritual healing ceremonies, folklore, and women’s life cycles. In 1969, six years after the project began and very close to its end, my husband and I joined it and went to live and work with the !Kung.

Some of the findings from this expedition were available to me before I left for Africa. I welcomed the perspective they gave me on the !Kung and their way of life. But when I asked questions about what they were like as people and how they felt about their lives, I received answers so varied that they seemed to reflect as much the personalities

of the individual anthropologists as anything they had learned about the !Kung. No matter whom I talked to or what I read, I did not come away with a sense that I knew the !Kung: How did they feel about themselves, their childhoods, their parents? Did spouses love one another; did they feel jealousy; did love survive marriage? What were their dreams like and what did they make of them? Were they afraid of growing old? Of death? Most of all, I was interested in !Kung women's lives. What was it like being a woman in a culture so outwardly different from my own? What were the universals, if any, and how much would I be able to identify with?

My initial field trip took place at a time when traditional values concerning marriage and sexuality were being questioned in my own culture. The Women's Movement had just begun to gain momentum, urging re-examination of the roles Western women had traditionally assumed. I hoped the field trip might help me to clarify some of the issues the Movement had raised. !Kung women might be able to offer some answers; after all, they provided most of their families' food, yet cared for their children and were lifelong wives as well. Furthermore, their culture, unlike ours, was not being continuously disrupted by social and political factions telling them first that women were one way, then another. Although the !Kung were experiencing cultural change, it was still quite recent and subtle and had thus far left their traditional value system mostly intact. A study revealing what !Kung women's lives were like today might reflect what their lives had been like for generations, possibly even for thousands of years.

Upon arriving in the field, I did everything I could to understand !Kung life: I learned the language, went on gathering expeditions, followed along on hunts, ate bush foods exclusively for days at a time, lived in grass huts in !Kung villages, and sat around their fires listening to discussions, arguments, and stories. I gained an invaluable perspective, participating and watching. I was struck by their broad, subtle knowledge of their environment, by their skill in deciphering animal and human tracks in the sand and in detecting, among mats of dry, tangled vines, the ones that signaled water-storing roots below the ground. I observed their sharing of vegetable foods, meat, and material goods so that no one had substantially more than anyone else. I saw how disputes were defused by discussions that went on for hours, long into the night, in which all points of view were expressed until a consensus was reached. I listened to hunters recount the events of successful hunts, to

musicians sing and play their own and other people's compositions, and to storytellers cause body-shaking laughter in their hearers. I noticed in each presentation a modesty akin almost to bashfulness, and I learned that it was considered bad manners to brag or to act in an arrogant way. I sat at their medicine ceremonies and saw the community bound together in a powerful, moving ritual.

I was thrilled to have seen this much in only a few months in the field. Still, I did not feel I knew, except in the most general terms, what these events really meant to the !Kung. I could see, for example, how much they relied on one another and how closely they usually sat together, but I did not understand how they felt about their relationships and their lives. I needed information that could not be observed; I needed the !Kung to start speaking for themselves.

Talking to people and asking questions that encouraged them to talk openly to me became the focus of my fieldwork. Because my own inclination was toward learning about women's lives and because I generally found it easier to talk with them than with men, my work centered almost exclusively on women. I presented myself to them pretty much as I saw myself at the time: a girl-woman, recently married, struggling with the issues of love, marriage, sexuality, work, and identity—basically, with what womanhood meant to me. I asked the !Kung women what being a woman meant to them and what events had been important in their lives.

One woman—Nisa—impressed me more than the others with her ability to describe her experiences. I was struck by her gifts as a storyteller; she chose her words carefully, infused her stories with drama, and covered a wide range of experience. My hundreds of interviews with the !Kung had shown me that much of human emotional life was universal. Nisa's narrative, despite its foreignness, brought that knowledge deeper.

Walking into a traditional !Kung village, a visitor would be struck by how fragile it seemed beneath the expanse of sky and how unobtrusively it stood amid the tall grass and sparse tree growth of the surrounding bush. Glancing at the six or seven small grass huts, the visitor might notice how low they were, how closely one was set beside another, and the more or less circular space they described. The center, where children often play, would be clear of grass and shrubs, making it easier to notice snakes or snake tracks.

A visitor who arrived in the middle of the cold season—June and July—and just at sunrise would see mounds of blankets and animal skins in front of the huts, covering people still asleep beside their fires. Those who had already awakened would be stoking the coals, rebuilding the fire, and warming themselves in the chilly morning air. The morning would start slowly for most of them, a luxury made possible by the cool of the winter season. A visitor on another morning, in the hot, dry months of October and November, would find people moving about, even at dawn, up early to do a few hours of gathering or hunting before the midday heat would force them to rest in the thickest shade.

The Dobe area, on the edge of the Kalahari desert, falls into an ecosystem classified as semi-arid. The land, covered with grass, thorn and scrub brush, and spindly trees, has a flat appearance that disguises a variety of low hills, dunes, flats, and river beds. The rivers are active only about twice a decade. The mean elevation is about 3,300 feet above sea level, and temperatures vary from below freezing in winter to above 100°F in summer. The wet season lasts four to six months; annual rainfall varies from five to forty inches. Then comes a brief autumn (April and May), followed by a three-to-four-month winter with about six weeks of freezing and near-freezing night-time temperatures. Spring begins late in August and turns quickly into a hot dry summer in which temperatures hovering above 110°F are not uncommon.

The area was long sheltered from more than intermittent settlement by outsiders, Europeans and Bantu-speakers alike, by its lack of dependable sources of water, by a vast waterless zone between it and the nearest large population center, and by the general harshness of its environment. This environment must have supported gathering and hunting, however; archaeological excavations demonstrate the continuous occupation of the Dobe area by gathering and hunting people for more than eleven thousand years.

The !Kung are masters of survival in this environment, capable of responding to its ever-changing and often extreme demands. Adaptability is the key to their success. People live in semi-permanent villages, or camps, numbering from about ten to thirty individuals. Personal property must be minimal (the total weight of an average person's belongings is less than twenty-five pounds), because everything has to be carried when the band moves. The technology involved in the manufacture of tools and implements is relatively simple, and each household provides them for itself.

Whatever possessions do exist are owned exclusively by individuals, who are free to dispose of them as they wish. Most items are eventually given away and become part of a network of goods that are frequently exchanged. All !Kung participate in this reciprocal giving of gifts, but each person gives to and receives from only a few partners. Gift-giving is a fairly formal affair, and people remember clearly who gave what to whom and when. These exchange relationships, which may last a lifetime and may even be passed on to one's children, help to even out wealth differentials. An approximation of equality is thus achieved, aided by the daily sharing of food and meat. Generosity also ensures the reciprocal help of others in times of sickness or need.

Both family and village life take place out of doors. Huts are too small to contain much more human activity than sleeping. They are set only a few feet apart. A fire burns outside each doorway, in front of the hut, and the area around it is the effective living space for the hut's occupants—the nuclear family—and their visitors. All doors face inward toward a large communal space. The intensity of social life that this fosters seems deliberate, as space is abundant and privacy could easily be arranged. Except for an occasional tryst in the bush, however, privacy is not something most !Kung deem very important. Companionship is cherished and sought at most times.

Residence in a camp is fluid and subject to frequent change, from day to day and from month to month. At its center, however, each camp has a stable core of closely related older people who have proved successful in living and working together. This core may spend years, perhaps the majority of their adult lives, with one another. They share food and material goods, and they travel together while foraging over an area they have access to by tradition. Spacious, yet essentially circumscribed, this region of approximately 250 square miles is generally acknowledged as being “owned” by some male or female descendant of the people who have lived longest in an area, although this association rarely goes back much further than a few generations. Access to land is collective and nonexclusive and, like so much else in !Kung life, flexible: most people live as visitors or residents in a number of different areas during their lives, and establishing short-term residence at one water hole does not jeopardize one's claim to residence at another. Visitors—perhaps from an area with a temporary food shortage—are expected to ask permission of the “owners” before making use of an area's water, game, and