

Marjorie shostak: the
life and words of nisa
a kung women essay
sample



" Nisa: The Life and Words of a ! Kung Woman," written by Marjorie Shostak; is a culturally shocking and extremely touching book about a woman who had gone through many struggles and horrific tragedies in her life. This book also emphasizes the perspective of most of the women in the society. There are many striking issues in this book that the people of the ! Kung tribe go through. Marjorie Shostak, an anthropologist, has written this book and studied the ! Kung tribe for two years. Shostak had spent her two years interviewing the women in the society. She was very eager to learn more about how women's roles differed from our own here in the United States. She knew that the ! Kung were one of the least sexist tribes ever, and was eager to see the roles of prestige during her two years of research and studies.

The ! Kung are a hunting and gathering people living today mostly on the western edge of the Kalahari sand system in what is now southern Angola, Botswana, and South-West Africa. The great majority of ! Kung-speaking people have abandoned their traditional hunting and gathering way of life and are now living in sedentary and semi-squatter status in or near the villages of Bantu pastoralists and European ranchers (Draper 1975). A minority of ! Kung, amounting to a few thousand, are still living by traditional hunting and gathering techniques and these were the techniques that Shostak witnessed. The way these people live is much different than what one would experience as our country is much more developed and industrialized than of places such as Botswana. These people lived on primarily wild vegetables, nuts from the trees and game meat. Surprisingly ! Kung women are the primary providers of vegetable food, and they

contribute something on the order of sixty to eighty percent of the daily food intake by weight.

These woman must carry during her gathering trip. In addition to the food supplies, she may also tote along a child and even household possessions (Draper 1975). During the typical 4-year period of child-mother dependency, this amounts to a large amount of additional weight. These people are also usually semi-nomadic moving from camp to camp irregularly. This is a sign of the ! Kung tribe's egalitarian ideology (Shostak 1981). Although we have yet to discover complete equality among the sexes in any pre-existing or presently existing society, the ! Kung people are among the closest to reach such equality. The ! Kung are an egalitarian society, meaning everyone has access to the valued resources. While the amount of access does vary, just the fact that everyone is included at least on some level when it comes to meeting the essential needs of living is significant. Much of ! Kung life consists of caring for one another and there is a strong effort put forth to keep everyone relatively on the same status level. A great example of this exists in the traditions of hunting. When a man returns to the village after killing a large animal, there is a certain role-playing he is expected to participate in.

As people approach him about what happened, he pretends that nothing worth mentioning took place (Draper 1975). This signifies to the rest of the ! Kung that the hunt was a success as they continue to inquire for further detail. The credit for the hunt invariably goes to the one who made the arrow (which, although rare, can be a woman as well as a man) and it is his (or her) duty to divide the meat fairly between everyone in the village. One way or
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another, either directly or indirectly, everyone will be given a part of the animal (Shostak 1981). While much effort is put into maintaining a fairly equal status among the people of ! Kung society, this is not to suggest that gender roles are non-existent. Men and women have different roles in society everywhere, it is also seen here. In most cases women took care of the children and preparing of the food. However, the women of the ! Kung culture are not limited to only be in their homes because without being able to get help from one another or socialize since these gathering activities were usually done in groups (Shostak 1981). Men also engaged in these activities.

Children would be raised in village groups of other children of a wide age range of ages. Marriage was generally between a man in his twenties and a girl in her teens. Newlyweds lived in the same village as the wife's family so that she had family support during her new life.. During this time, the husband would hunt for his wife's family. This is called bridewealth, which is a transfer of wealth to the bride's family in terms of labor. So every groom is responsible to hunt not only for his family, his wife, but also for the bride's family. Even if bride were to die, the groom would still hunt for her family until he got married again. This fact shows that women are valued in this society. Often, young wives would return to their parents' houses to go to bed with the usual arrangements until they become comfortable with their husbands. If the wife or maybe even the husband never felt like he or she was comfortable, divorce was acceptable even if it were prompted by either gender (Draper 1975). One aspect to look at is the sexuality of these women. These women were almost looked at as sexual objects, used for pleasure.

Throughout the book Marjorie uses plenty of sexual slang and verbiage to detail this. Most of grooms in ! Kung San do not look at their wives as on potential mothers but rather as sexual objects and express concern that a wife should be pretty.

Though women are also quiet sexual, she may believe that if she wis having intercourse she must finish her work (a euphemism for having an orgasm) or else risk falling ill. She also reveals the ! Kung belief that a woman who does not satisfy her sexual desires will die. Despite the frankness of Nisa's narration and the bawdiness of her fellow ! Kung women, jealousy over extramarital affairs and lovers is common, and, ideally, affairs are kept hidden. Still, the frequency with which men and women take lovers outside of their marriages points to the primacy in ! Kung society of satisfying sexual desires and maintaining a fulfilling sexual life. Since divorce remained possible throughout marriage, extramarital sex wasn't condoned, but was equally acceptable for each spouse (Shostak 1981).

Ultimately, the sum of gender roles among society and in marriage are chiefly influenced by the ! Kung's cultural ethos of interdependence. This ethos is demonstrated in all aspects of ! Kung life and is what helps maintain the nearly equal relationships among men and women along with an egalitarian way of life. The concept of interdependence makes perfect sense within the ! Kung way of life. And perhaps there is a lesson we might take away from this culture. Hopefully through learning about the ! Kung not only can we begin to understand a little more about worlds that exist beyond our own, but may we also apply such knowledge to our society and help enrich our own culture.

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