

# THE OLD WAY

**A Story of the First People**

**ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS**





Elizabeth Marshall Thomas is the author of nine books of fiction and nonfiction—among them *The Hidden Life of Dogs*, *The Harmless People*, *Reindeer Moon*, and *The Animal Wife*. She has written for *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, and *The Atlantic*. She lives in New Hampshire.

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Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

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*In loving memory of my parents,*

*Laurence and Lorna Marshall,*

*and of my brother, John.*

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## ABOUT WORDS AND NAMES

The five groups of San or Bushmen are called the First People. Most call themselves Bushmen when referring to themselves collectively. I respect this and use the term Bushman rather than San in the text. Two groups appear in this book, the Ju/wasi (the singular is Ju/wa) and the /Gwi. Although today some of these people read and write, they had no say in the spelling of their language, which has been chosen by others. The *Ju* part of Ju/wa might better be spelled *Zhu*, following the International Phonetic Alphabet, but it isn't, because when Lorna Marshall, my mother, wrote the first important ethnography of these people, she rendered the *j* of *ju* as the French *j* of *je* or *jolie*. Others have followed her example. Today, her *j* rendition seems to be standard.

Meanwhile, the */wa* part of Ju/wa is also spelled *'hoan*, also */hoan*, as was eventually suggested by linguists in an attempt to reproduce the phonic subtleties. My spelling is therefore somewhat archaic, as most academic publications now favor *Ju/'hoan* (also *Ju''hoan* and *Ju/hoan*). But to the average reader, the word would appear to be pronounced “Jew-ho-an” or “Jew-hone”—never mind the slash mark and the apostrophe. Missionaries with linguistic inclinations determined the spelling of the Fijian language with similar results. For instance, an important Fijian beverage made from kava and pronounced “yang-gona” is spelled *yaqona*. Many of us would take that for “yak-kwona.”



The same fate seems to await the Bushman languages. If only the linguists would settle for approximate, layman-type spellings such as are used for other African languages. That way, although not every nuance is represented on paper, the word looks something like it sounds. All else quickly gets confusing.

And it's only the Western world that cares about our spelling. I used to work for the Embassy of the State of Kuwait and will always remember asking an important Saudi

personage how, in preparing correspondence for his signature, I should spell his name. He said, "Spell it any way you like."

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Today, *Ju'hoan* and *Ju/hoan* are pretty much in the literature, but they look so very much like "Jew-hone," while to the layman's ear the actual word sounds so much more like "Ju/wa," that for the sake of the readers this book uses the latter version.

The language of the Ju/wasi belongs to a language group called !Kung, (the *u* as in *pull*) and the Ju/wasi are also sometimes known as the !Kung. This language, like all Bushman languages, uses clicks. The dental click (/) resembles the sound we represent as *tsk*, as in *tsk tsk*. The alveolar click (≠) is somewhat the same but farther back in the mouth, where *t* and *d* come from. The alveol-palatal click (!) has no corresponding sound on our part and is made by pressing the tongue against the top of the mouth and popping it down. And the lateral click (//), made in the cheek, resembles the click one makes to urge a horse.

Interestingly, the Ju/wasi had relatively few personal names in use because their lifestyle fostered small, partially isolated populations in which people were inevitably named for relatives. The approximately 550 people in the areas we studied had forty-one personal names for women and forty-eight for men. We knew twenty-three men named Gao and eighteen women named /Khoa, for instance, which meant that in any group there could be several people with the same name. We even knew two brothers who had the same name, having been named for two different men who also had the same name. People did not have surnames, but certain people had distinguishing nicknames—some honorary, such as Male ≠Toma, others descriptive, such as Lame ≠Gao, Short /Kwi, and Crooked /Kwi; some calling attention to a special physical feature such as Gao Beard, Bau Shortface, Gao Feet, and ≠Toma Longface; some to commemorate an event, such as Tsamko Bone Arrow; and some mildly pejorative, such as Lazy /Kwi. These and others appear in the manuscript.

Today, most of the Ju/wasi have surnames, usually the father's name. The eldest son of Male ≠Toma was named Tsamko, for example, and now is Tsamko ≠Toma. His eldest son, named for his grandfather, is ≠Toma Tsamko.

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# PART ONE

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## *Fifteen Hundred Centuries*

If you look at a map of Africa made in the 1940s, you will see in the southwest portion of the continent a sparsely inhabited bushland about the size of Spain. Within this is the Kalahari Desert, an area of about 120,000 square miles, much of it as seemingly empty as the Antarctic. In the interior, the map shows 20° south latitude crossing 20° east longitude, which formed part of the border between South West Africa and the Bechuanaland Protectorate, now Namibia and Botswana. But there, the map is otherwise blank, without place names or topographical features, because the mapmakers did not know of them. When in 1950 my father, Laurence Marshall, was looking at such a map in Windhoek, then a frontier town with unpaved roads, a government official told him that the place he was viewing was the end of the earth. No white person, he thought, had ever been there, and no Bantu person either.

Yet that was where my father planned to go. He wanted to visit the hunter-gatherers who were believed to live there and was considering the map because he was preparing to take my mother, Lorna, my brother, John, then eighteen, and myself, then nineteen, into that country. But how to get there, where we might find water, how much of the interior was dry bushland and therefore habitable, and how much was true desert and therefore not habitable, was just a guess.



How we would find the hunter-gatherers was also just a guess. Much later, we were to learn that perhaps ten thousand people known as Bushmen lived there by hunting and gathering, and that perhaps one hundred thousand square miles were more or less habitable, at least for part of the year, which meant that the population density, if you can call it density, was one person for every ten square miles. Obviously, we would not find these people easily.

But find them we did. We found people who called themselves Ju/wasi and were living the lifestyle of our ancestors, a lifestyle of the African savannah that began before we were human beings, changing in form but not in essence as time passed and the climate fluctuated, and lasting until the late

third of the twentieth century. That any of us are here at all is due entirely to the long-term culture that these hunter-gatherers, with their courage, skills, and knowledge, continued to uphold.

To me, the experience of visiting this place and these people was profoundly important, as if I had voyaged into the deep past through a time machine. I feel that I saw the Old Way, the way of life that shaped us, a way of life that now is gone. I also feel that I saw the most successful culture that our kind has ever known, if a lifestyle can be called a culture and if stability and longevity are measures, a culture governed by sun and rain, heat and cold, wind and wildfires, plant and animal populations. Any human culture is a work in progress, modifying as its members adjust to new conditions, but no matter what conditions your environment offers, no matter what you use for language or what gods you worship or whether your decisions are made by group consensus or by a hereditary leader or just by someone bigger than the rest of you, for those who live in the Old Way certain elements never vary. Your group size is set by the food supply, your territory must include water, the animals you hunt will always be afraid of you, and the plant foods will always be seasonal, so you had better remember where they grow and be there when they're fruiting.

Today, we find this hard to picture. If Europe had known a similar stability, the continent would still be covered with forests and steppes, the fauna would include Irish elk and lions, and little bands of people along the Dordogne River would still be painting the walls of their caves. Yet while much of the world was changing, the Ju/wasi and their ancestors maintained at least the material aspects of their culture. Archaeologists were eventually to find objects like those used by modern Ju/wasi in sites that dated back to the Upper Paleolithic but were perhaps much older—at one site that went back thirty-five thousand years, the excavation was discontinued, and the extent of its antiquity was not determined.<sup>1</sup> Sites from other parts of Africa demonstrate that gracile, light-bodied hunter-gatherers who made objects like those of the modern Bushmen once lived all over the continent, in all kinds of environments. Ancient pan graves containing such objects were found in Egypt.

Aspects of this culture were known to the very first members of our lineage, whose bones were found near Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in the Klasies River Mouth Caves, where they had rested for 150,000 years, some of the earliest remains of *Homo sapiens* yet discovered. This original lineage was to branch and branch again as its people traveled to all corners of the world, changing themselves by adapting to different climates, perhaps even finding mates among a different kind of hominid, until they became the many varied phenotypes that today enhance our planet. But some descendants of the original people didn't experience much change. Small and light bodied, deft and graceful, these very successful people stayed in the places that had shaped our species, living in the Old Way, with aspects of the culture such as group size, ways of gathering foods, and territorial requirements very similar to those of many other creatures, all shaped by necessity in a manner that most of us today cannot imagine. Yet this was the situation in the 1950s. To go there was indeed time travel, and for the rest of my life I saw everything through the lens of the Kalahari. But back then, I didn't understand what I was seeing.

For one thing, not much was known about our human origins. The Taung australopithecine *Australopithecus africanus*, had been discovered by Raymond Dart in 1924. But the importance of the fossil and its recognition as a human ancestor were not acknowledged for more than twenty years because Dart (as he himself once told me) had two strikes against him when he found it. He was merely a graduate student at the time, and a South African at that, and therefore in the eyes of the higher-ups of the archaeological community, he wasn't important enough to discover the earliest hominid. So the implications of the fossil were not acknowledged until about the time we were

starting our work.

Today, our beginnings are better understood. Our creator was an ice age, which began when most of Africa was covered by rain forest. As the world became colder, the growing glaciers captured much of the world's water, and not enough rain fell to support the great reaches of the world's forests, which became prairies, grasslands, and steppes. In Africa, most of the land that once had been rain forest slowly changed to open woodlands, and later to open savannah.

Our ancestors were there when all this was happening. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins presents a compelling image: You are standing beside your mother, holding her hand. She is holding her mother's hand, who is holding her mother's hand. On and on goes your lineage, each of you holding the hand of your mother, until your line is three hundred miles long and goes back in time five million years, deep into the African rain forest, where the clasping hand is that of a chimpanzee.<sup>2</sup>

As our ancestors lost the rain forest and began to adjust to the new conditions, they had several things with them in addition to their DNA. If we look across the aeons to our next of kin who stayed in what was left of the rain forest—the great apes, most especially the chimpanzees—we can guess what some of those things might be. A good candidate might be the half-dome shelter of grass and branches used by savannah hunter-gatherers, a structure sometimes called a *tshu*, that shares important characteristics with the nests of great apes and thus, by inference, the probable nests of our rain forest ancestors. Whether in the rain forests or on the savannah, when those of our lineage find a new place to stay, the individuals fan out from the group and each one quickly whips together a little structure by weaving flexible branches into a curved, basketlike frame that then is stuffed with leafy twigs (in the rain forests) or handfuls of grass (on the savannah). The structures are used for resting or sleeping as long as the group stays put, and are abandoned when the group moves away. At the next stopping place, the individuals make new structures. If the group later returns to the old place, the individuals do not reoccupy the old structures but instead make fresh ones.

Many creatures, such as nesting birds and denning wolves, make shelters, but these differ quite profoundly from the nests of the primates in that bird nests and wolf dens are the products of lengthy group effort, some (as with birds' nests) with materials gathered far away, and often are designed for permanence, sometimes to be used for generations.

Large primates have a different strategy. They make a little structure in a few minutes, using materials directly at hand. They use the structures for a short time, abandon them when they move on, and make new structures at the next destination.<sup>3</sup>

The people we knew in the 1950s used such structures wherever they camped. A woman would break branches from a bush, set these in the ground, weave the tops together into a basketlike frame, make a half dome, and cover it with handfuls of grass. If the group moved, she would make another. If the group returned to the former area, she would make another and not reoccupy the first, which would probably no longer be standing.

Could such a custom continue for so long? That question would never be asked about our rain forest relatives, but only about us, not only because most of us understand other creatures so poorly and assume that all their habits are permanently hardwired, but also because by now we have become so accustomed to rapid, perpetual change that we cannot imagine life without it. And indeed, our species has made many changes since that long-ago time. But for as long as the Old Way lasted for our species, our living arrangements were not necessarily among those changes, or at least, not all of them, and not for all of us.

Thus the little nestlike structures continued to be made, probably because of their temporary nature and the ease with which they are assembled. If our ancestors made new structures every few days, making nests in the trees while big trees were available, making similar nests among bushes as the big trees vanished and the savannah began to spread out around us, adapting the structures in minor ways to changing conditions, parents teaching children for as long as we lived in the Old Way on the savannah, we had no chance to drop the habit. Neither did our primate relatives who stayed in the forests. All the great apes make nests, and all make them in trees—except adult gorillas, who over time became too big for the average tree and solved the problem as our ancestors seem to have solved it, by making nests on the ground.

Although our bodies changed as we became human beings, and although we changed many of the things we thought and did, we didn't change anything unless we had to, because change for its own sake is undesirable, experiments are risky, and life is tenuous enough without departing from what is known to be helpful and safe. Repetition is a form of permanence. Whenever we could, all else being equal, we stayed with the tried and true.

One of the functions of a nest is to partially protect its occupant from all but the most determined predators, so the difference between a nest in a rain forest tree and a half-dome shelter on a treeless bushland is not as great as it might seem. The nest in the tree offers protection from predators below while the shelter on the ground offers at least a measure of protection from predators from behind—the popular approach of the cat family. Fire is often credited as our main help against predators, but we did not control fire until later, and fire is not as helpful as many of us might suppose (more will be said about this later). This makes the savannah shelter a nest without a tree, and means that the structures have changed less than their makers.

Another good candidate for extreme antiquity is the straight stick about three feet long and an inch or so in diameter—a humble item, surely, but very important. Today, these are known as digging sticks. While we still had the rain forest, our environment consisted largely of sticks, of course, and surely we broke them off trees for many purposes, just as chimpanzees now use sticks for dipping and poking into beehives, say, or hurling at those who displease them. The Peabody Museum at Harvard has a collection of tools used by chimpanzees, including several such sticks, one of which a large male chimpanzee was seen using to beat a female. (The rare event, reported during a lecture at Harvard, outraged a group of politically correct female graduate students, underexposed to life and overexposed to academia, who vehemently attacked the female lecturer for reporting the event in science without censuring the male aggressor. This scene, too, was older than our species, wherein a group of primates mobs a conspecific who has temporarily fallen in status.)

In the dim, dense rain forest, most of our food had come from plants that struggled to get enough sunlight. Throughout the year they put out a profusion of moist leaves and tender buds, meanwhile providing a welcome supply of fruits and berries. The plants didn't mind if we ate a few leaves, and they wanted us to eat the fruits and berries because we would pack the seeds in dung and drop them a distance, just as the plant intended.

On the savannah, though, the plants had more serious difficulties. The problem faced by most savannah plants is not lack of sunlight, but too much of it, and the drying that it causes. Thus some plants were grasses and others were covered with thorns to conserve water, while still others spent most of the year hidden deep in the earth in root form as bulbs, corms, tubers, and rhizomes, with nothing aboveground to show their presence. Of course they needed sunlight, but they would wait until the rains began before sending up a stalk or vine and some leaves. The root would shrivel in the



process, but with the rain and with the energy it was getting from its leaves, it would fill out again and be ready to send up another vine a year later. Until then, though, the vine and leaves were a liability, leaching moisture from the root and also betraying its location. So the root would stop feeding them. They'd dry and drop off. A wildfire might come by and burn them, or the wind might blow them away. This was what the root intended. Secure in the earth, with nothing aboveground to show its presence, it would wait out the dry season where animals could not find it. Naked mole rats sometimes eat the roots, but these little conservationists eat only part of a root without doing too much damage. Eventually the root repairs itself and the mole rats can tunnel up to it and eat more later.

As for us, with the loss of the rain forest we were reduced to eating dry berries, the shallow bulbs, little onions, ground-growing nuts, and the edible ends of grass blades, as well as grubs, large and small baby birds, snails, and caterpillars. Many other creatures were also eating these foods, especially other primates such as ancestral baboons. These were about the size of macaques in those days, weighing perhaps 15 to 30 pounds, so they were smaller than us with our larger bodies, perhaps 60 to 140 pounds.<sup>4</sup> But if modern baboons are any indication, their groups were bigger than ours. A large group of small animals is more efficient at foraging than a small group of large animals, because a large group can cover a wider area, with each individual needing less food. If the baboons found a food-producing place before we did, they picked it clean and deprived us. We needed more food, but where to find it?

Like the baboons, we would have been pulling up the little wild onions that grow on the savanna, and like the baboons, we would have noticed the shriveled stalks discarded by the deeper roots, suggesting something farther down. But the hands of a primate are not made for serious digging, and anyone who has tried to dig a hole two or three feet deep in hard earth without a tool will quickly testify, and the baboons couldn't do it. Neither could we, with bare hands.

Enter the digging stick, perhaps a branch with a slanting point where it broke off the tree, or perhaps a stick found at the edge of a burned area where fire had removed the outer layers and hardened the point. But sharpening a stick would not be difficult, especially for primates who were already using sticks for various purposes and knew about altering them slightly, as chimpanzees still do today, by chewing the end of a stick, say, to make a little brush for gathering ants. Making a point on a stick was not much of a leap. Perhaps we took a sharp stone to it. With sticks, we chopped away the earth around the shriveled stalks, followed them down, and found the roots. We have been eating roots ever since.

Archaeological evidence suggests that some of our ancestors may also have used the horns and bones of antelopes for digging, although evidence is scanty on the subject because a stick is less likely to appear in archaeological remains. But surely horns and bones came later, after we already knew about deep digging. And, unlike the sticks, they didn't remain in use. Nobody uses them now, probably because to get them you must first get a carcass, while a suitable stick can be found on almost any tree. The people who are called the First People still use sticks to this day, and probably will for years to come, as many prefer them to shovels. A digging stick weighs less, is easier to carry, and costs nothing. It also has more uses than a shovel: it can balance a load, extend your reach, or be a cane, a lever, a boomerang to knock nuts from a tree, or a weapon to smite an attacker. Over the millennia, many a predator has been discouraged by a sharp whack on the snout. For digging roots, a stick is better than a shovel, because if you stand up and dig with a shovel (for which you really should wear shoes), you can't feel what you're doing. Any judgments about the hole and its contents are made visually. But if you sit on your heels and chop the earth with the point of a digging stick, each blow says something to your hands and arms, and as you get near the root, perhaps feeling its hairs when

scraping away the loose dirt with your fingers, you can modify your digging to expose the roots unsmashed. And you can do this in about the same amount of time you would need if using a shovel, but you would spend less energy, because a digging stick weighs less than a shovel, because the downward blow is easier to make than the up-and-out movement of a shovel, and because it's easier to scoop or brush the loosened dirt out of the hole with your hand than to hoist it and heave it onto a shovel.

A digging stick is humble, yes. The very name of this item in the English language shows how seriously we underrate it—we assign specific nouns, not vaguely descriptive phrases, to objects that we consider important. Our long stick with a blade at the end is called a spear, for instance, not a stabbing stick. (!Kung speakers have named the digging stick, of course—the word is *!ai*.) But even a pointed stick seems insignificant to us in our innocence, as an invention of consequences it ranks with the discovery of the deep roots themselves and has made more difference to our species than virtually all the other inventions that we celebrate with more enthusiasm. And a modern digging stick is not very different from the rain forest sticks we used millions of years earlier except that we sharpen one end and take off the bark.

Then, too, there is the ostrich egg. This useful item is first a meal and then a water bottle. To use these eggs, we had to do only two things—steal a fresh egg without being kicked by the ostrich, and open a hole in the shell. Unless the egg is opened carefully, the contents will spill, so the best way to eat the egg without wasting the contents is to pick up a rock, tap open a small hole in the shell, and suck the contents with a stick. After sucking out the egg, we had an empty eggshell, with obvious implications. An ostrich egg holds from five to five and a half cups of water, more than a day's supply. No further refinement was needed except a wad of grass for a stopper.

On the dry savannah, the need for water limited our foraging. One ostrich eggshell filled with water could expand the foraging range of its owner by fifty to one hundred square miles.<sup>5</sup> Some people still use ostrich eggshells to this very day, for this very reason. The Ju/wa Bushmen used them in preference to many other possible water containers, such as leather bags and animal stomachs. The leather items leak and spill and require considerable preparation, while an empty ostrich eggshell can be used immediately. An ostrich eggshell is thick and strong, and is even simpler than a digging stick. In terms of what it has done for our lineage, it might be equally important. We could not have carried ostrich eggshells until we became proficient hind-leg walkers, but we could have been using them even since then, and they cannot have changed one iota.

Today there are 233 species of primates, but only baboons, red guenons, and people live outside the forests. And only one kind of primate—our kind—found a way to reach the deeply buried foods, carry small amounts of water, and modify tree nests into ground nests so that we could sleep anywhere and didn't need to stay near cliffs or rocky hilltops or big trees—the places where baboons and red guenons take refuge. We moved ourselves beyond our competition. This has been true for millions of years and was true in the rolling bushland of the Kalahari in the 1950s, where water was scarce and there were very few large trees and no cliffs or rocky hilltops. Out there, the people were the only primates.



*A man sits in front of a grass shelter, or tshu. Visible in the background are a spear, a digging stick, and an ostrich eggshell used for storing water.*

Our human version of the Old Way was born in the rain forests but developed on the savannah. For fifteen hundred centuries, we kept the Old Rules, then broke them all and erased the Old Way from our lives. Among the last to lose it were the Ju/wa Bushmen in the Kalahari interior, who in the 1950s were still living entirely from the savannah, as people had done since people began, eating the wild plants and the wild animals they caught and killed, making their clothes from animal skins and their tools from stone, wood, bone, and plant fiber. They had no agriculture, no domestic animals (not even dogs), no fabric, no manufactured items, and no metal except for a few lengths of wire and a few bits of tin or steel that, beginning in the 1920s or '30s, they obtained in a usurious trade at the few scattered settlements of the Bantu pastoralists at the edges of the Kalahari. If a Bushman wishing to trade journeyed to one of the Bantu settlements, the pastoralists might give him a piece of wire about ten inches long in exchange for five or six jackal skins.

The bits of metal replaced some of the Bushmen's former materials of bone, stone, and wood—but by the 1950s most arrowheads were made of cold-hammered wire rather than bone, but arrowheads made of bone and even one or two made of wood were still in use. Because the size, shape, and purpose of the arrow were unchanging, this minor use of metal did not alter the technology.

The hunter-gatherer life of the savannah, which began when our ancestors lost the shelter of the trees, survived until the 1970s or '80s, by which time the First People had been forced to change profoundly. And although today a few individuals may remember the Old Way and keep some of its skills, no human population lives by it any longer. Even so, it clings to us still, in our preferences, in our thoughts and dreams, and even in some of our behavior. All over the world, many men who hunt are following the Old Way whether they know it or not, even the Americans with gun racks in the back of their trucks. Hunting offers too many variables to be learned from books or videos, so many a successful hunter learned the skills from an older man, often his father, who also learned from another man, probably his father, in a lengthy chain that reaches to the men who hunted Irish elk and bison at the edges of the European glaciers, and beyond that to the African savannah.

## *Our Lineage*

We often imagine our lineage vaguely. Millions of years ago there were Australopithecines—Lucy and the rest. They vanished, time passed, and suddenly there was *Homo habilis*. Nothing much happened for a while, and then *Homo erectus* appeared. As for ourselves, the *Homo sapiens*, we enter the picture as cavemen.

This vision is like taking four far-apart frames from a full length film and trying to guess what the film is about. We might all agree that the few fragments don't give us much to go on, but the sporadic image still clings. Better to think of Richard Dawkins's hand-holding chain of daughters and mother-in-laws. Better to think of the animals in the rain forests who were our mothers, because we were like them when we began our journey toward our human state.

Five million years ago, we were three to five feet tall if we reared up, hands off the ground, to take a look around. Our males were much bigger than our females. Surely we were partly covered with hair—not with fur, implying an undercoat, but with hair resembling that of chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, and orangutans. The hair was probably more or less straight but not long or heavy. Under the hair our skin was probably pinkish white, as is the skin of most animals. Perhaps our bare faces, fingers, and toes were pigmented as protection from the sun, but perhaps these exposed areas were pink when we were children, like the faces of young chimpanzees.

Because our males if not our females were bigger than most other primates, and because all of us were too big to run along the smaller branches of the trees as did the monkeys, we might have traveled along the ground with the help of our knuckles, but our lineage was arboreal and had been since the Miocene, perhaps even since the days of the dinosaurs, so we had traditionally climbed and lived in trees, and while still in the rain forests we spent much time in the trees because most of our food was in them. We looked for seeds and budding leaves, also for slugs and caterpillars, and we listened for birds, perhaps hornbills, who called to one another when they found fruit. We would know why they were calling and, following the sound, we would spread out to find the tree where they were feeding. Whoever saw the fruit first might also cry out, as the hornbills had done and as a chimpanzee might do, giving a food call that the rest of us would hear, and we'd hurry over. We would climb up to the fruiting branches and throw things at the hornbills until they flew noisily into the sky. If the fruit was on branches too slender to support us, we might shake them to make the fruit fall.

We would stay near that tree as long as the fruit lasted, making nests in nearby branches so that we could sleep out of reach of predators, and when the fruit was finished we would move on together to another place. We would know most of the fruiting trees in our section of the rain forest, and even without the aid of hornbills, we would visit them regularly.

Then the climate began to change. The world became colder and the glaciers developed. It is at this time that we find the mother whose hand our lineage is holding. Along some of the larger rivers, strips of rain forest remained, and our relatives who occupied those particular riverside forests were able

live life as before. Environmentally speaking, not much was happening as far as they were concerned, so their bodies and their lifestyle changed very little. They became the modern chimpanzees.

As for us, however, we were not fortunate enough to live along the rivers with their permanent sheltering forests. In the forests we occupied, the environment deteriorated, the trees withered or died from under us, and we were forced to adapt. So we did the best we could from day to day, moving about in small groups, shape-changing slowly as the streams ran dry and the heavy rain forests became open woodlands, which in turn shrank away until nothing was left but a few little trees and endless stretches of grass and thornbush.

Out on the open savannah with the sun burning down, not many creatures moved about by day, but we did, teaching our children the things our parents had taught us, but having to make some adjustments. When we traveled, for instance, we could no longer spread out as we had done in the rain forest because big trees were not at hand to climb in case of trouble. Instead, like soldiers in combat, we began to travel in single file behind a leader who was watchful for danger. Most other savannah animals did the same. If we stopped to rest, we sat together in a circle, doing as other animals do because the circle as an antipredator device is as effective as it is important. Cows or sheep in a field lie down close together but face in different directions, birds on a telephone wire face both ways unless they are facing a storm, and even the dog who sleeps on your bed normally faces away from you so that together, as the dog sees it, you can cover all sides of the room. Even if he nuzzles up to you at first, he'll probably change position later. Remembering in our hearts our experiences with predators, all of us feel vulnerable to attack from behind, and to this day we favor circles.

What determined the size of our groups? Water was the single most important factor—water and the food supply around it. In the rain forest, we had been free to travel wherever there was food, and water had been everywhere—in the morning mist, in streams and rivers, in every fruit and berry, in the breath of every leaf. There, we could have lived in groups of forty or fifty, perhaps coming together at night and spreading out to forage by day in smaller parties. But as the glaciers formed elsewhere and the rainfall lessened, many rivers ran dry, and the sources of water became scarce. Streams and rivers became uncommon, some merely the conduits of water from elsewhere passing through without influencing the surroundings. The Okavango River, for instance, cuts a track through miles of semidesert with little else than grass and low thornbush on either bank. No people and few animals lived in these stretches. We could not have lived on the banks of such rivers.

So we probably lived on the shores of seasonal lakes. The Paleolithic camps of the Kalahari, many of which were still in use in the 1950s, are on the shores of seasonal lakes. After the rains that fill these lakes, water remains around the edges in waterholes, but even these were few. Yet the need for water limited our foraging. We would have been obliged to stay within a half day's walk of a source at least during the dry season.

Perhaps for short periods, some groups of our ancestors could have lived without water, as did some groups of Bushmen during the 1950s, if their groups numbered no more than ten or twelve individuals. These people would get moisture from little green melons called *tsama* melons, from certain water roots, and from the rumens\* of the antelopes they killed. But as a way of life this was only for those who could not do better, because it put the foragers so close to the edge. People under such conditions survived the hottest weather by digging the watery roots, squeezing the pulp, drinking the juice, digging gravelike pits, lining the pits with the squeezed pulp, urinating on the pulp, lying down on it, covering themselves with earth, and waiting there for the day to cool, thus conserving the water in their bodies. But this was done by only a few, and only in extremis. We did not become a species that

thrived in this manner. Our development as a species depended on our being able to live near a source of water.

During a gathering trip, we could spread out over five or six miles (about as far as anyone can go a day, do the necessary work of gathering, and get back to water and to the safety of the group in an encampment by dark). This would be roughly fifty square miles, if we lived by the shore of a large lake, or twice that if our source was a spring or waterhole. Thus the size of our group would depend upon the amount of food that the area could produce. This calculation was not firmly fixed, as in the past we were surely not very different from the modern hunter-gatherers, who sometimes made foraging trips that lasted three to five days, carrying water with them in ostrich eggshells. Also, leftover rainwater was sometimes available in hollow trees, and certain roots and melons held substantial liquid. Even so, in the long run, it was the source of water and the gathering opportunities around it that limited our range.



*An ostrich egg is a useful item: it is first a meal, and then a water bottle. An empty ostrich egg holds from 5 to 51½ cups of water, more than enough for a day's supply. No further refinement is needed except a wad of grass for a stopper.*

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In the six thousand square miles known as Nyae Nyae, there were only seven waterholes that the Ju/wasi considered to be permanent and had not failed in living memory, even during drought. Eight more were considered to be semipermanent; they might go dry during years of drought. Some were at the edges of pans, tucked away under rock ledges. One was at the edge of a fault, where a block of stone had sunk away from its neighbor, leaving a three-foot cliff. And one was a natural sinkhole in the middle of a pan called Nama. The sinkhole itself was very deep, with the water far below the surface, but several groups of people used it until two or three spotted hyenas tried to drink, fell in, couldn't get out, and drowned. Their bodies floated face-down with their ears and hairy backs showing above the waterline. Of course the water was polluted for years thereafter. The people went elsewhere. Thus the problem of drowned animals shows, I think, why the people did not dig deep wells, although possibly they could have done so. Better to use a natural waterhole where the water is near the surface.

Here are four passages from my notes and journal that suggest what it might have been like for our species in Paleolithic times, out on the dry savannah. The people in the passages, besides myself, a

/Gwi or Ju/wa Bushmen, but what the place was like, and what the people were doing, was not new. The first passage is about distance.

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I am alone an hour's walk from camp, sitting in the long grass at the edge of an arm of the pan, listening to the wind moving the grass and to something going *huff, huff*, miles away—a lion—and looking at the hazy gray sky. It will be dark soon, and I'm looking at the miles and miles of yellow, silver grass and black bushes in the grass, and thinking how the wind may have blown for thousands of miles before it touched a person, and perhaps it blows over a Bushman camp tucked away somewhere, one point in the enormous, vast veld that goes hundreds of miles in every direction and it is all like this, just grass and grass and grass, and a few bushes and a few thorn trees and a few antelope in small herds and a few groups of lions and a few groups of Ju/wasi, as far apart from each other as the stars—all living in this country but so small and few that they are hardly aware of each other. The wind stops. The air seems very still. The sun is moving down and the sky in the west is yellow. A cold night is coming. I hope I can remember how I came here so I can find our camp before the night sets in. In all that space, you could miss it by the slightest turn or step, and walk right by.

The second passage is about cold weather.

It was almost morning, and very cold, below freezing. Water in a gourd had frozen to solid ice. The winter sky was leaden black with dull moonlight and stars. The wind lifted and blew very cold, and some little dark birds that were hunched freezing in the thorn trees gave out a few shrill cries. The shadows cast by the last of the moonlight were almost gone. Daylight was coming and a mouse that lived nearby was throwing up footfulls of sand to plug in his burrow for the day. At their camp, the people were also freezing cold because they were almost out of firewood. They were sitting in a half circle around what had been their fire, all packed close together with the children between them and the infant held close between his mother's belly and her leg—all maybe getting a little warmth from each other and from the still-warm ashes. The wind was exceptionally strong, blowing the sand from around the roots of the grass tussocks, blowing soft ashes away from the little hearth so that everyone was sprinkled with white. The people were wrapped in their leather capes but their skins were almost gray with cold.

The third passage is about shallow roots.

We are in an open forest. The trees seem large and old, with fine, intricate branches and light gray bark. Fine, tall yellow grass grows all around. The sky is bright. Flies are buzzing—little, fast-moving, high-buzzing wild flies. The ground is pocked with little dents. People have been digging here for tiny onions. All the women sit down and begin to scrape, picking up the chivelike bulbs and peeling and eating them. It is rather hot. We are all down in the yellow grass—*chunk chunk* sounds of the digging sticks, an irregular rhythm—the faint fresh dust rising—people crunching the onions and talking like mad with their mouths full. The three children who are too big to be carried sit together in the shade and play.

The fourth passage is about water. The people mentioned here lived where there was no water.

When I got there, the mother gemsbok and her calf were dead and the leopard had run away. The mother's sides were raked by the claws of the leopard. Her calf was soft furred and tawny brown with a white belly. The leopard had removed its intestines and had eaten its face up to the eyes. The mother had milk in her udder, which had four teats like goats' teats, all covered with hair, two large teats in front and two small teats behind. The two men milked her, stroking the milk veins in the bag, milking a squirt into their palm and licking it off. The gemsbok, lying on her side with one hind leg slightly raised, was so big that both men could squat below the leg to milk her. I tasted some milk, which was strong and gamey, also harsh and salty, very different from the mild, sweet milk of cows. Then the two men rolled her on her back, skinned and opened her belly, then opened the rumen. Inside was her cud, a big, dark green, crunched-up mass of small leaves? grass? which she had eaten. It looked wet and spongy. Two big white worms rose up from the rumen, not knowing what was happening, but the men paid no attention to them. Instead, they took handfuls of rumen and squeezed the juice into their mouths. I tasted a little of this too. It was watery, but tasted something like oak leaves, slightly bitter. The men then dug a bowl-shaped pit beside the gemsbok, lined the pit with a flap of her skin, and squeezed out about a gallon of water.

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\*The rumen is the "first stomach" of the even-toed ungulates. The rumen contains the cud, the vegetation that the ruminant quickly gulps down to regurgitate and chew at leisure.



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