

# Wilderness, wild foods, subsistence & identity for hunter-gatherers: an ethnographic report

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### 1 The affair of the spoons

I arrived at the camp of //oa/e one afternoon and looked around in dismay. Three men were busy carving pieces of wood by the fire, ignoring the cries of the five small children who seemed to be waiting to have something to eat. Once in a while the oldest girl, about nine years old, would draw some small roasted onions from the ashes and share these with the children. But they were clearly not happy with this meagre fare and rushed around me when I sat down, asking if I had brought any mealie (maize) meal for them. I had, as a matter of fact, brought some with me and the older girl and I rapidly made ready a little cast iron pot to cook it. The older girls and all the women had gone out to get wood, and would hopefully also bring home some wild plant foods for the evening meal.

But the men had done no hunting in over two weeks and were neglecting their trap-lines as well. The nine year old wiped her face wearily and muttered that no one had tasted meat in a long time and all their bellies were empty. I looked around and saw that the rough huts were in poor repair, and new large holes had appeared in addition to the ones that had still not been repaired from my previous visit. There were a few skins still piled in a corner but no work had been done to soften and make them usable for clothing, blankets, or carrier bags. The piles of firewood were alarmingly low, and several of the fires seemed to have gone out all together. There was very little food stockpiled. None of the usual baskets filled with roasted wild beans, dried berries or fresh tubers were to be seen. There was absolutely no dried meat to be seen anywhere.

You may be wondering now, if this picture was brought on by drought, or the mid dry season 'hungry

season' when few fresh foods were available. No. This sad state of affairs was not the result of an ecological or seasonal calamity. It was pure economic breakdown. And it was all my fault.

A few weeks earlier, I had inadvertently set in motion the gradual dissolution of normal subsistence activities that kept these people fed and housed. I had an idea, as my time in the Kalahari was coming to a close, of what kind of thing I might bring back with me as presents for all my friends and relatives back in Canada. I would get them carved wooden spoons. I had noticed many times the Kua men making such spoons and decorating them with patterns using a wire glowing red from the fire. The spoons were made of a light wood, usually a common tree wood called *mohonono*. Each spoon was unique. So I offered to pay a small amount of cash for any spare spoons.

That's it. That is all I did. Within a few days I had been able to buy about 15 spoons, and every morning there was a steady line of men arriving with more. I had called a halt within a few days, saying I had enough, but the response was that some exceptionally beautiful spoons appeared, with much more elaborate carving than I had seen before. So I weakened and told them I would make an exception for such fancy ones. Within a week I had some incredible spoons.

By the end of the second week however, I began to see some upsetting things. All the older boys and men seemed to be doing nothing but making spoons. The women had to travel further every day to find enough suitable wood for making more spoons. As a result, the men did not go hunting and the women were neglecting their gathering of food. They were not going to places where wild plant food was abundant,

but rather gathering whatever they could on their way to get suitable wood for making more spoons. With the money from selling spoons, a lot of tobacco was purchased and everyone was using much more than they normally did. A lot of the younger kids had started to smoke, since there was so much to share around. I heard a lot of coughing. Many people spent the day lying under their blankets with raging headaches, a not uncommon result of too much smoking, as I understand it. Three times that week women came to me to buy maize meal from me, saying they had no time to walk all the way to the shop for it. As a result, I had to go get some more in the local shop, much earlier than I had intended and I bought extra in anticipation of my neighbour's needs.

Within two weeks, things were looking pretty grim.

From independent subsistence hunters and gatherers, my little spoon project had turned these people into a cottage industry proletariat on starvation wages.

And this was why I had come into the camp that morning. No more spoons! It took a long time to persuade them that I was serious. Even several weeks later some really nice merchandise still kept appearing. One man said that if I would keep him on as a worker making spoons, it would be just between the two of us. He would leave the spoons in a special hiding place and all I had to do was replace it with money every day. He had discovered, he told me, that he could not live unless he had tobacco every single day.

So, in a nutshell, I had learned the hard way, that human beings love falling into economic traps, espe-

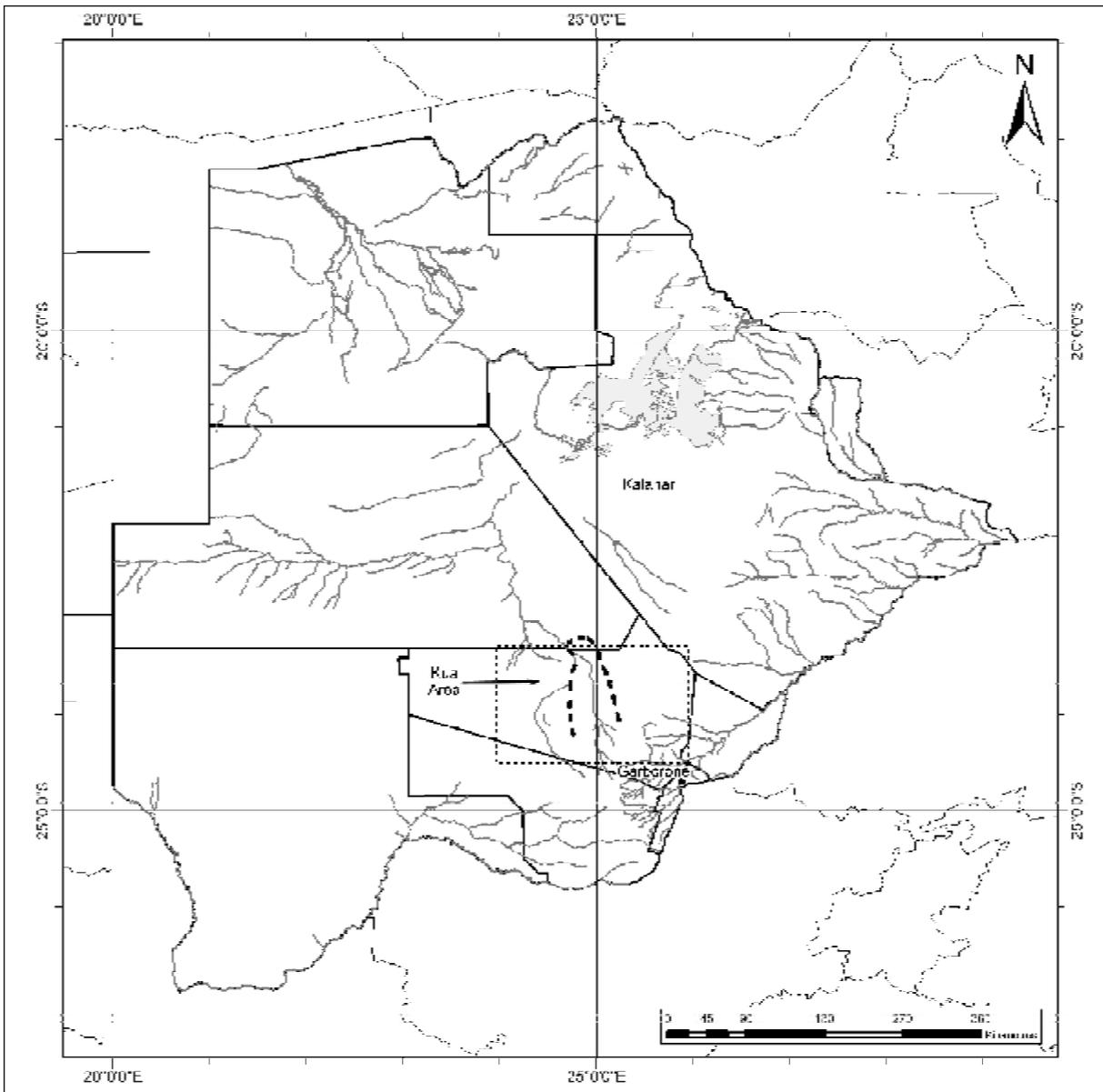


Figure 1 The study area in Kweneng District Botswana

cially when it makes some attractive consumer goods more available.

And yet these were not people who knew nothing about economic traps. They had balanced their foraging way of life for centuries up against the edge of the pastoral and horticultural economy of the BaKgalagadi and the BaKwena. The people lived with were barely two hours as the crow flies from the heart of Botswana's capital, Gaborone (figure 1).

Most of them had worked at one time in the fields for their farming neighbours or as herders for their cattle, sheep, and goats. They had been trading with these neighbours for centuries as well: milk and grain in exchange for their wild meat and wild products like the roasted nuts of the two related nut/beans that form one of the staples of their diet. They had worked their neighbours' cattle and goat skins for them and built their giant storage baskets for them. Payment for all these activities was in kind, consisting usually of milk or grain.

Every adult man and women I interviewed at some point in their life had gone to work for the BaKgalagadi or BaKwena, and some of the men had even gone to the South African diamond mines. This was true even of the people in the camps far out in the bush. One young man who had recently married told me he loved his new wife but he was especially happy to be able to live with and learn from her father, who was widely reputed to be a skilled hunter and trapper. 'He is free,' I was told. 'If he has a chicken, it is his chicken, not a *mafisa* chicken!' *Mafisa*, by the way, is the term for the relationship of a herd or flock guardian to the owner of the animals. It means that the individual will not be paid in wages, but rather in livestock, when his work period ends. I often heard it said that nobody gave a female animal in *mafisa* as the owners of the animals did not want the herders to set up their own livestock enterprises. There was always a lot of talk about the pointlessness of working for the Bantu speaking farmers and pastoralists.

Many weeks later, I happened to ask the father-in-law about this, and it turned out that he, the consummate hunter, was in fact born at a cattle post and had grown up as a herd boy working until his late teens for various BaKgalagadi households until he, too, married and escaped into the bush to learn the way of the hunter from his own father-in-law. I sought out his daughter and got her version of these events. She was angry and disappointed that her marriage had

not worked out as she planned. She had spent all her life envying her cousins who lived near the towns and cattle posts, who knew all the news of the world and all the new music coming from the wider world over the radios and who wore real cloth clothing instead of skins. And they WASHED EVERYDAY! So she fell for the guy from the cattle post. I suppose there will always be tension in that marriage about which relatives they will be visiting next!

Beyond hunting and gathering, which was the universal fall back economic activity, there was almost no permanency to any economic pattern observed. The people who seemed to have the smallest range of choice were those whose traditional territories had been made virtually barren by the presence of livestock and farmers from the other two ethnic groups. It is under such circumstances that people grew small garden plots and even some larger fields of grain.

What became clear to me was that it is NOT the example of a better or easier way of life, but rather the extinguishing of the opportunity to practice the older one that lies behind this change. To illustrate this, I provide one example. I recall seeing many wild melons on my way into a settlement near a borehole over twenty years old. I asked about why the people never ate them. They were all bitter melons now, the people said. I think the sweet ones were sought out eagerly every year by the Kua and the BaKgalagadi both, and possibly by their cattle and goats. So now only the bitter ones remained. Many people had a small well-fenced plot where they grew sweet melons. I think this provides some insight into how melons are domesticated in the Kalahari even today. And how they may have come to be domesticated thousands of years ago in the rest of Africa and the Middle East.

Things have no doubt gone from bad to worse in terms of soil erosion and over-grazing by livestock around many of the permanent water points since I did my original fieldwork in the Kalahari (for debates and discussions of this issue, see Campbell & Child 1971; Perkins 1991; Perkins & Thomas 1993; Sporton & Thomas 2002). If the wild food resources – and the large tracts of land undisturbed by grazing livestock – have shrunk too small, then the 'default' setting of the subsistence economy might no longer be possible for many of the Kua. To be truly at the mercy of one's employers on 'lands' (agricultural) areas and cattle posts can only have made life more difficult for them. The land area that sustained them in the past was

roughly 12,000 square miles. Of this, cattle and goats overgrazed only about ten miles, around each borehole.

The rest of this vast area was rich in the resources that could sustain them indefinitely even if all the cattle, boreholes, BaKgalagadi and BaKwena (local non-San peoples) were to vanish overnight. Whether it could sustain them after another hundred years of borehole drilling and increased livestock grazing is questionable. Add to the impact of livestock on the local plant ecology the impact of hunting and gathering activities of the growing populations of BaKgalagadi and BaKwena people in the region, and the picture looks grim

## 2 The people and their setting

Three years previously I surveyed the San who lived throughout the Kweneng district in the south eastern part of the Kalahari Desert (Vierich 1977, 1981, 1982; Vierich & Hitchcock 1996). However most of my more intense fieldwork was carried out among a group of people who call themselves the Kua. The region they inhabit includes part of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve and part of the northern Kweneng District of Botswana. In the late 1970s they numbered some 1500, most of whom were still living entirely or seasonally by means of hunting and gathering. There were varying degrees of employment in the farming and herding economy of their neighbours, the BaKgalagadi and the BaKwena. Most of this work was for payment in-kind, in the form of cereal food, milk, and/or meat. Employment tended to take the form of traditional contractual arrangements, and was mutually opportunistic. It was clear from the employment histories and life histories collected that long-term relations between employers and employees were rare, in spite of the fact that the relations between San and these other ethnic groups had been previously described in the literature – and indeed by the employers themselves – as a sort of serfdom (Livingstone 1857; Schapera 1930; Tagart 1933; Joyce 1938; Datta & Murray 1989).

It was also clear that the Kua, despite living for some centuries on the very edge of the ethnic boundary, had remained very flexible. In a lifetime, people might move back and forth between various economic options many times. Sometimes they spent a few years working as herders at cattle posts, and then returned to the life of independent hunter-gatherers. Often the change was occasioned by marriage or by

changes in residential arrangements, rather than by any concerns of job availability or peaks in local supplies of wild animals or plants.

Many new boreholes have been drilled for water in this part of the Kalahari since 1950. With the securing of new and reliable water supplies came the cattle and other livestock, and more permanent occupation of what was formerly only seasonal grazing lands. This increased the grazing pressure and has led to ecological change. According to my local Kua and BaKgalagadi informants there has been an ongoing replacement of open grassland with thorn bush within a five to ten kilometre radius of the new water points. The wild edible plants and animals preferred by the Kua already showed rapid decline in these areas by 1977. It was in such locations that the Kua found their options beginning to narrow. Even the cattle were regularly trekked out beyond the thorn belt to graze. At Dinonyane, one of the older boreholes, cattle were brought back to the borehole only every second day. Dew on vegetation was their only water for 48 hours.

The Kalahari has been shaped by a pronounced shift between a wet and a dry season, imposed on a stratum of red sand. Dunes and broad, desiccated river valleys dominate a landscape dotted with salt pans. In rainy season these pans fill with water often only a foot deep, teeming with tiny shrimp. Some big pans, like the great Makgadikgadi Pans of north-central Botswana covering hundred of square miles, fill with nesting flamingos and pelicans. Most of these pans are dry within weeks when the rains stop, and there are no streams or rivers flowing all year round, except for the Okavango, a vast inland delta far to the north. In some areas the Kua told of places where there had been year-round springs attracting large herds as the dry season set in, but all of these had been occupied for generations by 'people of the cattle'. The seasonal hunting bonanza such locations would have afforded to hunter-gatherers were long past.

The sand is very deep – hundreds of metres in many areas – and rainwater seeps down into the sand until air pressure from air trapped in sand below overcomes the flow of water downward between the grains. This process forms water 'lenses' which support a rich diversity of plant life. Rather than a sandy wasteland, the Kalahari is actually a visually stunning open parkland, with beautiful groves of trees set at intervals over a rippling carpet of grasses and shrubs



**Figure 2** A scene of Kalahari landscape in a region without cattle or other livestock. Photograph by Helga Vierich

(figure 2) (Thomas and Shaw 1991).

This is a rich ecosystem, source of numerous tasty and nutritious fruits, nuts, vegetables, and tubers. It is home to over a dozen species of antelope, two species of Rhinoceros, six species of cats (from lions to the ancestor of our own housecat), two species of hyena, several species of monkeys and baboons, three species of canids, a host of rodents and lagomorphs, as well as elephants, common zebra and Cape buffalo; and about a billion birds, large and small and everything in between – including a few found nowhere else in the world. In the region occupied by the Kua, buffalo, elephant, and rhino had disappeared in living memory but had never been common. Zebra were rare. The children were no longer aware of the word for some of these animals, but the adults told me that their word for the zebra was *quagha* – essentially the same as the word in the extinct language of the Cape San for their extinct form of zebra, a word we know in English as quagga. Many of the larger herbivores are migratory, as are many species of birds. The herds and flocks flow into the Kalahari during the rains, deeper and deeper as the landscape greens and becomes dotted with temporary water points. They flow out again as the seasonal drought advances, retreating to the more permanent

rivers that flow on the edges of the Kalahari. A few antelopes remain year-round, like the gemsbok, the hardy little duiker, and the sable and kudu.

In the dry season the land is still fruitful, however, if one knows where to look. Many plants have stored up water and starches in their roots, bulbs, corms, or tubers. Even at the height of the dry season, a few hours walking and digging could yield 10–25 kg of such food. Wild berries and tree fruits, which survive the attentions of birds and eager human hands, tend to dry up on the stem and take on the flavour and consistency of currants, edible well into the dry times. As well, many plants produced seeds packaged with a dense energy supply to sustain germination – in other words, nuts. The Kua, like humans everywhere, know exactly what to do with nuts; and they live surrounded by some of the best nuts that have so far escaped the notice of the rest of the world.

The Kua camp in small groups comprising one to five families. I say camp to impress upon the reader the fluid and temporary nature of their traditional residential arrangements. The huts are small and made of local materials (branches and grasses). The people can move camp in a day, as the huts are easily built in a few hours (figure 3). These arrangements suit the mobile way of life of the hunter-gatherer. When

people are working for months or, occasionally, years on end for some family of BaKgalagadi or BaKwena, they may stay put for the duration. In such cases they tend to make their camps larger and their huts bigger and sturdier. Of such camps they say that they are building, not 'BaSarwa' but rather 'BaKgalagadi' style homes.

There was clearly a kind of ethnic identity emerging out of their dealings with other groups, for the Kua were quite explicit about what constituted a BaSarwa cultural trait or artefact as opposed to the things and customs and languages of their Bantu-speaking neighbours. Note that they spoke *not* of things Kua but rather of things BaSarwa, a kind of identification with other Khoisan speaking peoples. This conception is remarkable in that in some cases they could not even speak to these other San, as in the case of their immediate neighbours to the south, who spoke a completely different Khoisan language, !Xoo. The wild foods of the wilderness that is home to these hunter-gatherers are spoken of as a kind of ethnic cuisine: some things are considered 'Sarwa food'. This only rarely applies to the game, but it does apply to particular ways of cooking it.

In the intervening years I have come to think of this vast region and its resources as a kind of 'trust fund' for the Kua. It provided a measure of security even if their ventures into wage or in-kind labour, or craft production, did not pan out. In a sense, it was what permitted them to be opportunistic and confident. If the job they had taken on a cattle post did not meet their expectations, they did not need to stay on. This was the commonest complaint made about Kua as hired help – they were unreliable as they were likely to 'melt in the bush' at a moment's notice. The BaKgalagadi often adopted a paternalistic attitude toward the Kua. They saw themselves as the 'masters' and their descriptions used the language of serfdom.

The reality of the situation did not support this. For one thing, serfdom usually implies a long term relationship between particular families of 'masters' and 'serfs'. However in almost every case of Kua employed by BaKgalagadi were working for that particular person for the first time. There were seldom any arrangements that persisted beyond a set contract. It was also clear that the BaKgalagadi had virtually no control over the movements and activities of the rest of the Kua even when one of the individuals from a Kua



**Figure 3** Typical Kua camp in the remote Kalahari - this was a recently abandoned camp and you can see by the doorways being smaller it was used at the beginning of the rains. Photo taken by Dr Becky Sigmon of the University of Toronto while she visited the author in the field in 1978

camp was working for them.

The language used by both groups to refer to the other seemed to me to be a kind of mutually convenient fiction. It gave people a whole repertoire of behaviour and language to use in face to face meetings. It established the Kua as persons who were entitled to beg for food and water and for whom a certain level of responsibility was felt. In a way, this buffered the Kua in cases when they had to deal with outsiders like government officials and tourists. And the benefits were mutual. The Kua undoubtedly provided a very important source of labour at key times in the cycle of agricultural activities. It is even likely that more young men from the BaKgaglahadi families could be spared to go to the South African mines to work because Kua men and teenagers were available to look after the cattle. Bird-scaring and harvesting were times when extra hands were always needed and Kua women and children often helped with these tasks in return for grain and milk.

It was unlikely that the level of production of the BaKgalagadi economy was sufficient to support the Kua as well as themselves. The fact that they did not need to support the families of their temporary em-

ployees must have been of great benefit to the BaKgalagadi who were never more than subsistence farmers themselves. In a sense they too were beneficiaries of the Kua 'trust fund'.

By world standards as measured in cash income, both of these populations are extremely poor. The exchanges of food and labour at the ethnic boundary that I witnessed in the late 1970s have appeared to be mutually beneficial although not perhaps strictly necessary to either group. But conflict was minimal and the possibility of negotiation existed since many of the Kua learned enough of the SeKalagadi language to get by during their periods of employment. As relationships at an ethnic boundary go, the situation was stable and had been evolving for at least a hundred years and probably much longer. It had not undermined either way of life. The Kua were still hunter-gatherers and the BaKgalagadi were still subsistence farmers and pastoralists.

It was at the ethnic boundary that the clearest kind of ethnic identity is forged. There would have been no need to speak of a thing as typical of one's own group unless confronted with a way of doing things, an object, or a behaviour that is different and can be attrib-



**Figure 4** Typical dry season hut - just a half circle really, to keep out the wind, set facing the full sun since this is the cold time. This hut belonged to an elderly widow who still gathered wild plants vigorously every day or two. Photograph by Helga Vierich

uted to a group of 'others'. The statements of ethnic identity made spontaneously in conversations struck me. Certain foods were said to be 'BaSarwa' (their common self-reference when speaking in SeKalahadi) foods. In fact this was usually 'bush food' of a kind that everyone, including the Bantu-speaking neighbours, liked, but which was almost always gathered in by the Kua women. Certain styles of dwelling were said to be 'Sarwa' (like the small conical huts typical of temporary camps and the associated windscreens [figure 4] and lean-tos) while huts with mud-brick or woven branches and then roofed in straw were said to be Kalahadi huts. Who built them was not important, it was the style that mattered. In locations where the Kua foresaw a longer period of residency, they too sometimes built in the style of the BaKgalagadi.

With reference to the economy, subsistence hunting and gathering were definitely considered 'Sarwa' activities. Indeed the form of dwellings, the handmade leather clothing, the tools and equipment that each Kua man and woman possessed, the songs and stories, the forms of dance, of healing, and the way children were treated and reared, all of these reflected this way of life. It will be difficult for the Kua to forge an identity for themselves within the larger nation of Botswana that strays too far from this.

In the tides of change to come, the Kalahari will change and change again. The 'trust fund' of the Kua, and indeed all hunter-gatherers was always sufficient land to support the wild ecosystem.<sup>1</sup> It will be invaded by diamond miners and cattle farmers in the near future, and this invasion has already led to the legal battles covered by other papers in this journal. Everywhere that boreholes are drilled, it seems, cattle and other livestock – and the pastoralists who own them – will follow. If the Botswana government thinks that keeping cattle out of the Central Game Reserve will be enough to preserve it for wild animals, they need to take another look at what goats have done to Morocco.

Hunter-gatherers equipped with modern hunting weapons can do as much damage to the wild game as any other hunter. Making the resources that they harvest into a commodity on the world market will have predictable results, no matter whose hands hold

the gun and get the cash. And then, there is always a black market for everything made illegal. The trade in 'bushmeat' has increased all over Africa in the last twenty years, to the point that now even the last wild gorillas are unlikely to survive this present decade. I am pessimistic about the survival of wild Botswana, and I think that without a sufficient area of wilderness, the hunter-gatherer subsistence system will be extinguished. The trust fund will be empty. What will happen to their ethnic identity then?

### Epilogue

But what happened to the spoon-making Kua? I am glad to say the damage was not permanent. Two weeks after I bought my last spoon most camps had returned to their normal activities. My 'special' friend with the hiding place was the last one to give up. I told him I was out of money. Resource depletion in the local area is something these people understand well. Next day, the man went out hunting again.

And so ended the saga of the spoons.

### Endnote

1 I have not touched on issues of emerging class structure in Kua society - there is none to touch on. Dombrowski (2007) spends a considerable time on this in his article, especially when discussing how wealthier members of the community pay poorer people to supply 'ethnic' subsistence foods for festivities. This is in the context of having certain kinds of foods and food preparation practices specifically serving as makers of ethnic identity within the Native community. He begins his paper, however, with a description of his research finding that traditional subsistence activities and the food these supply still constitute a mainstay of the Native economy - especially its poorest members. I see a parallel with the Kua here, in that the Native economy was still deriving significant support from the wild 'trust fund'. In the Alaskan context, wild resources are also becoming increasingly limited by other economic activities, which puts a squeeze on the resources supporting the poorest among them, who then need to fall back on their 'trust fund' more than their fellows, just as surely as when the wilderness is exploited for cattle or mining in the Kalahari. So, more than 25 years after my research in the Kalahari discussed here, perhaps the findings are still relevant - if not more so - for those working with hunter-gatherer survivors today.

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