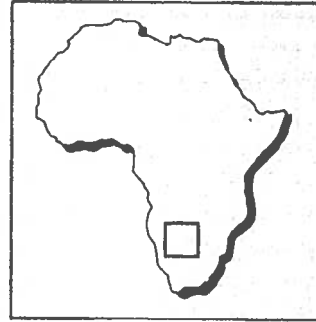


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The Pathways of the Past: !Kung San *Hxaro* Exchange and History



Notable among risk reduction systems of hunter-gatherers is that of the !Kung San called *hxaro* which, together with kinship and ritual, serves to structure and reproduce the reciprocal relations that are so critical to dealing with risk. *Hxaro* has a number of features, however, that are not shared by other foragers who use similar methods of risk reduction, and that are not easily accounted for by conditions in the ethnographic present. These include explicit, semi-formalized and long-term partnerships of gift exchange, pathways of exchange that extend far beyond the knowledge of individual participants and the efforts made to preserve these pathways over generations. When explored within a broader historical and geographical context, *hxaro* pathways appear to have originated as a means to tap into the larger trade networks of the past in southern Africa.

Unter den Systemen, die von Jägern und Sammlern zur Risikominimierung eingesetzt werden, ist das der !Kung San, genannt *hxaro*, besonders bemerkenswert. In Verbindung mit Verwandtschaft und Ritual dient es dazu, die im Zusammenhang der Risikominderung so wichtigen reziproken Beziehungen zu strukturieren und zu reproduzieren. Vor allem zeigt das *hxaro* System eine Reihe von Merkmalen, die unter den ansonsten durchaus ähnlichen Methoden der Risikoreduzierung anderer Jäger und Sammler Gruppen einzigartig sind. Das *hxaro* Austauschsystem ist durch die Bedingungen der Gegenwart nur unzureichend zu erklären. Seine Komponenten sind v.a. halb-formalisierte und langdauernde Partnerschaften, die auf dem Austausch von Geschenken beruhen. So entstehen regelrechte Austauschpfade, die sich weit über die jeweilige Kenntnis-sphäre eines Individuums erstrecken. Außergewöhnlich sind weiterhin die intensiven Bemühungen, diese Pfade über Generationen zu erhalten. Auf dem Hintergrund eines weiteren historischen und geographischen Kontextes gestellt, haben diese *hxaro* Pfade offensichtlich dazu gedient, die großen Handelsnetzwerke der Vergangenheit im südlichen Afrika für die !Kung San zu erschließen und nutzbar zu machen.

1. Introduction

Theories of risk reduction have occupied an important place in hunter-gatherer research of the last two decades. Amongst other things, they have provided criteria for the classification of hunter-gatherer societies into complex hunter-gatherers and

foragers (BINFORD 1980. TESTARD 1982. WOODBURN 1982)¹; elucidated underlying reasons for the apparent "underproduction" of many foraging societies (WIESSNER 1982a. WOODBURN 1982); and stimulated the construction of mathematical models concerning risk that can be tested with empirical data (WINTERHALDER & SMITH 1981. WINTERHALDER 1986. SMITH 1988). The attention that has been focused on these issues has been well-merited, for most peoples who subsist by hunting and gathering today live in natural and social environments in which risks abound: those caused by environmental variation, personal disability, difficulty in finding marriage partners in sparse populations and conflict, both within the society and with neighboring ones. While some complex hunter-gatherer societies in rich environments are more sedentary, use storage to reduce subsistence related risks and have more formal social institutions to deal with conflict, most foragers rely on risk pooling. That is, they spread risk over the broader population in such a way that small, definite losses are substituted for larger, indefinite ones – people help others on a regular basis in order to receive similar assistance when they are in need. Social systems to organize risk pooling in foraging societies throughout the world are based primarily on the obligations of kinship, which are in turn strengthened or extended through a number of other relationships, to mention a few – the section systems of Australia (YENGOYAN 1968) or lineage systems of African Pygmies (BAHUCHET 1992), band alliances (HEINZ 1979), partnerships based on meat sharing (BALIKCI 1968. DAMAS 1972), spouse exchange (SPENCER 1959. DAMAS 1972), and name relationships (MARSHALL 1957. GUBSER 1965). Virtually all of these are backed by a set of values and ethics concerning sharing, generosity and egalitarianism, and many are supported by integrative ritual performances (HAYDEN 1987).

Notable among risk pooling systems of hunter-gatherers is that of the !Kung San of the N.W. Kalahari called *hxaro* which, together with kinship obligations and ritual, serves to structure and reproduce reciprocal relations. I have discussed *hxaro* in detail elsewhere (WIESSNER 1977. 1981. 1982a. 1986) centering on the aspects of *hxaro* that operated in the ethnographic present of 1973-75. There are, however, a number of features of *hxaro* which cannot be so easily accounted for in the ethnographic present, and which are not widely shared by other hunter-gatherer societies. These include:

1 It has been recognized in the last two decades that the category "hunter-gatherer", although useful for some purposes, incorporates societies that exhibit a great deal of variation. As a result, several attempts have been made to subdivide hunter-gatherer societies according to their degree of complexity. One critical variable on which most of these classifications have been made is the way in which hunter-gatherers deal with risk and uncertainty in their environment, with the distinction being drawn between those who live in seasonally rich environments and rely heavily on storage and those who depend largely on social means of risk pooling (WIESSNER 1977. 1982b. BINFORD 1980. TESTARD 1982. WOODBURN 1982). A number of terms have been introduced to describe this division, for instance the immediate and delayed return systems of Woodburn. For simplicity "storage" societies will be called complex hunter-gatherers following HAYDEN (1990) and those which rely heavily on risk pooling will be called foragers.

- the marking of relationships of mutual reciprocity by semi-formalized and long-term partnerships of gift exchange;
- *hxaro* pathways that create broad networks of reciprocity throughout the N.W. Kalahari;
- the efforts made by !Kung to reproduce these pathways through time.

At present, historical and archaeological findings of the past two decades, although far from definitive and uncontroversial, are making it possible to reach an understanding of *hxaro* that goes beyond that which I attempted in the 1970s. In the following pages after giving an overview of *hxaro* in the ethnographic present, I would like to explore the above-mentioned features of *hxaro* within the context of historical findings. Although attention will be focused on *hxaro*, it should be noted that *hxaro* does not constitute the entire universe of !Kung exchange; !Kung regularly share food with kin and visitors, carry out barter with strangers and agropastoralists, and engage in various forms of exchange of labor for domestic foods or wages with agropastoralists and Europeans.

2. Background

The study of *hxaro* that will be presented here was carried out between 1973 and 1975 and for two months in 1977 among the !Kung San or Zhu/'hoasi², one of the best documented populations of southern Africa (LEE & DeVORE 1976. MARSHALL 1976. LEE 1979. 1984, amongst many others). The study centered on the !Kung San of the Dobe-/Xai/xai area in northwest Botswana and families who were previously residents of the NyaeNyae, but who had been relocated at the government settlement scheme of Tsumkwe in Bushmanland, N.E. Namibia. In 1974, !Kung of the Dobe-/Xai/xai area were largely foragers, living off of hunting and gathering supplemented by occasional subsistence labor for pastoralists, wage labor in Namibia, planting, milk from a few head of San who owned livestock or cash from the sale of handicrafts (WIESSNER 1977). Only ten out of 58 households were more or less permanent employees of pastoralists. Tsumkwe !Kung were residents of a government settlement scheme and had access to opportunities for wage labor, agricultural projects, school, store, handicrafts marketing and clinic. Most Tsumkwe programs were only moderately successful, and social problems from having so many !Kung

² The Zhu/'hoasi are speakers of the central dialect of the !Kung language. Other authors such as WILMSEN (1989) refer to them as Zhu. To be consistent with former publications I will use the term !Kung San.

settled in one place abounded. !Kung in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area and those at Tsumkwe had ties of reci-procity that opened up access to resources of surrounding regions within a 200 km radius. In 1974 spatial and temporal variation in natural resources within the study area and neighboring ones were great [Fig. 1], as they had been for centuries, confronting the !Kung with both short and long term risks. Added to these was the ever-changing social and economic scene in surrounding populations, introducing new opportunities and with them potential for social disruption. It was in this context that *hxaro* operated in the 1970s.

3. *Hxaro* in the 1970s³

Hxaro partnerships are relationships of mutual reciprocity that operate on two levels. The first is the delayed, balanced but non-equivalent exchange of gifts that designates a partnership and gives information about the status of the second, an underlying relationship of mutual reciprocity. Depending on the distance separating two *hxaro* partners, gifts may be exchanged every few months to every few years to please the other and signal whether or not both partners still care (WIESSNER 1977. 1981. 1982a. 1986). *Hxaro* gifts can be any non-food items with a significant economic value – for example beads, arrows, blankets, tools, clothing, livestock – and thus the gift exchange of *hxaro* provisions !Kung with goods from other regions. The !Kung say that in the past these goods included metal, tobacco, beads and other trade goods; in the 1970s they were largely glass beads, shoes, pots, clothing, blankets and other utilitarian store-bought items. Equally or more important than the economic value of gifts is their social one, for *hxaro* gifts communicate about status of the underlying relationship.

Relationships underlying the exchange of gifts in *hxaro* are, like all forms of mutual reciprocity among foragers, difficult to define. From the !Kung perspective a *hxaro* partnership indicates that two persons “hold” (/ /hai) each other in their hearts and accordingly are responsible for one another. A person has the right to call on a *hxaro* partner at any time he or she is in need, whether the need be precipitated by environmental failure, conflict, personal disability or inability to find a suitable marriage

3 The material presented here is based on a systematic study of *hxaro* from a sample of 59 !Kung, 35 from /Xai /xai, 6 from Dobe and 18 from Tsumkwe (WIESSNER 1977. 1981). Persons were asked to first discuss *hxaro*, then list all of their partners, give their age, sex location, kinship relation to ego, and intensity of relationship. They were then asked once again to explain the spirit and principles of *hxaro*, how it functioned, etc. To check the information given, a tally of all the possessions of each individual in the sample was made, and for each item the following information was collected: where or how ego got it, if it was in *hxaro*: from whom, age sex, kin relation and location of giver. 69 % of possessions were obtained through *hxaro*. The study provided information on 955 *hxaro* partnerships and 1483 possessions.

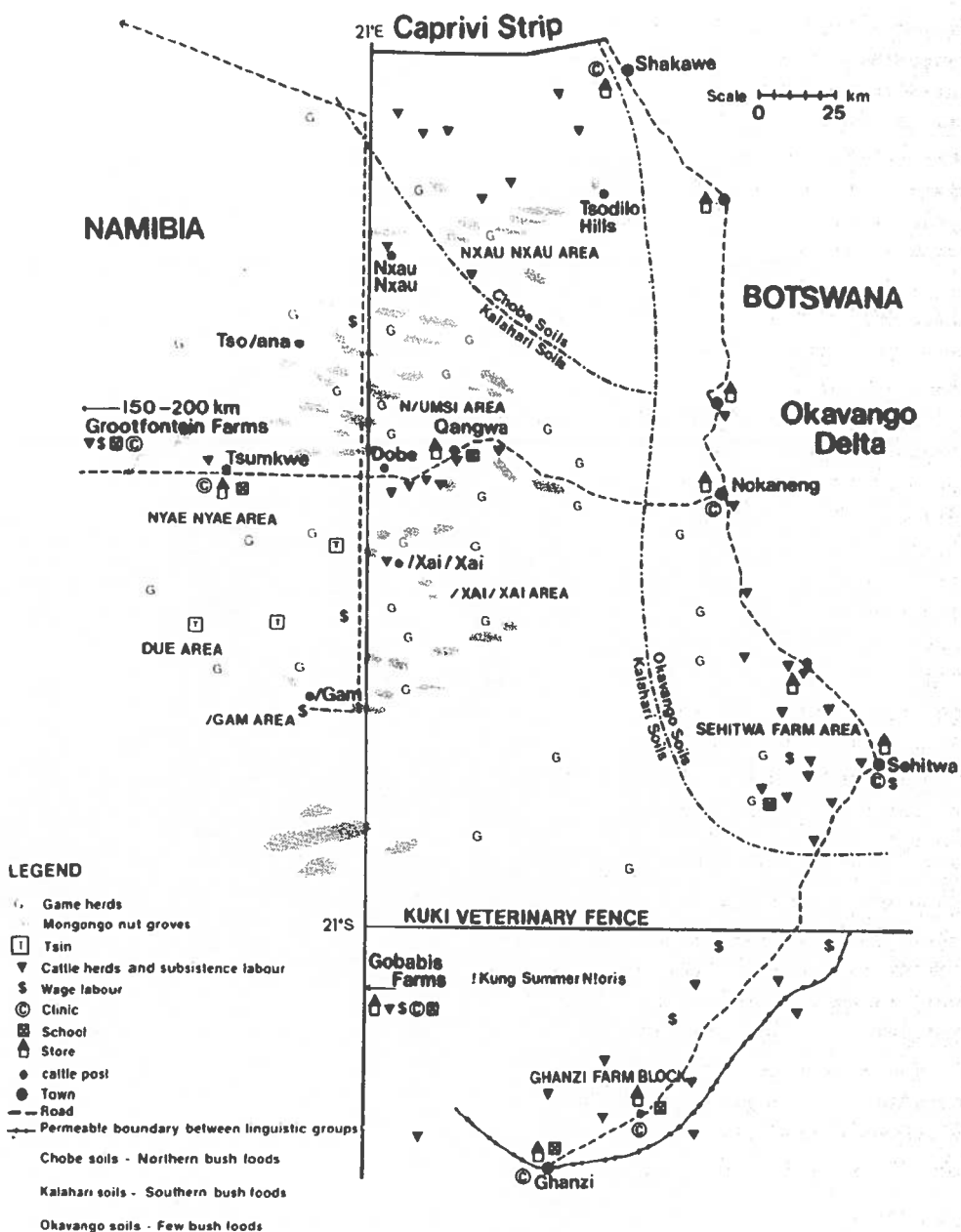


Fig. 1 Distribution of resources within the study region.

partner. While *hxaro* does serve to smooth relations within a camp and between neighboring ones, its major role is to open up alternate residences that can be utilized for extended visiting in times of need. The terms underlying *hxaro* relationships correspond very closely to those defined by SAHLINS (1972: 194) as 'generalized reciprocity': that the one who has gives to the one who is in need, need being relative to the means of both. *Hxaro* gifts must be reciprocated adequately and within a reasonable period of time⁴ for they give information about the status of the relationship; by contrast, returns for the underlying obligations are not stipulated by time, quantity or quality for they must cover indefinite needs. It is not expedient to have an immediate return for assistance given, for then the relationship is balanced and able to be canceled. Rather it is desirable to store the debt until the situation of have and have not is reversed, so that returns will be timely and effective in covering losses.

Hxaro can be best understood as an extension of the broader kinship system. LEE (1984), in an extremely perceptive analysis of !Kung kinship, has identified three principles for designating kin. The first is what he calls Kinship 1, the standard kinship system that assigns kin terms to those related to ego, distinguishing nuclear family from collaterals and in most cases, collaterals from affinal kin.⁵ Standard !Kung kinship terms are structured by relative age and generation, and each term carries with it a relationship of joking or respect that delimits eligibility for marriage and a range of permitted behavior. The second is the name relationship (MARSHALL 1957) through which the sharing of personal names allows !Kung to extend terms of close kinship to distant relatives, if desirable. The name relationship thus destroys the logic of standard kinship, and continues to do so as demographic events add ever new names to the Kinship 2 universe. The discrepancy between Kinship 1 and 2 is resolved by the Kinship 3 principle called "*wi*" in which elders chose, amongst possibilities afforded by standard kinship and the name relationship, the terms that they wish to apply to juniors. It is elders who thus have the potential to manipulate kinship. After these three principles, *hxaro* comes into play. Kinship terms and corresponding relations of joking or respect determine to a limited extent only who has obligations to whom; through *hxaro* !Kung further activate the responsibilities of kinship and specify with whom they want to have more firm commitments. As with kinship, a !Kung's sphere of *hxaro* develops with age (WIESSNER 1982a).

Hxaro carries its own risks because individuals may be unable or unwilling to be of assistance at any given time due to bouts of illness, absence from their own area, shortages of resources, etc. For this reason, !Kung distribute their partnerships widely, the average !Kung having 16.5 *hxaro* partnerships. To initiate *hxaro*, it is necessary have

4 What is considered reasonable is a matter of debate.

5 Only spouses' siblings and siblings' spouses are given terms that do not distinguish them from collateral kin.

some putative consanguineous relationship: of 995 *hxaro* partnerships studied, 71 % were indeed traceable on a person's genealogy as consanguineous kin, another 20 % were said to be consanguineous kin with whom the precise genealogical relationship had been forgotten and 9 % friends or affines.⁶ *Hxaro* is not done directly with affinal kin, but indirectly – one spouse takes gifts from his or her side of the family, gives them to his or her spouse who in turn passes them on to his or her kin. Exceptions do occur, the most common being when one spouse dies after many years of marriage and the other continues to do *hxaro* directly with affinal kin. New relationships may be initiated at any time, although they take several years to be considered established; conversely, if both partners lose interest, *hxaro* may be allowed to gradually die out. Essentially then !Kung use *hxaro* to activate kin relationships: kin who do *hxaro* feel responsible for one another, while those who do not leave kin relations casual or dormant. *Hxaro* thereby equalizes number of active kinship obligations despite variation in family size: !Kung from very large families can limit their sphere of obligations, while those from smaller ones can activate almost all of their kin ties.

Most !Kung have a set of partners composed of persons of different ages and both sexes. Older partners represent relations past that are still valued for their knowledge and authority, middle aged partners are those who fill most of the needs of the moment and young partners are the security of the future. Men and women participate equally in *hxaro*, and with marriage each brings in his or her own set of partners to broaden the sphere of family contacts. The distribution of *hxaro* partners in space and over persons with different ways of making a living affords individuals several alternate residences and lifestyles during times of hardship. As can be seen in Tab. 1, in 1974 18 % of all partnerships were in a person's own camp smoothing day-to-day relations; 24 % were with people living in neighboring groups permitting access to the highly varied natural resources around /Xai/xai; another 25 % were with !Kung 30-50 km away whose areas provided a variety of different resources as well as a place of refuge for those seeking relief from conflict; 24 % were in the Tsumkwe or /Gam areas where a variety of non-traditional resources were available. Finally 9 % were in regions more than 150 km from /Xai/xai where most !Kung were settled on farms. The range of possibilities afforded by *hxaro* can be even better understood when partnerships of both husband and wife are combined [Tab. 2]. Outstanding in these figures are the facts that *hxaro* integrates !Kung who engage in different ways of making a living and that a large proportion of old, partially dependent individuals are retained as partners. The former is self-evident and the latter not surprising in view of the fact that !Kung elders

6 Although a consanguineous connection could not be identified on genealogies for all partners, the existence of one in the past seems to be an important criteria for establishing *hxaro*. Purely fictive kinship, such assigning a kinship term on the basis of the name relationship, does not provide a basis for *hxaro* partnerships though it certainly facilitates sharing when !Kung go to visit their partners (WIESSNER 1986).

who are core members of a camp have a knowledge of kinship and history that together govern who has access to which resources. Accordingly, they are in the best position to integrate long-term visitors.

The relationship underlying *hxaro* varies with location of partner. Within a camp, it smooths tensions and facilitates sharing, although it does not govern the latter. For partners in neighboring camps, visits made with the intent to join hunting or gathering trips or to obtain a share of meat from a large kill are usually backed by a *hxaro*

Area	No. and % of <i>hxaro</i> partners		Important resources
Own camp	91	18 %	—
1-25 km Other /Xai/xai camps	123	24 %	H, G, SL, H*
25-50 km N/umsi (Dobe area)	82	16 %	H, G, SL, WL*, T*, ST*, SCH (built in 1974)
NyaeNyae ¹	44	9 %	H, G, W, FP, T
50-100 km /Gam	17	3 %	H, G, W*, T*
Tsumkwe	102	21 %	WL, SCH, FP, H, ST, CL, AP
100-200 km NxauNxau	1	0.002 %	H, G, SL
Namibian farms	12	2 %	WL, SL, ST, CL, T
Sehitwa farms	26	5 %	WL, SL, ST, CL, SCH, T
Ghanzi farms	12	2 %	SL, WL, ST, CL, SCH
Total	510	100 %	

¹ In 1974 some of the partners from the NyaeNyae area lived in border camps established by police ca. 10-20 km from /Xai/xai.

Resources available in 1974: H = hunting; G = gathering; SL = subsistence labor; W = wage labor; ST = store; SCH = school; T = vehicle transport sometimes available; CR = crafts; CL = clinic; H = handicraft market; FP = supplementary feeding programs for elderly, school children, pregnant mothers, etc.; AP = agricultural projects (* = poor or irregular).

Tab. 1 Distribution of *hxaro* partners of 35 /Xai/xai !Kung in space.

relationship. For example, out of four large kills for which sharing was observed, every person in the camp received meat. In three out of four, !Kung from other camps who were *hxaro* partners of the hunter or his spouse also came to collect a share. !Kung in neighboring camps who did not have *hxaro* ties to the owner of the meat remained home and did not ask (WIESSNER 1981).

A *hxaro* tie is almost mandatory for visits of more than a week to other areas during which the visitors become temporary residents of the host's camp and hunt and gather on his or her land: a survey of the visits made by 20 !Kung adults in 1968 and 1974 of one week or longer in duration revealed that the average !Kung made 1.5 extended visits a year with a mean duration of 2.2 months per visit. Eighty out of the 86 visits recorded (93 %) were made to a camp in which a person or his/her spouse had a *hxaro* partner. This means that for approximately 3 months a year, a person and his or her family lived off of the resources of *hxaro* partners, being hosted for the first few days and then hunting and gathering their own living and participating in food sharing within the camp.

Though extended visits continually take place for social purposes – to visit a loved one, to relieve tension or arrange marriages – they also correspond to environmental

Age Category	Families interviewed						
	2	3	4	5	2		
Way of making a living of <i>hxaro</i> partner	Adolescent female: Gatherer	Married couple – no children: Gatherer	Married couple w. mature children: Hunter & Gatherer	Old married couple Partially Dependent	Married couple w. 4 young children Gatherer	Total	%
Wage laborer in Namibia	0	2	2	1	1	6	6
Employee in Border Camp	1	3	2	3	2	11	12
Subsistence laborer in Botswana	3	3	6	0	0	12	13
Hunter, bow & arrow and horseback	2	4	4	1	3	14	15
Trapper and/or gatherer	3	4	5	2	2	16	17
Adolescent	1	2	2	2	1	8	9
Old, partially dependent	2	4	9	5	3	23	25
Disabled	0	1	1	1	0	3	3
Total	12	23	31	15	12	93	100

Tab. 2 Distribution of *hxaro* partners according to ways of making a living.

conditions. Tab. 3 gives the number and percent of /Xai/xai residents who were away visiting for more than two weeks in each of the months listed. When surface water was available in pans throughout the region (January-April), approximately 24 % of the population was away visiting other camps, by contrast to 40 % for the drier months (September-December). Number and duration of visits made to *hxaro* partners in a good year (1968) and an extremely poor one (1974) was similar, although visits to distant areas, where domestic foods were available were almost twice as common in 1974 as in 1968 [Tab. 4].

Hxaro is at once a strong integrator and a potential source of conflict. Gifts are many but the most desirable ones few, and the choice to give a valued gift to one person rather than another does indeed cause hard feelings. As for the underlying relationship, opportunities for exploitation are many and occur often. To control for this, hours are spent discussing who has what and did or did not give it to whom while making disparaging remarks about those who fail to give generously (WIESSNER 1981). Should any particular individual feel that he or she is being subjected to 'freeloading' from

Months	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
n =	31	31	35	40	42	41	44	67	55	55	55	53
% =	22	22	25	28	30	29	31	47	39	39	39	37

* Residents are defined as people who have landrights in the /Xai/xai area and have lived there since 1969.

** 1974 was a very poor year due to the failure of the mongongo nut crop.

Tab. 3 Number of /Xai/xai residents* away on extended visits by month in 1974** (n = 142).

	1968 *		1974	
Adjacent areas within 30 km of /Xai/xai	25	55 %	6	15 %
Distant areas between 30 and 200 km from /Xai/xai	20	45 %	35	85 %
Total	45	100 %	41	100 %

* The data on visiting for 1968 was generously provided by Richard Lee.

** Extended visits by definition have a duration of more than a week and are to places outside of the area of landrights (n!ori) of a person and his/her spouse.

Tab. 4 Number of extended visits** made by 20 /Xai/xai !Kung in the years of 1968 and 1974.

partners, a common response is either to conceal what they do have or simply stop producing, placing themselves in the category of 'have not'. Accordingly, good hunters who have been doing more than their share announce that "luck is no longer with them" or that they "need a rest" and sit back to let others do the work and reciprocate. Those who work for wages in Namibia periodically quit their jobs, saying they are tired and had other things to do, letting one of their many *hxaro* partners/relatives who had been living off their wages take over. It is generally considered to be the job of the creditor to make the debtor want to or have to reciprocate and one means of doing this is to temporarily become a 'have not'.

When a one-way flow of assistance for months or even years in the relationship underlying *hxaro* is unavoidable, it is mitigated by the fact that assistance is given within the shelter of a strong emotional bond and is usually of small cost to giver in relation to its benefit to the receiver. For instance, to give meat when one has made a large kill, or to host a family when resources are ample, is of relatively little burden to the host in relation to its benefits to a partner in dire need.

Just as exploitation of "haves" by freeloaders is a risk in *hxaro*, so is the potential of the more productive to turn their success into relationships of dominance and coercion. Those who work hard and attempt to amass wealth or use it in such a way as to either create powerful networks of influence are tolerated up to a certain point only; should they go too far, they are harshly leveled through social pressure, for the entire system depends on the equality of members. What one sees in *hxaro* is a system for pooling risk that in the first round is most efficiently adjusted to deal with variation and unpredictability in the natural and social environment, but in the second has its own effects on production. The amount of time devoted to regulating *hxaro* relationships should not be underestimated, nor should its restraints on production.

4. *Hxaro* in a historical perspective

Given this brief overview of *hxaro* in the 1970s, let us now turn to the features of the system that cannot be so easily explained within the context of ethnographic present and which are not so typical of hunter-gatherer risk pooling systems: the marking of relationships of mutual reciprocity by explicit, semi-formalized gift exchange partnerships and the linking of these partnerships in a chain-like manner to form *hxaro* pathways that are reproduced through time.

The use of semi-formalized gift exchange partnerships to mark a relationship of mutual reciprocity is rarely found in foraging societies, with the exception of meat sharing partnerships in some Eskimo groups (BALIKCI 1968. DAMAS 1972). More common are rules stipulating that meat and other prized foods, whose availability is variable and/or unpredictable, be distributed in roughly equal proportions to all

camp members or members of the work party (CLASTRES 1972. GRIFFIN 1984. ENDICOTT 1988. BAHUCHET 1990, amongst many others), often with specific obligations to spouse's parents. Access to alternate residences is more frequently secured through marriage ties or band alliances than through formalized exchange partnerships (YENGOYAN 1968. HEINZ 1979. BAHUCHET 1992). Among Kalahari San, only the Nharo have partnerships similar to *hxaro* called //ai in which gift exchange expresses mutual solidarity between partners (BARNARD 1992: 141). The G/wi obtain visiting and sharing rights through kinship (SILBERBAUER 1982); the !Xo rely on both kinship and a nexus system of allied bands (HEINZ 1979).

Hxaro partnerships of the !Kung are thus effective, but more formally developed than would be necessary for risk pooling alone. This is most likely because they are used as building blocks for longer pathways of exchange called *nama cheesi*, literally "paths for things", that extend the sphere of reciprocity beyond dyads of mutual obligation to link nodes of kin into complex networks of reciprocity. In 1974 it was possible to follow the course of *hxaro* paths as they wound their way through twenty or more partners who were spread out over 300 km of desert terrain without finding an end. For example, Fig. 2 represents a typical path that originates somewhere in the Sehitiwa-Lake Ngami area south of the Okavango swamps, crosses 150 km of desert to /Xai/xai and then proceeds 75 km to Tsumkwe.⁷ This *hxaro* path, like most others, is made up of segments of approximately five to eight people who know and feel some obligation to one another.

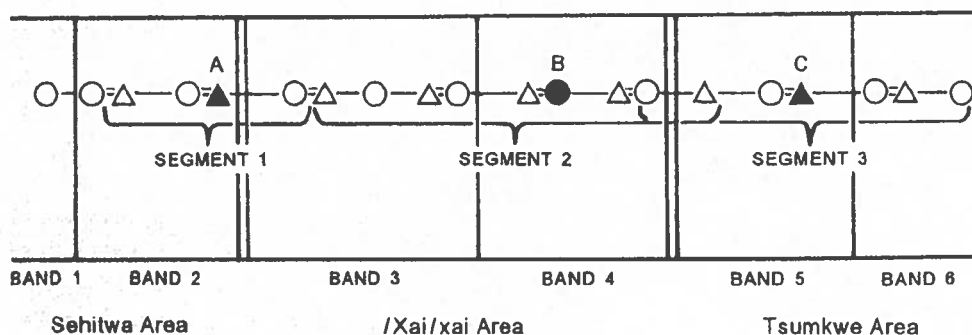


Fig. 2 Diagram of a typical *hxaro* chain and its segments. (Brackets enclose others along the *hxaro* chain of whom ego is aware and for whom he or she feels some responsibility.)

7 At the time of the study it was not possible to get a research permit to follow *hxaro* paths deep into Namibia. According to !Kung the length of paths such as this one would have been doubled as it left Tsumkwe for /Gam and eventually went on to San communities in Hereroland.

Segment 1 is an unusually short segment with four members only; segment 2 has nine members; and segment 3 seven. The latter two are typical segments in that they contain one or two members in the camp from which the path comes, three or four in that of ego, and another two or three in the camp to which the path continues. Beyond these segments usually only the general direction of the path was known, although !Kung say that in the past people had better knowledge of participants further down the line. What is clear from Fig. 2 is that *hxaro* paths connect nodes of close kin such as A and C who would not be linked by ordinary kinship reckoning. Even though family A may not know family C, in the course of an extended visit to B they could travel with B to Tsumkwe and together stay with C. Without a *hxaro* path, A and C would probably have no connection.

Hxaro paths can vary in their course, although possibilities for deviation are limited to two or three alternatives (WIESSNER 1977: 199). Such flexibility is necessary because frequency of *hxaro* gift exchange varies with location of partner, and because gifts may be kept for as long as the receiver desires before being passed on. Only a minority of gifts travel the total length of any *hxaro* path – most wear out or are used up along the way and replaced with roughly equivalent ones. Approximately 20 % of all gifts, usually beadwork, have a prescribed course. Once a prescribed gift has travelled its course, the return is supposed to remain on the same path. As gifts travel along *hxaro* paths they are often altered to add a personal touch – additional beads or dangles may be sewn onto an apron, knit caps unravelled and reknit into a different design and so on.

In the 1970s *hxaro* paths supplied the residents of the Dobe-/Xai/xai areas with goods not available in their own region, for the most part store bought items: blankets, bowls, cups, pots, shoes and clothing. Accordingly most chains came from or went to Tsumkwe where the cheapest and best supplied store was located. Other paths crossed the border to camps where !Kung who were employed by border patrols made frequent trips to the larger town of Rundu on the Namibian-Angolan border, bringing back a wide variety of store-bought goods. A minority of chains led eastward to Sehitwa where domestic foods and store bought goods were also readily obtainable. Not only did *hxaro* paths supply San with goods, but they also facilitated extended visits. When !Kung visited partners, other individuals in the camp who had been receiving their gifts for years recognized them as generous and reliable kin.

5. *Hxaro* pathways in the past

Virtually all San interviewed agreed that they did not really understand why *hxaro* gifts traveled such long paths. Short paths were recognized as useful for they created friendships with several persons in another area, not only their immediate partners, and thereby facilitated visiting. Only a few older men gave another explanation – that

before metal, glass beads, tobacco and other goods could be obtained nearby, longer *hxaro* paths were necessary to gain access to non-San communities and the trade. Although interviews on the topic of past trade routes gave very limited information⁸, elders said that the following *hxaro* paths were of importance in their fathers' lifetimes⁹:

– From /Xai/xai north through the Dobe area to NxauNxau.

Interviews with a small group of San at NxauNxau indicated that such paths then continued on to Tsodilo. In the past, this route was said to bring in metal, pots and other trade goods; today ties with this area are few.

– From /Xai/xai eastwards to the Sehitwa/Lake Ngami area which was said to be the major source of metal.

Hxaro paths that existed with this area in the 1970s wound their way through settlements of !Kung who were brought/migrated into the area as servants of Batwana in the late nineteenth century. However, it is said that prior to this time that *hxaro* paths extended to other San between Ghanzi and Sehitwa: Nharo, Ts'aokhoe, Qabekhoe, Nhaints'e and possibly /Haba¹⁰. Relations along the eastern route remain important today.

– From /Xai/xai south to /Du/da and then on into the Ghanzi area where they connected with Nharo San networks.

I was unable to determine what goods were imported and exported via this route aside from beads. It is only maintained by a handful of individuals today.

– From /Xai/xai through NyaeNyae, south to /Gam and on into Herero land.

A wide variety of trade goods were received along this route. In the 1970s with the settlement of most NyaeNyae !Kung at Tsumkwe, this route was diverted through,

8 The meager information received was probably due to the fact that I was largely concerned with the present at the time and only asked casual questions about *hxaro* in the past. Systematic research on the history of *hxaro* paths would probably have yielded better information – certainly some elders did have an idea of the role of *hxaro* paths in the past.

9 In the list of pathways given here, I say 'from /Xai/xai' for convenience. It should not be taken to mean that /Xai/xai was the center for *hxaro* and that paths began and ended there. Paths leading out of all of these places came from elsewhere – /Xai/xai is just one point in a vast network of *hxaro* paths.

10 The Ts'aokhoe are estimated to number about 1000. The Qabekhoe and Nhaints'e, who may be subgroups of Nharo, are smaller still. BARNARD (1992: 136) says that the Nharo see the Ts'aokhoe as separate peoples, while CHILDERS (1976: 30 as cited in BARNARD) as the northernmost band cluster. I visited these groups in 1974 while conducting research on stylistic variation. /Xai/xai !Kung who accompanied me, one of whom had a Qabekhoe grandmother, were familiar with these people and considered the Ts'aokhoe and Qabekhoe as separate, but related to the Nharo and said that some of these people fell within their sphere of *hxaro* pathways. The /Haba have some linguistic affinity with the Nharo and live together with them as "squatters" and ranch laborers on the northern Ghanzi farms. Only one !Kung mentioned that *hxaro* pathways extend into the /Haba region.

and in many cases truncated by, Tsumkwe. Since the establishment of Tsumkwe in 1960, fewer *hxaro* paths continue on to /Gam and Hereroland.

6. The reproduction of *hxaro* paths

The continuation and reproduction of !Kung *hxaro* pathways is not left up to chance. To assure that important links in *hxaro* paths will not depend on the whims of any one individual, *hxaro* partnerships are "duplicated", that is, several people in one extended family carry out *hxaro* with several in a related one. For example, of fourteen individuals in my sample for whom there were data on the *hxaro* partners of all parents, siblings and children, 143 (63 %) of their total *hxaro* partners were also partners of another member of their nuclear family, that is either their parents, siblings or children (WIESSNER 1986: 133). This means that should any one link with another area be broken due to disagreement or disinterest, the connection would not be lost. When further replication of important ties in a certain area is desired, *hxaro* relationships are used to negotiate marriages that will create new *hxaro* pathways.

Further stability in *hxaro* pathways is assured by passing successful alliances down to the next generation: as men and women grow older and their mobility decreases they gradually hand over their *hxaro* partnerships to their children. Upon death their children take the deceaseds' possessions, give them to the remaining *hxaro* partners or their descendants with whom continued relations are desired and ask that the link not be broken. For 59 !Kung whose *hxaro* networks were investigated, 46 % of their 955 partnerships were identifiable on genealogies as being with close kindred members (parents, siblings, children, grandparents/children, parents' siblings/siblings' children and parents' siblings; children, both full and half). These were formed during their lifetimes. 16 % were with great-grandparents' descendants and had been passed on for one to two generations. Thirteen !Kung in the sample could give genealogies for at least one side of the family that made it possible to look further back in time. For these, 9 % of partnerships had originated in the generation of great-great grandparents and another 1.4 % in the generation of great-great-great grandparents. The former had thus been passed on for 2-3 generations and the latter for 3-4. For the 20 % of all !Kung partnerships that could not be located on genealogies, it was emphatically stated that these were distant consanguineous kin with whom partnerships were inherited, and who would have been identified as such were genealogical knowledge sufficient.¹¹

11 This was probably true for quite a number of genealogies of the 59 !Kung in my sample did not go back beyond grandparents. Each time I located a family member who could take their genealogy back further in time, more partners could be placed in the family's genealogy.

The inheritance of *hxaro* partnerships is part and parcel of the reproduction of a broader social universe negotiated by kinship, marriage and exchange that links people to each other and to the land, assuring a certain continuity in social relations and land tenure through time¹² (WILMSEN 1989b). While kinship relations alone may be enough to transmit risk pooling partnerships to the next generation, they are not sufficient to reproduce *hxaro* paths which link those who would be unrelated by ordinary kinship reckoning. Were inheritance of *hxaro* partnerships not formalized, paths would be dissolved upon the death of members. What we see then is that there exists in *hxaro* a constellation of features designed to create pathways to other regions and replicate them through generations. The question then arises: Where did these paths lead in the past and what did they bring since so much effort seems to have been made to establish, maintain and reproduce them? To even begin to investigate this question, it is necessary to look back into the history of the last 2000 years.

7. Opportunities of the past

As southern Africa's past begins to take shape, the nature of historical processes that occurred in a number of areas, including the western sandveld, remains a matter of debate. What is certain is that change did not proceed linearly but in "protracted processes with fits and starts, plateaus and reversals, and varied outcomes" (SOLWAY & LEE 1990: 110), bringing political turbulence and corresponding fluctuations in relations between populations. Furthermore, it is clear that cultural influence did not flow in one direction from immigrant Bantu speakers to San, but involved centuries of borrowing and exchange. Historical and archaeological data at present are insufficient to resolve debate concerning the nature of interaction of San and non-San in the study area over the last two centuries, however, they can give us some understanding of the new opportunities that arose.

The archaeological information that is currently available indicates that by 2000 years ago a very large portion of southern Africa was occupied by pre-Iron Age ceramic-making pastoralists. The earliest site within the current sphere of exchange of the study area that has more than mere traces of pastoralism is Divuyu at Tsodilo Hills (WILMSEN 1989a: 71). Divuyu dates to the sixth and seventh centuries and is rich in ceramics, iron, copper tools, ornaments and ivory, with sheep and goats being the mainstays of the economy. It appears to have been a settlement of some of the earliest Bantu speakers who migrated into the region from the north, and who were part of a wider sphere of production and exchange that extended northward throughout a large portion of the Angolan and Congo river systems (WILMSEN 1989a: 70f.).

12 See WILMSEN (1989b) for a good discussion of continuity in land tenure.

Between AD 700 and 1000 a number of other major agropastoral sites appear in the region including Nqoma, also at Tsodilo, where cattle made up an important segment of the economy, supplemented by sheep, goats, wild game, sorghum, millet and wild plant resources such as mongongo nuts and *Grewia* berries (WILMSEN 1989a: 71f.). Goods and valuables found on the site indicate that by the ninth century Nqoma may have been connected to the intracontinental trade routes that extended to the Indian Ocean. Another site, Matlapaneng on the eastern side of the Okavango Delta has all the material characteristics of Nqoma but fewer trade goods from the Indian Ocean. Additionally, ceramics indicate that its social, political and economic ties were to the east rather than to the north like those of Nqoma. By the eleventh century, trade routes to the east were truncated by developing Zimbabwean states, however, in the sixteenth century new opportunities opened up to the north when the Portuguese initiated the Atlantic oriented trade (WILMSEN 1989a: 72f.). Archaeological evidence for the Dobe-/Xai/xai area indicates that the early trade of desert products, such as furs, ivory and honey in exchange for iron, tobacco, ceramics and possibly domestic foods was carried out through Bantu-speaking intermediaries and that there is no evidence of sustained Iron Age occupation of the area until the twentieth century (YELLEN & BROOKS 1988).

In the nineteenth century, the boom in the colonial trade based on ivory, ostrich feathers, furs, hides and cattle brought Europeans into the western sandveld and with them new riches: bullets, beads, sugar, tobacco and horses. The impact of the colonial trade remains a matter of contention. WILMSEN (1989a: 64ff.) argues that the !Kung of the Dobe-/Xai/xai and Nyaenya areas, in addition to being involved with stock keeping, participated intensively in mercantile trade from the seventeenth century (before Europeans themselves arrived in the area) until the 1890s. It was only when the merchant capital collapsed at the end of the nineteenth century and the colonial rule subverted indigenous social-political relations that these areas became as marginalized as they appeared to be in the 1950s and 1960s. However, LEE & GUENTHER (1991) contend that outside of a five year period in which five parties traveled into the area, 1875-80, the evidence for mercantile activity is sparse. As we shall see, however, the impact of the colonial trade can not be judged only by events that actually took place within the study area, for *hxaro* chains extended precisely to points where it would be possible to tap into major trade routes.

From the 1880s to around 1925, Tswana, who had been employed by Europeans made their own trips with oxen wagons to the Dobe-/Xai/xai area to trade. According to !Kung oral traditions, it was the !Kung who initiated this trade (SOLWAY & LEE 1990: 116). Tswana - !Kung exchange took two forms, barter and later *mafisa*, whereby Tswana farmed out their cattle to !Kung, who in turn exchanged their labor as herdsmen for the milk produced by the herd and the meat of animals who died of natural causes. If the owners were satisfied, he might throw in a calf as payment.

Early in this century the colonial trade collapsed – elephants were hunted out and ostrich feathers went out of style. Cattle were the major remaining source of wealth in the Kalahari. The Herero-German wars of 1904-05 then sent refugees into western parts of Botswana. By the mid-1920s they had settled permanently at cattleposts in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area, deepening existing water holes and digging new ones to accommodate their cattle. The !Kung welcomed the newcomers and their cattle, feeling that they were adding resources to the area in the form of milk, domestic foods and trade goods. 1954 saw more Herero immigrants, increasing the pastoralist population five-fold and with it the employment of San herdsmen (SOLWAY & LEE 1990). The large cattle herds inflicted severe environmental degradation, further accentuating dependence on domestic resources.

Beginning in approximately the 1920s with the settlement of agropastoralists in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area, some very important features of !Kung organization began to be gradually phased out. These included the *choma* or male initiation that drew in young men within a radius of 100 km or more, a system of exogamous named groups which were associated with certain areas of land rights (*nloris*); and a tradition of stronger leadership. These higher levels of !Kung organization dwindled in importance as an increasing number of San became attached to cattleposts, fragmenting the society and as Tswana and Herero provided a court system through which San could settle disputes.

The history of the Dobe-/Xai/xai area given above is but a sketch, intended only to demonstrate that domestic products and trade goods of surrounding agropastoralists have been within reach of the Dobe-/Xai/xai !Kung for at least 1500 years, first in surrounding regions and later in their own. It is, of course, not possible to project present patterns of *hxaro* back 1000-2000 years or to even suggest that they may have been formed at that time. However, we do know that the configurations of *hxaro* paths described by elder !Kung as having been operative in the lifetimes of their fathers were indeed structured to tap into opportunities provided by nineteenth century developments in regions peripheral to their own. As can be seen in Fig. 3, major *hxaro* paths of the late 1800s and early 1900s extend to areas through which major routes of the late colonial trade passed, and where the availability of domestic foods and subsistence labor was increasing: (1) south-southeast to Ghanzi, (2) southwest to /Gam and Hereroland, (3) east to Sehitwa-Lake Ngami and (4) north to NxauNxau and Tsodilo.

That some form of exchange between !Kung and surrounding agropastoralist populations has taken place for centuries would, of course, be expected. What is interesting however, is that this was done through a number of different relationships, each with its own terms. One of these, probably the oldest, was barter which did not compel relationships of long duration or dominance/submission but rather immediate, balanced reciprocity. A second, that appears to have begun early in this century was *mafisa*, the exchange of labor for meat and milk in which agropastoralists were dominant, but not continually present. The third was an exchange of labor for domestic foods in

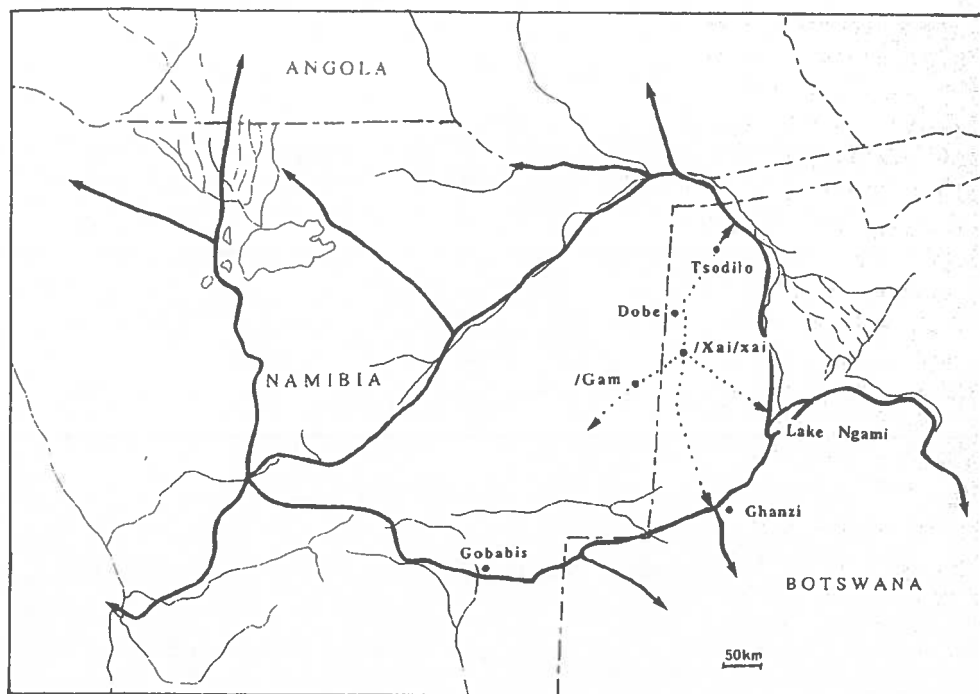


Fig. 3 *Hxaro* paths of the late 1800s and early 1900s in relation to major trade routes of Southern Africa. Solid lines represent the trade routes and dotted lines *hxaro* paths. (Map of trade routes based on LEE & GUENTHER 1991: 597.)

which San were attached more permanently to the cattle posts of agro-pastoralists. This began in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area in the 1920s and expanded greatly in the 1950s although it had long existed in other regions. As over-grazing caused environmental degradation, it became an increasingly important component of the !Kung economy. The fourth was *hxaro*, a relationship that has some interesting implications for the nature of intergroup relations in the past. Let us now consider these.

8. *Hxaro* and late nineteenth century relations

The first significant facet of *hxaro* in the context of late nineteenth century relations is that it incorporates two forms of exchange. The one is a delayed, equivalent exchange of non-food items along paths that wind their way through the Kalahari, and the other

a broad underlying relationship of mutual support between partners. The gift exchange supplies !Kung with a wide variety of material goods, while a major component of the underlying relationship is the provision of alternate residences. The exchange of gifts and mutual assistance are so intertwined that it would be difficult to imagine that they developed separately and were only recently combined. Accordingly *hxaro* has both the potential to move trade goods efficiently in and out of the Dobe-/Xai/xai area and on to the major trade routes, and to facilitate !Kung travel to other regions where they can spend months living off the resources of their partners. Dobe-/Xai/xai !Kung could thereby gain experience with different populations and their lifestyles long before these peoples entered their own area.

A second important consideration for late nineteenth century relations is that *hxaro* is never done with non-San. This means that *hxaro* pathways would not bring !Kung into direct relations with agropastoralists or colonial traders, but nonetheless close enough to their cattle posts, settlements or camps to permit either barter or exchange of temporary labor for domestic products to take place without incurring subjugation or more permanent obligations. Genealogies and personal travel histories indicate that for some San extended visits were trade excursions, for others sojourns to live off of domestic foods and for still others a first step into a new way of life as "workers" for agropastoralist populations. *Hxaro* thereby provided an "in" to the San communities of different regions from where they could choose from a number of options.

Finally *hxaro* relationships are reciprocal, and as such they could bring as many people into the study area as out – San in other regions could and did travel regularly to the Dobe-/Xai/xai area for as long as !Kung can remember. However migration patterns of the past two generations, as reported in genealogies, and those of the 1970s indicate that the Dobe-/Xai/xai area was not seen as a desirable for immigration, but as an important alternate residence for extended visits. This means that in principle visitors also could have brought their own livestock with them for seasonal grazing. Unfortunately I did not ask if this had been done.

9. *Hxaro* from 1930-1975

The period between approximately 1930 and 1975 saw many changes in the distribution of resources. Opportunities in regions to the north and south had become limited after the collapse of the colonial trade. Furthermore, the settlement of Herero and Tswana in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area brought the domestic resources of agropastoralists to the doorstep of the !Kung. With the establishment of Tsumkwe in 1960, it was no longer necessary to go as far afield to have access to store-bought goods or wage labor. With these changes came alterations in patterns of *hxaro*. The longer *hxaro* pathways began to dwindle in importance, namely those extending south to the Ghanzi district in

Botswana, southwest to Hereroland in Namibia and north through NxauNxau and Tsodilo.¹³ Those !Kung in the Dobe-/Xai/xai area who lived primarily by hunting and gathering continued to maintain wide spheres of *hxaro* but redirected many of their pathways to Tsumkwe. Those attached to pastoralist homesteads, who had greatly reduced subsistence-related risks, found the demands of *hxaro* too taxing and narrowed their sphere of *hxaro* exchange to close kin. They kept but a few partnerships in other areas to secure a certain freedom of movement and independence from agropastoralists when desired. At Tsumkwe, quite another development took place. Traditional ties with Dobe and /Xai/xai were energetically promoted to allow for places of "rest" and refuge from the social problems at Tsumkwe – quarrels, boredom, alcohol and social inequalities brought about by uneven access to wage labor.¹⁴ Within Tsumkwe, great emphasis was put on gift exchange to make friends, to level out inequalities in the distribution of material possessions, soothe jealousies and mediate conflict. *Hxaro* pathways wound and rewound their ways through the settlement scheme, relaying fine articles of beadwork and store-bought goods through ten to fifteen different sets of hands. Accordingly, the *hxaro* ties of families living in different areas and contexts were restructured to cover current needs though one feature remained constant throughout – all !Kung maintained ties that would allow them to utilize alternate residences in other regions.

10. Concluding remarks

Although the data on the history of *hxaro* are sketchy, it is clear that the past hundred years saw many changes as !Kung activated different configurations of kinship, demonstrating the keen sensitivity of a foraging population to the ever-changing resources and opportunities afforded by surrounding populations. In view of ongoing discussions of the relations and dependency between foragers and their neighbors (HEADLAND & REID 1989, amongst many others), it cautions against generalizing from

13 Despite the dwindling of *hxaro* ties with these areas, it was surprising how San who accompanied me to NxauNxau, Tsodilo and Ghanzi could call on the past *hxaro* connections of their kin, and after lengthy exchanges of news receive hospitality. It became apparent that ties with distant partners, that dwindle due to lack of interest on the part of both parties, can remain dormant for long periods of time before they are forgotten.

14 In 1974 alcohol was readily available at the Government run settlement at Tsumkwe in Namibia and there was a continuous flow of San to and from /Xai/xai and Dobe. Rumors were rife that food shortages were imminent and many San who had lived on maize meal and store-bought goods for months began to feel an intense "meat hunger". When Tsumkwe San who were employed with a good salary asked why they kept up relations with /Xai/xai San who often came to freeloader, the answer was straight forward: to have a place of refuge from the social tensions of Tsumkwe.

observations made at any one point in time, for over the last centuries surrounding populations have been experiencing as many or more changes as foragers themselves (BAHUCHET & GUILLAUME 1982. CHANG 1982). In the !Kung case, *hxaro* has provided a sensitive mechanism through which !Kung can exert a certain freedom of choice with regard to the exploitation of new opportunities without totally altering their foraging lifestyle or becoming heavily subjugated to others.

As a final note, a look at *hxaro*'s past begs the question: What will its future be? No doubt its future will vary greatly from area to area, however, for all rural dwellers the step from foraging to full time food production or employment is a formidable one. If and when it occurs, it will be accompanied by the many risks of social change. Despite the growing resources of Botswana and Namibia, there is little indication that new forms of security will be widely available for rural populations in the near future. As long as risks remain that can best be dealt with through social means, *hxaro* is likely to persist through the many faces of change, embedding !Kung in ever-evolving networks of "those who hold each other".

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