

Another Look at the !Kung

A Life History Approach

In 1967 I was privileged to go to southern Africa to live with the !Kung Bushmen in the Kalahari desert. I was in the final stages of my Ph.D. in sociology at Harvard, and recently married to Richard Lee, who had already spent a year and a half living with the !Kung San people and learning their language. Richard was a lecturer at Harvard at that time, and he applied to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health with his longtime collaborator Irven DeVore (a new professor at Harvard then) for funding to support a substantial study of the !Kung, involving fourteen scholars, including me. When they were awarded the grant in 1966, I hurried to finish my dissertation before the !Kung project started.

RESEARCH WITH THE DOBE !KUNG

Richard and I flew to Johannesburg, consulted with colleagues, bought a truck, and loaded it up, adding supplies at each stage of the journey. We drove first to Gaborone, the new capital of Botswana, to get final research permissions; then to Francistown, where we left the paved road parallel to the only railroad line in the country to drive west and north to Maun, on the Okavango delta. We rented a mailbox at the post office in Maun, and bought our last-minute supplies from their few general stores and a garage, and finally drove in our new truck to Nokaneng, a small town on the edge of the Kalahari. There we offloaded all but one of the drums of petrol we had brought from Maun,

to create a storage system that would allow us to move safely between Maun and the isolated Dobe area on the Namibian border, where we were headed. From Nokaneng, in July 1967, we drove the last eight-hour stretch across the waterless 100 km or so that we called “the Middle Passage,” to the string of ten waterholes on the Botswana-Namibia border that maps call the Xangwa (or Gwanwa) area, but which we always called the Dobe area. The name Dobe, easy to spell and pronounce (doe-bee), refers to one of the smallest waterholes there, where Richard had been welcomed into the !Kung kinship system in 1964 during his earlier visit.

That was a long time ago. The results of the research we did over the next two years have been described in detail in a book of preliminary research reports (Lee and DeVore, 1976) and in research monographs (Howell, 1979; see also Lee 1979) and the dozens of articles and books cited there and published since that time. The research that the fourteen of us as a research group carried out from 1967 to 1969 included studies of the biology, culture, social structure, economics, and psychology of the !Kung (or the *ju l'hoansi*, as they call themselves and are increasingly often called by scholars).¹

My own research focused on the demography. After learning the language well enough to make my questions understood, and after pre-testing the format with Richard Lee's help, I started a data collection of reproductive histories of the 165 ever-married women in the Dobe area alive in 1967 to 1969. Eventually I got them all, plus another twenty-five reproductive histories from adult women who visited the Dobe area but who did not usually live there, which I ended up not using. This data collection included all of the marriages and marriage terminations, pregnancies and pregnancy terminations, and a history of survival of each of the husbands and children mentioned by the 165 adult women.

This work was interspersed with occasional “campaigns” of data collection with Richard Lee. We took the truck to each of the ten waterholes in turn to visit each of the thirty-five or so villages, usually staying at each waterhole for a few days to make sure we had covered all the residents there. Richard and I conducted censuses in October 1967, November 1968, and April 1969, and in addition we collected measures of height, weight, and skin-fold thickness in August 1968, October 1968, January 1969, and April 1969. We measured weights, especially

1. I continue to refer to the !Kung to avoid confusion between my earlier work and this book. They are the same people as the *ju l'hoansi* and they never called themselves the !Kung.

of children, continuously, wherever we had people and the scale in the same place, but the “campaigns” were especially organized to include all of the members of the population, to look for seasonal changes in weight and height. These sweeps through the population also provided occasions for successive stages of my estimations of the ages of individuals, which consisted of rank ordering the people in local areas by age, and then merging those local age-ranks into a single rank order, later fitting a curve from stable-population theory to the rank order to estimate individual ages, and then checking the plausibility of the resulting estimates.²

These data collections were designed to be holistic inventories of the contemporary Dobe !Kung people, including everything that was possible to observe about an ongoing population of people that would allow us to describe in detail how their society operated. Howell (2000) details the data collection and analysis of the fieldwork from 1967 to 1969.

RESEARCH RESULTS: *DEMOGRAPHY OF THE DOBE !KUNG*

Briefly, the book *Demography of the Dobe !Kung* shows one way to construct a demographic description of a small population in which there are no historical records and people don't know their own ages. After sorting out the interrelated issues of the age estimates and the population age structure, I presented a chapter on causes of death during recent decades, and then the life tables, for the two sexes, and for different periods of time. The study revealed that mortality was high overall (an approximate Expectation of Life at Birth of thirty years and an Infant Mortality Rate of 200 deaths in the first year per 1,000 births) but that most !Kung appeared to be remarkably healthy (strong, energetic, cheerful) most of the time. Next, in that book, the fertility history of the women was laid out, first for the older post-reproductive women; and then for the younger women who were still building their families, showing that the fertility is remarkably low for a population that marries young and doesn't use any methods of contraception. The !Kung were found to have a Total Fertility Rate of about 4.6 children born to women who survive to the end of the childbearing period, which is a remarkably low level of natural fertility.

2. Howell 1979 is the original *Demography of the Dobe !Kung* (Academic Press, New York), and Howell 2000 is a second edition of that book (Aldine de Gruyter, New York), with a new preface, a new final chapter, and an enriched bibliography. As only the 2000 version is in print at this time, I will cite it in this document, but readers who find only the 1979 version in their local library should know that pages 1–359 are identical. Methods of age estimation are described in detail in Chapter 2 of that book.

To examine the interactions of fertility and mortality, a computer micro-simulation program called AMBUSH was invented and used (Howell and Lehotay, 1978; Howell, 2000). The program is a stochastic model that shows what happens when you start with a population identical to the !Kung as we observed them in 1968 and simulate a future based on the observed probabilities of birth and death for varying periods of time in the future. The simulations can be thought of as an answer to the question: If there were a continent with 100 (or any number) of independent populations with the probabilities of survival and reproduction that the !Kung have, what range of variation would we expect to see in their functioning? The simulations are not entirely realistic (some of the complexities of life are not included in the models) but they are helpful for confirming the plausibility of the estimates of the real population and for stimulating thinking about the fluctuations that one would expect in such populations, without any complex causal processes. The simulations are best thought of as a variety of the null hypothesis, valuable in a world in which hunting and gathering societies are few and far between. Unfortunately, the AMBUSH program is no longer available for use as it was written in a machine language, IBM Assembler, which is no longer usable, but alternative simulation programs are readily available now.

The original work went on to look at detailed aspects of the population in some detail, to describe marriage, divorce, widowhood, and remarriage, and to explore the networks of kinship ties of consanguinity (birth) and affinity (marriage) generated by the demography. The analysis based on the women's fertility and mortality is repeated for the men, in condensed form. The population was found to be essentially stationary (not growing) as a result of the balance of their moderate fertility and mortality. The people are shown to be small in size, short and thin, and we considered the possible importance of thinness in keeping fertility low, as proposed by the Frisch hypothesis (Frisch, Revelle, et al., 1971). Computer simulations were used to spell out implications of the population parameters over long periods of time, specifically the degree of inequality in reproductive success to be expected in successive generations, and the numbers of living kin to be expected by people of varying ages and sex.

The first edition (Howell, 1979) ended with some predictions about the future to the year 2000; the second edition (Howell, 2000) evaluates those predictions (they were pretty accurate) and discusses the ways that population has changed from the late 1960s to the year 2000, and the

probable trends in future decades. *Demography of the Dobe !Kung* included pretty much everything I knew about the !Kung at that time and could infer from the models that I developed. When data archives became available at the University of Toronto Data Library in the 1990s, the raw data from these studies were entered to be made available to any interested researchers who cared to access it. My impression is that few researchers have used the raw data, but many researchers have used the published versions of detailed empirical descriptions of the !Kung (Howell, 2000) in their studies, for comparative or exemplary purposes. Later in this chapter, we will consider a new generation of data archives.

RECONSIDERING THE !KUNG

Why, then, one might ask, is there any need for another book on the same people, based on the same data? Some scholars have complained that the Dobe !Kung case has already been vastly overused in archaeological and ethnographic modeling: Isaac (1990) refers to a “Sanitation phenomenon” in understanding early human societies, and suggests that the field should give the !Kung a rest. There is no new data in this book (although some of the old data are described in more detail than has been done before). The !Kung way of life has changed so much since the 1960s that any new data collected now would be interesting but it would not illuminate the hunting and gathering way of life. In any case, I have not done any fieldwork since 1969, although I was pleased to have the chance to go back to Dobe with Pat Draper for a short visit in 1991–1992 (Howell, 2000). Others in the research group (Richard Lee, Patricia Draper, Henry Harpending, Megan Biesele, and Polly Wiessner) have continued to do fieldwork when they get the chance, but this book is not based on their new data.

What I have is the old data set, some new but mostly old ethnographic background to that data, and the conviction that there is still much to be learned from it. The niche for another book on the !Kung arises from new questions that have been raised, and new models that have been proposed, from the great advances made by the many multidisciplinary colleagues who have contributed to what Roth (2004) has called “anthropological demography” and “human behavioral ecology” or evolutionary biology since the original analysis was completed in 1978. In the course of using the old data to try to answer these new questions, I am trying to make the data more accessible to other scholars, in

the hope that it can be used by others to explore the current set of questions and perhaps also others that haven't been thought of yet.

My first book on the !Kung came out of the field of demography (the study of population), with some influence from social-cultural anthropology and sociology. Demography and anthropology seemed quite distant disciplines in those days, but since that time some demographers (Watkins, 1995) have enthusiastically embraced data collection methods and insights from anthropology into demography to enrich the sometimes thin descriptive understanding of populations that are studied by demographers from census and vital statistics registration records. Some circles in anthropology have welcomed the more rigorous models and more systematic data collection methods from demography into their field, in their publications, and in training offered to young anthropologists in graduate programs. By now (2010) most graduate programs in anthropology seem to have some expertise in demography, and some have a great deal.

Roth (2004) argued in a recent book that there are two distinct streams of interest in demographic studies in anthropology, "anthropological demography" consisting of social-cultural anthropologists (and some demographers) who are largely interested in understanding the contributions that demography can make to understanding social structure in the populations that anthropologists study. The other, "behavioral ecology," is primarily made up of biological or physical anthropologists looking for insight into human evolution. Both streams are interesting: it is odd that they tend to ignore each other. Perhaps this is because they draw upon different disciplines for their expertise, and there are only a few scholars like Roth who have mastered both streams of research and methods.

Theoretical and empirical studies of other hunting and gathering peoples (and some horticulturalists and pastoralists) since 1979 have also posed new questions and have suggested new techniques of analysis. There are now detailed accounts of the Ache of Paraguay (Hill and Hurtado, 1996), the Hadza of Tanzania (Woodburn, 1968; Dyson, 1977; Hawkes, O'Connell, et al., 1991; Blurton Jones, Smith, et al., 1992), the Agta of the Philippines (Early and Headland, 1998), the Ganj of New Guinea (Wood, 1980), the Aka (Hewlett, 1988), and Efe Pygmies (Bailey and Peacock, 1988) of West Africa, and the Yanamamo of the Amazon basin (Divale and Harris, 1976; Chagnon and Irons, 1979; Early and Peters, 1990; Early and Peters, 2000), and many more. When research methods and theoretical models that were developed in those studies are applied to the !Kung, as I do in the following pages,

I am impressed by how much we gain in explanatory power. But let me warn the reader that I do not attempt here to review these findings in any systematic way, or make systematic comparisons between these populations and the Dobe !Kung. That would be a good thing to do, but I am not the person to do it. My ambition is smaller: I use the stimulating work of colleagues on other small-scale populations to help me understand the only case study that I have any confidence that I can understand, that of the Dobe !Kung. My goal is to better understand the !Kung, and to leave it to others to generalize about hunters and gatherers or small-scale societies.

The Life History Model

Life history theory is another holistic attempt to integrate a wide range of observations of life in human societies (Alexander, 1987). To paraphrase Roth (2004), all life history theory rests on the principle of allocation, which states that energy used for one purpose cannot be used for another. Energy allocations between the essential life processes of (1) maintenance, (2) growth, and (3) reproduction are viewed as a series of trade-offs made over an individual's life course. Individuals are distinguished by stages of life that correspond to these energy allocations, and these stages are related to the age and sex categories that we have used before. We consider the ways that evolution has worked upon these life stages to produce the adaptations of the hunting-gathering way of life, both those features that are true of all hunter-gatherer groups and those that are peculiar to the !Kung. The task of the present work is to specify the questions that arise from life history theory, consider the ethnographic knowledge that may pertain to the answers to these questions, and then to operationalize the numerical data available to produce the best approximation of an empirical answer to the question posed that I can manage. Readers will note that I rarely present any statistical tests on the answers to the questions in the chapters that follow. And there are many more figures than tables that show the numerical data. I like to look at the patterns of data more than focus on the "bottom line." The process is more exploratory than confirmatory, more suggestive than definitive.

Incorporating the studies of mortality and fertility established in the earlier work, I focus in this study on the food calories that people produce and consume, and that they use to fuel the activities of their daily life that determine their life stages. Note that I account for the same

daily calories of the population in three ways: (1) how the calories are acquired from the environment, (2) how they are distributed and redistributed by individuals within the population, and (3) the amounts in which they are consumed by various individuals.

Production of calories was a major focus of others in the “Harvard Kalahari expedition” during the 1967–1969 studies, especially Lee (1979) but also Konner and Worthman (1980), Draper (1975), and Wilmsen (1982). The means of production consisted of hunting and gathering, but also lactation, and some wage work and agricultural work that is outside of the traditional way of life of the !Kung (which we acknowledge as a complication, although it isn’t our primary interest here).

Consumption of calories has not been so well studied directly for the !Kung: We have information on gains and losses in weight over time that reflects consumption, but we didn’t directly measure consumption of food. The utilization of calories includes growth, maintenance of body size and condition (basal metabolism), the physical activity of work and other activities, and reproduction. All of these together account for the calories required by the population.

Further, we will look at these flows of calories from the environment through the producers to the whole population in the social forms the people use to organize the production, consumption, and use of calories: Individuals differ, especially by their stage of life, in their ability to participate in these flows of calories, and individuals are gathered into households, the primary consumption unit; households are gathered into living groups (also called camps or villages), which are the primary production unit; and villages are spread through the environment to maximize access to natural resources, gathered around named water-holes. In this book, we will come to understand these social structural units as determinants of how food is produced, distributed, and used by individuals, and also as products of these processes, resulting from the interactions of individuals at different stages of the life history process to channel the flows of calories.

The redistribution of calories from producers to consumers is not an automatic process: The concept of “sharing” poses as many problems as it solves. But kinship is the primary form of social structure of the !Kung, the redistribution of the calorie resources is critical to the population, and after we look first at the residential units in which people live and share resources, we will turn our attention to the effects of consanguine and affinal kinship on energy allocation processes. We account for as much variance as we can by focusing on the units of residential and

kinship association, but it is clear that we can only account for a certain low proportion of the allocation process. The rest must be a product of variables not included in our kinship model, including sharing outside of kinship channels. The motives, methods, and means for that sharing will be discussed in the final chapter.

The model being constructed here is original in details but not in overall design. Richard Lee's classic study (1979) and an earlier paper (1969) weave together most of the same variables used here and come to similar conclusions: Mine is an independent approach that both builds on and confirms most aspects of Lee's analysis, and examines some questions that arise from it.

In summary, let us be clear about the goals of this book, particularly those it does not aspire to reach. First, it is not a systematic comparison of the !Kung to the very fine work that has been done in recent decades on comparable populations of hunters and gatherers, such as the Ache and the Hadza, and simple horticultural societies.

Second, this book is not a review of the very interesting literature that has developed on behavioral ecology over the past twenty-five years, and makes no claim to completeness of references to or discussion of this literature. I mention literature only where it is useful in pursuing the goals of this project, and I apologize in advance to authors of much very valuable literature for not mentioning their work, even if I found it extremely interesting.

Finally, it is not a test of any part of the theoretical framework of life history analysis that has been developed, but merely an empirical application of some concepts and some questions that arise from that theoretical body to a database that I created for other purposes.

Richerson and Boyd (2004) offer a thoughtful warning to people like me who want to focus entirely on a single data set:

A good set of data . . . is a beautiful thing to behold. Foolish, of course, is the empiricist who thinks that even the most beautiful set of data captures any complex phenomenon completely, especially one who thinks that the data from his own case applies without exception to a diverse system such as human culture. However, data are the ultimate arbiter. More than just testing hypotheses, data often start us thinking in the first place.

(Richerson and Boyd, 2004)

The data will be central to this book, with the hope that it starts us thinking about some additional aspects of the puzzles of the !Kung adaptation, and provides the ultimate arbitration between competing models.

It is amusing to note that Henry Harpending and Pat Draper, in their “comments” in the Current Anthropology debate on the “revisionist issue” (Harpending and Draper, 1990), said in passing “. . . Like the devil with a bible, anyone is free to take the data and generate whatever image is desired.”

Archiving and Replicating This Research

I use this body of !Kung data collected in 1967–1969 to address some questions in life history analysis in this book, but I disclaim any aspiration to have the last word on the subject of how life history theory applies to the !Kung. On the contrary, I invite the reader to join the process of applying these questions to the !Kung data, by downloading all or some of the data to the reader’s computer for manipulation. These data are now in the public arena, and no permissions are required to use them for any purpose. I think the downloading process and analysis will go easily once it is underway, but following along the process used in this work may make it easier for students and professionals alike to understand the data.

The methods of data collection used to create the database used here will not be explained in detail in this book, as the interested reader can go to the earlier work for a full account of the collection and analysis of the raw data (Lee and DeVore, 1976; Lee 1979; Howell, 2000) and can go to the t-space archives (<http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca>) for access to the many files that result from using the data in this work. A goal of this work is that it is laid out so that any motivated reader can replicate everything I have done here, and contrast the results I produce with any alternative formulations that the reader may think of. Variables can be added, subtracted, recoded, or redefined to apply to any of the theoretical questions defined below, and statistical techniques can be applied to take the analysis beyond the point where I leave it.

The t-space data archive contains the whole set of raw data, and the many subfiles that were created to analyze the variables considered in this book. Some of the subfiles are limited to certain age groups or genders; others concentrate on certain variables. Figures and tables in this book are labeled with the unique web address of the data file that produced it,³

3. There are many data files in the archive because it is most convenient to create a file containing only the variables to be immediately explored on the individuals who can contribute to that particular analysis. Readers can create their own specialized data files if they wish, building on the ones used here, which will be stored on their own computer until or unless they choose to archive them.

so that the reader can use either the SPSS data analysis package (available by license at most universities, and also for sale from the software company that created it) or MS Excel to re-create what I have done here, before modifying the analysis in any way that seems useful.⁴

The unit of analysis of most of this book is that of the individual !Kung person in the 1968 population. Individuals have identification numbers as well as names, date of birth, and other identifying characteristics.⁵ Most of the characteristics studied (the variables) are simple and straightforward observations of the individual at that time. It seems to me valuable to preserve the simplicity and comprehensibility of the original data collection to the greatest extent possible.⁶ Most of the data presentations in this book will be exploratory, as befits the small and unique population that is being described. Statistical analysis is kept to a minimum because it is implicitly based on the assumption that the data used are drawn as a random sample from a large universe, to which one wants to generalize. In this work, however, the Dobe !Kung cannot be said to represent a sample of all hunter-gatherer populations, all African hunters, or even all San people. My focus is relating the variables explored here—body size, food production and consumption, and sharing and redistribution—to all that we know about the population of the !Kung San of the Dobe area as we observed them in the 1967–1969 period. Statistical analysis is valuable to help recognize and test patterns in the raw data. But the raw data itself is even more valuable, and skipping over the raw data to go directly to statistical analysis of hypotheses generated seems a great waste and even disrespectful to the !Kung, who cooperated so willingly in the data collection. In this book we will stay close to the raw data, using descriptive techniques like scattergrams and cross-tabulations, moving the richness of direct observation of the !Kung only

4. To access the data, go to <http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca>, and click on “Communities and Collections,” and then on “Dobe !Kung.” Note that each file has an identifier or URI, the “handle” of the file. Most files come in two versions: the SPSS version (filename.sav) and an alternative MS Excel version (filename.csv). This research used the SPSS version, so generally the documentation is more complete in that format, and the tables and figures will look somewhat different if created in Excel.

5. Issues of the privacy rights of identifiable individuals are reduced by the forty-five years that have passed since these data were collected. Almost all of the individuals identifiable from the archived research results are now deceased, and privacy was not a concern of the !Kung in the 1960s. The value of the data would be greatly reduced if we removed identifying information, as the links between individuals known to exist at that time could not be maintained.

6. Only a few variables considered here (the Body Mass Index Differences of Chapter 3, and the Caloric Balance measure of Chapters 5–7) are complex, computed variables that are not immediately understandable.

a step of abstraction away from the reality of their lives. More complex statistical procedures, like multi-variate analysis, will only be used at a few points where it seemed important to check a hypothesis that is not obvious to the naked eye.

I like to think of the archived data as a way to preserve the concrete results of the hard work that I and the other anthropologists in residence at Dobe in 1967–69 carried out, for the benefit of students, teachers, and researchers who were not there at the time but who may be able to make continued good use of our efforts. The analysis in this book illustrates one way that the old data can be reorganized to address a new set of research questions. And of course the life history analysis considered here is not the only possible use for the old data set. Readers may consider what other models of small-scale societies may be illuminated by this data, and may return to this data set in future years or decades, when new models that have not been proposed yet make their appearance.

POVERTY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE DOBE AREA

Before we begin the reconsideration of the Dobe !Kung in the 1967–1969 period, there are two additional issues that I want to address directly in response to questions from students and colleagues. The first is the question of poverty and malnutrition of the !Kung; and the second is the question of how much social change has already occurred during the twentieth century, and the extent to which the !Kung are really hunters and gatherers in a world dominated by agricultural, urban development and technology. Readers may be interested in considering these questions before turning to the details of the model under construction, or you may turn to the next chapter to begin the study report.

Poverty of the !Kung

The !Kung represent a dilemma for modern observers, who are simultaneously charmed by the beauty of the !Kung adaptation to living simply in a wild environment, and are appalled by the extreme poverty of their lives, without property, without education, with minimal governmental assistance, without any means of security provided by the outside world. With their small bodies and their constant concern with the management of scarcity, !Kung San people are as poor as people can be and continue to reproduce their social group reliably. The so-called revisionist scholars (Wilmsen, 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow, 1990) insist

that it is untrue and irresponsible to describe the Dobe !Kung adaptation as “original affluence” or anything like it.

If poverty is defined as inequality, however, the !Kung are not poor. Within their society, everyone has more or less the same level of ownership and access to resources. And if poverty is defined as lacking control over one’s own activities, the !Kung are rich, as each person, or at least each competent adult, can decide for himself or herself where to live, who to marry or divorce, what people to live with, and what work to do, within the guidance of their cultural norms. Their society is not based on money or property, but on harvesting food and the other necessities of life directly from the natural world. In the 1960s, people owned nothing more than their clothing, perhaps a blanket, a pot, and a few dishes and tools that they carried from place to place as they moved their villages frequently around the territory circling their waterhole. Their only wealth was human capital, consisting of health, vitality, and knowledge of how to live in the Kalahari, plus their network of kinship ties to others.

It is possible to be well nourished and at the same time very thin, but that is surely more dangerous than it would be to be well nourished and also a bit more plump. In the world as a whole we see a strong correlation between being very thin and being positively poorly nourished, but that is not as true of the !Kung San as it would be of people whose diet primarily consists of a starch with a little meat and vegetable material. The thin !Kung we saw at Dobe in the 1960s typically ate quantities of meat, nuts, roots, fruits, and vegetables. They have many sources of protein, vitamins, and minerals. They are short on fats and calories and positively deficient on processed starches and sugars by world standards. We need to think explicitly about the nature of malnutrition and poverty in their society and in ours, so that our preconceptions about poverty don’t blind us to the realities of their life.

The !Kung adaptation consists of applying their own energy and work to the natural products of the environment—plants and animals—to obtain all the things that the people need to live, such as food, shelter, tools, medicine, and decoration. The !Kung ask for supernatural help in solving their problems, but in their traditional way of life neither ask for nor receive any supplements to their own energy to solve their problems, with two exceptions. The first is their only domesticated animal in the traditional hunting and gathering way of life, the dog. Dogs are included in village life, although they are rarely deliberately fed by humans, usually getting their own food and indeed providing food

for humans by their help with hunting. Dogs were domesticated very early in human prehistory (Cartmill, 1993): Indeed, some experts believe that it is more accurate to describe dogs as having domesticated themselves by hanging around human settlements and making themselves useful as guards against animal intruders into the village, and as “cleaners” who keep the village free of decaying organic materials by eating spilled food and human feces. !Kung dogs are only semidomesticated, in that their owners do not systematically control the reproduction of the dogs, do not feed them consistently, and do not eat them.

The second exception to the generalization that the !Kung have no supplementary sources of energy is that they help each other. The !Kung do a lot of what Richard Lee calls “sharing” and later we will see that sharing is precisely the key to understanding how they can live in the sparse Kalahari environment with some security even if not with surpluses or with ease. Their tendency to help one another with food, with work, and with caring of various kinds will be a major focus of this reconsideration of the !Kung data collected in 1967–1969. A shortfall of the necessities of life is not a fatal problem if others fill the gap, whether they do so out of a self-interested “insurance” program, kin selection, generalized reciprocity, tolerated theft, or pure altruism.⁷

What, then, are the resources that people traditionally depend on to make their living? The Kalahari is a vast sandy semidesert, which is full of food, water, and shelter for those who know how to find it, but desperately inhospitable to anyone who does not have the knowledge and skills that suit the environment. The !Kung have these skills, and they live in groups of ten to fifty people (average twenty or so), with a mixture of workers and dependents, hunters and gatherers, men and women, old people, adults, and children, so that all their knowledge-based resources are likely to be present in every small group. People live in intimate contact with their kin, with virtually no privacy or independent individualistic ambitions, in a way that seems to be deeply satisfying to most people, most of the time.

Babies live in skin-to-skin contact with their mothers from the day of birth, carried much of the time, and take breast-milk whenever they wish, several times an hour, for years. !Kung babies seem orders-of-magnitude happier with their lives than any American babies I have known, despite the high infant mortality rate (20% of babies failed to survive the first

7. We will return to the question of motivation for sharing in the last section of this book.

year of life in the 1960s, and about 45% died by age 15). Konner (in Lee and DeVore, 1976: 245) describes the general rules of !Kung child rearing as “indulgence, stimulation, and nonrestriction.”

We note that daily satisfactions of life are not necessarily correlated with the probability of death. Babies enjoy physical satisfaction of their needs; children enjoy that, plus freedom from constraint; adults enjoy the close social relationships that they live in, the mastery of their way of life that they exercise, and the gratification of seeing their children grow and thrive. I don't want to romanticize the life of the !Kung, but we need to recognize that there are a lot of benefits to their way of life in order to understand the adaptation as a whole.

At the same time, we need to be aware that people often work very hard under difficult circumstances of heat and thirst and hunger. Later we will attempt to quantify exactly how hard they work. People of all ages are forced into extreme exertion when they have to move long distances, carrying heavy loads, despite sickness, injury, and handicap. People are extremely thin (we will see just how thin they are) and they say that they are often hungry. The debates about “the affluent society” as applied to the !Kung have an element of truth but the phrase also misrepresents the reality as !Kung people live it. The !Kung I knew in the 1960s owned nothing or very little, worked hard, and by and large seemed to be enjoying their lives. Applying concepts of poverty from industrialized societies, as Wilmsen does (Wilmsen, 1989), has a certain value in understanding where the !Kung are, compared to others in international perspective, but also distorts the reality of how they see themselves, and how they manage to move toward their goals.

Social Change in the Kalahari

Our second preliminary question is whether the !Kung as described in 1968 still exist. The answer is both yes and no. To find “hunters in a world of hunters” uncontaminated by influences from people who live by other forms of economy, we would have to go back at least 1,000 years in the Kalahari, as there have been herders, agriculturalists, miners, and travelers through the desert over the past millennium and no doubt before that as well. Even so, it was probably true that 99% of the calories acquired by the Dobe !Kung came from hunting and gathering until 1920, more than 90% until 1950, and still the great majority of calories in 1967–1969 when this study was done. It wasn't until about 1980, when the Xangwa area was firmly incorporated into the structure of the Botswana state, that

the !Kung needed to be considered “ex-hunters,” living now by gardening, herding small animals, selling craft items, welfare payments, and wage labor (Howell, 2000:1–16 and 370–377).

In 1967–1969, when the data of my study were collected, there were or previously had been cattle at eight of the nine permanent waterholes in the Xangwa-/ai/ai area, and about 30% of the !Kung population were living in groups that Lee (1979) calls “client groups” rather than traditional living groups, dependent on Herero and Tswana cattle owners for work, food, and income. The tallest, strongest, most cooperative young men tended to be selected as employees by cattle keepers, and they would be offered opportunities to live with the cattle owners, alone or with their immediate families, in these special “non-!Kung” settlements, which I often refer to here as “cattle posts.” These individuals and families are included in our study of the !Kung, which is the basis for this work (although the Tswana and Herero cattle owners they lived with were not included), and for some purposes we will want to identify exactly which people these were and how they differ from the rest of the population.

In 1967–1969, therefore, the majority of the !Kung were still living by hunting and gathering most of the time, and my study (and that of Lee and the others on the Harvard expedition) focused on the portion of the population that was living in the traditional way, most of the time (Lee, 1979; Draper and Kranichfeld, 1990; Howell, 2000). Virtually all !Kung would pay an occasional visit to relatives who live at a cattle post in the 1967–1969 era, and would eat a few meals of domesticated meat and milk while they were there, before returning to their bush diet and workload. Some families, especially aging adults or families that include a handicapped or sick member, who were finding it difficult or impossible to survive in the bush, deliberately moved to a cattle post to ease the workload and reduce the need to walk so much, and of course, this move changed the bush camps from which they came just as it changed the cattle posts to which they went. We need to remain alert to the possibility that findings focused on bush camps are distorted by the absence of people who would otherwise be there—especially people who are particularly strong and productive, who are prime employees for the cattle owners, and those who are sick, handicapped, or aged, or who have many children to be supported, who go to the cattle posts in search of an easier life.

As I reviewed in the concluding chapter of the second edition of my previous book (Howell, 2000), there has been considerable social

change in the Dobe area after the collection phase of that study was completed. In the decades since the data for this study were collected, !Kung have encountered problems regarding jobs and welfare, animal husbandry, private property, alcohol consumption, shopping and currency, debt, taxes, and the dilemmas of improving as well as deteriorating health, especially AIDS. It would take us too far afield to review the many kinds of social change that have occurred in the Kalahari since 1969, but this work, harking back to the late 1960s as though that is the only time period that matters, should not be interpreted as a denial of contemporary changes in the lives of the Dobe !Kung.

In the subsequent chapters, we will draw on my previous database and its analysis by me and by the others who work on the !Kung, to reorganize our understanding of the demography of the Dobe !Kung, reconciling ages and stages, work and calories, fatness and well-being into what I hope is a better and clearer image of the functioning of the Dobe !Kung society in the twentieth century.

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