



A CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Not running out of fuel in the dangerous passage between G!o'oce and Nokaneng/Tsau was a huge relief. I thought I had learned my lesson and could start to pattern my behavior more on that of my confident Ju/'hoan friends. But my relief when we returned to Tsau that day was soon replaced with anxiety. I was worried that my professor, Richard Lee, might have arrived and might be waiting at my camp to ask me how far along I was with my thesis research. The early 1970s were *way* pre-cellphone, even pre-radiophone in the Kalahari, and the only way for a message to have reached me was my poste restante box in Maun, far to the east of Tsau and Kauri. So that time, and each time I was returning from a trip and was on the last stretch of the back road to Kauri, I worried that Dr. Lee could have arrived and could be awaiting me at my camp. I imagined him eagerly expecting to be shown a neat stack of transcribed and annotated stories, complete with metadata and an overarching plan for the insertion of it all into a meaningful whole within an evolutionary theoretical framework. That day and on several other occasions I skulked guiltily around Tsau at dusk before taking the sand track to Kauri, asking people there if a foreigner had come through asking for directions to my camp, um, a short guy with a beard? Possibly also driving a Land Rover? No? Are you sure? The contrast between the joyfully adventurous days we were having and my thesis anxiety—shareable with nobody within hundreds of kilometers—was coming to seem absurd.

Yet I knew deep down that the way I was proceeding was allowing me to learn what I needed to learn in a very effective way. I was not “drilling down” through an academic plan and “getting it done” in a way I could explain to anyone at the time. Instead I was proceeding opportunistically, taking promising paths as they presented themselves, to meet the shadowy goals with which I had arrived in the field. I didn't know whether it was working fast enough, but I knew it was working. I felt assured that the general vision I had started with, that of uncovering storytelling's enabling functions for Ju/'hoan society, was continuing to develop organically as I lived and participated in whatever was happening, asked questions, and pondered their answers.

So I resolved to try to “get out of my own way” and go with the flow of experience there, not resisting but taking advantage of its mysteriousness and ineluctability. It was becoming clear to me that with any more programmatic approach, the holistic vision I sought—one I could barely articulate but was sure was there—might elude me. Basically, I saw that a kind of membrane between me and the immediacy going on all around me—one built up by experience in my own culture—needed now to be peeled away. And I was being given opportunities, practically on a daily basis, to do just that.

I took an important cue from the way the people saw their *n!oresi* (their home resource territories) and the wider territory of Ngamiland that contained all the *n!oresi*. They seemed to think of them as maps to the important assets of their lives. The *n!oresi* were not only mental maps of the resources—water sources, places where wild foods grew, and hunting grounds—but were marked by points of light that were the “people who know things”—composers, expert trackers, excellent dancers whose work they could enjoy and learn from. Taken together, the interlocking *n!oresi* formed a reliable map of physical and spiritual community resources that were open to everyone. I came to see that this dazzling resource map was made possible not only by the leveling mechanisms of their sharing system but by lack of competitiveness in creative achievement—beautiful things, like medicine songs, were seen to “come through” people, to belong to everyone, and were to be used and celebrated by all. There seemed to be a precise parallel here to the modesty of Ju/’hoan hunters about the animals they killed. The meat they brought in for the community through quietly doing their job as hunters did not bring them personal glory: it was meat destined for each member of the group. This realization of the parallel between sharing of meat and of powerful, created beauty was for me a major turning point: I felt it firmly structured my understanding of basic tenets of Ju/’hoan culture—and thus, my thesis.

It’s hard to emphasize enough how the storytellers and healers I had met all seemed to fit, with the rest of the Ju/’hoan people, into one creative community. The same augmenting and reinforcing meanings crossed all the media I had encountered and were freely shared. I never got the sense that knowledge or meanings or artistic skill were being sequestered by anyone: rather, they seemed joyfully accessible to all. The very word “artist” began to take on new meaning for me. Ju/’hoan art did not have overtones of proprietorship or market value, as the word now has in Western cultures. I saw that Ju/’hoan artists were more like spiritual guides who could not do other than pursue their artistry. Jimmy the composer; storytellers like //Xukxa N!a’an, !Unn/obe,

/Xoan, and /Ukxa; the men healers Kxao =Oah and Kxao Tjimburu, and the women healers like Tcoq'a N!a'an I worked with later at G!o'oce; the women and girls who sang for the dancers or played the lute-like, five-stringed *g//oaci*—all were viewed as channels to the beyond, giving access to other realms (of aesthetic enjoyment, of knowledge, of health and welfare) to everyone. As an unlikely visitor to this realm of psychic plenty, I was very much motivated to share awareness of its riches responsibly. But how?

At first I saw my main responsibility as learning enough about Ju/'hoan culture to explain its treasures and peculiarities to fellow Westerners. I felt I owed this to those who had not had an opportunity to travel to a place like the Kalahari. I began to understand ever more deeply how one's own culture, unchallenged, could seem to be the be-all and end-all, leaving one terminally suspended inside an impermeable bubble.

In truth, it was only at Kauri that I began to learn the startling fact that I, too, had a culture, and that it was quite as relative, quite as arbitrary, as any other. I believe I started to absorb these facts only there, because I was learning the radically different Ju/'hoan culture via the individuals I was now dealing with on a daily basis. At Dobe, with Mel and Marjorie as my guides and with the Dobe people's view of me colored by their history with the Harvard project, my social relationships had been largely mediated by others. It was indeed as if I had been in a bubble, as if I had had, not only growing up in the US but also at Dobe, a nearly invisible, foggy membrane between me and many kinds of "Others." At Dobe this seemed true even of Ju/'hoan individuals with whom I had been hunting or gathering "on my own" without English-speaking colleagues, even of the storyteller //Xukxa N!a'an, from whom I heard my first folktales, even of strong, direct, articulate Baq'u, who bestowed on me her name. This membrane had been clouded for me long before I arrived at Dobe, of course, by romantic and other misconceptions of indigenous people held by Western culture in general.

At Kauri, where my social experiences were less mediated by other outsiders, the membrane began to thin. The process was a patchy one, took time, and seemed to be a thing that needed to be repeated more than once. The bubble began to clear up in spots for me, often through dramatic encounters with the wrongness of my own preconceptions. I remember vividly and with lasting embarrassment one such encounter. After my houses and kitchen hut were completed, and after I had danced with and heard stories from the Kauri people who came to stay with me for some months, I was invited to visit the village, not only informally, as I had been by Di//xao, but a bit more formally, by a fam-

ily. I was to stay at the cluster of huts of the family of Boo (pronounced Beau), who had acquired the nickname surname “Becker” after a white farmer for whom he once worked. I congratulated myself on having politely held off from inviting myself to Kauri, and on having given enough proof of my friendliness that someone might see me as a pleasant guest. I packed a knapsack and bedroll light enough to carry the few kilometers to Kauri, feeling that for my first “village experience” I should leave the Land Rover—and my campmates !Xoma and =Oma !Oma—at Toothbrush Tree/Spirit Voice.

The first evening was very enjoyable, with a quiet, harmonious, brief dance followed by a boiling pot of buffalo meat one of the hunters had obtained from a Herero who owned a gun. (Ju//hoansi also hunt Cape buffalo occasionally, but without a gun it is a very dangerous undertaking indeed.) I rolled out my bedroll beside Boo Becker’s fire, as did some of the rest of his family. I saw women preparing their families’ sleeping places: first they laid down the stoutest mat they had, a tarp or a large antelope skin, and at one end of the mat they laid a small, straight tree trunk, perhaps four inches across and five feet long, to serve as a pillow. The next layers were draped over the tree trunk to soften it and then flattened down over the length of the mat. These layers consisted of all manner of skins, cloth and fabric, usually thin and much tattered, though some families had one or more store-bought blankets as well. Their beds were often little wider than the single twin beds I was used to, yet when bedtime came, the mother, father, and all the children crept in together and kept each other warm.

By the time I got up the next morning, most of the children were larking about with other kids at their own or nearby campfires several yards away. Women and men were hanging up the sleeping things to air them. Many of the adults were going about their business, bringing in the few goats so they could be milked and the milk used for tea. I was brought a large tin mug of strong tea with hot, fresh goat milk, and it tasted like heaven. I sat for a while with my tea, enjoying watching people move into their morning. It was refreshing that nobody seemed to feel awkward in any way because of my presence. I was somehow comfortably invisible, even in this intimate and homey scene.

Not really knowing what to do with myself, though, I reflected on what my role as a guest might be. I had not planned to do interviewing or record stories, but just to observe and participate as might be indicated. I felt I should center myself at the camp to which I had been “invited,” but Boo and his wife and their entire family were absent, dashing about from an early hour doing chores, such as fetching water at the edge of the village. I began to feel large and obtrusive and

self-conscious, with the familiar question “What am I doing here?” hammering softly at the back of my brain. The feeling was made worse by the fact that by late morning there was no sign of breakfast or any other meal forthcoming. None of the boiled buffalo from the night before was visible: maybe it had all been eaten. I had not brought with me so much as a handful of groundnuts.

As the sun grew hotter towards midday, I realized I had a throbbing headache from hunger, heat, and, probably, social tension. In a moment of abashed self-realization, I saw that I had come to the village in the grip of preconceptions that were straight out of nineteenth-century Europe or America. A guest would be given three meals a day and would be directly invited into the days’ activities, wouldn’t she? Instead, the situation was a wide-open one for guests, just as for any other individuals there, to do pretty much as they pleased, or as they needed to do—short of pilfering food from what I suddenly saw were pretty much nonexistent larders.

These were people who truly did not store, hoard, or do much planning for the next meal: they had knowledge of what the options were on any given day, could plan ahead on known fail-safes, but most of the time were relying on what the day would bring. They probably all knew what their neighbors had at any given time, but they were certainly not going to steal it, given that everyone knew the footprints, shod and unshod, of everybody else in camp, and given that each person absolutely depended on others on the days when they personally had no food. Sharing and being shared with by others was the only constant resource, the only permanent bank account. Humbled, I stayed as long as I could until hunger and the limitations of my own social knowledge drove me back to my own relatively well-stocked camp.

Many, many of the other realizations I had around that time also centered on my mistaken assumptions about Ju/’hoan food culture. Once I was traveling with both !Xoma and =Oma !Oma and a truckload of Kauri people, again on the diamond track to /Kae/kae, and I discovered that I had not brought along nearly enough loose tea or teabags. What I had would clearly not last everyone until we got to the next trading store. That could be a week away. That night at our roadside campfire, the usual festive mood of journeying prevailed. Everyone shared in gathering wood, making the fire, cooking, and making tea. I waited until the first pot of tea was consumed, then said that we would need to ration the tea if we wanted to drink a little every day until we got to !Aoan. I also stated the obvious, which was that there was never any guarantee that there would even *be* tea in stock in any trading store, especially in one as remote from real roads and towns as !Aoan was. =Oma !Oma and

the others around the fire stared and blinked at me for the briefest of instants. Then they measured out fresh tea leaves for a second pot, put water on to boil, and the convivial hilarity went on unabated.

Nettled, I first worried that I had expressed myself inadequately in Ju/'hoansi. Next I mentally dragged myself over the coals for losing control of my employees and the supplies in my mobile camp. Last, I chided myself for being so uptight, yet again making judgments that welled up unexamined from the depths of my own culture, with little recognition of theirs. It was clear that Ju/'hoansi on the whole found it more sensible to take tarts when tarts were passed, as Alice did in Wonderland, than to fuss about concerns for the days ahead. To them, it seemed, a road trip was no more perilous, in terms of provisions, than were the other days of their lives anywhere. Ideas from grad school readings danced in my head that night about "Dionysian" cultures versus "Apollonian" ones. Was I witnessing here the confrontation of my own prissy capitalist upbringing with the comprehensive sharing ethic that had brought the hunting and gathering ancestors of us all safe and sound through the millennia of prehistory? I knew these were oversimplified categories I was tossing around, but they helped me get some perspective through a night of self-questioning—and the next several caffeine-less days on the road. On top of all else, I was confronting for the first time my degree of dependency on tea and coffee to lift my energy level to meet that of the Ju/'hoansi.

Despite what might have looked to an outsider like rudeness about the tea supply, there was at the same time an exquisite politeness and care about how tea and other commodities were shared—on this road trip and also in general. A person who didn't show up or ask for a share was assumed not to be interested, and was blithely ignored. In contrast, a person coming to sit at a fire where food or tea was in process of being served was understood to be presenting himself or herself for a serving. However, he or she was not supposed to ask directly for it. As mentioned in chapter 3 with the extended metaphor about honey, sugar, and boiling the tea leaves twice, he or she was supposed instead to look anywhere but at the teapot or at the *potjie* (Afrikaans for the ubiquitous three-legged iron cookpot). And he or she was to use only respect words or elliptical metaphors to refer to what was being served. This social delicacy of the Ju/'hoansi was able to coexist with their Dionysian sense of style (the stylishness my own socialization had coded as "throwing caution to the wind"). Everyone in western Ngamiland but I, it seemed, knew the rules, the careful words and gestures, that made such a seemingly contradictory balance possible.

A lot of what I found myself doing in my fieldwork, in fact, was trying to understand the balance Ju/'hoansi found among seeming contradictions. A contradiction that constantly captured my attention was one between individualism and conventionalism in spiritual settings like the healing dance. It would start to look like a contradiction to me, but over and over, I would see it resolve into an admirable balance. This balance had everything to do with the embeddedness I now saw of each individual—and of each individual's innovations upon tradition—in this creative community.

For instance, on this same trip from Kauri, camping again at /Kae/kae, I heard words declaimed by a healer in trance that enhanced my understanding of the balancing power of Ju/'hoan artistry. We drove west through the flat soft sand region to the slight hilly uplift that begins at /Kae/kae. This uplift at the start of the Aha Hills contains the /Uihaba bat caves and a sinkhole, Huwetju, said by the Ju/'hoansi to be the hole from which God and his animals popped out onto the surface of the earth. The full moon was just rising as we neared /Kae/kae, and a dance was in progress on the side of a mild slope facing east. "It's Kxao Tjimburu and his family dancing!" said someone in the truck excitedly. We hastily made camp and then walked quietly towards the music, the silver sand's surface shining and the hard, tiny leaves of the bushes glittering with moonlight beside our path.

Kxao, whom I had met once before in the daytime, had oiled his skinny, always bolt-upright body and had wrapped frayed bands of red fabric around his upper chest. I had been told he had created his own special dance, and had long ago taught his wife and all his girl children to sing for him in a special way. Indeed, there were all the girls and women, in a tight circle around the fire, their legs interlocking, their heads all inclined to the right, the better to hear each other and to sing in effective polyphony. From them rose the scent of *sa*, warming with the heat of their bodies as they clapped and sang. Kxao's sons and other boys and men were following him in a line that in tiny, complexly stepped increments was inscribing a precise circle in the sand. The Ju/'hoansi use the phrase *djxani tcxai*, "to dance a song," for this dancing and the singing that is inseparable from it. In performance, especially as the night moves on, it is as if dance and song become one. I had heard and seen a number of dances before, at both Dobe and Kauri, but this one was of a wholly different order. Originally the product of a single inspired individual, it had become the actions of a multiperson

organism, so attuned had Kxao and his extended family become to each other's artistry over the years.

Some of our traveling group were quickly absorbed into the singing and dancing group as if by centripetal force. As we approached the group around the fire, the singing stopped briefly as greetings were exchanged with kin who had not seen each other for a long time. During such arrivals, I had found, travelers would be joyously welcomed and have the limbo and the tiredness of travel removed by having their temples touched with cooling *sa* and then blown upon by adoring relatives—pew, pew! /Xoan N!a'ang, traveling with us, was wafted in this way with *sa*, and the people murmured incantatorily to her, "Tju/ho o aga" (this is your village) and "!O!o sa =hom" (older brother and father-in-law), over and over before starting again to sing.

A rank beginner in the complex music, I sang as much as I could and then went to sit by one of the "watching fires" where other people were smoking and joking. But I was close enough to hear Kxao's words as they suddenly rang out of his whole body, already ecstatically in trance: "Mi ku =oa mba!" (I am imitating my father, doing as my father did!) This cry and its context made me feel I was hearing a voice from a timeless world. Was Kxao ecstatic because he was reunited with his dead father in that instant, faithfully doing what his father had taught him was important to do in life?

I began to glimpse that the healing dance was a nexus of strength at the absolute center of Ju/'hoan experience. I saw that it demolished any contradiction between the individual and the group. And that it could have everything to do with relationships—and identity, and respect—among kinspeople down through the generations.

This is literally, I thought, life in death and death in life. *!Aia*—trance—is an obvious cognate of *!ai*—to die. The Marshalls had translated *!aia* as "half-death," and Richard Lee used *koe !ai*, "like death," but to me it seemed as frightening and absolute as the real thing and was clearly held by the Ju/'hoansi in much the same awe and respect. Healers in the coveted altered state in which healing can take place are first and foremost gaining access to that realm where their parents—and other relatives who have passed on—abide. Relationships with deceased elders persist vividly after death. As in everyday life, relationships are the most powerful resource of all. When Kxao sang out that he was imitating his father or doing as his father did, this was a signal that he had entered the realm where he and his forebears could still communicate, still be united, still be "as one." In spite of the obvious innovations Kxao had brought into the dance in his lifetime, he was experiencing the ecstasy of being a part of the whole that had long been

this dance and its history in the lives, energies, styles, and ideas of all his people. Both men and women of the Ju/'hoansi, who dance and sing for each other so the healing energy can be activated, are celebrated for this hard and beautiful work of ecstasy that is done for all.

I was to hear the words "I am imitating my father!" sung out many times over the following months and years, by Kxao and by other healers as they went into trance, laid hands on others, and in this powerful state, proceeded to heal them. I also heard a woman who had been singing and clapping and then jumped up to dance shout in utter joy, looking towards the sky, "We're dancing and our old, old people see us!" Over time I have learned much more about this healing dance that has been so central to the lives and cultures of San people all over southern Africa. I have come eventually to regard it as a collective art form, one of the great intellectual achievements of the human world. It shares with other artistic forms a profound respect for messages from the beyond, especially from direct ancestors, made possible by many kinds of creative activity. The dance, the stories, the music, all keep alive the flame of belief that healing, transformation, and transport are possible—for healers and the healed alike.

I could see that stories, with all their emphasis on transformation, were deeply important in all this. But I was still wondering about the coexistence in Ju/'hoan folktale tradition of many versions of "the same" tale. There seemed to be as many ways to tell a traditional story as there were storytellers. I was dazzled by this richness, but also confused. How was I going to pinpoint "expert" storytellers or "authoritative" versions for my Harvard story collection, if there were so many good storytellers, and so many versions of each story? One day in Kauri I was sitting beside !Unn/obe at the door of her hut as she sewed beads onto a dancing skin for her husband. I asked her why some stories were called "the same" as others even when they were told differently by different storytellers.

She shrugged. "All these stories about the old times—people use different words and different names for the same things. . . . Different people just have different thoughts," she said. Her shrug was the first glimpse for me of the elaborate tolerance for individual variation—a tolerance underlain by respect for, and interest in, each person—that I was coming to see in her egalitarian society. Ju/'hoan storytelling aesthetics, it seemed, gave wide latitude not only for variation in daily behavior but also for the expressive styles of different individuals.

Some of the variations I saw and heard in expressive style were downright flamboyant. //Xukxa N!a'an, the first storyteller I had listened to at Dobe, was a good friend of !Unn/obe's but told "the same" stories as she did in very different ways that bore her own indelible signature. //Xukxa was fond of using comical reduplication in her stories to emphasize outrageous actions. (Later, Mel Konner told me that biblical Hebrew contains instances of such reduplication for emphasis as well: scholars refer to it there as the infinitive absolute, among other terms.) For //Xukxa, arguing people did not merely *n=uiankhoe*, contradict each other, but they *n=uin-n=uiankhoe* (thus reduplicating the expression); the marks of gnawings made by a hare on the moon's face were /'om-/omsɪ, "gnaw-gnawings"; dirty-minded speech was "foul-foul," or /kau-/kau; vultures could drop //aba-//aba, voraciously and scandalously, out of the sky onto corpses; people could not only kill but "kill-kill" each other, !hun-!hun. Kxao Kasupe, =Oma !Oma's father, a man about //Xukxa's age also living at Dobe, liked to wave his hands in emphasis while telling a story about the beautiful heroine elephant girl (who could also appear as a python or an aardvark maiden). As his hands waved, he was comically prolonging the glottal stop in the word /'hom (beautiful) to show how this woman could be lovely beyond description.

I heard other versions of the heroine's story and her beauty, but they also foregrounded the virtuous nature of the heroine, describing in great detail her demeanor, clothing, and ornaments. !Unn/obe's versions emphasized dialogue between the heroine and the enemies she vanquishes, as well as euphemisms of trickery as the heroine pretends to step behind a bush to powder or "freshen herself up" while actually plotting magical vengeance. (You will see one of !Unn/obe's long, detailed versions of the heroine story in chapter 9).

Bemused, I began to wonder about the relationship between storytelling style and its content or message. If the medium was the message, might personal ostentations in style liberate a tradition from slavish adherence to content, yet somehow preserve that content in its essentials? I began to ask whether culture were perhaps a less monolithic concept than I had thought, whether individual expressive energies were in fact what combine to make a culture. The concept of dialogue within a tradition *itself* constituting the tradition began to stir for me.

What makes disparate stories "the same" as each other includes not only plot and characters but the way they address similar themes or problems of culture. One frequent theme in Ju/'hoan tales, for example, is the difficulty of maintaining right relationships among in-laws. These themes will be well known to all and provide the well of refer-

ence from which all versions ultimately take their power. The different storytellers' versions never violate these themes but rather explore their ramifications, turning them over and over in a sort of fascination to see how many intellectual or artistic changes may be rung on "the same" theme and plot.

It is difficult to convey, without multiplying further examples, the richly individualistic nature of Ju/'hoan tradition. When I was first confronting this richness and, at times, apparent contradiction, I felt myself floundering in my work of understanding the tradition as a whole. I felt rather like Bartholomew Cubbins in Dr. Seuss's story of *The Five Hundred Hats*. Each new version I heard was like the successive cocked hats Bartholomew found on the stairs of the tower, one embellished with one jewel, the next augmented by another jewel, the next by a jewel and a feather, then one with a jewel and two feathers, and so on. Yet I never heard a listener complain, except in jest, "You're not telling it right!" All the versions of a story told "the same" story.

How could this be, in what I had been led to believe was a highly "conservative" culture? How could such diversity exist in a society that prized equality of individuals perhaps beyond all else? As an anthropologist, I knew Ju/'hoan culture's social technology contained many mechanisms for social leveling and the prevention of self-aggrandizement. How could I square this knowledge with the personal flamboyance I was seeing in storytelling?

!Unn/obe's shrug, as I said, provided my first insight into the answer. The complexity that bemused me was ordinary to her: it presented no problems whatsoever. Why, then, was I struggling so much with it? I began to think about the perspective from which I was trying to understand her tradition.

For one thing, I was from a scribal culture, and she from an oral one. She was nonliterate, as were her listeners and the other storytellers who told variants of the stories !Unn/obe was telling. I had gone to Africa, after all, with the specified intent of studying a narrative tradition as completely oral as I could find in the world in the 1970s. Now that I had found one, I had no idea what to do with it! My literacy was a screen that prevented me from seeing the powerful strengths of oral communication. My literacy was an enormous component of the fogged membrane between me and the understanding of people in an oral culture.

Working on defogging the membrane, I gradually began to piece back together my academic reading about the nature of oral versus literate communication—Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, Eric Havelock's *The Greek Concept of Justice*, Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. I remembered that literate people must in a real sense struggle to realize

that, where speech is both the norm and the model for all verbal communication, two messages may be regarded as “the same” though they are rarely verbatim equivalents. This equivalence of message explains storytellers’ insistence that they are faithfully “repeating” an old story when they are actually telling it in their own words. Each telling thus reflects the performance situation of the moment *and* participates in the timeless authority of tradition. Concentration on specific wording and phraseology per se is a phenomenon of alphabetic literacy that has long distorted scholars’ understanding of communication in oral societies. Thinking anew about the Parry-Lord theory after some time in the field gave a new dimension to the question about the oral antecedents of the Homeric epics. I began to understand more clearly how many oral variants of those stories must have been told before they were written down and fixed for all time.

Yet each of those variants must have seemed in some way to be “the same” story, likely carrying the same social lessons. Looking at an oral tradition as a whole, I recalled, means detailed attention to the idiosyncrasies of its performed parts. I found that all the versions of a Ju/hoan tale would convey the same indirect social lessons, provide a scaffolding of events for graphic portrayal of moral and immoral behavior, and in the end be catalogued by listeners and storytellers alike as “the same” story, though they were widely divergent in style, language, and dramatic detail.

And the socially shocking events often referred to in the folktales, for instance in those dealing with vengeance among in-laws, are routine parts of their oral tradition for Ju/hoan listeners. But their familiarity doesn’t diminish their entertainment or their (indirectly instructive) value. The same is true for expletives and scatological references, which enliven both folktales and daily talk for the Ju/hoansi, while the actual behaviors are subject to scrupulous social avoidances. (Ju/hoan talk, like that of many other cultures, is vivid with humorous hyperbole, none of which would ever be carried out in deed. An example I heard of a perfectly polite greeting between two old men, friends who hadn’t seen each other in a long time, was “face like a dead-spirit face, go screw yourself!” After this opening, the two elderly pals hugged each other and fell about laughing. Yet the personal space and quiet dignity of both parties, I saw, remained intact and was even enhanced. I could easily imagine a parallel verbal exchange in a pub in Ireland or beside a football field at home in the US.)

It seemed that with people of circumspect social behavior, expressiveness could sometimes flourish in opposite proportion. In the area of equality of ownership of possessions, Ju/hoansi are fierce levelers.



Figure 6.1. Baby on tarp at Kauri. © Megan Biesele.

Yet I began to see that their verbal agility, especially in storytelling, was not subject to leveling mechanisms in the same way as their social behavior was in life: it seemed individuals could push their creativity in speech much further without risk of censure. Later I was to read that George Steiner commented, in *After Babel*, that “certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives” (Steiner 1975: 55).

I took these realizations as cautions against the linguistic colonization of a local oral tradition by my literate mindset. A resilient oral tradition continually challenges the literate urge to standardize, to fix in print for all time, to specify the right or original or “authoritative” version of a tale or any sort of utterance. Such an oral tradition must preserve the right to individual ostentation within its own culturally defined limits. For my thesis work, I needed to find a way for the meaningful variability of a contemporary oral tradition to penetrate the consciousness of a world increasingly dominated by print and electronic media.

I reflected that both oral and written stories consist of the accumulations of the performances and changes in a tradition over time. Far from limited to outdated models from the past, the repertoires of contemporary “traditional” storytellers could continually expand and transform to address the current moment in which the storytellers found themselves. I sensed that Ju/’hoan oral tradition, by its very evanescence,

probably like many other oral traditions, could constantly re-form itself for new contemporary situations. After all, just as writers do best to write about what they know, oral storytellers, even those drawing on a long history of traditional materials, do best if they comment in their stories on their own particular place and slice of time in the world.

I began to see that specific storytellers now, as in the past, do cultural work appropriate to their times and crucial to the continuation of culture. They do this by influencing children and other individuals as they learn and mature. What emerges from this perspective is a humanized view of the past as ever-present grist for the mill of the future. Thus the title I chose for my memoir of this fieldwork in storytelling. The performative approach, one emphasizing the “work” done by stories in culture, well characterizes the insight later articulated to me by Richard Lee once I had written my thesis. (I had finally gotten over my panic that he would come to my field site and find me lacking.) “Oh, now I see what you’ve been talking about, Megan,” he said. “Once upon a time is *now!*”

Richard has a knack for memorably encapsulating important concepts. In that case, he nailed one of the most powerful lessons yielded by my fieldwork. I had gradually come to see that old stories are powerful not because they come from the past but because they are being told in renewed form in the present. They are told in the present in specific ways by specific individuals with specific histories. They are told to specific children, who imitate what they hear in stories, who see from their elders’ behavior, and who are encouraged to innovate in creative ways specific to themselves as individuals.

Indeed, there seems to be an essential relationship between the storytellers’ experiences and their aesthetic choices, one which determines the dimensions of the stories’ power and energy. I heard enough stories from !Unn/obe that I had a chance to look closely at both her history and her style. She had been twice married, both times to rather eccentric Ju//hoan men. She had a wry but resigned attitude toward men’s foibles, and she kept up a gentle but firmly effective joking with her second husband, Kha//an. She had lived half her life in skins in the bush, and half as a serf doing barely recompensed domestic labor, as I mentioned earlier, for Boer ranchers who settled in Ghanzi. She learned Afrikaans and spoke from her perspective at the outdoor kitchens and washtubs where she cooked and scrubbed for others. She had indeed lived for a while on the mission station at D’kar but had rejected the religious teaching in favor of the Naro and Ju//hoan healing religion.

When I met !Unn/obe in 1971 she was living in a grass hut again in the sixth decade of her life. She sustained herself as part of a socially traditional community by gathering wild foods and sharing them. One

of the names she was often called was !Unn/obe *Morethlwa* (Setswana for raisin berry). She also told me she sold ostrich-eggshell beadwork to occasional tourists traveling through the area in trucks—but at that time and in that place these trucks could not have numbered more than five or six per year. Her people’s isolation and hunting-gathering heritage were increasingly under pressure not only from white ranchers but also black Tswana and Herero pastoralists, who wished to expand their cattle herds into the former San foraging areas. (Though white ranchers in southern Africa generally control their cattle with fencing, and black pastoralists do it through herding practices, the effect on hunting and gathering people is the same. Their land, cut by fences or invaded by herds, no longer allows the free movement of migratory meat animals, and their vegetable food resources are often ruined by the large trampling hooves of nonindigenous cattle.)

!Unn/obe’s perspective on changing times had been informed by a great deal of experience on the boundaries between her own and the incoming societies. As a thoroughly marginalized individual, she had all the makings of a trenchant political analyst. She was, in fact, the catalyst for my own political awakening, informing me shortly after we met that what had “ruined” her people were four things brought into her remote area by outsiders: tobacco, sugar, alcohol, and coffee. “These things have turned us into slaves,” she said matter-of-factly. In a long interview I did with her in late 1971 she explained without rancor but with great clarity the process by which contact with settlers where she grew up in the Ghanzi District, south and east of the Ju/’hoan area, had gradually circumscribed her people’s freedom:

When the white people had filled up Ghanzi, we then saw for the first time the things that came with them. We saw for the first time engines to draw up water, and all the other things that we had never seen until the white people came. The white people certainly have a lot of things!

But when the first whites came, they had to pound up and eat what [we] ate. They used digging sticks like ours at the beginning. They collected food and ate it. In fact, I came to know *zan* roots [used to sour milk distinctively for churning butter] through the Boers. They spoke, and we dug *zan* roots for them and pounded them and laid them out to dry. Then we’d churn and churn and churn with them, receiving only black coffee to drink for doing this. Then we’d churn and churn some more, and the butter would come, and they’d put it in bowls, put it in bowls, and then they’d sit and drink the buttermilk and distribute some to us also.

Another portion of the milk they would refuse that we churn, because they wanted us to put it into their coffee for them to drink. When the empty

tins were full, the Boers were finished with this work. The milk spent the night here, and the butter spent the night there. The water engine would stop and make a sound like “ko-ko-ko,” but the cattle still drank because we Ju/’hoansi drew and drew and drew their water by hand. We cranked and cranked until the trough was full and the cattle could come and drink. If there was no engine—uh-uh! A Bushman would do the work! Bushmen worked hard! We, the red Bushmen, are the ones who did the work of that place, Ghanzi.

Women did the work of drawing water. Women took care of the cattle. Women took care of the calves. Women took care of the horses. Women took care of the donkeys.

The men worked cutting trees for poles and lumber and all kinds of wood uses. Men did this, and they also milked the cows. The women were slower about getting up in the mornings, because they had no warm clothes. The Boers for whom we worked at that time are no longer in Ghanzi, as we sit here now. Then the word came to us, the word of Seretse [Seretse Khama, first president of Botswana]. The word was *ipelegeng* (self-reliance). Seretse said to the Boers, “White people, treat your employees nicely and with respect.” When the word came down, they ran off. They are no longer over there in Ghanzi. There are only different Boers there now.

The Tswanas said, “We’re not chasing you away. We’re just saying you should pay your employees regularly, so they can make a decent living.” Some of them agreed, even if doing it defeated them [i.e., they couldn’t carry it out in practice]. Some of them just packed up and left without asking any questions. Took their money and left. I’m telling you. The pain we had from them was just that they didn’t pay us, and our heads were good enough to tell us this wasn’t right.

When I turned off the tape recorder at the end of this story, !Unn/obe and I were both quiet for a while. She sat with bent head working on a beaded necklace that I had commissioned her to do: I had brought the beads from Maun and would pay her for the piece when it was finished. I had asked her to make something with the theme of *glu-!’o!umi*, “backbone of the night,” the Ju/’hoan term for the Milky Way. I asked her a question I had been wondering about for a long time: “Do the Kauri people who work for Tswana or Herero in this area get paid for taking care of their cattle for them?”

“Not well,” she replied. “A few people here work for the black people, but they only get old clothes and some milk, and maybe a calf at the end of a year or two years, if they have worked very, very well. Most of us have to keep moving around to other places, asking for food from our relatives. We usually only stay at Kauri a short time and then move on.”

“But you and your family have been here a long time this year. Why haven’t you been traveling as usual?” I asked. “Because of the beadwork and the little handicrafts you buy from us,” she replied. “That and the housebuilding work for you, and the meals we got while we were telling stories. We’ll stay as long as you are here.”

I was floored. I had not realized how close to the edge the Kauri people were, that my presence and what I thought of as my tiny financial input were enough to cause a group of thirty or so people to change their subsistence plans for a year or more. I was amazed and shamed by how blind I had been. When I spent the night at Boo Becker’s camp at Kauri, there had been no breakfast because there was nothing to eat for breakfast. If there had been something, there would have been a meal prepared, and I, because I was there and was a human being, would have been offered a share. This was the way it was for the Ju/’hoansi in western Ngamiland in the 1970s, every day of their lives.

I say “close to the edge,” but I came to realize that if they were so, they were reliably and resiliently so. They were stable close to the edge because they were quick to incorporate any unexpected resource—such as my unheralded and unlikely presence at the edge of their short-term camp for an unknown period of time—into their list of temporary options. I began to understand that—perhaps like “good” Afrikaner farmers—I fell neatly into a slot of rational opportunism they kept open for just such occasions.

After that I thought all the time about the meaning of my presence in Kauri and in Botswana in general. I felt sickened by the way I had assumed I could just swan in here, have a glorious time living with these wonderful people in the bush and learning so much from them, then disappear on my own mysterious schedule, of which they knew nothing. I asked !Xoma what I could do to help the Kauri people while I was still here.

!Xoma had already been thinking that we could clear some small garden areas in the nearby *molapos* where there was fertile silt and where water stayed for some time after rains. If we could get hold of some seeds, good food crops would result, he said, and he himself would be content to stay here for some time. He thought the Kauri people would also appreciate the opportunity to grow some vegetables for themselves. So I bought tools, seeds, and a couple of donkey-drawn ploughs, and we started a community garden project. Though growing food in the Kalahari is always a dicey proposition due to spotty rainfall,



Figure 6.2. Ju/'hoan ladies clearing brush. © Megan Biesele.

the project did produce a bit of extra food. That started me wondering what else I could do to help in some larger way beyond just providing seed and buying a few crafts.

After the new year started, in 1972, I approached !Unn/obe with this question. She was ready with her answer: my literacy was a tool she could use. “You’re a =*xanu jua* (paper person, literate person),” she said. “Take a letter to the chiefs of Botswana.” She dictated the following letter to me, which I translated as faithfully as I could. It went off by post to the Office of the President (and was, not surprisingly, never answered). But later I managed to have it published in *Kutlwano*, Botswana’s features magazine, and it may have reached some governmental eyes that way (*Morethlwa* 1972: 14–15).

To whom it may concern:

One day a white person came and saw me. I soon forgot him and was just sitting by my fire as I always had. I knew nothing of what he was doing. But all the while he was sitting and thinking about how I could make a better living.

I knew nothing of what was going on in his mind. All I saw was a strange person. And one day he came to me, and I was so frightened I nearly ran away. I just didn’t understand why such a person should come to me.

While I stood there shaking with fear he looked at me and greeted me. And my heart asked, “Yow, is this a person who likes me, that he greets

me like a friend?" And I just stood quietly and watched him. And he came nearer and started to talk to me.

"I have come from far away," he said. "I have come on purpose to see you."

And I said, "Really? See me so you can do what to me?"

"See you and give you some water to drink. And see what it is you find to eat in this bush."

And I heard what he said. And I just sat there until he said to me, "You're going to plant crops."

"What will I find to plant crops with?" I asked.

"You will plant seed."

"Where will I find seed?"

"I will give you seed."

And I said to myself, "Now maybe if I do this I will eat this year."

And the seed really arrived. And it went into the soil. And it germinated. And [it] was food, food you could really eat. And I saw all this.

I have no land of my own. I am just a little bird and have nothing to hold me fast to one place. For this reason I feel pain, my flesh does not feel at rest.

We Bushmen just have no chief to raise us up. I want the chiefs of Botswana to give us a place of our own where we may rest. I am a person who has no one else to take care of me, to feed me. Therefore I ask that education be given me, so that I am full of sense and can feed myself.

!Unn/obe *Morethlwa*

Kauri, western Ngamiland

Absorbed in the narrative, dialogic format she had chosen for the letter, I was halfway through taking the dictation before I realized that !Unn/obe was talking about me! (The pronouns he and she, him and her, his and hers are all the same word in the Ju/'hoan language.) I looked at her in astonishment as this awareness dawned. I don't think she was aware I had been so unaware: telling a story to inform someone or to accomplish a practical end was second nature to her. And she probably never thought I would fail to infer the pronoun gender from the context.

Beguiled by her effective rhetorical approach, I left the pronouns as I had taken them down—he, him, and his—in the letter I sent off. I felt conflicted about the little time I had remaining in Botswana before I would have to go back to Harvard, and I didn't know whether I would make it back to continue this big responsibility I had unwittingly undertaken. So I thought it best to keep the actual context of the letter vague.

At first, too, I was taken aback by the apparently passive and subservient words of the dictation (i.e., *give* us equality and benefits), especially in contrast to the forthright story of the first Boers in Ghanzi! Unn/obe had told me a few months before. But by the time I sent it off I was convinced of its diplomatic wisdom. I reflected that where her first communication had been relatively comfortable, oral, and conversational, the second was designed as a formal approach to a mysterious hierarchy in a written medium, whose conventions were unknown to her and possibly full of pitfalls. When making an ask to a person whose face you cannot see while he can see yours, best to be wearing a smile.

That was the simple beginning of my activist career. Unn/obe's charge to me—"Take a letter!"—could not have been a more clear-cut call to action. I felt the appeal to my possession of the tool of literacy approximated a simple appeal I might have received back home—for instance if a neighbor had walked across my driveway and asked to borrow a hammer. I could not but hand it over—and was happy to do so.

I resolved to speak to my fellow graduate students, and to the professors who sent us out on fieldwork to Botswana, about what we could do as a group to advocate for and support the Ju/'hoansi, who had introduced us to such cultural riches. It turned out that many of my HKRG colleagues, including Mel and Marjorie, my language teacher Pat Draper, Richard Katz, Richard Lee, Nancy Howell, John Yellen, Alison Brooks, and Irv and Nancy DeVore, also felt the same as I did. Along with Lorna and John Marshall, and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, we started the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF) in 1973, shortly after I returned to Harvard. One of the first anthropological advocacy groups in the US, it is still highly respected today.

For nearly fifty years KPF has supported and carried out projects as diverse as mother-tongue educational projects in the click languages, water development in the Kalahari and protection of water sources from elephants, and legal support for San land and resource rights. KPF's story is a long chronicle of discussion, tentative plan making, study of experimental projects in other parts of the world, and learning by trial and error from projects we undertook at the behest of San people. That story is one I will tell later, in another place. This book's story, that of my first fieldwork experience, is the story of the shared events that cemented my commitment to San individuals and communities.

My first eighteen-month experience laid the foundation for the practical and political work in southern Africa, combined with research and activism, that I'm still doing today.

By Christmas 1971, I had spent a year with the Ju/'hoansi. I felt I had learned a lot, but I clearly still had layers and layers of fogged membrane between them and myself to peel off. There were moments when I thought I was comprehending, bit by bit, the profound depths and strengths of this Ju/'hoan culture, which I felt bound to witness and convey to my anthropological colleagues as well as to a wider public back home. These moments were sheer delight for me. Yet in the times between these epiphanies, I often felt self-conscious or sealed away from participating in the moment. I despaired about the filmy barrier that always seemed to grow back between me and the Ju/'hoansi each time I pried some of it away.

Once when we were at Dobe on a trip, another of the layers of membrane separating me from Ju/'hoan people was peeled away like tree bark by a stroke of lightning. I sat by a fire at Dobe one day near the beginning of 1972. Ju/'hoan people were also at the fire, cooking and eating and talking in the bright light of an afternoon sun. I was dozing a bit and letting the voices blend into a blur. I was sleepy after a morning spent trying to pay attention to every word as I continued to work on my Ju/'hoan language skills. By this time I had spent over a year there already, doing that.

My camp employee, =Oma !Oma, sat holding forth on a rickety handmade stool. =Oma had continued work with me ever since I first started my new camp at Kauri, helping me with my camp and with the gradually disintegrating old Land Rover. The Land Rover had by now acquired the jaunty name "Primitiv aber Glücklich" (Primitive but Happy), from the caption under a photograph of a toothless and grinning San grandmother I had seen in a book in a library built by German Lutheran missionaries. I painted the name onto the back door of the vehicle with white paint; the door itself was now held onto the vehicle only by leather thongs, the hinges, like the grandmother's teeth in the photo, having fallen out and disappeared.

Though younger than most storytellers, =Oma seized the narrative floor with relish. He was telling a tale about a visit he and two friends had made to a nearby trading post, and about the outrageously low prices the rich, fat trader had offered for the crafts they had brought to sell.



Figure 6.3. “Primitiv aber glücklich.” © Megan Biesele.

In my somnolent state, I followed only a fraction of what he said, instead enjoying =Oma’s delight in his own articulateness. Though he never left the stool, he seemed to strut and prance in the telling of his story. His teeth flashed in the sun as he put his head back and embellished the ridiculousness of the interaction. “We refused, saying that with the price he offered for this bow and arrow set all four of us would have to share a single *cooldrinki* [Coke or Fanta].” Mimicking the trader, =Oma shouted “Get out of here!,” waving his hands. “And then when [the trader] tried to run us off he tripped over his own stomach! *Ha g!u taahn ha!* [His stomach itself defeated him!]” Hilarity rose around =Oma and his listeners like stirred dust.

Soon people were wiping their eyes with laughter. =Oma, in shorts and wearing a shirt with no buttons, sat up straight on the stool making grandiose gestures with his arms in illustration. A tiny young man like his father, Kxao Kasupe, and all the rest of his family, he seemed to me to grow in direct proportion to the fun in his narrative. I watched him in admiration. As I did, my dozing was suddenly transformed: it came to me that he was my contemporary in the 1970s world, that we were sharing the world in this instant. I had not known before that I still, after a whole year, had had him and other Ju/’hoansi frozen in never-never land.

I felt that day that the world shifted on its axis. Though I had lived and worked and eaten and slept right next to =Oma and his people for the whole of the year 1971, it seems I had still regarded them as being in a world different from mine. I saw them and heard them, but they

were somehow mediated, myths of themselves, phantoms nurtured by my life's collection of attitudes toward Others.

This was many years ago. I am embarrassed by the incident in retrospect, as it seemed rather late in a person's life to be having such basic realizations. But I am profoundly grateful for it, as it and others like it have made all the difference in what has happened to me since, in Africa and elsewhere. The fact that this transformation of consciousness occurred allows me to know that it can happen again. I know this possibility can help me face, progressively, many challenges of this kind in sharing the world. But what about fellow Westerners, I asked myself, who have not had the extraordinary chance I had to clear away some of the screens and walls and bubbles and begin to make a shared life on this planet with people like the Ju/'hoansi? Could I ever convey in writing, especially in the academic writing I was pledged to Harvard to provide, the profound privilege and learning opportunity I had had in going to Africa? Looking back on these experiences, it's still shocking to me that I arrived in Africa with so much to learn about the lives, realities, and even the *existence* of indigenous people with whom I shared the world. But I believe that in my pervasive blindness I was not so different from many other white Americans of my age, at that time. That, too, is shocking.

Meanwhile, the "lessons of the Ju/'hoansi" continued to accumulate for me. I saw more and more clearly that all their media, all their avenues for enjoyment and learning, revolved thematically around the central message of tolerance and equality of individuals. I saw that their insistence on the equitable sharing of resources extended reliably to artistic and spiritual resources. Those who were artists, those who were healers, were not set apart as a class with any more rights than others. Like all others in the society, they were subject to the overriding necessity of group survival, and thus to sharing what they had. Those who had special gifts saw themselves as channels through which inspiration came unbidden, from unknown sources, to be used to the benefit of all.

The sense I had of having somehow landed in a creative community of individuals functioning for each other as well as for themselves was beyond anything I had ever experienced—it was beyond my wildest dreams. I told myself a collective work of art like I had observed here—such as the constant dialogue among living stories, or the gorgeous achievement of song and movement that was the healing dance—must

be no less a work of art than what we in the West call “a work of art.” In fact, I marveled at how very much *more* art—and social genius—it must take for diverse individuals to coordinate themselves in these ways I had seen!