Nisa

The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman

Marjorie Shostak

Vintage Books
A Division of Random House
New York

Introduction

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

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

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

sick. That's why I hadn't told anyone when I left the village.

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

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

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

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

He called to his grandmother, still asleep, and yelled, "What happened to you that you, a woman, stayed here while a little girl went out by herself to give birth? What if the childbirth had killed her? Would you have just left her there for her mother to help, her mother who isn't even here? You don't know that the pain of childbirth is fire and that a

child's birth is like an anger so great that it sometimes kills? Yet, you didn't help! She's just a little girl. She could have been so afraid that the childbirth might have killed her or the child. You, an adult, what were you asking of her?"

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

His grandmother got up and followed Tashay to where I was sitting with the baby. She arrived and called out softly to me, "My daughter-in-law . . . my daughter-in-law . . ." She talked to the infant and greeted her with lovely names. She cut her umbilical cord, picked her up, and carried her as we all walked back to the village. Then they laid me down inside the hut.

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

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

THIS STORY WAS TOLD to me in the !Kung language by Nisa, an African woman of about fifty years of age, living in a remote corner of Botswana, on the northern fringe of the Kalahari desert. It was March 1971, the last month of my twenty-month field stay among the !Kung San, a people who had recently started to leave their traditional means of subsistence—gathering and hunting.

But Nisa, her family, and the people she knew had spent most of their lives as their ancestors had before them—gathering wild plant foods and hunting wild animals in their semi-arid savannah environment.[1]

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

This should in no way suggest that the !Kung San or other contemporary gatherer-hunters are less modern as human beings than anyone else. People everywhere are, in a biological sense, fundamentally similar, and have been so for tens of thousands of years. Gatherer-hunters today exhibit the same range of emotional and intellectual potential as can be found in other human societies. What they represent is a way of life that succeeded; in terms of duration, at least, it is the most successful adaptation people have yet made to their environment.

Nisa is a member of one of the last remaining traditional gatherer-hunter societies, a group calling themselves the *Zhun/twasi*, "the real people," who currently live in isolated areas of Botswana, Angola, and Namibia. Referred to in the past as the Sonquas and in Botswana as the Basarwa, they are also known as the !Kung Bushmen, the !Kung San, or simply the !Kung. They are short—averaging about five feet in height—lean, muscular, and, for Africa, light-skinned. They have high cheekbones and rather Oriental-looking eyes. Along with their pastoral neighbors, the Khoi-Khoi, they are distinguished in these and other physical details from the Black African peoples immediately surrounding them, and are considered by population biologists to be part of a separate racial group called Khoisan. (It is

from this term that the words currently used to refer to them are derived: "Khoi" for Hottentots; "San" for Bushmen. The terms "Hottentot" and "Bushmen," used for more than three hundred years, although more familiar, are also more derogatory.)

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

Some of the findings from this expedition were available to me before I left for Africa. I welcomed the perspective they gave me on the !Kung and their way of life. But when I asked questions about what they were like as people and how they felt about their lives, I received answers so varied that they seemed to reflect as much the personalities of the individual anthropologists as anything they had learned about the !Kung. No matter whom I talked to or what I read, I did not come away with a sense that I knew the !Kung: How did they feel about themselves, their childhoods, their parents? Did spouses love one another; did they feel jealousy; did love survive marriage? What were their dreams like and what did they make of them? Were they afraid of growing old? Of death? Most of all, I was interested in !Kung women's lives. What was it like being a woman in a culture so outwardly different from my own? What were the universals, if any, and how much would I be able to identify with?

My initial field trip took place at a time when traditional values concerning marriage and sexuality were being questioned in my own culture. The Women's Movement had just begun to gain momentum, urging re-examination of the roles Western women had traditionally assumed. I hoped the field trip might help me to clarify some of the issues the Movement had raised.

!Kung women might be able to offer some answers; after all, they provided most of their families' food, yet cared for their children and were lifelong wives as well. Furthermore, their culture, unlike ours, was not being continuously disrupted by social and political factions telling them first that women were one way, then another. Although the !Kung were experiencing cultural change, it was still quite recent and subtle and had thus far left their traditional value system mostly intact. A study revealing what !Kung women's lives were like today might reflect what their lives had been like for generations, possibly even for thousands of years.

Upon arriving in the field, I did everything I could to understand !Kung life: I learned the language, went on gathering expeditions, followed along on hunts, ate bush foods exclusively for days at a time, lived in grass huts in !Kung villages, and sat around their fires listening to discussions, arguments, and stories. I gained an invaluable perspective, participating and watching. I was struck by their broad, subtle knowledge of their environment, by their skill in deciphering animal and human tracks in the sand and in detecting, among mats of dry, tangled vines, the ones that signaled water-storing roots below the ground. I observed their sharing of vegetable foods, meat, and material goods so that no one had substantially more than anyone else. I saw how disputes were defused by discussions that went on for hours, long into the night, in which all points of view were expressed until a consensus was reached. I listened to hunters recount the events of successful hunts, to musicians sing and play their own and other people's compositions, and to storytellers cause body-shaking laughter in their hearers. I noticed in each presentation a modesty akin almost to bashfulness, and I learned that it was considered bad manners to brag or to act in an arrogant way. I sat at their medicine ceremonies and saw the community bound together in a powerful, moving ritual.

I was thrilled to have seen this much in only a few months in the field. Still, I did not feel I knew, except in the most general terms, what these events really meant to the !Kung. I could see, for example, how much they relied on one another and how closely they usually sat together, but I did not understand how

they felt about their relationships and their lives. I needed information that could not be observed; I needed the !Kung to start speaking for themselves.

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

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

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

A visitor who arrived in the middle of the cold season—June and July—and just at sunrise would see mounds of blankets and animal skins in front of the huts, covering people still asleep beside their fires. Those who had already awakened would be stoking the coals, rebuilding the fire, and warming themselves in the chilly morning air. The morning would start slowly for most

of them, a luxury made possible by the cool of the winter season. A visitor on another morning, in the hot, dry months of October and November, would find people moving about, even at dawn, up early to do a few hours of gathering or hunting before the midday heat would force them to rest in the thickest shade.

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

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

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

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

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

Residence in a camp is fluid and subject to frequent change, from day to day and from month to month. At its center, however, each camp has a stable core of closely related older people who have proved successful in living and working together. This core may spend years, perhaps the majority of their adult lives, with one another. They share food and material goods, and they travel together while foraging over an area they have access to by tradition. Spacious, yet essentially circumscribed, this region of approximately 250 square miles is generally acknowledged as being "owned" by some male or female descendant of the people who have lived longest in an area, although this association rarely goes back much further than a few generations. Access to land is collective and nonexclusive and, like so much else in !Kung life, flexible: most people live as visitors or residents in a number of different areas during their lives, and establishing

short-term residence at one water hole does not jeopardize one's claim to residence at another. Visitors—perhaps from an area with a temporary food shortage—are expected to ask permission of the "owners" before making use of an area's water, game, and vegetable foods. Accepting this favor, however, brings with it an obligation to reciprocate if the occasion arises.

Little in the way of special privilege is gained by ownership, because virtually all members in a band are directly or indirectly related to a core member and thus have free access to the area's resources. A senior descendant coming from a long line of owners may assume a position of dominance, but only if he or she also shows personal leadership qualities. In general the !Kung do not have status hierarchies or legitimized authorities, such as chiefs or headmen. Group decisions are reached through consensus. Although a small number of men and women do function as leaders, their influence is derived primarily from having earned the respect of others, and is essentially informal.

Traditional !Kung groups are economically self-sufficient (except for iron, which is acquired by trade). Children, adolescents under fifteen, and adults over sixty contribute little to the quest for food, and others gather or hunt only about two or three days a week. Additional time is spent in housework, cooking and serving food, child care, and the making and repairing of tools, clothing, and huts. But this still leaves substantial time for leisure activities, including singing and composing songs, playing musical instruments, sewing intricate bead designs, telling stories, playing games, visiting, or just lying around and resting.

The central ritual event in traditional !Kung life is the medicinal trance dance, in which all members of a band participate. Healers enter trance and ritually draw illness out of a sick person's body. Other group members support their efforts with singing, clapping, and dancing. The dance takes place anywhere from a few times a month to several times a week and is grounded in a very old tradition—so old that its origins are beyond speculation, even among the oldest living !Kung. Its long history is confirmed by scenes depicted in rock paintings, by dance circles etched in rock, by archaeological findings, and by the occurrence of dances similar in form, content, and musical

style in San groups that speak languages other than !Kung and live several hundred miles away.

Travel—whether in search of food or to visit relatives in distant villages—is usually concentrated during or just after the rainy season, when water is widely available throughout the savannah and food resources are varied and abundant. Travel ceases by nightfall, when living areas are hastily cleared of shrubs and grass, minimal shelters are erected, and huge fires are stoked to establish dominion over the bush and the night. If the group plans to stay, the grass shelters may be made more substantial, especially if the downpours and lightning storms of the rainy season are expected. After a few weeks in one place, however, the group will have depleted the major food resources in the area and will move on. Only if a large animal has been shot will they stay longer, and even then they will move to the site of the kill.

As temporary pools and semipermanent springs dry up, people start moving back toward permanent water, to build new camps for their winter residence. For a while, water trapped in the recesses of large trees may make bush travel possible, but as the temperature and the humidity fall—a signal that winter has arrived and the rains are long over—the only available water may be that squeezed from heavy water roots dug from deep within the sand, or from melons distributed throughout the area. When the nights become bitterly cold and the days cloudless and windy, most bands will settle in for a three-to-five-month stay around one of the permanent springs. The large aggregations of people that result—sometimes more than two hundred—intensify the ritual life of the community as well as the social life of individuals. Trance dances occur more frequently (up to two or three times a week), initiation ceremonies requiring a large number of boys of similar age are performed, gifts are given and reciprocated, and marriages are arranged.

With so many people depending on one set of concentrated resources, tension is inevitable, especially as the distances required to find food increase and the approaching hot, dry season makes travel difficult and unpleasant. Add to this the conflicts that always increase when large numbers of people gather in a

small area, and the result is that a greater number of fights occur in these camps. Passionate and explosive, most are resolved quickly and without serious incident. (Before 1948, however, when a Bantu headman was officially appointed to administer Tswana customary law in the Dobe area, significant numbers of fights led to death from poisoned arrows.) By the time the rains finally come, scattering the dry landscape with temporary oases again, the composition of the small groups that leave to forage on their own may have changed, as some members may have left and others joined.

The day-to-day organization of subsistence is as complex as the seasonal round. !Kung women contribute the majority (from 60 to 80 percent by weight) of the total food consumed. Averaging little more than two days a week in the quest for food, they gather from among 105 species of wild plant foods, including nuts, beans, bulbs and roots, leafy greens, tree resin, berries, and an assortment of other vegetables and fruits. They also collect honey from beehives, and occasionally small mammals, tortoises, snakes, caterpillars, insects, and birds' eggs. Intact ostrich eggs are sought both for their nutritional value—equivalent to about two dozen hens' eggs—and for their shells. After the egg is extracted through a hole bored in one end, the shell makes an excellent container for carrying or storing water. Broken eggshells found at old nesting sites are fashioned into beads, to be strung or sewn into necklaces, headbands, and aprons.

The staple of !Kung nutrition is the abundant mongongo (or mangetti) nut, which constitutes more than half of the vegetable diet. It is prized both for its inner kernel and for its sweet outer fruit. Other important plant foods are baobab fruits, marula nuts, sour plums, tsama melons, tsin beans, water roots, and a variety of berries. Most women share what they bring home, but there are no formal rules for distribution of gathered foods and those with large families may have little left over to give others.

Although food resources are located at variable distances from the villages, they are fairly reliable. Groups of about three to five women leave, usually early in the morning, and head for an agreed-upon area. They proceed at a leisurely pace, filling their karosses with a variety of foods as they travel, and return to

camp by mid-to-late afternoon. After a brief rest, they sort their piles of food, setting some aside to be given as gifts. Most of the food is distributed and consumed within forty-eight hours.

!Kung women also care for children and perform a variety of daily domestic chores. They average close to four hours a day in maintaining their subsistence tools and in housework: fetching water, collecting firewood, maintaining fires, making huts (frame and thatching), arranging bedding, and preparing and serving food (including cracking nuts for themselves and their young children). Men average three hours a day in making and repairing tools and in domestic work: they chop trees for fires and for building huts, help collect firewood, and butcher, prepare, and serve meat. Devoted and loving fathers, they also participate in child care, though their contribution, in terms of time spent, is minor.

Women's status in the community is high and their influence considerable. They are often prominent in major family and band decisions, such as where and when to move and whom their children will marry. Many also share core leadership in a band and ownership of water holes and foraging areas. Just how influential they really are and how their status compares with that of men is a complicated question: women may, in fact, be nearly equal to men, but the culture seems to *define* them as less powerful. In other words, their influence may be greater than the !Kung—of either sex—like to admit.

Men's principal food contribution is hunted meat, which is very highly valued—perhaps because it is so unpredictable—and which, when brought into the village, is often the cause of great excitement, even dancing. Men average slightly less than three days a week in hunting. They, too, leave early in the morning, alone or in pairs, and usually return by sunset, although overnight stays are possible. Although accomplished hunters, they only succeed about one day in every four that they hunt. Game is sparsely distributed in the northern Kalahari—a marked contrast to the herds of thousands of animals in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve farther south—and has become scarcer over the last fifty years.

Bows, arrows, and spears of minimal size and weight make

up the basic hunting kit, along with a variety of bags and implements. But the hunters depend most on a lethal poison extracted from beetle larvae. It is so potent that an antelope, or even a giraffe, is likely to die within a day of being struck with a well-placed arrow. Harmless to people ingesting the meat, the poison works on the animal's central nervous system; it becomes harmful only when it enters an animal's—or a person's—bloodstream. In the village, poisoned arrows are stored in closed quivers hung out of the way of adults and the reach of children. For additional safety, poison is applied only to the shaft, not to the sharp arrow point, to avoid poisoning from accidental cuts. The arrows are periodically checked and fresh poison applied.

Unlike women, who maintain a fairly constant gathering routine, men rarely adhere to strict hunting schedules. They often hunt intensively for a few weeks, then follow with a period of inactivity. Because success in the hunt is so variable, meat accounts for only 20 to 40 percent of the !Kung diet, depending on the time of year and the number of hunters residing in a camp.

Men are as knowledgeable as women in plant lore, but they collect plants only infrequently and account for about 20 percent of all food gathered. Their primary contribution to subsistence is in the animals they hunt. Most prominent are the large game animals (kudu, wildebeest, gemsbok, eland, roan antelope, hartebeest, and giraffe) and the smaller ones (warthog, steenbok, duiker, and hares). Men also collect reptiles (snakes and tortoises), amphibians, and insects, trap hole-dwelling animals (porcupine, antbear, springhare, and anteater), and snare birds (guinea fowl, francolin, kori and korhaan bustards, sand-grouse, and doves). Honey, a great favorite, is extracted from beehives, often with the help of women. Distribution of all but the smallest game is tied to more formal rules than is the case for gathered foods, but the result is similar.

Perhaps because of the limitations of their hunting methods, the !Kung kill only what they need and use every part of the animal. Bones and hooves are cracked for marrow; skins are either eaten or tanned for blankets; sinew is made into thread or strung on a hunting bow. Even the tails of some animals are used: the hair may become the strings of a musical instrument or be

braided into a bracelet, or the entire tail may be carried as a spiritual object in a medicinal trance dance.

Food is rarely stored for any length of time. The environment can be depended on to act as a kind of natural storehouse, with food being gathered only when needed. There are occasional scarcities in some of the important wild vegetable foods, but rarely has there been a shortage in the mongongo nut, which is so well adapted to the Dobe area that even in most years of drought hundreds of thousands of nuts are left on the ground to rot.

Dietary quality is excellent. Richard Lee studied the !Kung diet in 1968 and found their average intake of calories and protein to exceed the United Nations recommendations for people of their size and stature. Their diet is extremely low in salt, saturated fats, and carbohydrates, particularly sugar, and high in polyunsaturated oils, roughage, and vitamins and minerals. In fact, it conforms to most contemporary ideas of good nutrition. The dry season of 1968 was one of the most severe droughts in southern Africa in recent history; thus it is likely that the !Kung diet is even better in normal years. (More recent studies have indicated that during the dry season many !Kung lose weight, suggesting an insufficient calorie intake. They usually regain the weight, however, when the dry season is over. Whatever the actual deficit during this period, the diet remains wide-ranging and high in nutrients.)

Their diet, along with their relaxed pace of life, seems to have protected the !Kung from some of the diseases common in our society: they do not suffer from high blood pressure, hypertensive heart disease or atherosclerosis, hearing loss or senility, varicose veins, or stress-related diseases such as ulcers or colitis.

This does not mean that !Kung health is, in general, good. It is not: nearly 50 percent of children die before the age of fifteen; 20 percent die in their first year, mostly from gastrointestinal infections. Life expectancy at birth is only thirty years, while the average life expectancy at age fifteen is fifty-five. One reason that the illnesses we associate with aging seem to have little impact on them is that only 10 percent of the population is over sixty years old—the age at which they would begin to be more

vulnerable to such illnesses. Respiratory infections and malaria are major killers of adults. !Kung health nevertheless compares favorably with that of many nonindustrial societies, and of our own society before the advent of modern public health and medicines.

Given the circumstances the !Kung face, they have been remarkably successful. They survive—even thrive—in an environment that is hospitable only to those who know it intimately. Their traditions, distilled from thousands of years of experience, have been passed on through hundreds of generations. There is neither memory nor legend regarding a time when, for example, the poison they use on their arrows, or their trance ritual, did not exist. They know nearly five hundred species of plants and animals: which are edible, and which have medicinal, toxic, cosmetic, or various other uses. Their skill in exploiting their environment allows them free time in which to concentrate on family ties, social life, and spiritual development. Their life is rich in human warmth and aesthetic experience and offers an enviable balance of work and love, ritual and play.

The !Kung are not exceptional among gathering and hunting peoples. According to scientists who have compared the social and economic organization in different groups of contemporary gatherer-hunters, these societies have more in common with each other than with their agricultural, pastoral, and industrial neighbors. Wherever it is practiced, whatever the climate, whatever the terrain, there is an undeniable "master plan" in contemporary gatherer-hunter life. The best explanation for the similarities among these groups is that within the gathering and hunting mode, there is a limited set of alternatives to choose from. Any group of people who had to live off the land would face similar ecological problems and would probably invent a roughly similar system. It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that this pattern—or more properly, this range of patterns—prevailed in most human societies before the agricultural revolution and during much of the course of human evolution.

But what relevance does all this have for us? What do we gain from knowing about our gathering and hunting past? Most important, perhaps, is the knowledge that the gatherer-hunter

legacy is a rich one. Life for our prehistoric ancestors was not characterized by constant deprivation, but rather by usually adequate food and nutrition, modest work effort, fair amounts of leisure, and sharing of resources, with both women and men contributing substantially to the family, the economy, and the social world. Today, gatherers and hunters, the !Kung included, live in the most marginal areas, whereas prehistoric gatherers and hunters occupied areas abundant with water, plant food, and game. If there is any bias in the data from modern-day gatherer-hunters, therefore, it probably leads to an underestimate of the quality of life of their—and our—predecessors.

Chapter 1
Earliest Memories

!KUNG CHILDREN spend their first few years in almost constant close contact with their mothers. The !Kung infant has continual access to the mother's breast, day and night, usually for at least three years, and nurses on demand several times an hour. The child sleeps beside the mother at night, and during the day is carried in a sling, skin-to-skin on the mother's hip, wherever the mother goes, at work or at play. (This position is an ideal height for older children, who love to entertain babies.) When the child is not in the sling, the mother may be amusing her—bouncing, singing, or talking. If they are physically separated, it is usually for short periods when the father, siblings, cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or friends of the family are playing with the baby while the mother sits close by. Separation from the mother becomes more frequent after the middle of the second year, but even then it is initiated almost exclusively by the child, who is steadily drawn into the groups of children playing around the village. Still, the mother is usually available whenever needed.

!Kung fathers—indulgent, affectionate, and devoted—also form very intense mutual attachments with their children. Nevertheless, men spend only a small fraction of the time that women do in the company of children, especially infants, and avoid many of the less pleasant tasks of child care, such as toileting, cleaning and bathing, and nose wiping. They are also inclined to hand crying or fretful babies back to the mothers for

consolation. Fathers, like mothers, are not viewed as figures of awesome authority, and their relationships with their children are intimate, nurturant, and physically close. Sharing the same living and sleeping space, children have easy access to both parents when they are around. As children—especially boys—get older, fathers spend even more time with them.

Assuming no serious illness, the first real break from the infant's idyll of comfort and security comes with weaning, which typically begins when the child is around three years of age and the mother is pregnant again. Most !Kung believe that it is dangerous for a child to continue to nurse once the mother is pregnant with her next child. They say the milk in the woman's breasts belongs to the fetus; harm could befall either the unborn child or its sibling if the latter were to continue to nurse. It is considered essential to wean quickly, but weaning meets the child's strong resistance and may in fact take a number of months to accomplish. The usual procedure is to apply a paste made from a bitter root (or, more recently, tobacco resin) to the nipple, in the hope that the unpleasant taste will deter the child from sucking. Psychological pressure is also employed, as was clear from one woman's memories of being weaned: "People told me that if I nursed, my younger sibling would bite me and hit me after she was born. They said that, of course, just to get me to stop nursing."

If a child has recently been weaned and the mother miscarries, or if the new infant is stillborn or dies soon after birth, the older child may be allowed to nurse again. But this situation is considered far from ideal. One woman whose baby died and whose young son then resumed nursing was worried because her son had become ill. Other people in the village interpreted his illness as being caused by his mother's milk, which had been meant for his dead sibling. In this time of stress the boy clung to his mother and to the security of her breasts with an intensity that was difficult for her to rebuff. Although she believed she should refuse him the breast, she too was suffering and could not bring herself to do it. A few weeks later she did find the strength, and soon after that her son got better.

Because of the physical and emotional comfort nursing affords, most children do not give it up easily. Also, with no domesticated animals to provide substitute sources of milk, the only alternative to nursing is to eat increased amounts of bush foods, but these do not compare to the appeal of mother's milk. Children, therefore, are likely to be miserable during this period and often express their displeasure quite dramatically. Tantrums are typical, and general psychological distress is usually obvious. One man remembered, "I wanted to nurse after my younger brother was born, but my mother refused. I cried and my grandmother took me to another village so I would forget about nursing. But I thought about it anyway, and asked why she wouldn't take me back to my mother so I could nurse. I was in great pain."

The last-born child of a mother in her late thirties or early forties is spared the pain of abrupt weaning. If the mother does not get pregnant again, a child may nurse until the age of five or older, stopping only when social pressure such as mild ridicule from other children makes it difficult to continue.

When the new baby is born the older child also has to give up the coveted sleeping place immediately beside the mother. Although she may sleep between her parents for a while, an older child is eventually expected to sleep on the far side of her younger sibling. No surprise, then, that resentments and anger are frequently expressed toward the parents and sometimes even toward the new infant. This was clearly the case of a four-year-old who kept asking to hold her newborn brother. The mother finally took the baby from her sling and placed him gently in his sister's arms. The girl sat and rocked the baby, singing to him and praising him, while her mother stood nearby. The next moment, however, hearing the shouts of other children playing, the girl suddenly stood up and dropped her tiny brother in the sand. Without a glance, she ran off, followed by her brother's cries and her mother's admonishments.

Within a year of being weaned from the breast the child is "weaned" from the sling as well. !Kung children love to be carried. They love the contact with their mothers, and they love not having to walk under the pressure of keeping up. As their mothers begin to suggest and then to insist that they walk along beside them, temper tantrums once again erupt: children refuse to

walk, demand to be carried, and will not agree to be left behind in the village while their mothers gather for the day. Other people often make this adjustment easier by offering to carry the child, and on long walks a father will usually carry the child on his shoulder. By the age of six or seven, however, a child is expected to walk on her own and is no longer carried, even for short distances.

!Kung parents are concerned that these events not hit their children too hard, but coming as they do one after the other, these times are difficult at best. The father may try to spend more time with the child, or the child may stay with a devoted grandparent or aunt (who will be sure to spoil her) in a nearby village for a while. But parents are aware that the tremendous outpouring of love given each child in the first few years of life produces children who are typically secure and capable of handling this period of emotional stress. The extremely close relationship with their mothers seems to give children strength: the child has the mother's almost exclusive attention for an average of forty-four months, thirty-six of these with unlimited access to the food and comfort afforded by nursing. Also, the child of three or four is no longer as needy of the mother's attention as she had been. The boisterous play of other children ultimately becomes more appealing than continuing the conflict with the mother. Within a few months after the birth of their siblings, many children can be seen playing exuberantly most of the day and only occasionally behaving angrily with their families. Before long even these difficulties are largely overcome as the child starts enjoying the role of older sibling. Because children are between three and five years old when these events occur, many adults remember, if not the actual details, at least the feelings that accompanied weaning, both from the breast and from the sling. Some adults, looking back, see these events as having had a formative influence on their lives.

The !Kung economy is based on sharing, and children are encouraged to share things from their infancy. Among the first words a child learns are *na* ("give it to me") and *ihn* ("take this"). But sharing is hard for children to learn, especially when they are expected to share with someone they resent or dislike.

And giving or withholding food or possessions may be a powerful way to express anger, jealousy, and resentment, as well as love.

It is also hard to learn not simply to take what you want, when you want it. !Kung children rarely go hungry; even in the occasional times when food is scarce, they get preferential treatment. Food is sometimes withheld as a form of punishment for wasting or destroying it, but such punishment is always short-lived. Nevertheless, many adults recall "stealing" food as children. These episodes reflect the general !Kung anxiety about their food supply, as well as the pleasure they take in food—both emotions already present in childhood.

!Kung parents are tolerant toward children's angry outbursts. Most youthful transgressions are explained by remarks like "Children have no sense" or "Their intelligence hasn't come to them yet." Behavior is judged, commented on, and occasionally criticized, and scoldings are not uncommon, but parents basically believe children to be utterly irresponsible. There is no doubt in the parents' minds that as children grow up they will learn to act with sense, with or without deliberate training, simply as a result of maturation, social pressure and the desire to conform to group values. Since most !Kung adults are cooperative, generous, and hardworking and seem to be no more self-centered than any other people, this theory is evidently right, at least for them.

Although the !Kung say that children need to be disciplined, their efforts to do so are minimal. Adult attitudes toward discipline are not always clearly understood by a child, however—especially an older child, who may feel stronger pressure to conform. One young girl was convinced that a woman's lack of response to the verbal assault of her young son was just as "senseless" as the boy's behavior: "His mother didn't do anything to him. She didn't even yell at him. That's how adults are—without sense. When a child insults them, they just sit there and laugh."

Still, these early years are often remembered as times of intense conflict between parents and children. Beating and threats of beating are almost universal in the childhood memories of

!Kung adults; yet observational research has shown that !Kung parents are highly indulgent with children of all ages, and physical punishment is almost never witnessed. It is probable that rare instances of physical punishment become exaggerated and vivid in the child's memory. So, too, the much more common *threats* of beatings may be translated, in retrospect, into actual incidents. Whatever the reality, such memories dramatize the very real tensions that exist in !Kung families as in any others.

Grandparents (and often other relatives) are remembered much more favorably. Alternate generations are recognized as having a special relationship, especially when the child is the grandparent's "namesake." Personal and intimate topics not discussed with parents are taken up freely with grandparents, and grandparents often represent a child's interests at the expense of those of the parent. Also, since older people contribute less to subsistence than do younger adults, they have more time to play with their grandchildren. It is not surprising that children are willing to live with them or with other close relatives, especially during times of conflict with parents. As one young girl explained, "When I was a little girl, I lived with my aunt for weeks, sometimes for months at a time. I didn't cry when I lived with her; she was my second mother."

FIX MY VOICE on the machine so that my words come out clear. I am an old person who has experienced many things and I have much to talk about. I will tell my talk, of the things I have done and the things that my parents and others have done. But don't let the people I live with hear what I say.

Our father's name was Gau and our mother's was Chuko. Of course, when my father married my mother, I wasn't there. But soon after, they gave birth to a son whom they called Dau. Then they gave birth to me, Nisa, and then my younger brother was born, their youngest child who survived, and they named him Kumsa.[1]

I remember when my mother was pregnant with Kumsa. I was still small and I asked, "Mommy, that baby inside you . . . when that baby is born, will it come out from your belly button? Will the baby grow and grow until Daddy breaks open your stomach with a knife and takes my little sibling out?" She said, "No, it won't come out that way. When you give birth, a baby comes from here," and she pointed to her genitals. Then she said, "And after he is born, you can carry your little sibling around." I said, "Yes, I'll carry him!"

Later, I asked, "Won't you help me and let me nurse?" She said, "You can't nurse any longer. If you do, you'll die." I left her and went and played by myself for a while. When I came back, I asked to nurse again but she still wouldn't let me. She took some paste made from the dch'a root and rubbed it on her nipple. When I tasted it, I told her it was bitter.

When mother was pregnant with Kumsa, I was always crying. I *wanted* to nurse! Once, when we were living in the bush and away from other people, I was especially full of tears. I cried all the time. That was when my father said he was going to beat me to death;[2] I was too full of tears and too full of crying. He had a big branch in his hand when he grabbed me, but he didn't hit me; he was only trying to frighten me. I cried out, "Mommy, come help me! Mommy! Come! Help me!" When my mother came, she said, "No,

Gau, you are a man. If you hit Nisa you will put sickness into her and she will become very sick. Now, leave her alone. I'll hit her if it's necessary. My arm doesn't have the power to make her sick; your arm, a man's arm, does."

When I finally stopped crying, my throat was full of pain. All the tears had hurt my throat.

Another time, my father took me and left me alone in the bush. We had left one village and were moving to another and had stopped along the way to sleep. As soon as night sat, I started to cry. I cried and cried and cried. My father hit me, but I kept crying. I probably would have cried the whole night, but finally, he got up and said, "I'm taking you and leaving you out in the bush for the hyenas to kill. What kind of child are you? If you nurse your sibling's milk, you'll die!" He picked me up, carried me away from camp and set me down in the bush. He shouted, "Hyenas! There's meat over here . . . Hyenas! Come and take this meat!" Then he turned and started to walk back to the village.

After he left, I was so afraid! I started to run and, crying, I ran past him. Still crying, I ran back to my mother and lay down beside her. I was afraid of the night and of the hyenas, so I lay there quietly. When my father came back, he said, "Today, I'm really going to make you shit![3] You can see your mother's stomach is huge, yet you still want to nurse." I started to cry again and cried and cried; then I was quiet again and lay down. My father said, "Good, lie there quietly. Tomorrow, I'll kill a guinea fowl for you to eat."

The next day, he went hunting and killed a guinea fowl. When he came back, he cooked it for me and I ate and ate and ate. But when I was finished, I said I wanted to take my mother's nipple again. My father grabbed a strap and started to hit me, "Nisa, have you no sense? Can't you understand? Leave your mother's chest alone!" And I began to cry again.

Another time, when we were walking together in the bush, I said, "Mommy . . . carry me!" She said yes, but my father told her not to. He said I was big enough to walk along by myself. Also, my mother was pregnant. He wanted to hit

me, but my older brother Dau stopped him, "You've hit her so much, she's skinny! She's so thin, she's only bones. Stop treating her this way!" Then Dau picked me up and carried me on his shoulders.

When mother was pregnant with Kumsa, I was always crying, wasn't I? I would cry for a while, then be quiet and sit around, eating regular food: sweet nin berries and starchy chon and klaru bulbs, foods of the rainy season. One day, after I had eaten and was full, I said, "Mommy, won't you let me have just a little milk? Please, let me nurse." She cried, "Mother![4] My breasts are things of shit! Shit! Yes, the milk is like vomit and smells terrible. You can't drink it. If you do, you'll go, 'Whaagh . . . Whaagh . . .' and throw up." I said, "No, I won't throw up, I'll just nurse." But she refused and said, "Tomorrow, Daddy will trap a springhare, just for you to eat." When I heard that, my heart was happy again.

The next day, my father killed a springhare. When I saw him coming home with it, I shouted, "Ho, ho, Daddy! Ho, ho, Daddy's come! Daddy killed a springhare; Daddy's bringing home meat! Now I will eat and won't give any to *her*." My father cooked the meat and when it was done, I ate and ate and ate. I told her, "You stinged[5] your milk, so I'll stinge this meat. You think your breasts are such wonderful things? They're not, they're terrible things." She said, "Nisa, please listen to me—my milk is not good for you anymore." I said, "Grandmother! I don't want it anymore! I'll eat meat instead. I'll never have anything to do with your breasts again. I'll just eat the meat Daddy and Dau kill for me."

Mother's stomach grew very large. The first labor pains came at night and stayed with her until dawn. That morning, everyone went gathering. Mother and I stayed behind. We sat together for a while, then I went and played with the other children. Later, I came back and ate the nuts she had cracked for me. She got up and started to get ready. I said, "Mommy, let's go to the water well, I'm thirsty." She said, "Uhn, uhn, I'm going to gather some mongongo nuts." I told the children

that I was going and we left; there were no other adults around.

We walked a short way, then she sat down by the base of a large nehn tree, leaned back against it, and little Kumsa was born. At first, I just stood there; then I sat down and watched. I thought, "Is that the way it's done? You just sit like that and that's where the baby comes out? Am I also like that?" Did I have any understanding of things?

After he was born, he lay there, crying. I greeted him, "Ho, ho, my baby brother! Ho, ho, I have a little brother! Some day we'll play together." But my mother said, "What do you think this thing is? Why are you talking to it like that? Now, get up and go back to the village and bring me my digging stick." I said, "What are you going to dig?" She said, "A hole. I'm going to dig a hole so I can bury the baby. Then you, Nisa, will be able to nurse again."[6] I refused. "My baby brother? My little brother? Mommy, he's my *brother!* Pick him up and carry him back to the village. I don't want to nurse!" Then I said, "I'll tell Daddy when he comes home!" She said, "You won't tell him. Now, run back and bring me my digging stick. I'll bury him so you can nurse again. You're much too thin." I didn't want to go and started to cry. I sat there, my tears falling, crying and crying. But she told me to go, saying she wanted my bones to be strong. So, I left and went back to the village, crying as I walked.

I was still crying when I arrived. I went to the hut and got her digging stick. My mother's younger sister had just arrived home from the nut groves. She put the mongongo nuts she had gathered into a pile near her hut and sat down. Then she began roasting them. When she saw me, she said, "Nisa, what's wrong? Where's your mother?" I said, "By the nehn tree way out there. That's where we went together and where she just now gave birth to a baby. She told me to come back and get her digging stick so she could . . . bury him! This is terrible!" and I started to cry again. Then I added, "When I greeted him and called him 'my little brother' she told me not to. What she wants to do is bad . . . that's why I'm crying. Now I have to bring this digging stick to her!"

My mother's sister said, "Oooo . . . people! This Chuko, she's certainly a bad one to be talking like that. And she's out there alone with the baby! No matter what it is—a boy or a girl—she should keep it." I said, "Yes, he's a little boy with a little penis just resting there at the bottom of his stomach." She said, "Mother! Let's go! Let's go and talk to her. When I get there I'll cut his umbilical cord and carry him back."

I left the digging stick behind and we ran to where my mother was still sitting, waiting for me. Perhaps she had already changed her mind, because, when we got there, she said, "Nisa, because you were crying like that, I'll keep the baby and carry him back with me." My aunt went over to Kumsa lying beside my mother and said, "Chuko, were you trying to split your face into pieces?[7] You can see what a big boy you gave birth to, yet you wanted Nisa to bring back your digging stick? You wanted to bury this great big baby? Your own father worked to feed you and keep you alive. This child's father would surely have killed you if you had buried his little boy. You must have no sense, wanting to kill such a nice big baby."

My aunt cut his umbilical cord, wiped him off, put him into her kaross, and carried him back to the village. Mother soon got up and followed, shamed by her sister's talk. Finally, she said, "Can't you understand? Nisa is still a little child. My heart's not happy that she hasn't any milk to drink. Her body is weak. I want her bones to grow strong." But my aunt said, "When Gau hears about this, he'll beat you. A grown woman with one child following after another so nicely, doesn't behave like this." When we arrived back in the village, my mother took the baby and lay down.

Everyone was now coming back from the mongongo groves. After they put down their gatherings, they came to look at Kumsa. The women all said, "Oooh . . . this woman has no sense! She gave birth to such a big baby, yet she was going to kill it!" My mother said, "I wanted his older sister to nurse, that's why I would have done it, and if I had been alone, I would have! I did the wrong thing by not taking my digging stick with me, but others did the wrong thing by tak-

ing him away from me. That's why I'm here with him at all." The women did not agree. They told my aunt, "You did very well. You were right to take the baby from Chuko and save him for his father. Wouldn't Chuko have had to answer to him if she had killed his baby?"

When the sun was low in the sky, my father came home from hunting. I greeted him, "Ho, ho, Daddy! Ho, ho, Daddy's home! There's Daddy!" He came and sat down beside the hut. He asked my mother, "What's wrong? Why are you lying down? Is something hurting you?" She said, "No, I'm just lying down." Then he said, "Eh-hey . . . my wife gave birth? Chuko, it's a boy?" She said, "Yes, a little boy." Then her sister said, "And a very large baby, too! But Chuko said she was going to . . ." I interrupted, "*Kill* him!" I rushed on, "She told me to come back and get her digging stick so she could kill my baby brother. I started to cry and came back to the village. But Aunt Koka went back with me and took the baby away from her." My aunt said, "Yes, I pulled the baby from his grave and carried him back." Then I said, "There he is lying over there. Mommy wanted to kill him."

My father said, "Chuko, why did you want to kill my son? If you had, I would have killed you. I would have struck you with my spear and killed you. Do you think I wouldn't do that? I surely would. What was making you feel so much pain that you would have killed such a large baby? You'll keep both children, now. Nisa will continue to grow up eating regular food."

After Kumsa was born, I sometimes just played by myself. I'd take the big kaross and lie down in it. I'd think, "Oh, I'm a child playing all alone. Where could I possibly go by myself?" Then I'd sit up and say, "Mommy, take my little brother from your kaross and let me play with him." But whenever she did, I hit him and made him cry. Even though he was still a little baby, I hit him. Then my mother would say, "You still want to nurse, but I won't let you. When Kumsa wants to, I'll let him. But whenever you want to, I'll cover my breasts with my hand and you'll feel ashamed."

I wanted the milk she had in her breasts, and when she nursed him, my eyes watched as the milk spilled out. I'd cry all night, cry and cry until dawn broke. Some mornings I just stayed around and my tears fell and I cried and refused all food. That was because I saw him nursing. I saw with my eyes the milk spilling out, the milk *I* wanted. I thought it was mine.

One day, my older brother came back from hunting carrying a duiker he had killed. I was sitting, playing by myself when I saw him, "Mommy! Mommy! Look! Big brother killed a duiker! Look over there, he's killed a duiker." My mother said, "Eh, didn't I tell you this morning that you should stop crying and wait for your older brother to come home? Now, see what he's brought back for you!"

When my brother started to skin it, I watched. "Oooo, a *male* duiker. Mommy . . . look, it's a male." I pointed, "There are its testicles and there's its penis." My older brother said, "Yes, those are its testicles and there's its penis."

After he skinned it, he gave me the feet. I put them in the coals to roast. Then he gave me some meat from the calf and I put that in the coals, too. When it was ready, I ate and ate and ate. Mother told me to give her some, but I refused, "Didn't you stinge your breasts? Didn't I say I wanted to nurse? I'm the only one who's going to eat this meat. I won't give any of it to you!" She said, "The milk you want belongs to your brother. What's making you still want to nurse?" I said, "My big brother killed this duiker. You won't have any of it. Not *you*. He'll cut the rest into strips and hang it to dry for me to eat. You refused to let me nurse so your son could. Now you say I should give you meat?"

Another day, my mother was lying down asleep with Kumsa, and I quietly sneaked up on them. I took Kumsa away from her, put him down on the other side of the hut, and came back and lay down beside her. While she slept, I took her nipple, put it in my mouth and began to nurse. I nursed and nursed and nursed. Maybe she thought it was my little brother. But he was still lying where I left him, while I stole his milk. I had already begun to feel wonderfully full

when she woke up. She saw me and cried, "Where . . . tell me . . . what did you do with Kumsa? Where is he?" At that moment, he started to cry. I said, "He's over there."

She grabbed me and pushed me, hard, away from her. I lay there and cried. She went to Kumsa, picked him up, and laid him down beside her. She insulted me, cursing my genitals,[8] "Have you gone crazy? Nisa-Big-Genitals, what's the matter with you? What craziness grabbed you that you took Kumsa, put him somewhere else, then lay down and nursed? Nisa-Big-Genitals! You must be crazy! I thought it was Kumsa nursing!" I lay there, crying. Then I said, "I've already nursed. I'm full. Let your baby nurse now. Go, feed him. I'm going to play." I got up and went and played. Later, I came back and stayed with my mother and her son. We stayed around together the rest of the day.

Later, when my father came back from the bush, she said, "Do you see what kind of mind your daughter has? Go, hit her! Hit her after you hear what she's done. Your daughter almost killed Kumsa! This tiny little baby, this tiny little thing, she took from beside me and dropped somewhere else. I was lying down, holding him, and fell asleep. That's when she took him from me and left him by himself. She came back, lay down, and started to nurse. Now, hit your daughter!"

I lied, "What? She's lying! Me . . . Daddy, I didn't nurse. I didn't take Kumsa and leave him by himself. Truly, I didn't. She's tricking you. She's lying. I didn't nurse. I don't even want her milk anymore." My father said, "If I ever hear of this again, I'll beat you! Don't ever do something like that again!" I said, "Yes, he's my little brother, isn't he? My brother, my little baby brother, and I *love* him. I won't do that again. He can nurse all by himself. Daddy, even if you're not here, I won't steal mommy's breasts. They belong to my brother." He said, "Yes, daughter. But if you ever try to nurse your mother's breasts again, I'll hit you so that it *really* hurts." I said, "Eh, from now on, I'm going to go wherever you go. When you go to the bush, I'll go with you. The two of us will kill springhare together and you'll trap guinea fowl and you'll

give them all to me."

My father slept beside me that night. When dawn broke, he and my older brother left to go hunting. I watched as they walked off. I thought, "If I stay here, mother won't let me nurse," so I got up and ran after them. But when my brother saw me, he pushed me back toward the village, "Go back and stay in the village. When the sun is hot like this, it could kill you. Why do you want to come with us, anyway?"

This was also when I used to steal food, although it only happened once in a while. Some days I wouldn't steal anything and would just stay around playing, without doing any mischief. But other times, when they left me in the village, I'd steal and ruin[9] their things. That's what they said when they yelled at me and hit me. They said I had no sense.

It happened over all types of food: sweet nin berries or klaru bulbs, other times it was mongongo nuts. I'd think, "Uhn, uhn, they won't give me any of that. But if I steal it, they'll hit me." Sometimes, before my mother went gathering, she'd leave food inside a leather pouch and hang it high on one of the branches inside the hut. If it was klaru, she'd peel off the skins before putting them inside.

But as soon as she left, I'd steal whatever was left in the bag. I'd find the biggest bulbs and take them. I'd hang the bag back on the branch and go sit somewhere to eat. When my mother came back, she'd say, "Oh! Nisa was in here and stole all the bulbs!" She'd hit me and yell, "Don't steal! What's the matter with you that inside you there is so much stealing? Stop taking things! Why are you so full of something like that?"

One day, right after they left, I climbed the tree where she had hung the pouch, took out some bulbs, put the pouch back, and mashed them with water in a mortar. I put the paste in a pot and cooked it. When it was ready, I ate and finished everything I had stolen.

Another time, I took some klaru and kept the bulbs beside me, eating them very slowly. That's when mother came

back and caught me. She grabbed me and hit me, "Nisa, stop stealing! Are you the only one who wants to eat klaru? Now, let me take what's left and cook them for all of us to eat. Did you really think you were the only one who was going to eat them all?" I didn't answer and started to cry. She roasted the rest of the klaru and the whole family ate. I sat there, crying. She said, "Oh, this one has no sense, finishing all those klaru like that. Those are the ones I had peeled and had left in the pouch. Has she no sense at all?" I cried, "Mommy, don't talk like that." She wanted to hit me, but my father wouldn't let her.

Another time, I was out gathering with my mother, my father, and my older brother. After a while, I said, "Mommy, give me some klaru." She said, "I still have to peel these. As soon as I do, we'll go back to the village and eat them." I had also been digging klaru to take back to the village, but I ate all I could dig. My mother said, "Are you going to eat all your klaru right now? What will you eat when you get back to the village?" I started to cry. My father told me the same, "Don't eat all your klaru here. Leave them in your pouch and soon your pouch will be full." But I didn't want that, "If I put all my klaru in my pouch, which ones am I going to eat now?"

Later, I sat down in the shade of a tree while they gathered nearby. As soon as they had moved far enough away, I climbed the tree where they had left a pouch hanging, full of klaru, and stole the bulbs. I had my little pouch, the one my father had made me, and as I took the bulbs, I put them in it. I took out more and more and put them all in together. Then I climbed down and sat, waiting for them to return.

They came back, "Nisa, you ate the klaru! What do you have to say for yourself?" I said, "Uhn, uhn, I didn't take them." My mother said, "So, you're afraid of your skin hurting, afraid of being hit?" I said, "Uhn, uhn, I didn't eat those klaru." She said, "You *ate* them. You certainly did. Now, don't do that again! What's making you keep on stealing?"

My older brother said, "Mother, don't punish her today. You've already hit her too many times. Just leave her alone.

We can see. She says she didn't steal the klaru. Well then, what did eat them? Who else was here?"

I started to cry. Mother broke off a branch and hit me, "Don't steal! Can't you understand! I tell you, but you don't listen. Don't your ears hear when I talk to you?" I said, "Uhn, uhn. Mommy's been making me feel bad for too long now. I'm going to go stay with Grandma. Mommy keeps saying I steal things and hits me so that my skin hurts. I'm going to go stay with Grandma. I'll go where she goes and sleep beside her wherever she sleeps. And when she goes out digging klaru, I'll eat what she brings back."

But when I went to my grandmother, she said, "No, I can't take care of you this time. If you stay with me, you'll be hungry. I'm old and only go gathering one day in many. Most mornings I just stay around. We'll sit together and hunger will kill you. Now, go back and sit beside your mother and father." I said, "No, Daddy will hit me. Mommy will hit me. My skin hurts from being hit. I want to stay with you."

I lived with her for a while. But I was still full of tears. I just cried and cried and cried. I sat with her and no matter if the sun was setting or was high in the sky, I just cried. One month, when the nearly full moon rose just after sunset, I went back to my mother's hut. I said, "Mommy, you hate me. You always hit me. I'm going to stay on with Grandma. You hate me and hit me until I can't stand it any more. I'm tired."

Another time when I went to my grandmother, we lived in another village, nearby. While I was there, my father said to my mother, "Go, go bring Nisa back. Get her so she can be with me. What did she do that you chased her away from here?" When I was told they wanted me to come back I said, "No, I won't go back. I'm not going to do what he said. I don't want to live with Mother. I want to stay with Grandma; my skin still hurts. Today, yes, this very day here, I'm going to just continue to sleep beside Grandma."

So, I stayed with her. Then, one day she said, "I'm going to take you back to your mother and father." She took me to them, saying, "Today, I'm giving Nisa back to you. But isn't there someone here who will take good care of her? You

don't just hit and hit a child like this one. She likes food and likes to eat. All of you are lazy. You've just left her so she hasn't grown well. If there were still plenty of food around, I'd continue to take care of her. She'd just continue to grow up beside me. Only after she had grown up, would she leave. Because all of you have killed this child with hunger. With your own fingers you've beaten her, beaten her as though she weren't a Zhun/twa.[10] She was always crying. Look at her now, how small she still is." But my mother said, "No, listen to me. Your little granddaughter . . . whenever she saw food with her eyes, she'd just start crying."

Oh, but my heart was happy! Grandmother was scolding Mother! I held so much happiness in my heart that I laughed and laughed. But when Grandmother went home and left me there I cried and cried. My father yelled at me, but he didn't hit me. His anger usually came out only from his mouth. "You're so senseless! Don't you realize that after you left, everything felt less important? We wanted you to be with us. Yes, even your mother wanted you and missed you. Today, everything will be all right when you stay with us. Your mother will take you where she goes; the two of you will do things together and go gathering together. Why do you refuse to leave your grandmother now?"

But I cried and cried. I didn't want to leave her. "Mommy, let me go back and stay with Grandma, let me follow after her." But my father said, "That's enough. No more talk like that. There's nothing here that will hit you. Now, be quiet." And I was quiet. After that, when my father dug klaru bulbs, I ate them, and when he dug chon bulbs, I ate them. I ate everything they gave me, and I wasn't yelled at any more.

When I was growing up, some days I stayed with my aunt. I lived with her, then went back and lived with my mother. After, I moved on again and lived with my grandmother and stayed with her for a few nights.

They all brought me up. All of them helped. My aunt brought me up; my father and mother brought me up; my grandmother brought me up. But I was very very small. My

mother made me stop nursing too early and I was *tiny!* So, even as I am today, although I'm old, I'm still small. Look at my older brother Dau and my younger brother Kumsa and you'll see how big they are. Only I am small.

People failed at bringing me up. I was too difficult for them.

Chapter 2
Family Life

THE ANGER AND RESENTMENT occasioned by the birth of a sibling may be reflected in tensions between adjacent siblings for months or even years. One young girl expressed feelings from her early childhood: "After my sister was born, I remember looking at her and thinking, 'That's not my sister, that's someone else's sister.' I wanted to hit her because everyone kept telling me she *was* my sister. But I just *knew* she wasn't. One day, when she was about a week old, I did hit her. My father punished me, so I didn't do it again. That was bad, of course. But I had no sense at the time."

!Kung children are discouraged from fighting, but anger is recognized as something they ultimately have to learn to handle themselves; children of comparable strength often resolve their own fights before parents become involved. Dealing with anger is difficult for adults as well as for children. Daily tensions often spark conflicts that result in bitter displays of antagonism. Bystanders attempt to quell the truly serious eruptions, but it is not always easy: when arguments arise, everyone is apt to become involved. Physical fights sometimes ensue. Such outbursts are usually followed by personal regret and by attempts to make up for any harm done. Fortunately, most conflicts are resolved before they reach this point, through hours of talk; or, less commonly, by splitting up of the group, either temporarily or permanently.

!Kung siblings are likely to be about four years apart in age—an unusually long birth spacing for a population without birth control. How !Kung women maintain these long intervals between births is a question only now being answered. The !Kung claim to know of plants that cause miscarriage when properly prepared and ingested, but there is no evidence that these are effective—or even that they are used. A taboo against resuming sexual relations is also said to be in effect for about six months after a child's birth, but most couples share their blankets again immediately after a birth and do not abide by this restriction for very long. (Even if they did, it would allow the women to get pregnant soon after the end of the six months, resulting in a birth spacing of two years at most.)

Infanticide has also been suggested as an explanation. Bantu law now prohibits this practice, but even in traditional times it probably occurred only rarely—in cases of congenital deformity, of too short birth spacing, or of twins, regardless of gender. The length of the birth interval could be a life-or-death issue: if a woman had another baby too soon, either the baby or her older child—already the object of great affection—would probably die. Nursing a child requires a large daily intake of calories by the mother. Although the !Kung diet is usually adequate for this, it would be debilitating or even impossible for a woman to produce enough milk for *two* children. (The milk has been analyzed and found to be nutritionally adequate and almost comparable in composition to samples taken from Western women.) With no other sources of milk available, the older child would have to be weaned onto bush foods, which are rough and difficult to digest. To survive on such foods a child would have to be older than two years—preferably substantially older. (Today cows' milk is available for toddlers, so this problem has largely been eliminated.)

The decision in favor of infanticide was never made lightly or without anguish, but sometimes there was little choice. The woman would probably give birth alone and bury the infant immediately, preferably before it took its first breath. (The traditional !Kung did not consider a child a true person until it was brought back to the village; thus early infanticide was not seen as

homicide.) Such cases, however, must have been extremely rare; even stillbirths, only a fraction of which could be concealed infanticide, accounted for only about one percent of births. Thus, only a few women had to face this choice personally and directly.

One likely explanation for the long birth intervals is the !Kung pattern of prolonged nursing. Although solid foods supplement a child's diet as early as six months of age (either premasticated or mashed at this early stage) nursing continues on the average of several times an hour throughout the first few years of a child's life. The constant stimulation of the nipple has been shown to suppress the levels of hormones that promote ovulation, thus making conception unlikely. Another possibility is that the huge calorie expenditure of nursing combined with subsistence-level nutrition does not afford the necessary surplus energy for ovulation to re-establish itself.

Whatever the exact cause, the resulting four-year birth interval is essential to the !Kung way of life. !Kung women are the major providers of child care and carry young children almost everywhere they go—an estimated 1500 miles a year. Women are also the major providers of food and walk between two and twelve miles two or three times a week to go gathering. When they return they carry, along with their child, fifteen to thirty-three pounds of wild vegetables, although loads of forty pounds and more have been recorded. They also make frequent day trips to villages a few miles away and take longer trips when the entire group moves camp or visits people living at distances of up to sixty miles. On these long trips women also carry their few possessions—a mortar and pestle, cooking utensils, water containers, a digging stick, various ornaments and pieces of clothing, as well as water—adding another two to four pounds to their burden.

For women who weigh an average of ninety pounds themselves, maintaining their subsistence activities would be difficult, if not impossible, were the birth interval any shorter. A four-year-old is able to keep pace walking with adults, at least on short trips, or may be willing to stay in the village while her

mother goes gathering for the day. A younger child would be more dependent; the mother would have to carry her, as well as the new infant, wherever she went. (Even four years is a compromise, and it is not uncommon to see a woman returning from a gathering expedition loaded with bush foods, a four-year-old—weighing perhaps twenty-eight pounds—astride her shoulder, and an infant—weighing perhaps thirteen pounds—in a sling on her hip.)

Perhaps because they tend to experience only a few menstrual periods between pregnancies, !Kung women consider menstruation "a thing of no account." Although it is occasionally referred to as "having sickness" and although some associated physical discomfort is acknowledged (for example, cramps, breast tenderness, headaches, and backaches), menstruation is not thought to affect women's psychological state. Many !Kung women do believe, however, that if a woman sees traces of menstrual blood on another woman's leg or even is told that another woman has started her period, *she* will begin menstruating as well. (This phenomenon, known as menstrual synchrony, has not been proven to occur anywhere, but it has received some support in American studies.)

!Kung women try to conceal their menstrual blood, but this is not always possible. Leaves, pieces of leather skins, or, more recently, cloth that can be washed and saved are the only articles they have to contain their flow. They are concerned about cleanliness, but water is available only in small quantities during much of the year, making daily bathing difficult. Some women curtail their visiting when the flow is heaviest, but others carry on their normal activities. One women explained, "When I want to visit, I go at night. Then, no one can see if there is blood on my legs." The end of menstruation is followed by bathing, even if water is scarce.

Menstruation is given minimal attention by the !Kung. Women are not set apart and couples do not cease to lie beside each other at night. Sexual activity is expected to come to a halt, but since conception is thought to result from the joining of semen with the last of the menstrual blood, the taboo may give way, especially during the last day or two, if conception is desired.

WE LIVED AND LIVED,[1] and as I kept growing, I started to carry my little brother around on my shoulders. My heart was happy then; I had grown to love him and carried him everywhere. I'd play with him for a while and whenever he would start to cry, I'd take him to Mother so he could nurse. Then I'd take him back with me and we'd play together again.

That was when Kumsa was little. But once he was older and started to talk and then to run around, that's when we were mean to each other and hit and fought all the time. Because that's how children play. One child does mean things and the other children do mean things back. If your father goes out hunting one day, you think, "Won't Daddy bring home meat? Then I can eat it, but I can also *stinge* it!" When your father does come home with meat, you say, "My daddy brought back meat and I won't let you have *any* of it!" The other children say, "How come we play together yet you always treat us so badly?"

When Kumsa was bigger, we were like that all the time. Sometimes we'd hit each other. Other times, I'd grab him and bite him and said, "Oooo . . . what is this thing that has such a horrible face and no brains and is so mean? How come it is so mean to me when I'm not doing anything to it?" Then he'd say, "I'm going to *hit* you! What's protecting you that I shouldn't?" And I'd say, "You're just a baby! I, *I* am the one who's going to hit *you!* Why are you so miserable to me?" I'd insult him and he'd insult me and I'd insult him back. We'd just stay together and play like that.

Once, when our father came back carrying meat, we both called out, "Ho, ho, Daddy! Ho, ho, Daddy!" When I heard him say, "Daddy, Daddy," I said, "Why are you greeting my father? He's *my* father, isn't he? Now, you can only say, 'Oh, hello, Father.' " But he called out, "Ho, ho . . . Daddy!" I yelled, "Be quiet! Why are you saying hello to my father? When I say, 'Daddy . . . Daddy . . .' you be quiet. Only *I* will greet him. Is he your father? I'm going to hit you!" We fought and argued until mother finally stopped us. Then we just sat around while she cooked the meat.

She put a few pieces in the coals and the rest she put in the pot. While the meat was cooking, I said, "I'm taking some." She said, "Don't take it from the pot! What do you have there?" I put the piece back and started to cry. Again I said, "I'm taking some." She finally sent me away, "Go, sit somewhere else and wait until the meat is cooked. Do you want to eat it raw?" I sat there, crying. Soon, I went back and this time grabbed meat that was roasting in the coals. She hit my fingers and I sat down and cried again, "How come Kumsa is only a baby and he's sitting there eating and I'm older and am sitting with nothing?" She took a small piece from the pot and gave it to me. I sat there, just starting to eat it, when Kumsa came and grabbed it from me and ran off with it. I jumped up, pounding hard against the sand, and ran after him. I grabbed the meat and bit him, bit him hard. He started to cry and I left him. I sat down again by the fire and ate what was left.

When the meat was done, mother took the pot out of the fire, served my portion, and then served Kumsa's. She said, "Nisa, you and your brother will share this plate and eat together." I refused, "I will not! Kumsa's fingers are dirty. Kumsa has dirty fingers and I won't eat from his plate with him. I'm going to finish this plate myself. Now, serve other meat to your son. Why should Kumsa and I have to eat together?"

We ate separately, but soon Kumsa and I were fighting and arguing again. We had no sense! We always fought with each other. I hated him. And Kumsa? He hated me.

I remember another time with Kumsa. He had a little leather pouch which he hung over his shoulder. One day we followed Mother when she went out gathering klaru bulbs. She had gone first and was soon way ahead of us. We were walking along behind looking for klaru. But one time, when I looked for her, I couldn't see her. I called out, "Mommy!" She didn't answer. I called again, louder, *"Mommy!"* She still didn't answer. I called out again and again and again, but each time it was the same. We didn't know that she wasn't

answering because she was hiding near a tree waiting for us. Meanwhile, Kumsa and I followed her tracks, calling out to her. When we came near to where she was hiding, she jumped out suddenly, yelling loudly, "What were the two of you doing? What were you looking for way back there? Why were you staying so far behind? Stay in front of me!" She surprised us! We were so scared, we trembled with fright. She went on, "If you two continue to walk like that, I'll go ahead digging klaru, but when I'm finished, I'll just go home. Then, things of the bush will come and kill you. What's the matter with the two of you that you stay so far behind when I'm gathering?"

We all sat down and rested. Soon, we began to talk again, then, to laugh about things.

After that, we kept up with her. When Kumsa dug up a klaru with a large bulb, he cried out, "Look! Look at mine! Look over here! My klaru is huge!" I said, "Ejaculate on yourself![2] You call that a bulb? Why did you call me over to look?" He called out again, "Everyone! Look! Just look at what I have!" Then he came and grabbed one of my bulbs. I yelled, "You're *really* crazy!" and took my digging stick and hit him with it. I said, "Have you no sense? Why did you take my klaru?" We kept walking and soon we returned to the village.

At first, I didn't want to eat any of my klaru and when I saw Kumsa eating his, I said, "Kumsa, give me some. You're not going to refuse me, are you?" He just sat there and ate until he had finished them. I thought, "Ah, I'll just wait until he finishes, because all my klaru are still sitting over there. Later, I'll take them and roast them, but I won't give any to him." That's what I did. I took them out and ate them all by myself.

We lived in that place, eating things. Then we left and went somewhere else.

But life continued and I kept growing up. One day, when I was a little older, I saw something red on my mother's thigh. It was blood. I kept looking at it, looking and looking.

Finally, I said, "Mommy, what . . . how come there's blood there?" She scolded me, "Nisa, are you crazy? You're just a child, yet you stare at other people's genitals? What do you suppose is there that you are staring like that?" She was menstruating, "seeing the moon."[3] She continued, "Do you already know everything about a woman's genitals that you think you can just stare like that? I'll hit you until you start shitting! I'll tell your father and he'll also hit you. Do you think you can just talk about my genitals like that?"

I was quiet. She got up, then sat down again. I said, "Mommy . . . there's blood . . . there's blood there!" Then in a whisper, I repeated, "Mommy . . . Mommy . . . there's blood there!" She said, "Where is there blood? Don't you know that some day, when you grow up, your genitals will also do that, and you, too, will menstruate? Why are you staring at me like that?" I said, "What? Me? I won't menstruate. I don't have what's needed to do that. I'll *never* menstruate." She said, "Look at yourself. You've got a vagina, right over there, and some day you *will* menstruate. You don't know what you're talking about." Then I said, "Why don't you wipe the blood away. Mommy, take something, some leaves and wipe it away." She wouldn't. Then she slapped my face. I started to cry and cried and cried.

The next day, I said, "Mommy, what's that? Where is that red coming from? Did Daddy strike you with a spear?" She said, "No, your father didn't strike me. This blood, this will also come from your genitals and spill out when you grow up. Someday, that which I see today, you will also see." I said, "Eh . . . really?" She said, "Yes, daughter, really. But I want you to know that when a daughter talks to her mother about seeing her menstrual blood it is an insult. So, don't insult me again by talking about it. Otherwise, I'll tell your father and he'll hit you, hit you very hard." I said, "No, that's not so. Daddy won't hit me *today*. No, he won't hit *me!* *You're* the one with blood. Now, wipe it off, Mommy. Wipe the blood away." But she refused. She wouldn't wipe it off.

A few days later, the moon left her and when I looked at her thighs, I thought, "Eh, hey! Her thighs are clean." I whispered to her, "Mommy . . . Mommy . . . your thighs are so clean! There's no more blood. Mommy, Mommy, there's no more blood on your thighs."

We continued to live and she menstruated again. It came to her when the moon was high in the sky at sunset. Then one moon passed her by and another came and went. Then another, and another; the moons kept passing her by. She was pregnant again.

This is when I was already an older child. My brother Kumsa had also grown, but we still hated each other and treated each other badly. Whenever he wanted to go to mother and nurse, I'd pick him up, carry him into the bush, and drop him there. I'd hit him and say, "Can't you see that Mommy's pregnant?"

It was during one of the early months of her pregnancy that my father became so angry at my mother that he kicked her in the stomach and she almost miscarried. It all started after a few of my father's relatives visited us and stayed for a while.

One of the children who had come with the visitors was Bau, and she and I didn't like each other. We treated each other badly and fought all the time. One day, I went with the other children to play in one of the water pans. I carried my little brother Kumsa and when we got there, set him down to play near the edge of the pan. Then I went and played with the older children, nearby. That's when Bau started to dunk him. She held onto him and pushed him down, again and again, until he almost drowned! When I saw what she had done, I asked "Why were you trying to kill my brother?" I ran and grabbed *her* younger sister and threw *her* into the water. I held her and dunked her and made her swallow a lot of water. I kept dunking her until her stomach was full! And just as my brother almost drowned, her sister almost drowned.

Then, I went to my brother. I rubbed his stomach and helped him throw up all the water he had swallowed. After a while, he was better. Bau helped her sister the same way—

rubbing her stomach until she, too, finally threw up all the water she had swallowed. I said, "Now don't let me see you kill my brother again!"

We stayed near the water pan a little longer. Then, carrying our siblings, we went back to the village. When we got there, our mothers hit us. "Don't ever play at drowning your siblings again! Are the two of you still babies?"

(laughs) Eh, but we really did things when we were small.

There was another incident with Bau. One time, she came with us when I went gathering with my mother and some other women. But no sooner did we start to walk, than she started to cry for her mother. She cried out, "Mommy!" When I heard I said, "Be quiet. What are you yelling for? We're following along with my mommy." We walked along and when we came near to where my mother was gathering, she called out again, "Mom-my! Mommy!" I said, "Have you gone crazy? Bau, be quiet. We're with my mommy now." My mother said, "Leave her be; she's following along with us. She's only asking for her mother. What are you yelling at her for?" We walked along again and dug for more klaru. After a while she did it again, "Mom. . .my, Mommy!" I shouted, "Be quiet! Your mother took a path that went over there and that's where she's digging klaru. So be quiet and just follow my mother." Then I added, "Also . . . any klaru you find, put in my kaross. Give me all the bulbs you dig. Don't save them for your mother to carry." She said, "No! I won't do that! I won't dig klaru for you. Are you a little chief[4] that I should?" I yelled, "I'm going to make you shit! You dig those roots and give them to me and I'll give them to my mommy." She yelled, "Mommy! Nisa's mean!" I said, "I'm going to beat the shit out of you! Have you no sense? You only want to be with your mother. You don't want to be with me." We walked along. The next time she whispered it, "Mommy . . ." When I heard, I said, "This time, I'm really going to do it!" I took my digging stick and hit her, again and again. She started to cry. I said, "You've cried enough. Dry your tears and be quiet and just stay with my mommy. We'll keep following her and then later, maybe your mother will join us."

She stopped crying. We walked along and she was quiet. I praised her, "Now that you're not calling for your mother, I like you again." We kept on walking. Finally we arrived home.

But as soon as we arrived in the village, she ran, crying, to her mother, "Mommy . . . Nisa was horrible! I went with Nisa and her mother and Nisa was so mean! See how she hit me, hit my back, hit me all over. That's how awful she was to me!" I cried, "Liar! I wasn't mean to you." (I was lying, of course.) "She's lying. I didn't do any of those things. But because she said that, she won't come gathering with us tomorrow, or ever again! Has she gone crazy?" Bau insulted me, "Death to your genitals! Are *you* crazy? Weren't you the one who asked me to follow you and your mother and . . ."

As she yelled, I just stood there not saying anything. But before she finished, I lunged at her, picked her up and threw her down. I bit her and said, "What's wrong with you? Why did you insult me like that? We're supposed to be friends!" She said, "Liar! You're a baby! That's why you're so full of hate! You're a little child, senseless and full of hate." I said, "I never told you to leave your village and come and live in our village. Why did your mother and father ever bring you here to live with us?" I threatened to bite her again and she ran off toward her parents' hut.

She ran past her parents sitting by the fire outside the hut. I was right behind. I ran between her parents and followed her into the hut. I grabbed her and bit her. Her mother stopped us, saying, "Aie! What sort of child is this? What is she doing? I'm sure her mother didn't tell her to come here and bite my child. Why is she acting so hatefully toward her? When we leave here . . ." I heard her say that and cried, "Yes! When are you leaving? Take your child! Go away! Tomorrow morning would be just fine. Tomorrow, take this miserable child of yours away from here. Just don't let her stay *here* any longer!"

The next morning they were still there. I asked, "Didn't you say you were going to leave? How come you're still sitting around?"

That's when my mother entered the argument. She sup-

ported me, "How come these people living with us are adults, yet they are being nasty to my daughter? She is only a little child, so why do they keep yelling at her?"

That was part of the reason behind why my father got so angry. He told her she shouldn't insult his relatives like that.

The next incident occurred soon after, when my little brother took one of my father's arrows and hit one of the visiting children with it. Fortunately, the arrow didn't have any poison on it. I don't remember everything that happened next, but I do remember my father yelling at my mother in support of his relatives, "Chuko, you were sitting here, yet you didn't say anything to your son . . . *our* son . . . and you didn't even take the arrows away from him? Now he's struck a child with it!"

That's when he got up and, filled with anger, kicked her. The blow was aimed higher than where it actually landed—right on her stomach. Then it was as though he had killed her; the kick had dropped blood inside her and it started to come out her genitals and her mouth. I was frightened, "Is she going to die? Why did my father kill her? Why did he kick her in the stomach and ruin her pregnancy?" Wasn't I by then an older child who understood things that were happening? I thought about it, about how she might miscarry and about how she would surely die. I cried and cried, so much that my throat was dry.

Others were there, pouring water on her, and all Kumsa and I could do was stand there and cry. After a while, it was as though she was alive again, even though the blood was still spilling. My father washed her feet and gave her water to drink, trying to help. He also made medicinal cuts on her lower back. It was only when the sun was low in the sky that the bleeding finally stopped. When it was all over, we saw that the blood hadn't come from the baby; it had come from somewhere else. Eventually she was better and her stomach continued to grow. The pregnancy had not been ruined.

When my younger brother Kumsa was first born, my mother said she wanted to kill him, because I was very small

and she wanted me to nurse. Then, before she gave birth to Kxamshe, she said she wanted to kill her, so that Kumsa could nurse. While she was still pregnant, she told people; she even told my father. Everyone refused.

My father said, "I don't understand. Chuko, first you said you wanted to kill Kumsa, and Nisa, a mere child, gave him his life. Today you say you want to kill the child now inside you. So tell me . . . do you want to kill me? That must be it, because these children are the children I conceived,[5] yet you want to kill one, then another. What you're saying makes me think you're a bad woman. Why do you talk like that? Are you afraid of having too many children? Or, perhaps, you no longer want me?"

He continued, "When you were a young girl, you wanted me. You grew up inside my hut, beside me, and I helped raise you. When we came to having children, you took care of them very well. Even so, if you kill this child inside you, I will leave you. Aren't there other women to marry?"

Kxamshe stayed in my mother's stomach. When it was time to give birth, it was just the two of us who went. We were living in the bush, just our family; no other women were there. She took me with her when she gave birth. After the baby was born, I said, "Daddy said that if you kill this baby, he'll take me and Kumsa and Dau and leave you." But she said, "Uhn, uhn . . . I don't want to kill her. This little girl is too beautiful. See how lovely and fair her skin is?"[6] My heart was happy. She cut the umbilical cord and carried her back to the village. Then she lay down.

My father had been out hunting, and when he came back, mother was lying down in the shade of a temporary shelter nearby. He asked, "Where is your mother?" I said, "She's lying down over there, resting. She gave birth to a little baby with very fair skin." My father went to see her. He asked, "Is it a little boy?" She said, "No, it's a girl."

My father went and cooked the springhare he had brought back with him and poured the gravy for her to drink. That was to give her strength and to help her milk come into her breasts. We slept that night, but her milk didn't come.

The next morning, he went and trapped a guinea fowl, came back and cooked it. She drank the gravy, but her milk still didn't come. Later, he killed and cooked another guinea fowl, and this time, when she drank the broth, the milk finally filled her breasts.

After that, we lived on. Mother stayed inside the hut for a while, and after Kxamshe had grown a little, she carried her wherever she went. Kxamshe had no younger brothers or sisters, because my mother didn't give birth again. Kxamshe just nursed and nursed and grew up. She gave up nursing on her own, while there was still milk in her mother's chest. The milk stayed for a while, then left.

Kxamshe kept on growing, without it. She was very beautiful and she was fair, like a European—that's how light her skin was. And I loved her. She grew and grew and stood tall. She was a young girl, almost a woman. Then, a sickness like malaria came from somewhere and entered her. It was that—the trembling sickness—that killed her and she died.

My mother lived on after that. She menstruated month after month, for a very long time. Then one month came and she didn't menstruate, then another and another. The months just passed her by and she was finished with the moon.