



## YOU HAD TO HAVE BEEN THERE

I have lived in a number of wonderful, quirky places in my life; none seemed so improbable yet so quintessentially *mine* as my camp, Toothbrush Tree, near Kauri. An island in “the middle of nowhere,” with an ocean of sand and brush stretching away in all directions, it had all I needed: my thatched living rondavel, a thatched kitchen with walls made of lashed sticks, my door-desk suspended from a huge syringa tree, our supply tent, my camp members’ tents (and later their plastered huts), occasional guest tents, and a communal cooking area. This was my home from autumnal April 1971 until wintry June 1972. There I saw the starkly different Kalahari seasons turn, learned to gather the bush foods that went with each season, and saw from the door of my hut small migrations of wildebeest and antelope passing close by under the little sand rise known to me and the few dozen Ju/’hoansi at Kauri as both “Toothbrush Tree” and “Spirit Voice.” Somewhat perversely, it was delicious to me, at this time long before GPS, that none of my friends or family elsewhere in the world knew exactly where I was. I felt more alive than I had ever been before. It was a revelation to be in that one place for more than a year: when April rolled around a second time I greeted the drying, cooling season as a familiar fact of my own life.

I had left Dobe at the end of the wet season. In that wet season, from November to January or February, the Kalahari turns into what I can only describe as a “short jungle.” Green vines and creepers writhe in all directions, but only up to about three feet above the ground. Salady foods like *!guashi* leaves and the peppery, tangy, fleshy lobes of *//guia* abound, along with huge white edible mushrooms that sprout from the sides of anthills. Small antelopes like duiker and steenbok can be advantageously hunted in the rains because the tracking is easier. Many Ju/’hoan folktales begin with the words “It was raining, and they were hunting duikers.” I began to understand that a world of seasonal information and atmosphere was evoked for Ju/’hoan listeners when they heard these few words at the start of a story.

As March and April come on, drying begins, and people turn towards digging the edible tubers that have benefited from the rains. By then, many such foods, looking like potatoes but tasting mostly like

cucumbers, have swollen and ripened underground. Some of the tubers function as actual water sources in many areas of the Kalahari during the drier months of the year. April, May, June, and July become cool, then cold and increasingly dry, with the tall green grasses turning golden and silver and sometimes a gorgeous metallic red before they are all consumed by termites. One can stand in a patch of grassland in June and, if the wind is not blowing, actually *hear* the clicking of grasses being eaten down by millions upon millions of termite mandibles. Animals become harder to track, and tubers become harder to dig. It's a time of real hunger, and people grow visibly thinner. By July, the air during the day is like an elixir, dry and cool and bracing. At night it may freeze, and people say that since they are too cold and hungry to sleep, there's not much else to do but stay up all night dancing to keep warm and well.

We danced often and easily at Kauri. I remember so well driving back to my camp in the morning after an all-night dance at the people's camp the night before. The people who had come in my employ from Dobe—Old !Xuma as language teacher, =Oma !Oma as mechanic, and =Oma's wife, Di//xao, and small daughter—were with me. =Oma's wife had opted to accompany her husband at least for a while, to see how she would like visiting distant relatives at Kauri. !Xuma's wife, N=aisa, however, had said she had too much work to do and would stay at Dobe. She joked as we were leaving Dobe that !Xuma should find a young cowife and bring her back to help with the work. !Xuma later told me that it was great fun to have two wives when you were an old man—all the younger people thought you were hot stuff, even if you weren't!

When we pulled up at Toothbrush Tree that morning after our night of dancing, I took my unused bedroll and was heading wearily toward my hut to stow it. I looked back and saw old !Xuma jump out of the Land Rover and burst into dancing again. Immediately the others in the truck began singing and dancing with him, and a new little dance continued for another fifteen minutes or so, ending with a glorious flourish. To me this seemed like a declaration of irrepressible energy: just when you thought all strength was gone, it could flare again in the most unexpected ways. After that I saw over and over again that Ju/'hoansi like to end things—from dancing to storytelling to performing hilarious mimicry—on a surprise or a high note or both. With them, I felt that I had somehow entered a kind of haven—a nurturing space—for creative spontaneity.

Through the months at my new camp, I got up most mornings on fire to see what new things I might learn that day. And because we



**Figure 4.1.** Morning dance at Kauri. © Megan Bieseles.

were all perpetually hungry, it was just as exciting to find out what fresh bush foods we might find to eat each day, beyond the boring and bland staples (mealie meal, oatmeal, tinned beans, corned “bully” beef) I had brought from Maun. Because there were many days when there were only tinned beans to eat, and many days when nothing fresh or enticing was available, I ended up writing excitedly about the days when I was surprised by the appearance of something delicious. Someone might show up with a couple of newly slingshot guinea fowl, for which I paid a few shillings, and which I could boil into a lovely soup with onions and whatever bush vegetables were on hand. Sometimes there was a rabbit haunch, or a slab of fresh kudu meat, or strong-tasting, dark-red eland meat, or even a hunk of Cape buffalo. One of my HKRG predecessors, demographer Nancy Howell, had written and mimeographed a very useful “Kalahari Cookbook” full of helpful tips about cooking these exotic things. I often went gathering with the Kauri women, who showed me how to find sour plums, berries, tubers, mushrooms, and nuts. Feeling like a hunter-gatherer of both food and information, I seemed to have entered a fairy-tale land of discovery.

Within my first few days at Kauri, the business of living began to merge seamlessly with the business of research and learning for which I was ostensibly there. On April 19 I wrote:

In the late afternoon we drove to Kauri with a big basket of *mabele* (grain sorghum, also called kaffir corn) to have it pounded. I took beads to Di//xao and we talked for a long time about how they would be sewn. I looked for eggs again in vain. I walked back to my camp, leaving the truck for the others. I got back after dark, and was glad to get a fire and lantern going. I cooked an incredible sweet and sour warthog stew with guava halves. When the Bushmen got back we drank some wine and talked around the fire. =Oma talked about what Henry (Harpending, a previous graduate student who taught =Oma auto mechanics and how to drive) meant to him, what his [own] plans for the future were (work for black people, he said, but demand a salary of at least five pounds sterling a month). I asked about whether he would like to take a second wife when he is a *ju n!a'an* (grownup). "No!" he said emphatically. I briefly wondered whether there might be a dawning monogamous ideal in upwardly mobile younger Bushmen. But then he said he wanted a second wife right away, while he is still young and strong!

The journal entry for the next day began:

Today has been a fine day. *Everything* went smoothly. I got up at dawn and nobody arrived for about forty-five minutes, which gave me time to dress, brush my hair, and have coffee and leftovers for breakfast before /Ukxa came and sat around the fire with us. By then I felt positively hospitable, and began to see in the old guy definite possibilities as an important storyteller, mimic, and player with words. Other Bushmen are delighted to listen to him twisting language, imitating little crazy birds, and being generally silly in an elegant way. More women came later on bead business, and !Xuma diplomatically gave them coffee without letting it become a decision for me to make. Then it clouded up and rained, and we all crawled into the tents !Xuma and =Oma had set up. People seemed interested in the fact that I was writing down their speech, and interested in teaching me, unlike the Dobe people who seem somewhat tired of teaching anthropologists by now.

This is coming to seem a lovely place to be. The men came and began putting up my house after we cleared a big space for it and marked out the size circle I wanted. They dug deep (two-to-three-foot) holes in the sand at about three-foot intervals around the circumference, and stood the poles in them with notched tops at a uniform height (about my height). Then they cut slender, flexible saplings and staggered them through the notches, bending them into a circle and tying them together with twine. I gave them a good meal of tinned meat over mealie meal (they didn't like the steak and kidney, so I gave them the minced steak). The women came from gathering grass and I fed them too, and gave everybody tobacco. No-

body asked me for anything extra! !Xuma's words to them on my behalf yesterday [asking them to cut down on the volume of requests they made of me] seemed to have really sunk in. Then I went with the women to see the sheaves of grass.

It was sad how suspicious I was this afternoon of the beautiful calm of the women who were gathering grass. I kept thinking this can't be true, these women must have something up their sleeve. But they didn't. We walked to see the sheaves they have been cutting for four days. We bound up a last few of them in the late afternoon. One small woman sat on a sweet-smelling pile of discards nursing her baby and binding sheaves. In a big pile some of the heads were long and red and some were golden, fluffy, shorter. I asked why. The red ones are *tci disi*, female things, and the gold are male, they said. The women were barefoot, ragged, calm, and graceful. Quiet: a group of traditionalists. Charging *me* a shilling a sheaf for something Rapunzel would have had an easy time spinning into gold. . . .

On the way back I met some men coming from the new borehole. They pointed out the way and I walked over there. I found three handsome, muscular fellows working there, none of whom spoke anything but Setswana. . . . They gave me some biltong (jerky) and I reciprocated by asking them to come to my camp to get sugar, which they needed. We walked back to my camp and got it. The *mabele* lady was there with it all ground very finely and beautifully. We sat around the fire and chatted. I hemmed a pair of =Oma's overalls. Bushmen here all seem to understand Setswana [the language of the Tswana pastoralists]. Everyone left at sunset and I was all alone, since my people were happily off at the village again. Lots of work done today (garbage pit—gargantuan—dug, two huge sets of dishes washed, two tires fixed, two tents set up). I swept out the truck, etc., etc., and there was an encouraging amount of work done on the houses. And I was calm and happy all day. I gave out lots of medicine, but the demands were not excessive. I looked over the land with !Xuma, who is as enchanted with it as I am and talks of staying another summer and planting a crop of corn. [Many Ju/'hoansi knew how to grow the few crops that would produce in the Kalahari, but uneven rainfalls and the rarity of places where groundwater collected made planting not a very winning proposition except under very favorable circumstances.] I learned that *tobo* (house plaster) must be made with anthill sand rather than regular sand because the texture is like that of wet sand, not sifty like regular sand. I learned the names of lots of the trees around here, and a nice new word, *!aihng!u*, for *n!ore* or place, or country, literally meaning "trees and water."

While I was at Kauri I learned how to find the location of tubers where tiny dry vines emerged from the ground; how to roast the tu-

bers in the coals, covered in ash in such a way as to keep them from burning; and how to knock the ash off with a stick so the flesh wouldn't taste gritty. I learned how to boil the purplish flesh off mongongo nuts and eat it as an astringent porridge, and how to crack the two layers of shell within and roast the delicious high-protein nut at the center. I learned how to carry a baby on my side or back in a *g//abaxa*, a softened small antelope skin with skin ties sewn to the four corners. I learned from tracks and from live observation that the brown hyena, unlike the spotted hyena, has a peculiar, uneven gait. The Ju/'hoansi ascribe this brown hyena trait to a withered leg acquired in an accident described in a folktale about male initiation.

Seeing and learning new things like this every day, I could positively feel myself expanding and changing. I saw, in fact, the possibility of living life like a story. I saw that oral tales might have a special ability to merge with and inform the identity and life path of a young person. Watching children listen raptly to their parents and grandparents telling stories, I saw that the stories could actually be quite integral to the sort of education young Ju/'hoansi were receiving from their elders. Boys delighted in hearing the stories in which boys and men featured heroically. Not only the Ju/'hoan girls but I myself began to identify with the courageous python heroine of the folktales, all while recording many versions of her transformative story. Here is one of them, in which a huge bird called a kori bustard features as the python's husband. (I title the stories for the purposes of this book only: Ju/'hoansi don't give their stories names.)

### *The Python Falls into the Well*

The kori bustard refused the jackal and married her older sister, the python, instead. The kori bustard said, "All right now, everybody, I, the kori bustard, will marry this girl, the python." So the kori bustard married the python. They lived together for a very long time. But the jackal was saying to herself all this while, "Oh, here's this man with such a wonderful head feather! I wish my older sister would die so I could marry her fine husband."

Then one day all the women went gathering. But the jackal refused to accompany them, saying to the python, "Sister, let's go draw water from the spring. Your husband is away, so let's go fetch water and bring it home." So the two of them walked to the spring. A big *n-ah* (buffalo thorn) tree stood near it. Its broad shadow fell over the well, and one of its branches was stretched out above the water.

This was the branch that broke and fell into the spring that day, carrying the python along with it. The jackal and her older sister arrived at the

spring. The jackal said, "Climb that tree and knock down the fruit. If you fall, I'll catch you."

But the python said, "You're a strong girl, climb the tree yourself and knock down the *n=ah* so we can eat. You're a young girl, a child—go on, climb the *n=ah* tree and shake down its fruit so we can eat."

"No," said the jackal, "you're the one to do it; you're soft and slippery, and you can slide along the *n=ah* branches as well. Go on, you climb it. Do you think so badly of me as to imagine that if you climb and fall I won't catch you? I'll watch you and run back and forth beneath you as you climb and then jump to catch you as you come down."

At last the python agreed. She slithered, and climbed, and slithered beautifully up the tree. When she came to the branch lying over the spring she went out on it to knock the fruit down. She shook the branch, and the *n=ah* fell down on the ground.

The python ate some of the fruit up in the tree, and the jackal ate the rest down on the ground. Then the python began to move out upon the branch so that she could reach another branch. But she lost her grip! Her smooth body slipped off the branch and she fell into the spring; "G!o-ae!" was the sound she made.

Her sister the jackal ran home to their camp. She went to her sister's husband and said, "Come and see! My sister has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree!"

At that, everyone wailed. "If she has fallen out of the *n=ah* tree, what will we do?" When night fell, everyone just went to bed. The python's husband went to his house, and there was the jackal, pretending to be his wife. The kori bustard told her to spread out their sleeping skins for the night. Secretly he stood bone arrows upright in the sand beneath her sleeping place. She lay down on top of them and began to complain that the place was thorny. But her sister used to sleep in the same place, so she had to be content. An arrow pricked her and she died in her sleep [from the poison]. Her anus protruded from her and stood out from her back. The kori bustard said, "Hey, everybody! What has happened to the good wife I married? Why is it that today so many *n=ah* seeds are sticking in her arse?"

He stood beside the dead jackal crying for his lost wife. He mourned for her loud and long. The people said, "Get together, everyone. Let's go and pull his wife out of the spring for him and bring her home. What makes you think we won't be able to get her out?"

The kori bustard said, "How can she possibly get out? I'm just never going to see her again."

But the others said to him, "Gather lots of people together, tell everyone to come together and help you get her out. Call the wildebeests, call all the animals, whatever their names are. Gather them all together so they can work on trying to get her out."

The kori bustard said, “How can they help? Who will be able to reach her? All of us are too short: everyone’s legs are too short to reach her, since she’s so far down. Who will be able to get to her? If you go down that far, you’ll never see the sky again. You’ll go right down to the bottom and never come up again. A person might never see daylight again! That’s how far down the python is.”

But the next morning the kori bustard got up and went to the spring. He gathered all the animals together: the giraffes, the wildebeests, the springhares, the gemsbok—all the many animals, all the animals there are. He called them together, and told them to come to the spring. He called the female animals and he called the male animals. He told them that yesterday the python had sunk to the bottom of the water. He gathered them together and called and gathered them, and there were female animals and male animals who collected at the spring. As many as there are animals came, and they spread as far as the eye could see. The sight of them was something to behold.

Then one by one they came forward to try their luck. Each one would stick in his leg and reach into the spring. But each one failed to go all the way to the bottom, and they all drew back their legs about halfway down. Each one said, “I can’t figure out a way to do it.” The gemsbok stepped forward and put in his leg. It went down, down, down—and he almost fell in. So he pulled back his leg and stepped aside. Then the wildebeest stepped up and tried it.

But he, too, nearly fell into the water. So he drew his leg out too. The kudu tried next. He put his foot in and nearly tumbled in himself, so he pulled it back out again. As many as there were animals, as many animals as have names, that’s how many animals tried and failed.

All this while, the giraffe just stood there, and so did the ostrich. The ostrich came forward then, and put in his legs. He sat down at the edge of the well and stretched his legs down and down and down. With the very tip of one claw, he was able to scratch the python.

“Mm,” he said, “I got pretty close. It felt to me as if my fingertip was touching something. Why doesn’t that long fellow over there come forward and find out if it’s really the python I’m feeling?” At this the giraffe drew himself up very tall. “If that guy tries it,” said the ostrich, “he’s bound to get the woman out. That woman will get out if the giraffe reaches down for her!”

Then the kori bustard said, “Mm, the rest of us will go back to camp to look for things to spread out on the ground to receive her. We’ll spread skin mats from the well to the village.”

So he and the others went to do that. Many of the animals said, “Aah, this will never come true.”



But others replied, “Don’t talk like that. Just be silent. They’ve gone to fetch mats and they’ll come back and spread them out. Then you’ll see what the giraffe can do.”

No! the kori bustard didn’t call for mats to be spread first. First the giraffe stuck his foot into the spring. Down, down, down, down it went. At the bottom it reached the python. The giraffe took hold of her and felt her all over. Then he withdrew his leg and said to the others, “I’ve put my leg all the way down and it feels like there’s more than one python down there.” The python had given birth in the bottom of the spring! “Now, go to the camp,” said the giraffe, “and find some things to spread out on the ground. Then bring them back here and spread them nicely.”

When they heard the giraffe’s words, everybody laughed and grabbed each other in delight and fell to the ground. “How has this guy managed to do it?” they asked each other.

Then they ran back to the camp and began to spread mats from the camp to the spring. Then the giraffe stepped out of the crowd again. He rocked backwards and forwards on his long legs as he approached the spring. He reached in with his leg, and reached and stretched right down to the bottom. He grasped the python and shook the mud off her while she was still down there. Then he opened his mouth and laughed!

He began bringing her up and up and up toward the surface. It was a very deep spring! It was a fearsome spring, and a deep waterhole. As the python came near the surface, the other animals saw her and hugged each other. They fell to the ground laughing. The giraffe brought her up, and lifted her to the surface. At last he laid her on the ground. She lay there and vomited up water. Then the giraffe pulled a baby python out of the spring and laid it beside its mother.

The animals were so delighted that they embraced each other and rolled on their backs on the ground. Here’s our beautiful girl again,” they said, “What the jackal did was a terrible thing.”

Then they brought a whisk to wipe her face. “Gla!” it went smoothly across her brow, and they said, “Yes, isn’t this the woman we were looking for the other day? And today she’s come up out of the spring, and here she is.”

Then they greeted her and embraced her and exclaimed over her: “Yes, this is a very good thing the giraffe has done for us.”

Then the python walked on the trail of mats with her child back to the camp. She walked beautifully and gracefully back home to her own house.

“Yes, it’s our daughter again,” said the people of the camp. “Here she is, and that jackal over there is dead, and good riddance.” The kori bustard greeted his wife and said, “Oh, my good wife, today you’ve come home to

me!” She glided regally and smoothly like she always had, and she sat down before her house and looked around at everyone.

Later she took her child to bed and they both slept well for a long time. The people said, “Mm, this is the right woman. This is the daughter of our camp for sure. She fits in with the camp so well, and she’s so very beautiful!”

So the people lived there together. After a while they separated and traveled around to different places. The kori bustard’s heart was so happy that he ran about tossing his head feather. He ran and tossed his head feather in praise of his wife. And the two of them went on living. Mm, yes, that’s how it was. My friend, that’s how it happened.

Many questions came up for me as I puzzled through the process of translating these stories. I knew that the kori bustard had his suspicions and so laid arrows beneath the sleeping skins to reveal that the deceptive jackal had taken his wife’s place. He pretended that his wife always slept on skins laid in that spot, and *she* never complained. But why specifically “bone arrows”? And why did the people lay skin mats all the way from the well to the village? It took me some time to ask all the questions each story raised, to follow all the references I could, often having to chase down the precise translations of words and phrases. Sometimes the answers would come to me from everyday activities I observed, or from ritual contexts, or from other stories. For instance, spreading skins to walk or sit on that sandy, often rough ground was a very nice thing to do for a person. I saw spread skins being used in marriages, to mark out a special spot for the young couple to sit during their ceremony, and in a number of other stories there were skins spread out to honor someone. In the python story, the trail of skins marked her welcome back into the embrace of her loving family.

“Bone arrows,” as opposed to the metal-tipped arrows used by the Ju/’hoansi today, marked the story as “a story of the old people,” reaching back to a time before metal had reached the Ju/’hoan area. But it was years before I knew the significance of some details. For that early time, I learned as much as I could about intriguing, unfamiliar items and actions in the stories, filling notebooks with questions I sometimes didn’t get answered until much later.

I was constantly aware of the privilege of being in such a place, with such people, at this time of my life. There was a sense of timelessness there for me, in that I didn’t always have to make my usual lists and deadlines for myself. Learning just began to unfold seamlessly along with the process of living. It was also sort of breathless: I felt I was on the edge of important discoveries at every moment. Yet I knew that my fieldwork was to extend only eighteen months in total. It seemed

a woefully short time to fathom the richness of knowledge and understanding available to me. There were so many stories, so much environmental and social knowledge I wanted to document and record. But I often found that need to record in conflict with the need to remain open to the serendipitous moments exploding from the circumstances of where I was and what people were doing. It was their knowledge and experience, after all, that I was attempting to understand, and they were carrying those with them into whatever they were doing and wherever they were doing it. Planning ahead to do certain things, or stopping the flow of events for meticulous documentation, were rarely options and would often have introduced distortions anyway.

So I often changed my plans for the day and followed new avenues that opened. If women were going gathering, I went along and learned about food plants. If someone said we were going hunting for a few days and offered a donkey for me to ride, I packed up and jumped on. During all the activities people were talking, talking all at once, talking to each other, talking to themselves, talking to me—and I was listening. Everything people said and did offered potential clues to nuggets of connection and meaning in the folktales and the healing dances. I realized the hard part would be paring all this richness down to something like a thesis. Struggling to focus, I began to develop a mental map in my head of whom I would need to learn from, where I would need to go, and what I would need to explore and understand by the time I had to go back to Cambridge. My research plan began to inscribe itself onto western Ngamiland, the area of Botswana where Ju/'hoansi is spoken, as a kind of master route around the area to meet key people, these “points of light” of whom I was told.

I thought of Kauri, and my solidifying relationships with people there, as a base from which to explore my evolving mental map. This kin-based, language-based, and culture-based map was becoming studded with places where special things had happened or could happen if I traveled there, and with the names of individuals I heard about who “!han tcisi”—knew things—whether storytellers, healers, or musicians. Most of them lived to the west of Kauri, at !Aoan, Dobe, and /Kae/kae, but some were as far east and south as Ghanzi. At Ghanzi, Ju/'hoansi, a Northern Khoisan language, intersected with Naro, a Central Khoisan language.

I learned about the storytellers of Ghanzi from !Unn/obe N!a'an, also known as !Unn/obe *Morethlwa*, a Naro woman who had married a Ju/'hoan man, Kha//an N!a'an, from /Kae/kae. Together, they had come to live at Kauri. *N!a'an* was not a surname the elderly married couple shared; instead, it means “old” in Ju/'hoansi. Most of the storytell-

ers had *n!a'an* as part of the names they were known by. Old Kha//an whittled chairs and other wooden objects and was an accomplished storyteller and healer (as were many of the adult men and women). !Unn/obe, fluent in both Naro and Ju//hoansi, had a double fund of stories, some of which, notably the heroine stories, overlapped. After a few weeks of daily storytelling, I asked her one day if she knew any other stories I hadn't heard about. She promptly brought out a wild tale of a man who had been created from the rib of a woman. "!"Unn/obe-o!" I said. "Where did you get this story?" "I learned it from the missionaries at D'kar, near Ghanzi," she replied, confirming with her version of the plot—a twist on the Adam and Eve story from Genesis—what I had already observed about the importance of women in San society.

!Unn/obe also became a great resource for me on the San's relationship to successive waves of early settlement of Ghanzi by Afrikaner pioneers. These Voortrekkers came north from South Africa to establish ranches in what was at the time the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The years 1895 to 1898 saw the first official settlement in Ghanzi, but some earlier groups of Dorsland (Thirstland) trekkers had gone through there in 1878, most of them ending up in South West Africa, which later became Namibia. A few of these returned to the Ghanzi area of Botswana later. Successive waves of Afrikaner settlers kept coming from South Africa, one of them as late as the 1950s, which may have been !Unn/obe's time as a domestic and missionary churchgoer there.

When my language proficiency eventually got good enough, I interviewed her about the settlers. She worked in Ghanzi for an Afrikaner farm family, and her story, told "from behind the washing lines," painted a poignant picture of the strained race and labor relations in the colonial days that were still going on, in such isolated places, in the middle of the twentieth century. "We helped them live in the bush," she said. "They really only knew farming. They may have known how to live in the bush of the Karoo but had to learn a lot about how to live around Ghanzi. We were the ones who taught them about *morama* beans and truffles." Always, as she talked to me, !Unn/obe sewed, scraped skins, cracked nuts, or strung beads—without benefit of a frame—in striking and beautiful patterns.

I found that learning folktales was a very natural way to build both vocabulary and an understanding of grammar. I was hearing and recording as many versions of "the same" stories as I could. I could soon recognize most of the plots and thus had a structure of events to help contextualize each storyteller's word choices. This approach, of learning language at the same time as I was learning items of lore and



**Figure 4.2.** !Unn/obe *Morethlwa*. © Megan Biesele.

environmental information, made me feel like I was always off on an adventure. In a way, everything was being created anew, all the time: in fact, the same storytellers told the stories differently in different social contexts, so each iteration was further grist for the mill of understanding. I barely wanted to sleep, for fear I might miss something.

I got many versions of the “boys’ story” I had wanted to record ever since Mel Konner made me aware of the “girls’ story” of the python/elephant/aardvark heroine. The heroine stories also vary a lot, but they consist in large part of dramatic confrontations between the heroine wife and her in-laws, ending up with the heroine’s rebirth or with her giving birth to a child. The boys’ stories, in contrast, are mostly about hunting, daring and surviving death, and altered states of consciousness.

Here is a summary of a familiar “boys’ plot” I heard many times. /Xoan N!a’an (Old /Xoan), a widow at Kauri, told this version of a tale about the sons of a trickster god with several names (the title is mine only, not used by Ju//hoansi):

*The Two Boys and the Lions*

The god had two sons, !Xuma and Kha//’an. The boys went hunting and killed an eland. Lions came and killed the boys in turn and buried them in the eland’s stomach contents. The father was helped to track the boys by a tortoise who put his head into the coals of the fires they had made along their journey. At the last fire the coals were hot, and the tortoise’s head was burned, so they knew the eland’s death place was nearby. When they reached it, the god immediately saw that his sons were buried in the eland’s stomach contents. He asked pied babbler birds and other birds to sing, but the boys didn’t come out of the pile of stomach contents. Then he asked all the animals in turn to dance, but his children still did not emerge. So he hung a meteor, “this fire that hangs in the sky and kills people,” up in a tree. When he called the meteor down onto the eland’s death place, it blasted through the stomach contents, and !Xuma and Kha//’an jumped out. They cooked the eland meat and ate well. They took the rest of the meat home and the lions had none.

When I first recorded this story, it seemed obscure and mysterious to me. I knew that, by their nature, myths always contained opaque and mysterious elements. Yet I was sure that ethnographic knowledge could enlighten me as to some of the details. Why, for instance, would the lions bury the two boys in the stomach contents of the dead eland? It took hearing other versions of “the same” story for me to begin to put the clues, allusions, and references, ranging from details about the environment to unfamiliar folk concepts, all together. But over time I heard further versions, got better at the language, and also had more and more chances to participate in events like hunts, gathering trips, and healing dances. I began to see the delicate references to animal behavior, to social attitudes, and to magical healing beliefs, which made of stories like this rich and memorable tapestries of information. I realized, though, that the unexplained references in the stories were so numerous, and so nuanced, that I barely had the tiger by the tail: to do justice to their richness in my thesis I would have to have an encyclopedic understanding of Ju/’hoan language, material culture, local flora and fauna, and on and on.

I began to see that, in giving up English literature as the focus of my higher education, I was foregoing the easy familiarity of my first language and its references to Western culture I had absorbed as if by osmosis. I had gotten myself into a situation where I would have to work in a language with not only a somewhat different alphabet and grammar but with social and environmental references that seemed to stretch out far beyond me, as unknowable as the vast Kalahari horizon.

This realization was overwhelming, but I was stuck with a task I had told the academic world I would and could do. Although I felt I had just cracked the surface of my work, the weeks and months were flying with terrifying speed toward the time of my departure. All I could think of to do was to put my head down and push forward in the way I had started: one foot in front of the other, always taking the clear next step as it offered itself to me at the time, illogical though it might seem to “outsider” eyes. I often imagined myself back at Harvard trying to answer questions about why I carried out my fieldwork as I did, and coming up only with “You had to have been there.”

So, plodding forward in those early weeks of working at Toothbrush Tree with the old people from Kauri, I recorded another version of the same “Two Boys and the Lions” story from the elderly hunter /Ukxa N!a’an (Old /Ukxa), he who loved wordplay and imitating birds. In this version the trickster god is named G!ara, an alternate name for Kaoxa.

#### *The Two Boys and the Lions 2*

G!ara sired two sons, one named !Xuma, the other named Kha//’an. Once the two boys were chasing an eland. G!ara followed their tracks but did not catch up with them. He had with him the tortoise, and the two of them were following Kha//’an and !Xuma.

G!ara and the tortoise came to the remains of a fire where the boys had slept along the way. G!ara told the tortoise to stick his head in the fire to see whether the center was cold. The tortoise stuck in his head and left it there awhile, then told G!ara that the fire was dead.

So they kept on tracking and tracking until they saw another old fire. Again G!ara told the tortoise to stick in his head and feel the heat. The tortoise left his head in the ashes awhile but at last reported that this fire, too, was dead.

Again they tracked the boys. When night fell they came to the place where the eland had died. They came to the fire the boys had lit the day before, the fire they had lit when they killed the eland. This time the tortoise put his head into the fire and cried, “Dzi dzi dzi dzi!” G!ara said, “My father’s namesake, hooray for you!” They had come very close to where the boys were, so that the tortoise had burned his head in a living fire.

G!ara and the tortoise jumped up and ran, ran to where the eland had been butchered. There they found that lions had been making waterbags of the eland’s stomach. They had taken out the eland’s stomach and had made waterbags of it. With the contents of the stomach the lions had made a pile to bury Kha//’an and !Xuma. Yes, the lions had made waterbags for fetching water. [As an aside, Old /Ukxa said, “That’s what lions do. Lions kill a thing to eat, and they bury its stomach contents in the sand.” Aha! I

thought. The story had made this point about lion kills through sideways allusiveness. To understand the reference, I had to know this further detail about Ju/'hoan knowledge of animal behavior.]

G!ara came up to the pile of stomach contents and saw his sons imprisoned in it. “!Xuma and Kha//an—is this you here?” They said, “Yes, here we are.” Then G!ara went to hang the bones from the back of the eland’s neck in a tree. He meant to make lightning, this fire that comes down from the sky with the sound “huru.” G!ara hung the bones in a tree.

He hung them up, but they fell down and went “//oh” in the sand. “No,” he said, “these bones won’t do.” So he went and hung up the horns instead. The horns stood up straight and stayed there. In this way G!ara was calling the lightning to come and kill the lions.

When he had hung up the horns, G!ara moved off a little way and gathered small birds together, gathered them so they could speak to him. He tied the birds all around his head, and they cried, “khoai, khoai, khoai.” He untied them and said, “Why do these things chatter so much?” G!ara threw the birds away. Next he took the little bird Tcxoe and tied him on his head, and sat down to wait for the lions.

After he had sat awhile, G!ara made the night come. He spoke to the night, saying, “/e/e! /Grow dark so the lions, who have gone to fetch water, will have to return.” It grew dark, and the lions returned. They came up to G!ara and offered him water. They gave him the biggest waterbag, but he refused it. “Give me that little waterbag over there, let me just sip a little, so that the water will go around,” he said.

Then he took the biggest waterbag and gave it to the tortoise. They all drank and drank and drank. Then G!ara said, “Now that you have finished, let’s eat.” So the lions cut the fat from the carcass and they all ate.

Next, G!ara said, “We’re going to dance. Let’s dance, so it will rain.” G!ara led off and the tortoise came behind him. The lions came behind the tortoise. G!ara said to the lions, “Now you two dance together; don’t separate. The tortoise and I will also dance close to each other, so that there will be a space between us and you lions.”

So they danced and danced and the dance began to be “heavy.” “Now descend!” bellowed G!ara. And the lightning came down—“hobo!”—and struck the lions flat. G!ara called out, “!Xuma, you and Kha//an come out and help me beat these pawed things!” The boys came out of the pile and ran to their father’s side to help him beat the lions.

Then G!ara stood back and said in surprise, “What will I do now . . . how will I powder myself with *sa* so my brains won’t be spoiled by this killing I’ve done?” So he went and got the eland’s hoof. He put coals in it and took a big whiff of the smoke—“he-e-eh.” But it didn’t work, he didn’t go into a trance. So he said, “No good. What kind of dried-up, tasteless thing is this?”



He walked back and forth thinking. Finally he killed the tortoise, his nephew who had accompanied him. He grabbed the tortoise so he shrieked “ee!” and snapped his neck in two. Then G!ara scooped out the meat from the shell. He took eland fat and poked it into the shell. He put in the fat and heaped coals on top of it and sniffed the smoke, and this time he began to trance.

Wow. I asked myself, why would hanging horns in a tree bring down lightning? Why would powdering oneself with aromatic root powder allow relief from having killed something? Why would sniffing smoke from a fire of fat made inside a tortoise shell enable a person to trance? Teasing out these references led me into ritual contexts whose sideways allusiveness provided ever more richness to the texture of meaning in the tales.

I heard yet another version from Baq’u N!a’an, Old /Ukxa’s wife. Baq’u and I of course had an easy relationship from the start, due to my having been given her name by the woman named Baq’u at Dobe. So I called Baq’u *Txun*, or “Grandmother,” and though I was patently not a Ju’hoan she called me “Little Name,” or “Namesake.” Warmth then grew between us as if by magic. The Ju’hoansi have a repertoire of about fifty men’s names and about fifty women’s names, usually conferred, as I’ve said, on the grandchild generation. These names provide an entrée for strangers to a satisfyingly complex layer of fictional relatedness complementing the web of actual kinship that exists among the people. They also provide links to people in the old stories: two of my best Ju’hoan friends had name relationships to the trickster’s two sons, named Kha//an and !Xuma.

I heard many different versions of stories whose plots had become familiar to me, from the old storytellers who came to stay with me at Toothbrush Tree, from people to whom I had different relationships due to factors such as the name relationship, or from other people I had worked with, whether they were regularly employed by me or not. Whenever I heard a different incident or item or character in a new version of a story, I had a chance to ask about it, learning new vocabulary, cultural equivalences, or environmental references in the process. Some of these things I managed to learn in time for them to go into my thesis, but many of them I only understood much later.

For instance, it took years for me to understand the significance of the different-sized waterbags in the story of the trickster god and his sons and the lions. At last a Ju’hoan man in Namibia, across the border, performed the story so graphically that I saw G!ara’s trickery clearly: G!ara refused the large waterbag because drinking from it would ob-

scure his view of the returning lions, the lions who had returned to claim their prey, his two sons buried in the eland's stomach contents. Instead he hung the small waterbag on his lip and drank in such a way that he could still see everything the lions did. The question I had been carrying around in my head for over a decade, about the puzzling waterbag detail, was resolved in a few seconds of pantomime. I came to see pantomime as a key element of storytelling performance. In fact, in the cases where I had heard the lion and waterbags episode told without pantomime, and been puzzled, all the rest of the audience understood the words to refer to some pantomimed version of the tale each of them had heard and seen before, perhaps many times before.

While the older people of Kauri were staying with me on their storytelling retreats, I sometimes took various ones aside (along with a few native-speaker listeners) and, as I had with !Unn/obe, tape-recorded each and every story they cared to tell. Sometimes hearing all these stories would take days or weeks for each storyteller. At the same time I was also following up on leads provided by Lorna Marshall's notes and articles concerning cosmological figures like the intriguing *G!xoa-G!xoa Koara* (Knee Knee None) people, who "eat the sun" every night when it turns into a ball of red meat and disappears over the western horizon. In Kauri, Botswana, a scant 150 kilometers from where Lorna worked in Nyae Nyae, South West Africa, I found that these figures were more often called *G//atzasi*, "Those Who Sleep Standing Up," an alternate name also recorded by Lorna. "About the *G//atzasi*," I wrote in my journal, "I additionally learned that some people regarded them as being only half-people—they have one eye, one ear, one breast, one leg + arm."

But most of the other details I heard about them were the same as those Marshall later included in her *Nyae Nyae !Kung Beliefs and Rites*:

They have human form but are not ordinary humans; they are *n|um* [*n/om*] people, we were told. They look like Bushmen except that their feet are as thin as grassblades, and they have no joints in their knees. . . . The Knee Knee None have hip joints, but it is so hard for them to sit down or lie down without knee joints that they always stand. When they sleep they lean against trees, or, if they can, they wedge themselves into crotches in the trees. When they eat, they lift the food from the fire up to their mouths with long, sharp sticks.

These people regularly eat the sun. The sun is their *//hara* [cultivated field or other main source of sustenance]. . . . Every evening the sun comes down to earth and turns into an elephant. (In another version, the sun becomes a giraffe.) The Knee Knee None kill it, and when we see it round and fiery red at sunset, it is the meat we see. The people then dance the Sun Dance. When the meat is cooked, the adults tell the chil-

dren to run away and play. (One version of the account says they chase the children away.) The adults then eat the meat. When the children come back, the adults pick their teeth and give the bits of meat that have stuck in them to the children for their supper. (To chase children away and to withhold food from them is the most unBushmenlike behavior that could be imagined.)

When they have finished, one of the men takes the elephant's clavicle bone and throws it across the sky to the east. There it falls into water. By morning, it has grown to be the sun again. It comes out of the water, dries itself in a tree, and bright yellow once more, begins its daily journey. The sun has its own *n|um* [*n/om*] which makes this happen. The !Kung [Ju/'hoansi] told us that sometimes they heard the clavicle bone passing over them at night. It makes a humming sound like a wind. They think if a short man throws it they hear it, but if a tall man throws it, it passes so high over them that they hear nothing. (Marshall 1999: 247)

Cosmological explanations like this, and the stories that the Ju/'hoansi told, are a far cry from heavy-handed allegories or moralizing tales. Beings who are the antithesis of good people, in the Ju/'hoan view, are stingy with food for their own children and have to endure life propping themselves uncomfortably against trees to even sleep. Yet these creatures of the imagination conveyed volumes of information about attitudes the Ju/'hoansi thought important to inculcate, and about behavior they thought important to avoid. That they did so in the form of memorable images, within a deceptively simple narrative, made them all the more powerful. For me, learning enough about the symbols in the stories and rituals to write with true confidence about them literally took decades. It was a process of tolerating ambiguity and entertaining mystery until I had enough context for the ambiguities and mysteries to resolve themselves. The process was much like the slow, natural way I had come to understand, earlier in life, what I did of English literature. In other words, it was much like just living and learning: it was part of my socialization. One socialization is all most people get. This second one was extra, a glimpse into an equally rich world afforded me as a consequence of my choice to be there.