



## EPILOGUE

Since the time of the experiences in this book, I have been able to pursue many of the intentions that were set in my life between December 1970 and June 1972. I wrote my thesis, got my degree, and have returned to the same Ju//hoan area of northwestern Botswana—and nearby north-eastern Namibia—at least twenty-five times, sometimes for years at a time. I returned for more fieldwork and also for practical advocacy work in projects requested by Ju//hoan communities. The advocacy work was done under the auspices of the Kalahari Peoples Fund I cofounded with colleagues in the Harvard Kalahari Research Group.

In my biggest adventure of the intervening years, I was with the Namibian Ju//hoansi as they founded their community organization, the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative (NNFC), in 1988. As a nationally recognized cooperative, they were able to participate in their country's independence process in 1990. I worked as a translator and facilitator for the NNFC leadership at that time and afterward, assisting them as they took part in Namibia's First National Land Conference in 1991. That conference was the enabling event for the eventual transformation of their cooperative into the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, the first nationally recognized land conservancy in Namibia, through which they have held onto a portion of their ancestral land and its resources.

During this work I learned much more of the Ju//hoan language, becoming conversant enough in it to found mother-tongue education projects and the Ju//hoan Transcription Group (JTG). These projects have not only allowed researchers to collaborate with native speakers in person and via the internet but have made it possible for Ju//hoansi to document important meetings and heritage materials for their community. Using an orthography (a linguistically standardized way of writing) developed by the late linguist Patrick Dickens and native speakers in the early 1990s, newly computer-literate Ju//hoan speakers of the JTG have worked in ELAN, a powerful transcription-software program developed in the Netherlands. They have been processing the oral materials I started collecting in Botswana in the early 1970s and continued to collect across the border in Namibia until 2018, the last year I did fieldwork. They have also done years of professional

transcription, putting into orthographically correct written form and translating many sorts of Ju/'hoan oral materials recorded by other colleagues and by governmental agencies, filmmakers, and educators.

The cultural heritage and language documentation projects are still ongoing now, in 2022. They have led to, among other things, a digital deposit of nearly twenty thousand Ju/'hoan-language text and sound documents in the Endangered Languages Archive at the School of Oriental and African Languages, University of London. Many of these documents address environmental knowledge, hunting and gathering techniques, and the ways group survival is enabled by social sharing. Others illuminate strong themes at the heart of what made their long-tenured adaptation successful, among them the efficacious and apparently ancient dance of psychic healing they still practice, and the surprisingly strong relationship of their postmenopausal women to power.

A “mirror archive” of all the materials is planned for the Ju/'hoan community in Namibia, to be housed at the office of Tsamkxao =Oma, the first chairman of the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative, who is now the Ju/'hoan Traditional Authority recognized by the Namibian Government. Already the political subsection of the archive, containing hundreds of hours of political speeches and deliberative processes recorded in the late 1980s, during the run-up to Namibian independence, is in use by the present Ju/'hoan leadership. It serves as both recorded history and rhetorical resource as they continue to fight for their land rights and confront governmental, industrial, and tourism entities over issues of appropriation.

While the independence process was going on in Namibia, the Kalahari Peoples Fund was also pursuing San community initiatives in Botswana and South Africa. In addition to educational and cultural heritage documentation efforts, KPF has through the years supported land and resource conservation, water source provision and protection, and general human rights efforts on behalf of San and other Kalahari communities in southern Africa. Since 2020, among other ongoing projects, it has used its available resources to provide covid guidance information, translated into Ju/'hoansi and a dozen other Kalahari languages, to remote communities.

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After my fieldwork in 1972, I returned in 1975 to western Ngamiland, Botswana, to take up a newly created position with the Botswana government as research liaison for Basarwa (Bushmen) development under

Liz Wily of the Basarwa Development Office. In 1987 I started working just across the international fence in the Ju/'hoan area of South West Africa. At /Aotcha, where Lorna Marshall had done most of her fine ethnographic work, I began as project director for a new foundation started by John Marshall and Claire Ritchie. I learned that many of the Kauri people I had known in Botswana had moved to South West Africa and joined their relatives at a place near /Aotcha called Djxokhoe. I went to visit them there, and we danced. I was delighted to find that the old bonds were still there—the bonds we created by dancing together fifteen years before. Now, in the time of the coronavirus, I have been thinking a lot about how such powerful bonds between human beings can persist across distance and time.

I spent most of 2020, all of 2021, and most of 2022 self-isolating at home in Austin, Texas. I finished this book during that time. Shortly after writing the final chapter, I received a cellphone call from /Kae/kae, Botswana. A Ju/'hoan man named =Oma greeted me, “Baq'u-o! A re ge'e?” (Megan, are you well, are you alive?), and he said that his father wanted to speak to me. Kxao Tjimburu, about whom I wrote in chapter 6, came on the line, sounding as clear as if he had been calling from downtown Austin.

I had last seen Kxao decades ago, at one of the /Kae/kae dances when I heard him cry out, “I am imitating my father!” From an associate of the Kalahari Peoples Fund who passes regularly through /Kae/kae, I knew that he had been dancing and healing there ever since.

I was electrified to be in communication with Kxao, and not just because I had recently finished writing about him in the story of my first fieldwork. I was elated to learn that, though he is elderly now, he is still keen to train members of his family and other young people in the healing practice.

The problem, outlined to me by Kxao and others on the phone call, is that his waning healing strength is so much in demand by outsiders (tourists and people from other ethnic groups) that he is often sapped of energy when it comes to healing and mentoring his own people. Though the road through /Kae/kae is still the deep fissure in the sand it was when I was last there, it has been resurfaced into a rutted calcrete track by local people on cash-for-work programs to improve access to tourists and services. I was told that Kxao, who lives near the resurfaced road, is often now approached by outsiders who thoughtlessly do not wear masks or observe social distancing. His family members were worried for his health and advocated transferring him from /Kae/kae to a much more remote area. There he could live with his extended family,

get his strength back, and go on teaching and conveying the healing power to the young Ju/'hoan people who want to work with him.

Accordingly, I arranged for private donations and some funding from the Kalahari Peoples Fund and other organizations to facilitate the relocation of Kxao, his family, and the young people who were already learning from him or wanted to learn from him. I continue to work with other concerned friends to make Kxao's move to safety permanent, and to support this community-based project to continue the healing tradition.

I was very moved by the timeliness of Kxao's people's project, given that the coronavirus has been problematic even in carefully locked-down, sparsely populated countries like Botswana and Namibia. Community healing continues to be greatly needed, not only in the event of outbreaks in remote areas with few medical facilities but also to allay the fear that is gripping those countries just as it has ours.

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I was also moved by Kxao Tjimburu's phone call because of the (non-coronavirus) death in June 2020 of the Namibian Ju/'hoan healer /Kunta Boo. I first met /Kunta when he was visiting Dobe, Botswana, in 1971, and I have worked with him in Nyae Nyae, Namibia, over the years since then. /Kunta, you will remember, was one of the healer/innovators of the Giraffe dance, through whom Be N!a'an's powerful song passed on its way from then South West Africa through western Ngamiland, where /Kae/kae is located, and eventually deep into southern Botswana.

From personal observation of /Kunta as recently as 2018, I feel strongly that his overwork as a healer to outsiders was part of what led to his untimely death. Perhaps due to safari companies' exploitative employment of healers on the Namibian side of the international fence, /Kunta was training no apprentices except one middle-aged daughter. When he was dying, according to his nephew, there was no one present to sing the Giraffe songs that were so dear to him: the few people who were there knew only the Elephant songs. I would have given anything to know /Kunta had departed this world with the Giraffe songs sounding in his ears. To me it is comforting that Kxao Tjimburu will be carrying on in Botswana the teaching of the powerful Giraffe tradition he shared with both /Kunta and Kxao =Oah. As Tsamkxao =Oma, the first chairman of the Ju/'hoan people's organization, which became the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, said, "People have died, but the teaching has always continued."

Kxao and /Kunta and their people knew immediately when a dance became “heavy” and full of *n/om*, the power to heal. This happened when people became attuned to each other, all in the community focused at the same time on the same goal. I think that Westerners, too, sense right away when *communitas* asserts itself, even when it comes after a long time of painful division in our societies. In this time of the coronavirus and the resurgence of white supremacy, our time of dire need and deep divisions, we have seen attempts to recreate community over and over again in myriad ways. I think that this is the thing humans may be most sensitive to in all the world: harmony or disharmony with the others who matter to us. Creating community by joint effort may be the basic moral action for which we have all been yearning.

I learned from the Ju/'hoansi that dancing together—or doing something creative together that is meaningful and has deep symbolic reference—is one of the enabling features of human adaptation. It allows us, at least for a stretch of time that can be repeated as needed, to be fearless enough to go on living in the face of the real adversities of our world. I saw it enable the Ju/'hoansi, with few possessions, with no pharmacopeia for disease but a handful of plant-based remedies, with no larder but the land, no mind-numbing substances like alcohol, to dwell on the surface of the earth in frequent delight and without making violent projections upon others. It allowed them to live face-to-face and to heal skin-to-skin, but also, through an ancient technology of consciousness, to minister to loved ones from afar.

The world is now facing, at enormous scale, the conundrum of how to maintain human contact at a safe distance. In this time of distanced connections enabled by our new technologies, the Ju/'hoan healing and maintenance of relationships from afar allow us to wonder: mightn't these mysterious, powerful, remote connections be strong enough to sustain us until we can be skin-to-skin again?

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The main goal of this book has been to present the lessons that anthropology—and I as both a person and an anthropologist—learned from the Ju/'hoan people. Lessons, they taught me, can often be best learned from stories. I had chosen anthropology partly because it contained the potential to increase understanding about what it means to be human. As I shifted my major from English to anthropology during my progress from undergraduate to grad school, I learned an immense number of impressive new things about anthropology's ability to increase this understanding. Yet as a humanist, I distrusted the seemingly “scientis-

tic” claims and methods of the field as a whole. Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was on a quest for a different model of anthropological scholarship from the ones presented to me in my first semesters at Harvard. A friend said to me later that I probably wanted a model that was consonant with the personal spiritual quest I seemed to be on at the same time.

This observation rang true for me. It was, after all, the 1960s when I was in grad school. There was dawning awareness at that time that youth in America were lacking the social, initiatory experiences that guided youth in other cultures through the perilous limbo of adolescence. I was not up on the psychological literature of adolescence at the time, but I somehow knew that to resolve the complexities of my own growing up I would have to work hard—very hard—in some way that did not come easy to me. In retrospect, as readers may have seen, I seem to have ended up designing the perfect initiatory ordeal and learning experience for myself. My adventures were an ordeal of my own choosing. I am inordinately grateful for having had this opportunity for further growing up.

Of course, I did not grow up all at once in the early 1970s. I still spent decades processing my experiences in the course of further research, teaching, translating, and writing. Writing was one of the main ways I managed to internalize the most important lessons I had learned. Like any field-worker, I had to bring order to a welter of experiences. This book is my story of how I solved problems of order and meaning through the painstaking accretion of participation and observations, vocabulary and idioms, symbolic connections and folk concepts. I set myself to present through my writing the way the arts of the Ju/’hoan people, especially their narrative and healing arts, both constitute the intricate symbolic mechanisms of their egalitarian culture and drive it forward.

Most of all I wanted to make the expressive art and lessons of the Ju/’hoansi more available to the world beyond the Kalahari. Though not a linguist, I have made close transcription and translation of their language my life’s work. I regard the hard spiritual work of translation as the most important job I can do. I wanted this book to bring readers closer to both the clarity of Ju/’hoan thought and to the mystery, especially in the healing dance, of what the Ju/’hoansi themselves say is beyond knowing.

I had had an unparalleled chance to live closely with a group of people whose survival depended not only on rigorous sharing but on functioning as a creative collective. I was compelled to write about this not just for myself but for my own friends and community. I believe that,

like all those who have had extraordinary experiences, I have a responsibility to share them. I believe they can matter to my peers, to students, to colleagues, to those in other fields, and to young readers casting about for ways to engage responsibly with a complex, multiethnic, multiracial world. What I learned from the Ju/'hoansi suggests civility and creativity options for many Western communities' very survival.

As I've said, the experiences I had in those first months of fieldwork set the stage for my lifetime intention. I have spent the ensuing half century advocating on behalf of the Ju/'hoansi and other San peoples, largely to foster awareness of the intricate symbolic mechanisms of their egalitarian culture. Wanting to make the expressive art and lessons of the Ju/'hoansi more available to the world beyond the Kalahari, I have mostly tried to use, not paraphrase or my own interpretation, but careful transcription and translation of their own recorded voices. To do this well I have needed to return often to both Botswana and Namibia. I would have been in Africa again these last few years, were it not for the coronavirus. In short, I am trying to share the many practical tools of thought I learned in the Kalahari. I believe we are going to need something like these tools to build, once we are through the current crises and their many associated challenges, the very different world that must lie beyond. We are lucky to have the tools and wisdom of our forebears to inform our own creativity as we go forward. Indeed, once upon a time is *now*.

A portion of royalties from this book will be donated to the Kalahari Peoples Fund, a United States 501(c)(3) nonprofit ([www.kalaharipeoples.org](http://www.kalaharipeoples.org)).