



Preface

Fifty years ago, armed with a Harvard MA in anthropology, I chugged across the Atlantic on a Lykes Lines freighter from New Orleans to Cape Town, South Africa. From Cape Town I rode the Karoo Express train overnight to Johannesburg and took Rhodesia Railways from there to Gaborone, Botswana, whence I flew in a two-seater Cessna to Maun, Ngamiland District, on a golden morning that seemed to go on and on forever into the afternoon. The bush pilot's lunch consisted of several hard-boiled eggs cracked nonchalantly against the plane's steering wheel and washed down with orange Fanta. He was as relaxed as if he were seated at a picnic table rather than flying high above the Kalahari Desert. In amazement I stared at him and then out the window at herds of giraffes, startled by the sound of the plane, undulating across the sand below.

I had PhD dissertation research to do for my next phase at Harvard, but secretly I knew I was embarked on the defining adventure of my life. For the next eighteen months, roughly 550 days, I would be living with and learning from the click-speaking Ju/'hoan (pronounced like "Jutwan") San ("Bushman") people, many of whom still got their main sustenance from hunting and gathering. I was to study how their social attitudes and subsistence skills, along with their immense and detailed knowledge of their environment, were taught and learned. In particular, I was interested in the role verbal narratives—like folklore and oral history—played in the communications enabling their adaptation as hunter-gatherers.

Botswana has changed a great deal since I arrived there in 1970. The discovery of the diamond pipe at Orapa, the internationalization of beef exports, and the expansion of nature-based tourism have transformed the country's economy into one of the most prosperous in southern Africa. In 1970, few if any of the economic changes beginning to affect the country had reached the remoter areas like western Ngamiland, where I was to work. I arrived in Botswana before bilharzia (schistosomiasis) came down the rivers from central Africa into the Okavango Swamps, before AIDS devastated the country's population,

before multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis reached dangerous proportions in far-flung Kalahari communities—and half a century before the coronavirus threatening its many ethnic groups now. I arrived before distances stopped being measured in British miles and went to international kilometers, and before South African rands and British pounds, shillings, and pence gave way completely to the currency Pula (Setswana for “rain”) of newly independent Botswana. I was there without a credit card, carrying instead eighteen months’ worth of traveler’s checks in a safety belt close to my body: it wasn’t until 1971 that Ruth Bader Ginsberg and other feminists made it possible for US women to hold credit cards in their own names. This was also a time before almost any of the exclusively sand roads of Botswana became gravel or tarmac. It was a time before cellphones, fax machines, and even radiophones: tissue-thin blue aerogrammes or postcards took months to turn around between Africa and the United States. GPS was decades from being invented. Today, GPS and cell phones and drone technology are being used to spread much-needed health and other information, and to document land use activities to help the Ju/’hoansi (“Jutwansi”) to hold on to some of their land in western Ngamiland.

Back in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I had managed to convince my academic advisors Irven DeVore and Richard Lee to send me to Botswana as part of their Harvard Kalahari Research Group. The last of the project’s graduate students, I was unmarried and would be “on my own” in the Kalahari after a brief period of overlap with fellow students Melvin Konner and his wife Marjorie Shostak. I had no return ticket back to the United States. I would be without other English-speakers to talk to most of the time. The Ju/’hoan (“Jutwan”) or !Kung language was to all intents and purposes an unwritten one I would have to learn by immersion. I had had some oral lessons in !Kung back in Massachusetts from fellow grad student Pat Draper and knew it had four click consonants, written /, =, !, and //. Only later did I learn that, combined with other consonants, the permutations of these four clicks yielded a total of eighty-four completely new sounds I would have to learn to make with my mouth.

The title *Once Upon a Time Is Now* is a quoted exclamation from my teacher Richard Lee. He made the exclamation after many discussions we had about storytelling’s specific enabling functions for society. As I pointed out the “work” of social cohesion that old stories perform as they are retold, Richard realized what I had been trying to do in treating Ju/’hoan folklore as integral to the ethnography of the present. The book is presented as a narrative: its arc is the story of my own journey to understanding the importance of constantly updated storytelling in

Ju/'hoan life, and it relates the lessons I myself and other Westerners may perhaps draw from it for our own lives. It is drawn from my memory and illustrated with extracts from the nineteen detailed handwritten journals I kept during that first fieldwork. It outlines my experience of a “second socialization” into a culture as different from my own as could be imagined. In the process I came face to face with a very hard fact: despite my anthropological training, I found I had been living in a membranous bubble from which the living reality of people like the Ju/'hoansi had been excluded. I had had them in a kind of never-never land. With repeated painful—but sometimes joyful—experiences, the membrane between me and them began to thin, and I could see them as my contemporaries on the same planet.

I deliberately present the immediacies of my action-packed eighteen months in raw, untidied form. Occasionally I quote directly from the field journals I kept of the sometimes comical, sometimes agonizing ways I learned from life with the Ju/'hoansi. (Journal passages have been lightly edited for print). I attempt to create a simulacrum of the tumult of impressions, sights, sounds, and scents, the steps, missteps, and times of introspection that I hope have led me some distance from the romanticism and naivete with which I arrived in Africa. This rough, vivid format allows glimpses of the larger meanings I pursued over subsequent decades. It allows a kind of dialogue to emerge between myself as a nervous twenty-five-year-old field-worker and my seventy-five-year-old self now recollecting her experiences in some tranquility.

Both of these selves embraced the inestimably valuable things I learned about the Ju/'hoan people, who lived somewhat as hunter-gatherers, the ancestors of us all, had lived for millennia. One of the most important things was what my fellow Harvard student Sarah Blaffer Hrdy spoke of as “original goodness,” a basic underpinning of their egalitarian way of life. I also learned that there was nothing rosy or romantic about this goodness or about egalitarianism: social balance is kept by the Ju/'hoansi through fierce and sustained attention to expectations and “leveling” rules. Another thing I learned was that the continuity of Ju/'hoan society is supported by a strong belief in the possibility of transformation. They relied then, and continue to rely, on transformation by hard work and determination, transformation by community effort, and transformation by efficacious, altered states of mind. The import of all of these is that growth, amelioration, healing, and change are possible in the world by the practice of known human means.

Since that first fieldwork, I have had a busy career of teaching, directing an anthropological nonprofit, further research, and writing. A few

years ago I finally got around to looking back into the box of personal field journals I had not opened for over forty years. I found a treasure trove. It was clear I needed to sift through the nineteen battered little notebooks I had scribbled in nearly every night of those eighteen months in Botswana. I went to a quiet place in the Hill Country near my home in Austin, Texas, for two weeks and sat down and read them all. It was an overwhelming experience. So much that I had forgotten came vividly alive: I laughed, wept, and was terrified all over again at my temerity in taking on what I had taken on. To do justice to the richness of these notebooks, I realized, I would have to do a completely different sort of writing from anything I had ever done before.

I have published extensively in the areas of anthropology, folklore, and advocacy of indigenous societies. This new project would be my first attempt at writing what I've really been wanting to write all along—the backstory, the deeper story, the spiritual story behind everything I have thought, said, and done since I first went to Africa. I saw that the key to this backstory lay in my long-neglected journals.

I had written most of my journal notes literally within hours of events as they occurred. They closely chronicle my personal responses and ruminations about those events. They also bear detailed witness to a slice of time in the history of a particular group of one of the most-studied peoples in all of anthropology. I have spent the intervening half century documenting some of the massive changes that have come into the lives and landscapes of the Ju/'hoansi and other hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari. I had a chance to experience that long-ago slice of time in an extraordinarily intimate way that will never be repeated. I felt keenly my responsibility to share my experiences—and how I made sense of them—to an audience not only of colleagues but of a much wider group of readers.

This first period of full-immersion fieldwork crystallized my intentions for all that I have done since. One of the most important of those intentions was to find a dignified way, through careful transcription and translation of things Ju/'hoan people said to me, to make sure their voices carried meaningfully to audiences far beyond myself. I also intended to publish detailed, contextualized documentation of the Ju/'hoan language, the meanings of many of its metaphors and folk concepts, and of its verbal art, song, and ritual. In the decades since then, I have had a rich and rewarding life of collaboration with Ju/'hoan colleagues, as well as with my academic colleagues, doing just that.

In *Once Upon a Time Is Now* I also describe the simple beginning of my activist career. !Unn/obe *Morethlwa*, a brilliant storyteller, bead artist, and singer, a nonliterate woman, asked me to take a letter to the

chiefs of Botswana on behalf of the Ju/'hoan people. I did so. The eventual result was the cofounding with my group of Harvard colleagues of one of the oldest anthropology research-based advocacy organizations for indigenous peoples. This was the nonprofit Kalahari Peoples Fund, in which I remain active today. Thus I describe in this book how my first trip to Africa set the stage for the rest of my professional and personal life. I try to present my adventures with the Ju/'hoansi in a form unvarnished by hindsight. This makes for an occasionally hair-raising story.

Thanks to an astounding linguist and teacher, the late Patrick Dickens, I have been enabled to work in a written form of the Ju/'hoan language since 1990, using the professional orthography, dictionary, and grammar he wrote. These Ju/'hoan-language materials have now been adopted by the Ju/'hoan people's organization, the Namibian government, and international linguistic scholars. Not wanting to disrespect the high phonetic complexity of the language, I have chosen in this language-focused memoir to present the names of Ju/'hoan individuals and other Ju/'hoan words in the professional Dickens orthography based on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), one which can be rendered using the symbols on an ordinary typewriter. This way of writing the Ju/'hoan language has become the basis for sustaining the use and detailed knowledge of it by the current and coming literate—and computer-literate—generations.

For the convenience of readers unfamiliar with the sounds of the four special IPA characters used alone or with other consonants to make the Ju/'hoan clicks, I list them here, running from the front to the back of the mouth in terms of where they are made.

- / = dental click (cf. expression of irritation in English: “tsk, tsk”).
- = = alveolar (laminal) click, no equivalent in English.
- ! = alveo-palatal click (cf. sound of a cork coming out of a bottle).
- // = lateral click (cf. sound used to urge on a horse).

It may help the reader to use the following rough equivalences in the English alphabet.

- / = t
- = = t
- ! = k
- // = k