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## **Persistence of Foraging among Tsumkwe Ju/'hoansi in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1)</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ju/'hoansi San of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in northeastern Namibia have been undergoing processes of social and economic change since the 1950s. This chapter documents these changes in the areas of subsistence economy, health, and religious practices. The strong persistence of foraging, the presence of wild foods in their diet, and the revalorization of 'the bush', as well as the still very low rates of HIV in the population, all give grounds for cautious optimism for the future of the Nyae Nyae Ju/'hoansi. However, threats to their well-being do exist, the most immediate in the form of a land invasion by neighbouring Herero.

### **INTRODUCTION**

I will begin with two data points forty-two years apart that will frame my topic. I started my field work in southern Africa in 1963 as a UC Berkeley student of Sherwood L. Washburn and J. Desmond Clark. They were interested in hunting and gathering peoples and human evolution, but could we find people who still maintained a hunting and gathering way of life? Despite all the changes that the continent of Africa was undergoing, it was an incredible stroke of luck to find a population of so-called 'Bushmen' that was still heavily reliant on foraging for subsistence.

A note on terminology: my UC Berkeley dissertation from 1965 was entitled 'Subsistence Ecology of !Kung Bushmen'. In today's literature, the term 'San' has replaced 'Bushmen', and 'Ju/'hoansi' has replaced '!Kung'. The Dobe Area, as I labelled it, straddled the border between the then British colony of Bechuanaland and the South African-controlled territory of South West Africa, today's Botswana and Namibia.

As documented in Lee (1979), on the Botswana side, gathering and hunting provided the core subsistence of about 80 percent of the population. Men hunted, but success was intermittent. It was the women's gathering that provided the bulk of the calories and nutrients. Women would go out in parties of two to six and

return to camp with bags of gathered plant foods. The now famous mongongo or mangetti fruit and nut was the mainstay of the diet. But over 100 species of roots, tubers, fruits, berries, and leafy greens were gathered and consumed (Lee 1979: 158–204).

Hunting was riskier in terms of reliability of returns, but men still went out weekly. Meat provided 20 to 40 percent of the calories and was highly valued by both genders, providing of course, nutrients not readily available from plant sources (Lee 1979: 205–249).

Material culture especially for clothing, housing, and food-getting was almost entirely home-manufactured from local sources. Only one key element in the hunting toolkit came from outside: *iron* for arrow heads, knives, and spears (Lee 1979: 116–157).

But even in 1963, there were abundant signs of change on the horizon. By the 1960s, most Ju/'hoansi villages shared waterholes with recently arrived Bantu-speaking Herero and their cattle. And some Ju men worked as cattle herders for the Herero. All Ju/'hoansi enjoyed the hospitality of occasional gifts of milk, meat, and grains from the Herero. Some Ju families were just beginning to build herds and to plant crops of their own (Lee 1979: 401–414).

It was evident that a lively debate was emerging among the Ju/'hoansi about the relative merits of two ways of life: the old life of foraging and the new life in settled villages emulating the Herero and trying to build a subsistence base of farming and herding.

From 1968 to 1969, I surveyed 148 adult Ju/'hoan men on a range of topics, including the question 'Do you like the bush?' The Bush: 'Tsi-' symbolized for the Ju their old nomadic way of life in small camps, foraging, and moving with the seasons five to six times a year following game and ripening plant foods. Its opposite – village life – referred to the new, tantalizing subsistence possibilities modelled by the Herero.

The survey results showed a sharply divided population. A bare majority, 51 % (76/148) favored the traditional way of life, while a substantial minority 45 % (66/148), favored village life. Only a few informants (6/148) were neutral or ambivalent, favoring both alternatives equally.

Over the next four decades I continued to work with the Ju/'hoansi, chronicling the major social and economic changes their communities were experiencing and covering a range of other topics central to social anthropology: kinship, religion, health and healing, and documenting political change. But it was not until 2010 that I returned to the original topic of my dissertation 'subsistence ecology'.

By now my research site had shifted from Botswana to the Namibian side of the border. In pre-colonial times, the Ju/'hoansi had formed a single intermarrying population speaking the same language, until International and Apartheid politics artificially split them into two.

In July and August of 2010, with the aid of University of Toronto students, I

carried out a systematic survey of subsistence at the town of Tsumkwe, Namibia, the administrative capital of the remote Nyae Nyae area and home to about 500 to 800 Ju/'hoansi.

The question 'Do you like the bush?' had provided such a lively difference of opinion back in 1968 and 1969 that I resolved to add it to the questionnaire. The Ju of Tsumkwe had experienced five decades of rapid social change and now appeared to have a very mixed subsistence base that included farming, herding, wage work, government welfare, and tourism as well as some hunting and gathering. So my expectation was that the 2010 survey would document a decisive shift *away* from foraging and toward the settled village alternative.

The results took me by surprise. *In 2010, 97 percent of the informants 'liked the bush' and expressed a clear preference for it over the settled village alternative.* Two informants liked Bush and Town equally, and only a single informant preferred town life to that of the bush.

What had happened to shift their priorities so decisively? The rest of this chapter is my attempt to document this decisive shift in attitudes and to explain the underlying dynamics.

## TSUMKWE SOCIAL SURVEYS

Tsumkwe and its surrounding district have had a turbulent political history, ably chronicled in an excellent book, *The Ju/'hoansi San of Nyae Nyae and Namibian Independence* (2011) by Megan Biesele and Robert Hitchcock. Here I also want to acknowledge the key role played by the late John Marshall in helping the Tsumkwe people navigate through a period of rapid social and economic change. Some of this political history is also covered in my chapter in the book *Why Forage?* edited by Brian Codding and Karen Leslie Kramer (2016).

Against this background, this paper presents the results of social and economic surveys conducted between 2008 and 2013. The goal was to take stock of the conditions of life for a wide range of Tsumkwe residents and visitors. A key question was the extent to which foraging subsistence played a role, if any, in their overall adaptation to 'modernity'.

The town of Tsumkwe, Namibia, 50 kilometres west of the Botswana border, serves a remote district of under 3,000 San people. The town has a primary and secondary school, a police station and court house, a medical clinic, churches, and even a broadcasting centre. The 500 to 800 inhabitants of Tsumkwe live in a wide range of housing, and the lives they lead there are mostly invisible to the casual visitor. An additional 1,500 to 2,000 Ju/'hoansi live at some 30 out-station villages scattered throughout the 9,000 square-kilometre district.

The town's Ju/'hoan inhabitants include 'permanent' residents and a large segment of floaters whose primary home is at one of the out-settlements. In the analysis they are divided into Residents and Visitors; but note: most of the 'residents' also claim links to and spend time at the remote settlements.

The survey asked, to what degree were the Ju/'hoansi – like other indigenous people around the world – adhering to or disengaging from their traditional ways of life? By embracing modernity were some also repudiating their past? These findings are presented in four key areas:

1. **Subsistence strategies:** The goal here was to get a good sense of the primary subsistence sources; what was the degree of reliance on wild, farmed, and store-bought food? How did meat from hunting figure into subsistence, and similarly, what contributions to the diet were made by livestock husbandry and government rations?
2. **Degree of dependence on the cash economy:** Money has entered the community in three different forms: wage-labour for both inside and outside work; petty commodity production of crafts and collecting wild products as marketable commodities; and government transfer payments in the form of disability and old-age pensions.
3. **Health issues:** Although the survey did not include a demographic analysis as such (cf. Howell 2000), this chapter addresses several epidemiological issues. Researching in a country (Namibia) that has one of the world's highest rates of HIV, it was of natural interest to research how severely the Tsumkwe District had been affected by the AIDS pandemic. Data was sought as well on rates of incidence of two other major disease conditions: Malaria and Tuberculosis. The survey results provided some unexpected answers.
4. **Religious practices:** For millennia, the Ju/'hoansi have relied heavily on their indigenous healing practices in the treatment of diseases and trauma. After five decades of missionary efforts, to what extent had the Ju become converted to Christianity? Had this meant traditional forms of indigenous healing practices were on the wane?

## METHODS

The focus here is on the 2010 social survey, which was the most extensive and which contained just under 100 informants. Two graduate assistants from the University of Toronto, Laura Meschino and Rhea Wallington, were aided by local bilingual interpreters, Leon Tsamkxau and Steve /Twi. Questionnaires took 45 to 60 minutes to administer. Overall, we collected 98 interviews.

As noted above, Tsumkwe is the capital of a sparsely populated district of 9,000 square kilometres with some 30 widely scattered settlements. We tried to get a good mix of Tsumkwe residents and visitors from the outlying villages. Table 1 shows the breakdown of informants by gender and residence.

**Table 1** 2010 Study Participants Breakdown

	Male	Female	Total
Resident	18	23	41
Visitor	25	32	57
Total	43	55	98

## 1) Subsistence Strategies: Reliance on Wild, Farmed, or Store-Bought Food

### a) Town-based observations, 2010

After fifty years of life settled on a government station, one would expect that Ju/'hoansi subsistence strategies would have shifted decisively from foraging wild foods to reliance on farmed, store-bought, or government-issued food. Surprisingly, this was not the case. (See Table 2.)

**Table 2** Percentage of Informants' Dependence on Various Food Sources: Wild, Domestic, Government, or Commercial\*

Food Source	Wild-Foraged %	Farmed %	Livestock %	Hunting %	Government-Issued %	Store-Bought %
Primary or Co-primary source	54 %	7 %	4 %	1 %	0 %	54 %
Secondary	45 %	54 %	30 %	61 %	94 %	45 %
Percentage using source	99 %	61 %	34 %	62 %	94 %	99 %
Not using source at all	1 %	39 %	66 %	38 %	6 %	1 %

\*N = 89; 9 informants were not ascertained on this question.

The results indicated the strong persistence in their food supply of gathered wild foods. 30/89, one-third of all respondents, listed wild vegetable food as *their most important single source of food*. The same number, 30, listed store-bought food as their most important source, and 18 stated that wild and store-bought foods were equal in importance as primary sources. In other words, *over half of all those interviewed stated that wild food was of primary or co-primary importance in their diet*. Only a single informant said he did not eat gathered foods.

Farming at 7 %, (6/89), Livestock at 4 % (4/89), and Hunting at 1 % (1/89) were distant third, fourth, and fifth choices. A large minority of informants (39 %) had no access to farmed foods, while a two-thirds majority (66 %) lacked access of any kind to livestock-sourced foods (milk or meat). Farming and Livestock's low standing in the subsistence hierarchy is a reflection of the ecological limitations seriously impacting crop and herd viability in a semi-desert

environment.

Regarding hunting, although 62 percent of informants stated that they did eat *some* meat from hunting, 38 percent did not. It is not clear why hunting ranked so low on the list of subsistence sources. Compared to the Australian Aboriginal Martu studied by Rebecca and Doug Bird (2008), for example, who hunt regularly from vehicles with rifles, neither are viable options for Ju/'hoansi due to the lack of availability of vehicles and strict gun laws. However, it is possible that, at the more remote outstations, the rates of return from hunting (with traditional weapons) would be higher.

### b) Subsistence at remote villages, 2013

In July 2013, as a follow-up, I visited remote settlements to see if the subsistence mix differed from the town-based observations of 2010. Interviews took place at six widely dispersed villages, 30 to 100 kilometres distant from Tsumkwe, with additional observations at two other remote settlements, for a total of eight.

A first impression gained from these outer villages was the abundance of wild-food residues in kitchen middens behind each house. Mongongo nut shell casings were particularly plentiful at one village. At another, we identified animal bones in the kitchen middens including porcupine, springhare, warthog, and kudu.

In each setting, I asked village residents to rank their most important and their second most important subsistence source based on the quantity of food from each source. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3** Rank Ordering of the Two Most Important Food Sources at Eight Remote Villages

Village*	Gathering	Hunting	Store-bought	Government
Den/ui 30 km. W	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>		
/Gau!oma** 35 km. W	1 <sup>st</sup>			2 <sup>nd</sup>
N//oma School** 100 km. NW	2 <sup>nd</sup>			1 <sup>st</sup>
N//oma Village 95 km. NW	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>		
//Karu** 85 km. SE	1 <sup>st</sup>			2 <sup>nd</sup>
//Kau/oba** 25 km. N		2 <sup>nd</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup>
Makuri 30 km. SE	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>		
De#toa 15 km. N	2 <sup>nd</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup>	

\* Distance in kilometres and direction from Tsumkwe.

\*\* Villages with schools and school feeding programs.

An indication of subsistence diversity is the wide range of stated food

sources, ranging from gathered food, to hunting, to store-bought food, to government-supplied food. Nevertheless, there was a clear hierarchy of food sources for the eight villages:

- Gathered food was primary in four villages and second-most important in three others;
- Government-supplied food was primary in two villages and second-most important in two others;
- Hunting showed surprising strength, being primary in one village and second-most important in three others;
- Finally, at a single village the residents stated that store-bought food was the most important food source, while gathering was second in importance.

These results indicate a high degree of dependence on *gathering* as a food source, first or second in 7 of 8 locations and considerably more important than store-bought food, which was primary in only 1 of 8 locations. This finding corrected what was evidently an urban bias in the 2010 survey results.

The 2013 results yield an additional significant finding: the increased importance given to *hunting* as a source of food. In one of eight villages, it was actually quantitatively more important than gathering. And in three others, it exceeded store-bought foods in importance.

I asked individual men in two of the villages whether or not they hunted. At Den/ui village eleven men between the ages of 18 and 50 were interviewed about hunting. Seven acknowledged that they hunted and named the species of animals killed. Three younger men 18 to 23 said they were still learning, while one 30-year-old man lamented that, though he tried hunting, he has not been successful. At N//oma village, a group of women told us with evident pride that *all* the men in the village hunted.

In accounting for the continuing relevance of hunting and gathering after a full half-century of directed social change, we must consider the role of Community-Based Natural Resource Management ('CBNRM'). After a long political struggle within and beyond the Ju/'hoan community, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy ('NNC') was established in 1998, the first of 28 CBNRM projects in Namibia. The Conservancy gave the Ju/'hoansi rights to co-manage the natural resources of their area and to hunt and gather there (Biesele and Hitchcock 2011: 198–226).

The NNC has fought to protect the land base and has provided a range of services to the community. The NNC has also championed the community's position that the farming and herding economy must be balanced against the importance of wild resources – game and plant-based – in the lives of the people. The fact that wild plant foods and game are such important subsistence sources in the twenty-first century indicates that the preservation of the land by the Conservancy is much more than a symbolic exercise.



A second significant finding of the 2013 research is the increased role in subsistence of *government-supplied food*, which was ranked first or second in importance in four of the eight villages. A possible explanation for this finding is that the four villages that ranked government food highly all happened to be sites where village schools were located and where extensive government feeding programs were offered to enrolled students and their caregivers.

Another source of government food is the large distribution of elephant meat to Nyae Nyae Conservancy members during the commercial hunting season where wealthy overseas clients pay top dollar to shoot elephants in the district. In the 1980s and 1990s, elephants had become a major pest and obstacle to development. Today their presence is an economic asset. The elephant hunting license costs the client from \$30,000 to \$80,000 (US). The Conservancy receives a small cut of the fee and all of the meat from the kills, estimated at 10,000 to 20,000 kilos annually. In our travels around the villages, we frequently saw strips of elephant meat hanging on drying racks.

## 2) Degree of Dependence on the Cash Economy

Despite the evident persistence of active foraging in Ju subsistence, half the 2010 survey respondents *did* list store-bought foods as their primary or co-primary source of food. The cash to purchase the food was coming from three important sources: wage-labour, government pensions, and petty commodity production.

Two-thirds of the respondents (65/98) listed *regular* sources of family cash income, 32 from waged work, and 25 from pension income. Eight listed both wages and pension as income sources. The remaining third had no source of regular cash income.

Income-generating jobs included government work, both inside (tribal authority councillors and clerks, health workers, cleaners) and outside work (game scouts, road work, drivers). The Tsumkwe Country Lodge, the Nyae Nyae Conservancy itself, local NGOs, and the general stores also employed one to three workers each.

Petty-commodity production took two major forms. Devil's Claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*) grows wild abundantly in Nyae Nyae and is collected and sold by the bag to suppliers for the herbal remedies industry. It is considered to be a treatment for arthritis and is widely sold in health-food stores world-wide. Hundreds of 25-kilogram bags are shipped annually to a South African buyer, and the harvester receives \$N 27.00 (c. \$3.00 US) per kilo.

The primary source of this form of income, however, is craft production: beaded headbands, necklaces, and bracelets made primarily from ostrich eggshell beads. This is almost exclusively an activity for women and compensates for the overall predominance of men in waged work. A majority of women reported at least sporadic income from craft production.

Their beadwork is part of a very old tradition. The women of Nyae Nyae have been known for centuries for the production of ostrich eggshell beaded

jewellery ('OESB'). Currently, artisanal OESB products are sold in gift shops and museum shops around the world.

A telling sign of the sheer volume of this production can be gauged from the fact that in Tsumkwe the production of crafts has far outstripped the availability of local raw materials. The bulk of the raw materials for bead-making are now eggshells imported from commercial ostrich farms in South Africa. The Conservancy craft shop receives regular shipments of crates of broken ostrich eggshells from the south and sells these raw materials at subsidized prices to female craft producers.

At dozens of households in Tsumkwe and beyond, Ju women can be seen seated at their family hearths making beadwork. With the addition of imported glass trade beads, Ju/'hoan women have used the medium of beaded headbands as an art form, to create amazingly diverse and imaginative designs (Wiessner 1982). The late Marjorie Shostak has written a thoughtful analysis of the design motifs of Ju beaded headbands (Shostak 1976).

With the advent of the NNC, the Conservancy made craft production a key priority. Overseas volunteers trained Ju women in business practices and in artisanal production, and the NNC gift shop worked hard to improve the quality and design of the work produced by the Ju women, based on the principle: better quality/higher prices. Today, high-quality crafts with original designs are sold at the Tsumkwe craft shop for \$14 to 70 (US) and up. When sold in Museum shops in Europe and North America, the same items would sell for \$30 to 200 US. All the Conservancy production is Fair-Traded, with artisans receiving 50 percent of the selling price.

It is clear that craft production generates income for Tsumkwe Ju women, collectively, of the equivalent of several thousand US dollars monthly. But this figure may be disbursed to over 100 or more vendors. What is difficult to determine is the income earned monthly by individual women.

A final source of cash is government payments. About one-third of all informants were in households where pension income is received, in 2013 at \$450.00 NAD, equivalent to about \$50.00 US.

### **3) Health Issues: Malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS**

Since the mid-1990s, in addition to my work with the San, I have been involved in long-term research and training in medical anthropology, particularly on the social and cultural aspects of HIV/AIDS in Namibia.

My focus has been on large urban centers and has been national in scope. Namibia has been one of the five countries with the highest rates of HIV in Africa and, hence, the world. During the research, whenever possible, I extended my inquiries to the remote Tsumkwe district to get a sense of how the pandemic was affecting the community with which I had historic ties.

The data from fieldwork in the 1990s and early 2000s, in collaboration with Prof. Ida Susser of the City University of New York and local counterparts,

indicated that, contrary to expectations of some observers, the Ju/'hoansi had maintained an extremely *low* rate of HIV (Lee and Susser 2006; Susser 2009: 171–198).

The 2010 survey reinforced these earlier findings: levels of HIV and AIDS infection remained low, in fact about 75 to 90 % below the national rate of 15.3 % (UNAIDS country survey online 2010). The doctor who oversees healthcare in Nyae Nyae recorded 17 deaths from AIDS up to 2003. For a base population averaging 2,400 people, this is considered a very low mortality rate.

The population of Nyae Nyae has not been as fortunate in their response to another major illness. Tuberculosis rates are extremely high, and this constitutes by far the major health issue among the Ju/'hoansi. Of the 98 subjects in the 2010 survey, no fewer than 30 (31 %) of the informants themselves reported that they were current or recovered TB patients, and 78 (80 %) had a member of their family or household with TB, current or past.

The Tsumkwe Clinic, a well-ordered government facility, has an active program of TB treatment. Under Directly Observed Therapy ('DOT'), TB patients are required to appear daily to take their medication in the presence of the staff.

In interviews, health workers were particularly concerned about multi-drug resistant ('MDR') TB. Of the 93 patients at the Clinic under TB DOT, 13 were MDR (14 %). This forced the medical staff to resort to second- and third-tier drugs with more serious side-effects and lower efficacies.

TB/HIV co-infection is extremely common in AIDS-endemic areas of Africa, often in the 50 to 75 % range. As an example, Michael Callaghan found that 58 percent of AIDS patients in the Namibian town of Walvis Bay were co-infected with TB (Callaghan 2015). And given Tsumkwe's high rates of TB, one would expect the Tsumkwe co-infection rate to be high as well. But in another surprising finding, TB/HIV co-infection was quite rare. All diagnosed TB patients are routinely tested for HIV. Of the 90-plus Ju/'hoan patients with TB, only four cases (5 %) have tested positive for HIV. This last number is a solid confirmation of the general thesis that the rate of HIV among the Ju/'hoansi is, by regional comparison, remarkably low.

The third major African illness, Malaria, has followed yet a different course from HIV and TB. Long a scourge of African populations, previous health surveys have shown that most of the Nyae Nyae and Dobe adults have experienced bouts of malaria in the past. Happily, that incidence has been reduced almost to zero by a proactive and successful campaign of setting up women's sewing cooperatives and distributing anti-mosquito bed-nets made from netting provided by the NGO Health Unlimited.

#### 4) Religious Practices: Indigenous or Missionary Derived?

Ju/'hoan traditional religious practices, centered around the Healing or Medicine Dance, have been well documented (Marshall 1969; Lee 1967). Here, the women gathered around a sacred fire and sang and clapped in intricate patterns as men danced in a circle around them. Healers – mostly men – would use the dance as a launch pad for entering trance states in which they would move from person to person laying on hands and pulling out sickness. The Ju strongly believed that the healer's work was vital to maintaining community physical and spiritual health.

For many years, missionary activity made few inroads into the spiritual life of the Nyae Nyae people. But after 1980, religious practices began to change, and small groups of Ju converted to Christianity. Today, traditional healing coexists in Tsumkwe with Christian churches, led by the Dutch Reformed Church and the evangelical sect 'Christ Love'. Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist congregants are also present.

We asked informants whether they still participated in traditional healing, or went to Christian churches, or participated in both traditional and Christian rituals. A large minority (44 %) attend church only, and only 9 % exclusively participate in traditional healing, while 38 % participate in both church and traditional healing. Finally, 11 % stated they did not participate in either church or traditional healing rituals. Today, when healing dances and trance rituals are performed, it is often for tourists.

A sea-change in religious beliefs and practices appears to be underway, with a steep decline in adherence to traditional healing and a corresponding rise in Christian church membership. There is some evidence, however, that traditional herbal remedies, made from local plants and administered in several ways, are still widely used.

#### DO YOU LIKE THE BUSH? ATTITUDES TOWARDS OLD AND NEW WAYS OF LIFE

Let us return to where we began, with the two surveys 42 years apart, asking the question: 'Do you like the bush? (Ade a\_re tsi?)'. The bush symbolized for the Ju/'hoansi their traditional life of hunting and gathering, in implicit contrast to a sedentary existence in cattle posts and towns with new foods, clothing, and gadgets like transistor radios.

The original question, answered with great animation and strongly held opinions, revealed a population sharply divided between a slight majority who still favored a traditional life of nomadic foraging in 'the bush' and a large minority who favored settled life in villages: 51 % favored nomadic life in the bush, 45 % preferred settled village life, and the rest (4 %) liked both or were undecided. The pro-village group mentioned thirst and hunger as minuses for bush living and a steady diet of milk, grains, and meat as pluses for the village.

Fast-forward 42 years to a similar survey conducted in 2010 in Tsumkwe. The same question was asked: ‘Do you like the bush?’. But the answers were strikingly different. *In the 2010 survey, fully 97 percent of the subjects responded favourably. They did like the bush and gave elaborate reasons for it.* Two responded that they liked the town and the bush equally, and only one lone informant stated that he preferred living in town, where his children were employed.

The ambivalence expressed in 1968 and 1969 was gone, and the respondents included many more positives about the joys of ‘bush’ living and an equal number of negatives about life in the town:

- ‘In the bush the food is free and plentiful compared to town’;
- ‘I love the peace and quiet of the bush: the sounds of nature vs. the sounds of alcohol-fuelled squabbles’;
- ‘There is no alcohol or drinking in the bush’;
- ‘The bush is part of our cultural tradition; it is who we are as a people’;
- ‘Town life is stressful’;
- ‘Town life is boring.’

We are now in a better position to understand this shift in attitudes towards a traditional Ju/’hoan life of foraging in small groups and its echoes in contemporary Ju adaptations. I see their pro-foraging values as a strong vote of confidence by the people themselves in favor of one large element of their tradition: the material bases of foraging life.

No longer infatuated by the promise of alternate ways of living, the Ju/’hoansi of 2010 and 2013 have had two generations to let the reality sink in. And while not abandoning town life or technology (or new medicines), they are keeping access to country food as a key part of their ecological adaptation.

Fortunately, the return to foraging as a major component of their daily life has occurred while the traditional ecological knowledge (‘TEK’) necessary for effective foraging is still being transmitted from generation to generation and is therefore part of the current body of knowledge of 20- and 30-year-old Ju/’hoansi. The 2013 research also revealed that there has been a corresponding increase in hunting, which is clearest in the more remote villages.

Their strongly favorable attitudes towards their traditional way of life jibe with the continued importance of bush foods in their diet. Although medical examinations were not part of our research program, our overall impression is that the nutritional status of the population was relatively robust (see Wiessner 2004 for an earlier survey that indicated a more stressful nutritional situation at some villages).

### CAVEATS: ALCOHOL, MINING, AND LAND INVASIONS

The 2010 social survey had several shortcomings and gaps not directly addressed in the 2013 follow-up. First was the underrepresentation of heavy alcohol consumers in the survey sample. Second was the looming possibility of mining development that could transform the region. And third, the problem of land invasions and illegal occupation by non-Ju/'hoan outsiders needs to be put into the picture.

On the first topic, though we tried to get a representative cross-section of the people of Tsumkwe, the population of regular alcohol consumers was underrepresented. There were at least 40 shebeens, or informal drinking places, in Tsumkwe, all of them run by non-Ju/'hoan entrepreneurs, serving home-brew, bottled beer, and spirits. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Ju made daily visits to the shebeens. A majority of shebeen-goers were visitors from outlying villages who came to town to shop, renew medications like TB treatments, collect pensions, and socialize. They spent time and money in the shebeens while waiting for transport back to their villages. A second component of the shebeen population was a more hard-core set of serious drinkers who lived in town and for whom the shebeen was the daily locus of social life.

Our interpreters, Steve and Leon, were leery of taking us to interview at the shebeens because the respondents could be rowdy and incoherent even at 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning. One of our translators was himself a reformed drinker who was now deeply involved in his evangelical church. We also suspect that they wanted to show us their community in a more positive light.

At our insistence, they took us to several shebeens towards the end of the study, and we conducted interviews with confirmed heavy drinkers, including the lone informant who said he did not like the bush. With some difficulty and interruptions by fellow drinkers, we did manage to get thirteen interviews from the shebeen-goers, both out-of-town visitors and hard-core local drinkers.

There are major, long-standing concerns about the impact of alcohol on nutrition, family life, childrearing, and of course vulnerability to HIV infection. Although as noted above, HIV/AIDS rates remain remarkably low, TB is the major health issue in Nyae Nyae, with over 90 people in treatment. It is important to follow up on the heavy-drinking segment of the Nyae Nyae people to get a better sense of 1) how large that segment is and 2) whether it is growing, shrinking, or stable.

Another gap in the study concerns the periodic prospecting initiatives. Southern Africa is the world's leading producer of diamonds, and diamond hunters have made several attempts to find the next big 'pipe', spending months in the Nyae Nyae area, but finding none at exploitable economic levels. The latest gamble is the possibility of a major *coltan* strike, the rare-earth mineral used in manufacturing circuit boards for computers and other electronic devices. If the coltan mine were developed, it would seriously disrupt the delicate ecological and

social equilibrium of the Nyae Nyae area. Although it might bring short-term economic benefits to the area in terms of jobs, this would be more than offset by the massive influx of outsiders and the real dangers of HIV spread.

But the most imminent (and serious) threat to the wellbeing of the people of Nyae Nyae is the illegal occupation of Conservancy land by Herero pastoralists from the overcrowded /Gam area to the south. In 2009, Hereros cut the cordon fence and drove hundreds of head of cattle into the southern part of Nyae Nyae. The authorities responded by confiscating the cattle, but through a loophole in the law, they allowed the Herero herders and their families to remain in Tsumkwe. As the occupation enters its tenth year, Herero continue to live in a cluster of compounds on the eastern edge of Tsumkwe. Claiming destitution, they are supported by government food shipments, and they supplement their income by running shebeens and extracting precious cash resources from Ju/'hoan patrons. Legal efforts to remove the Herero continue, but the outcome hangs in the balance.

### **TAKING STOCK: TSUMKWE TODAY AND ITS FUTURE**

These very legitimate concerns notwithstanding, it is important not to lose sight of the larger significance of our overall findings. On several important socio-economic variables, the Ju/'hoansi of Tsumkwe appear to be making a reasonably successful transition to the cash economy and municipal life in a developing nation-state.

On conventional development economics indices, the Ju of Nyae Nyae would fall well below the poverty line. Yet such indices have no way of incorporating non-market or non-agricultural sources of food. These sources may well spell the difference for the Ju/'hoansi between the observed genteel but survivable poverty and absolute destitution.

This better level of nutrition, combined with the ongoing high status of women and the area's relative isolation, may also play a role in explaining the ongoing very low incidence of HIV among the Ju/'hoansi. The long-predicted – by some observers – rapid increase in HIV among the Ju has not materialized.

When seeking the sources of these modest successes in adapting to life in a post-colonial state, we should acknowledge the role played by the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. The Ju/'hoansi often criticize the NNC on a variety of grounds, perhaps giving expression to traditional Ju/'hoansi 'complaint discourse' as documented by the research of Harriet Rosenberg (1997). Although the NNC is clearly 'a work in progress' with many shortcomings, the Ju/'hoansi do acknowledge its benefits to the community: ranging from their work on protecting the land base, building up wildlife for hunting, and distributing elephant meat from commercial hunting, to creating a fair-trade outlet for craft production and fostering quality control. In addition, the Conservancy has paid an annual cash dividend to members and has provided a secure conduit for financial-development

support from regional and international governments and foundations (Biesele and Hitchcock 2011: 222–226). An example of the latter is the ongoing support of the Kalahari Peoples Fund, based in Austin, Texas, founded in the 1970s by a consortium of anthropologists who recognized their ethical responsibilities to the people they had studied.

Turning to other dimensions of Ju/'hoansi life, it is too early to ascertain what the shift in spiritual focus, from the traditional healing dance and its underlying cosmology to a Christian ideology with its roots in Dutch Calvinism, will mean for the well-documented Ju/'hoan core values of sharing and respect for personal autonomy.

However, as revealed in their overwhelming response to the question 'Do you like the bush?', it is clear that the Ju/'hoansi of Tsumkwe have learned some valuable life lessons about the hard realities of 'development' and the real world of capitalist globalization. In the bush, the food IS free, at least in a monetary sense, and they have preserved the necessary skills and knowledge to sustainably exploit these valued resources and wisely have not answered the siren's call of unbridled development along conventional Western models.

The strong persistence of foraging practices, the presence of wild foods in their diet, and the revalorization of 'the bush', as well as the still very low rates of HIV in the population, all give us grounds for cautious optimism for the future of the Ju/'hoansi. Now all they need to do is remove the threat to their land and livelihood posed by the Herero land invasions.

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## NOTE

- 1) An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Lang Colloquium, Stanford University, March 6, 2015. Parts of this version originate from a paper from the SAR



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