

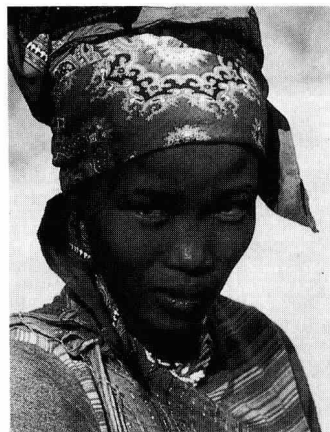
Marjorie Shostak

RETURN TO NISA

Author of the
acclaimed *Nisa:
The Life and
Words of a
!Kung Woman*



Return to Nisa



Marjorie Shostak



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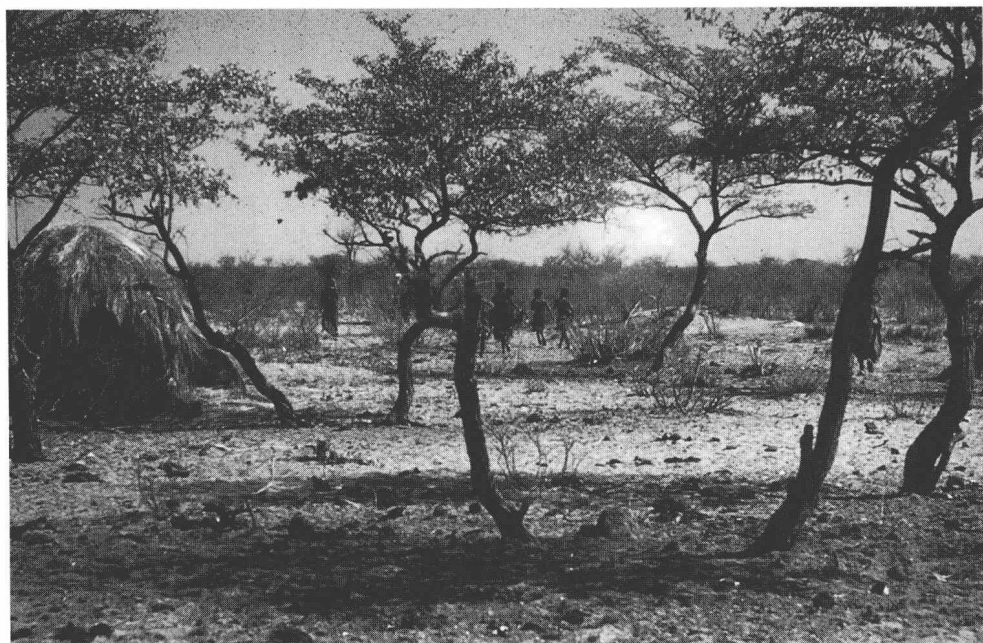
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Africa!





Towering beside them, I sit awkwardly in the circle of small-boned !Kung San women, shifting often, my body unused to the cross-legged position. The quarter moon drops toward the horizon, and the stars brighten as it descends. The sounds of a healing dance flood the air. Complex clapped rhythms drive the women's songs, fragments of undulating and overlapping melodies. Each woman tilts her head toward her shoulder, trapping sound near her ear, the better to hear her part. The women's knees and legs, loosely describing a circle, fall carelessly against one another—an intertwining of bodies and song.

In the center of the circle, a fire flares as it is stoked and whipped by human breath, soon to ebb again into glowing coals. Beyond the circle, men and boys-almost-men, their taut upper bodies hardly visible in the darkness, pound the cool sand with bare feet, blending new rhythms into the song. So forcefully do they dance that a deep circle forms in the sand beneath them, enclosing us, separating us from the profane, protecting us from the unknown.

Beyond, in the dark, the spirits of the ancestors are said to sit, drawn to the event to watch, possibly to stir mischief. A trancer screams at the spirits, warning them not to cause trouble, not to inflict harm. He weaves among the seated women, laying on hands to heal those who are sick and to ward off illness from others. Hands reach out to steady his trembling legs and body, to protect his feet from the burning coals as he nears the fire.

My own hands tire of clapping and drop to my lap, easing the tension bound up in following along. The melodies of !Kung traditional songs swirl around me, familiar and soothing. My attention moves off, beyond the healing dance, beyond the village with its small groups of traditional grass huts and more contemporary mud ones, beyond the half-dozen villages that use the same local well, to the vast Kalahari landscape, immensely quiet and immensely broad. The intense human

drama enacted on the sand would go unnoticed from a plane flying above the dark, mysterious land.

A lull in the singing brings me back, to the sounds of small talk and the distant ringing of donkey bells carried on the wind. The healing dance slowly builds again, layers of song and movement both strange and familiar to me. I savor a strong feeling of well-being and peace, a sense of rest in the midst of a long and difficult journey.

██████████ In June 1989, I left my home in Atlanta to spend a month in a remote area in northwestern Botswana, on the northern edge of the Kalahari desert. I had lived and worked in the area twice before, but had not been back in fourteen years.

My first sojourn with the !Kung San, or Bushmen,* began in 1969. Then the people were still part-time hunters and gatherers, although their traditional ways had begun to change. They were trying to emulate the herding and agricultural ways of life of their Bantu-speaking neighbors, the Herero and Tswana.

During that first stay of nearly two years, I learned to speak the !Kung language—replete with clicks, glottal flaps, glottal stops, pressed vowels, and tones—well enough to pursue my research on the personal lives of !Kung women. Using the format of the life history narrative, I asked women about their childhoods, marriages, sexuality, friendships, and dreams, delving into their experiences and feelings as only an outsider might do.

Of eight women I interviewed, one stood out. More open than the others and more willing to articulate the intimacies of her life, she had a striking gift for verbal expression. She was about fifty years old at the time. We completed fifteen interviews during my first field trip and another six when I returned in 1975: about twenty-five hours of tape-recorded talk. She knew I hoped to write about her, and together we chose a pseudonym to protect her privacy. The name we selected was Nisa. I translated and edited the interviews, and in 1981 Harvard University Press published my chronological rendering of her story, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*.

Now, fourteen years after my last trip, I was on my way back, in-

* They call themselves the *Zhun/twasi*, “the real people.” 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.

fused with a particular sense of urgency. Nisa was now about sixty-eight years old, far beyond the usual !Kung life expectancy of fifty-five. And my own life had taken a distressing turn toward early mortality. A year earlier I had learned I had breast cancer. Although my odds were favorable and a majority of women with my prognosis survived, I was terrifyingly aware that many women lost their lives to the disease. My future had been cast into deep, threatening shadow; the present turned in on itself as my daily experience acquired a brutal, slashing edge.

██████████ A week after my mastectomy I had a visitor: an unnervingly cheerful, I've-been-there-myself woman a bit younger than my forty-two years. Having experienced no recurrence of breast cancer for five years, she had entered the fortunate statistical category of cancer survivor. She bubbled as she told me of the changes she had made in her life. She had always wanted to go to nursing school, she said, but had never followed through. Once diagnosed with cancer, however, she had no longer felt she could keep putting off her dream. She had successfully balanced the demands of school with raising two small sons, and proudly announced her impending graduation.

I was usually wary of people who addressed somber subjects with unrelenting cheer, and this woman proved the rule. She spoke of her experience with cancer with only the barest hint of emotional pain—or, to put it more generously, perhaps she spoke from the other side of the pain. In my thoughts I dubbed her “Miss Chirpy.” And yet, in the end, her visit served me very well. At some point during the following year, a year of endless doctor’s appointments, blood tests, chemotherapy, chest X-rays, bone scans, fear, and paralyzing depression, I asked myself the same question she had asked herself: “What can I no longer afford to put off?” And a voice in my brain shouted: “Africa!”

██████████ Thursday evening, June 22, 1989: Almost time to board a flight from Atlanta to London, en route to Botswana. The scope of my gesture felt overwhelming. I, “Mommy” to three small children, wife to a concerned husband, was about to leave, to be gone a month, after having been distracted for weeks.

The exchanges in the airport bristled with an air of unreality: words spoken of departure and separation, of coping and managing, for the family and for myself. Each of my actions was a step toward removing

me from the children who had sprung from my body, who were part of my soul, whose presence bolstered my flagging spirits. And from my husband, my companion and friend.

The children were on edge, wary of the impending change, unsure of how to say goodbye. With the last travel details completed, we had half an hour: to talk, to connect, and then to let go. I had tried to prepare my youngest child, Sarah, for my leaving, but at age two and a half, what did she understand of “Africa” or of a month without her mother? We ate sweets, took pictures in a concession booth, and read goodbye cards.

Finally it was time. Holding Sarah on my hip, I hugged my eldest daughter, Susanna, my son, Adam, and then my husband, Mel. Slowly, reluctantly, I transferred Sarah from my hip to Mel’s. They waved as I turned and walked through the “international passengers only” security checkpoint. A few steps later I looked back at the tightly knit group receding down the terminal, already working out their new alliances, discussing dinner and treats, reassurances of continuity in the face of disorienting change. When they were no longer in view, I passed through to the gate. I was alone. I was on my way.

██████████ The decision to go had preceded the practical, starting with a need, the need to return: to see, to taste, to smell, to experience again, perhaps even to heal. I yearned to be surrounded by the landscape that had etched itself upon my young, impressionable soul twenty years before, that had initiated me into the beauty of its sparse, wild, and independent rhythms. And I wanted to see Nisa again, the woman whose views about life had infused my own during my years of writing and thinking about her. I had heard periodically that she was alive, the latest report received only months before. I wanted to connect with her again before her life ended, and, for reasons that were not entirely clear to me, I wanted her to know that my life was threatened.

Thinking of returning to that stark world filled me with longing. For years, bearing and raising children, teaching at a university, doing research, and writing a second book had edged out most serious thoughts of a return. Then, without warning, my life had changed, and my priorities had as well.

The voice calling me back to Africa, which had been lost in the clutter of those other concerns, became audible, then compelling. As it gained strength, to my grateful surprise, it displaced my despair. Grad-

ually it garnered a powerful alliance of internal forces that enabled me to leave my family—my support and my charge—to travel around the globe on this personal quest. If my life did end prematurely, at least I would have confronted again one of its most intense and mysterious chapters.

Determined to make the trip no matter the financial and emotional cost, I was delighted to learn that two other anthropologists, Dick Katz and his wife, Verna St. Denis, would be in the area. Dick, knowing of my illness and sympathetic to my desire to return, offered help: I could live at the camp where he and Verna were working. They would drive me to Dobe, Nisa's village, and we could take her back to their camp—or I could stay in Dobe, and they would pick me up at the end of my visit. Neither option was ideal. I wanted to see Nisa in her own world, but to be without a truck of my own—for transport and for emergencies—would be foolhardy.

Then I was awarded grants that would cover most of my expenses. In exchange for my collecting, drying, and documenting plants the !Kung used as food, a pharmaceutical company interested in the level of vitamin E in the “natural human diet” paid my airfare. And the dean of Emory University—with which I was affiliated—provided funds for most of my other expenses, affirming the work I had done and might yet do. At last I was able to see my way clear: I would rent a truck, hire a driver, outfit myself, and live at Dobe.

~~~~~ As the plane sat on the runway, the drone of its engines enveloped me and fears suppressed for days clamored to the surface. Going alone to the wilds of Africa—was it a mistake? Would I face death in that remote land? Would something happen to me so that I would never see my family again? Would something happen to them that would alter our lives forever? If something went seriously wrong, could I live with the responsibility?

My anxiety staked in deeper. Would I see Nisa? Might not administrative red tape, tribal warfare, mechanical problems, or some simple practical limitation undermine my journey? Would I be safe? A strange thought, because in the past year “safe” had changed its meaning: nothing had protected my body from invasion, and nowhere did I feel safe.

My fingers moved to a sore spot on my elbow, probing at an unexplained pain, one similar to others I had watched and worried over un-

til they, fortunately, had disappeared. Would this one be different? Was my body harboring a second, lethal round of dread disease? Was this departure from my family a dress rehearsal for my more dramatic, final leave-taking?

Breaking into my reverie came the sudden firing of engines as the plane took off. Rain beat against the windows. Now I truly was on my way. What would I be staying for, after all: for more fear, more depression, more despondency? Whatever lay ahead, it would be hard to rival the pain of that previous year. I looked around the cabin, at other faces caught in reverie, and as the plane lifted from the earth, excitement rose within me. Ahead was adventure.

//// In London, with almost a full day's layover, I groggily headed toward a hotel to sleep before the next twelve-hour flight. I woke with the alarm for a phone call home, prearranged to reach the children before the older ones left for day camp. Ready to be touched and filled with yearning, I was surprised by my impatience and by how little I had to give. I conversed with all three, yet was eager to go back to sleep so as to wake in time for a few hours of exploring London before my evening flight. As we spoke, my son spilled hot coffee on himself, hurting his arm. I said the right words, yet, knowing that his father was there, I was only marginally engaged.

That evening, at the British Airlines check-in counter, excitement surged again as I spoke the words "Gaborone, Botswana" to the clerk. I peered at others waiting in line—blacks and whites on their way to Africa—searching for something of my past, straining to identify an accent or the look of a face. My eyes moved among the dark-skinned men in business suits and women in multicolored dresses, then rested on a woman with closely cropped hair and high cheekbones, her face so reminiscent of !Kung San physiognomy that I was tempted to greet her in the !Kung language. With three days' travel ahead before I would reach their world, I nevertheless felt kinship with those who made Africa their home. I wanted to embrace them, to tell them of my love for their land, to share my longing after fourteen years of separation.

//// Around me, passengers slept restlessly as the DC10 moved south over the vast African continent. It would take twelve hours to reach Lusaka, Zambia, our first stop. A woman across the aisle nursed

her four-week-old infant; sounds of satisfaction, too soft to be heard over the hum of the engine, reverberated in my thoughts. My chest ached as I recalled the tenderness and sensuality of nursing and the anguish of weaning fifteen-month-old Sarah in one day, a wrenching deprivation necessitated by the diagnosis of cancer.

That Monday morning a little over a year before, I had been concerned but not terrified: a small hardness in my breast would surely be diagnosed as a clogged milk duct. I had refused my husband's offer to cancel his classes to go with me to the doctor but had asked my parents, who were passing through town, to bring my daughter along: she would drain my breast of milk before the examination. My concern intensified, however, when the doctor proposed a needle biopsy: with local anesthesia, he withdrew cells from the breast and sent them to a lab. As I dressed, his voice rang out from the phone in his office, speaking to a radiologist who was my friend, medical advisor, and colleague. "Boyd," he said, "I'm sending Marjorie over to you for a mammogram. No, I don't think it's cancer."

The needle biopsy came back positive, and the mammogram showed a sizable tumor with spread into the milk ducts. Boyd broke the news to me in the mammography room where I had been waiting. Not only was it cancer, but because it had spread beyond the initial mass, he couldn't tell how pervasive it was. The next day, Tuesday, a radioactive bone scan and a tomogram—a sci-fi-vintage robot whirling above me taking multiple-exposure chest X-rays—gave me my first good news: no detection of cancer in my bones or chest. On Wednesday, I had a mastectomy.

My daughter slept with a close family friend the night she was weaned, the night before the operation, when my body still retained radioactivity from the day's procedure. I didn't see her again for four days, until I returned from the hospital. It was the first time we had been apart for more than a few hours.

When I got home from the hospital, it seemed as if years had passed. Wary of a mother who had disappeared so suddenly, Sarah remained aloof, although interested. She stayed beside her father, her support. Only much later did she nestle in my arms again, a healing for both of us. Drinking from a bottle, she searched for the skin of my neck with her hand, stroking it gently, a reminder of the tender warmth of our former bond.

“I guess I need this time away,” I wrote while on the plane. “Time not to be available to others, not to answer to anyone but myself. The intensity is powerful, at times overwhelming. It’s beyond anything I remember feeling before. Sheer pleasure, to be so self-involved, so self-contained.”

Restless and uncomfortable, I eventually slipped into sleep. I woke as we descended below the clouds in Zambia, with its brown fields and scattered leafless trees. My heart pounded as we touched down on that winter landscape, dispelling the daze of forty-three hours of travel. Then my senses dulled again; I was grateful not to have to disembark.

The DC10 took two hours to reach Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, where I went through customs and immigration. Then I boarded a flight on Botswana Airlines that would take me to Maun, a dusty town with the feel of the American Wild West, on the banks of a marshy, crocodile-infested river.

Sadness and pride mingled with anticipation as I traveled farther and farther from family, friends, all that was easily familiar. The plane’s shadow traversed the barren land below. Like relics of an ancient millennium, flat salt pans stretched endlessly beneath us, only the faintest of trails suggesting human or animal passage.

As we approached Maun, the land sported settlements, isolated at the farthest fringes, with cattle fences mere pencil lines across the vast undifferentiated canvas of sand. Rising from the flat land, round thatched homes clustered together as if on a game board: a simple tilt of the land seemed enough to rid the baked earth of this human presence. Yet the compounds survived, a testimony to human ingenuity and stamina. Nearer to the town, green vegetation followed the river’s course, and the land was thick with human settlement. Rondavels and thatched huts, earthen in color, spoke distinctly of Africa.

In Maun, the town that had served as my reentry into “civilization” years before, I headed for the hotel, still called Riley’s but recently remodeled. I tipped the porters, bought a four-ounce can of soda water, and went to my room: a broad bed with starched sheets, thatch and wood beams rising high on the lofted ceiling. Jet-lagged and exhausted, I craved sleep, but first placed a call to my family and then took a shower, one of a precious few I would have in the coming month.

The phone rang: my call to the United States had gone through. This

time it was different. The two older children, excited that I was in Africa, insisted I call again as soon as I knew the color of my truck. The youngest had cried for me that morning, I was told, but had accepted her father's comfort. Keeping me somewhat distant, she asked me to send kisses to and talk to her doll, and I did, speaking words of endearment meant for them all. I hung up, happy and suddenly energetic—not sad or even guilty. Having both the connection and the independence was exhilarating.

Wanting to eat before I slept, I headed to the newly refurbished dining room, complete with imitation-lace vinyl table coverings and bouquets of plastic pink and blue roses. At the table I reviewed a message I had received at the airport: Dick and Verna planned to arrive in town that day or the next. That was good news! I had worried about traveling—ten or more hours into the wilderness—with a driver I knew nothing about. But with Dick and Verna in town, we could drive to their camp in convoy, and then my driver and I could take off together for Dobe; by that time I would know whether I felt comfortable with him.

As I picked through the thin bones of the local bream fish that was my dinner, Dick and Verna arrived and joined me. They told of their experiences in the bush, and I shared some of the pain that had led to my sitting alone at a table in Riley's. We discussed the best ways to outfit my trip, and they generously offered to help. The next morning we would begin by renting my truck.

After a fretful sleep, I woke, keenly alert to my new surroundings. Outside was bright sunlight, a gentle breeze. Shifting shadows played along a path luxuriant with tropical plants. A man with a thick broom was clearing away debris from the previous night's drinking and socializing. The patio and walkway beside the office and bar were being waxed with a thick red paste, its color and odor familiar even after fourteen years.

Leaving the shelter of the tall trees near the parking lot, Dick, Verna, and I drove out into the bright world and onto the only paved road in town. As we headed away from the center, sand colors and shades of brown were everywhere: little vegetation grew in the compounds of mud huts and thatched roofs, where children played and their elders sat and talked. Trucks passing on the right side of the road threw dust onto our window as we drove to the edge of town, where a truck was reserved for me through Avis.

Helena, an articulate Tswana woman who had spent some time in the United States, was the manager of the Avis office. She greeted me with a friendly smile. After the papers were signed she gestured toward a truck resting in the shade of an open-sided hangar: a blue Toyota Land Cruiser. It had a closed cab in front and an open back with two high safari-style viewing seats crossing from one side to the other.

I opened the right (driver's-side) door, got behind the wheel, and carefully reviewed the shifting pattern. My left hand moved to a knob on the floor that controlled high and low four-wheel drive, setting off memories from years before: harrowing driving experiences through mud and sand. I started the engine and inched out slowly from under the hangar, keeping an eye on a parked truck to my left and on the rear and side mirrors. Then I started to turn. My confidence surged as the heavy engine followed my command.

Then *scrunch!*—the sound of metal grinding against metal filled my ears. Unbelieving, I got out of the cab. The massive front right bumper was hooked tightly around one of the poles supporting the hangar. Shame displaced my elation as Dick, Verna, and Helena looked on sympathetically.

Our repeated attempts to dislodge the bumper inflicted even more damage. Finally, by roping Dick's truck to mine and pulling sideways, we freed the reluctant metal. Helena assured me that the damage was essentially cosmetic and could be repaired after I returned the truck. The deductible, however, was so high that my insurance wouldn't pay for the repairs. I asked Dick to drive back to the hotel; I wasn't ready to tackle driving on the left side of the road just then.

██████████ Dick and Verna told disquieting stories of life in the !Kung villages where they worked. Drinking was widespread, as was accompanying violence, and people were depending more and more on government handouts for food rather than procuring it for themselves. Dick and Verna also gave me the troubling news that the army, the Botswana Defense Force, had an outpost near Dobe.

Concerned about the military presence, I arranged to meet with an army colonel before I left Maun. With only a tourist visa in hand, I told him I had taken a leave of absence from my university to visit people in Dobe whom I hadn't seen in fourteen years, including a woman about whom I had written a book. This was not considered actual research—which would have required administrative approval with advance no-



tice of at least six months, approval that I might or might not have received—but was more like a working holiday. I said I was worried about being a single woman in the bush and asked if I could count on the army if I needed help. The colonel assured me that I could. He gave me the names of three officers who were stationed in the Dobe area, and promised to send a communiqué to let them know I was coming.

“!Kung San Works,” read the fading sign outside the low whitewashed building. After hours of shopping for staples to take to the field, I stepped through the portal of the shop, going back in time. Piled on the desk, hanging from the walls, overflowing from boxes were San bows and arrows, beadwork, decorated skins and bags, mortars and pestles. The familiar aroma of San perfume—pressed from the branches of the *sa* plant—surrounded me.

Dick and Verna introduced me to Kxau, an office worker also known as Royal—one of a handful of San who had gone through primary school and who spoke English. Words pouring from my mouth in uncontrolled enthusiasm, I attempted to resurrect a language I hadn’t spoken in fourteen years. My tongue moved heavily among the clicks used in words of greeting; the sounds stuck to the roof of my mouth. Crimson-faced, I labored on, unwilling to resort to English.

I managed—perhaps because Royal was being polite and tolerant of my awkward phrasing—to convey greetings from Richard Lee, another anthropologist Royal had worked with. I learned that Hwantla, the woman who had given me my !Kung name, had been seriously ill but was getting better. I even teased Royal about his having children by two different women—a !Kung San woman and a Herero woman, neither formally married to him—and asked why the Herero hadn’t killed him. (At least, that’s what I thought I said.)

What a thrill to speak again a language whose sounds and thought patterns I had learned to love, a language that had been difficult to master, that I had used as a reference in my daily life long after I left Africa, that had remained dormant in me for years. And to speak it with someone with whom I could stop in mid-sentence, ask what a word meant, and have it translated on the spot into English! I begged Royal to take time off from his job at the tourist shop to work with me at Dobe. He could help me learn and relearn subtleties of the language after years of disuse.

He couldn’t tell me for sure, Royal said, because he had agreed to