

## U's Story, Kung people of NYAE NYAE, Namibia

### Part 1:

Our home is the Kalahari. We are the !Kung of Nyae Nyae. The Kalahari is a very big desert which takes up almost a third of southern Africa. Where we live, it is very dry. The big rains come in January, February and March but for the rest of the year, the rain never falls. During the season of the rain, water collects in pans. The largest of these is Gautscha. The happy people of Gautscha who live on the banks of the pan, delight in the water. Every day the children play in it, dancing and splashing and making patterns.

The land around us as far as you can see is very flat. There are no hills; nothing is higher than the termite hills and the baobab trees. For most of the year, we live without a roof. This means that you can always see the beauty of the morning, the setting sun and the blazing stars. The sky is also where our gods live and where the spirits of the dead move about.

"But don't you have houses?" you may be wondering. The answer to this question is that we don't have permanent dwellings. Although we return to the same waterholes, we don't reoccupy the old camp sites. We don't want to make new fires exactly where the old fires have been. To build new fires on the old sites might invite misfortune. Also, we don't like to tire out one spot of land.

Nobody owns the land and everybody has the right to use it. The place where we decide to settle is called our n!ore. Once we have decided where we will settle, the next act is to make a fire. This requires two fire sticks and a bunch of grass. Usually two men make fire together. As one pair of hands holds the bottom stick, the second pair is ready at the top to keep the twirling going. Making fire is the work of men and men carry their fire sticks with them constantly.

You can tell where a family has settled from its fire. The family hangs its possessions in the bushes near the fire, sits around the fire, cooks at it, sleeps at the fire, water and food hold our lives together. We have been so created without fire, we would have no light, no warmth; food could not be cooked. Even an old person can live by his fire. Someone will give him food and water and he will be warm.

Oh, we do have shelters. It is the woman's job to build a shelter. Often we women do not bother to build shelters unless it is raining. A woman can build a shelter in less than an hour - and, of course, the materials are always available all around us. We gather some slender branches from the bushes and push each branch into the ground. Then we bend their tops together and weave them into each other making the frame of the shelter. Next we bring armloads of tall grass, which we pat into place over the frame, and the job is done!

"And what about clothes?" is usually the next question that people ask. Our clothing is very simple and modest. Women wear karosses made out of the whole hide of an antelope, which is scraped, tanned, pulled and rubbed by the men until it is like suede. At night, men, women and children wrap themselves in karosses and sleep in them, beside their fires. By day, the men wear only their breechclouts, the children perhaps only beads, but we women wear our karosses constantly.

Plants are at the centre of our lives. I must add that, except for mangetti nuts, meat is our main source of protein. Still, vegetables make up 75% of our food - there about a hundred plants we can in the Nyae Nyae region. We use grass and branches for shelter; wood that bends for bows; strong wood for digging sticks; light, strong reeds for arrows; resins for glue; light, soft wood for musical instruments, bowls, spoons and ornaments -you see what I mean? So we, like all people all over the world, depend on our environment. We take care not to kill all the animals use all the plants in one area and we do this by moving from one to another and giving the plants and animals time to grow again.

!Kung people remember an animal and a plant after they have seen it once. Then we can tell the difference between that plant and any other plant, even if they look nearly the same. We get our training from doing and from watching. Mothers carry their babies with them on a gathering day and the children learn all the time. When the children can walk, they play at digging, picking and carrying the food, copying what their mothers do. Little boys play with toy bows and arrows from an early age.

## Part 2:

We are gentle with our children and do not want them to be involved in work when they are still young. Besides copying the activities of adults, the play of children involves many other things like climbing trees, swinging on swings, copying the way animals carry and throw their heads and dragging babies on karosses, a favourite game. The girls and women play many different kinds of ball games. And there are many different dances that the girls do together.

Dancing and singing are very much part of !Kung life. People sing to their babies to soothe or entertain them. Everybody sings and almost everybody plays a musical instrument. Men play music on their hunting bows. The most common instrument we play is the gwashi. It is made out of wood. Four or five thick sticks are cut into pieces of 30 centimeters in length and attached to a wooden base. Then strings are attached in slots and wound around the sticks. Playing music lightens all aspects of our lives.

Men and boys from the age of about eight to early old age play together. They play games like tug-of-war, stick throwing and these days, a game called airplane. Sometimes a boy will catch a bird, tie a cord to one leg and play aeroplane until the bird is too tired to flutter anymore. Then it will be left to die. To kill animals is a way of life among hunters.

And our old people, they have a special place because the Creator has instructed the old people in the ways of life, given them knowledge of plants and digging, of arrows and poison, taught them the skills and crafts and the customs they should follow. The old people passed on this knowledge to the generation that came after them, and so it has been passed on from generation to generation until today. We say that the young know nothing; they have no sense, till they are taught by the old.

Now to get back to food. Like all people, we spend a lot of time talking and thinking about food. And providing food for the whole family takes a lot of hard work. Gathering plants is what women are made for; men are made to bring meat. But, men are not excluded from gathering whereas women are totally excluded from hunting. Women may not even touch bows and arrows.

Every able, adult woman is responsible for gathering for herself, her family and her dependants. For a woman to be lazy would be unacceptable in our society. What we do is we form gathering parties and go out and gather together. The equipment we use consists of a digging stick and containers to carry the food we have gathered. The men make the digging sticks for themselves and their wives. A root about an arms length long may take about fifteen or twenty minutes of digging. Then we have to carry what we have gathered in the pouches of our karosses. But the main weight we have to carry is the weight of our children. Our children are fed on breast milk until they are about four and we take them with us wherever we go, whether it's moving from one area to another to gather or to visit relatives and friends.

All !Kung men hunt. The men talk endlessly about hunting as they sit repairing their equipment and poisoning their arrows. Little boys practice shooting throughout their childhood. They hear about searching for spoor (scent of an animal) fresh enough to be worth following, about the need to act quickly once an animal has been seen, about laying down their hunting bags, quivers and spears and only carrying their bows and arrows with them when they are tracking - and about the importance of approaching silently.

At the age of about thirteen, boys begin to hunt with their fathers. This is when they practice the skills of tracking, stalking and participating in actual hunts.

A young man may not marry until he has killed a big game animal, like a wildebeest, a gemsbok, a kudu or even an eland - and proved himself a hunter.

The animals and insects of Nyae Nyae supply us with many things. We use their skins for all our garments and for bags; we use their bones and horns to make tools and other things; we use cocoons to make rattles and ostrich eggshells are used for carrying water. In all these ways, nature is once again our provider. And, when we have been without meat for some time, we love to eat it. The animals belong to no one until they are shot. A dead animal belongs to the person who kills it but the meat of the animal is shared with everyone according to custom. No one wants to seem "far-hearted" or stingy in meat sharing.

The custom of sharing is something that we believe in very strongly. The person with whom one shares will share in return. The idea of eating alone and not sharing is shocking to us. Lions could do that, we say, not people. So, every family gets a portion of the animal. Usually we cut our piece into strips and hang these strips on branches to dry. This way the meat keeps for some time. You know, there is one thing that has always interested me. Although the women bring in most of the food that keeps the people alive, the roots and berries are often tasteless and harsh. People crave the taste of meat. And there is no splendid excitement in returning to the camp with vegetables. The return of the hunters from a successful hunt is very different. The craving for meat, the uncertainty of the hunt, the excitement of the kill and, finally, the eating and satisfaction arouse powerful emotions in people.

The words of this song express the way people feel about meat:

You must sing well. We are happy now. Our hearts are shining. I shall put on my rattles, And put on my headband, And put a feather in my hair

To explain to God how happy we are that he has helped us and that we have eaten.  
My heart is awake.

When we do not have meat My heart is sad from hunger, Like an old man, sick and slow.  
When we have meat my heart is lively.

### **Part 3:**

How big is a family and who belongs to it? A family consists of a mother, father and children. A man can have more than one wife if he wants to. Three or four families, that is between fifteen and forty people, usually live together in what we call a band. Everybody belongs somewhere and no one has no relative whatsoever with whom to live. The territory to which a person belongs may be that of his father's people or that of his mother's people: whatever territory his family is settled in will be his home, that is the place in which he lives or comes from, the place to which he belongs.

We have no chiefs or political leaders. No one gets treated in a special way because of their status. People do not want to stand out or be above others because this draws unfavourable attention to them and may arouse envy and jealousy.

But, I was about to tell you about !Kung weddings. At the time of a wedding the first marriage is usually arranged by the parents. The boy must bring an animal that he himself has killed to his bride's parents. Then the mother of the bride rubs her daughter with the fat of this animal and draws lines on her cheeks with red powder mixed with fat. All men go to live with the parents of their brides and serve them. We call this bride service. This takes the form of hunting. We explain bride service in terms of meat. The bride's family wants meat and

they also want the boy to feed his bride while she is young, believing that this unites the two. Bride service should go on for long enough for three children to be born.

And, of course, there are often fights. But, we have a way of handling conflict. We talk. When a quarrel breaks out between a husband and a wife, relatives and lends get involved and help them stop the quarrel. We don't quarrel very often but I do remember one terrible fight I had with my husband. He tried to force me to leave with him when I wanted to stay visiting my parents. You know how he did us? He snatched my baby from my arms and walked off with him. I was so cross, I could have killed him. I ran after him and hit him on his head with my digging stick, went round in a circle stamping my feet in great, high stamps and then followed him home.

But, mostly we solve conflict by talking. To have a fight is to have lied to find a solution by other means. Fighting is dangerous because someone might get killed.

We !Kung, like all other people in man history, live in an uncertain world. We must face ness, bad luck and the biggest loss of all death. Our beliefs help us to understand and accept these things. We believe in a high God, a lower god and many other spirits that bring good luck and bad luck. But the main spirits that affect our lives are those of people who have recently died the 'gangwasi. When serious illness strikes, it is almost always the 'gangwasi who cause it. Longing for the living is what drives the dead to make people sick. They miss their people on earth. And so, they come back to us and put sickness into people saying, "Come, come here to me."

We have many spells, herbs and forms of magic, which make people better. But, if these fail, we have the most powerful spiritual medicine or energy given by God to men and women called n/urn. Trained healers have this energy. To reach this energy within themselves, they usually dance all night. The women sit in a circle around the fire, clap to a rhythm and sing special medicine songs. The dancing, the singing and the clapping cause the n/um to "boil", as we say, and to rise up the healer's spines. When it "explodes" in their heads, they enter into a trance. Then they can heal the sick, change the weather and so on. Often men and women work in teams on seriously ill people.

And you know what I've noticed? Different people were created by God with different things to use, different skins and different medicines. The Tswana have their sangomas and their muti, the Europeans have their medicine in pills and steel needles, and we !Kung have our medicine in the form of n/urn. Different medicine, very different ways of living, but when you cut any one of us, our blood flows the same colour.

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