The Embers of Society: Fireside stories among the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen
Implications for cultural transmission and cognition

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At some time in our evolution, firelight extended the day and altered our circadian rhythms.

After 300-400,000 ka? (Dunbar & Gowlett 2014) (165 ka Brown et al. 2009)

Humans became the shortest sleepers of all primates.
Physiological changes were great. Changes in circadian rhythms and sleep intensity. Since time gained is not economically productive time, what might have been selection pressures for extending the day?
What transpires in conversation by day and by night among the Ju/'hoansi Bushmen of the Kalahari?

Why are these additional hours important for human sociality?

(a) For the formation of imagined communities composed of members widely distributed in time (ancestors) and space.

(c) Transmission of cultural institutions: the big picture. Abstract sets of rules and procedures.
SETTING

NW Botswana with visitors from NE Namibia.

1974 Heavy rains destroy resources – time of hunger and hardship.

Dry season: bands clustered at permanent waters.

7 camps at /Kae/Kae; one at Dobe.
- 3 camps with 1 segment of close kin.
- 3 camps with 2 segments
- 2 camps with 3 segments
On the cusp of change

- Bushmen beginning to hunt on Herero horses.
- Metal arrows.
- Alcohol available in surrounding communities.
- Small income from sale of crafts.
- Bushmen settled in Namibia 75 km away on South African station.
- A few kids go to school in other villages.
Ju/'hoansi foragers of the NW Kalahari

Seven central cultural institutions regulate relations and make behavior predictable.
I. KINSHIP

- Eskimo terminology at base.
- Modified by name sharing relationship.
- ‘Wi’ relationship: older person chooses term for younger.

Only close biological and affinal relationships stipulate obligations.
II. EGALITARIAN RELATIONS

- Leadership involves first among equals. Constant leveling.

- Ju/'hoansi can rank people: strong, average, weak.

- Equality avoids dominance or exploitation.

- Reduces costs of mobility and social exchange.
IV. FOOD SHARING

- Vegetable foods and small animals consumed at family hearths.
- Meat from large animals distributed in waves in camp and to other camps.
- Rules govern sharing with close kin and affines. Primary recipients redistribute.
- Promotes harmony.
- Reduces risk of hunger.
III. ARRANGED MARRIAGE AND BRIDE SERVICE

- Elaborate rites.
- Builds far flung social ties. With supportive families.
- Long bride service while girl matures and young man becomes integrated into camp.
V. LAND TENURE

Defined territories (*n!ores*); great variation in resources.

Tenure obtained by assembling people with rights and occupying land.

Great concern with holding *n!ores*; reason to assemble larger groups.

Access to land of others obtained through social ties and xaro exchange.
VI. XARO EXCHANGE

Exchange of gifts signifying underlying mutual relations of support and access to alternate residences.

Average person: 15-16 partners living within a radius of 200km.

Ju/'hoan spent approximately 3.3 months a year residing with partners.
VII. TRANCE HEALING

Entire bands or groups of bands work to heal by singing, clapping and dancing to support healers.

Healers travel to the spirit worlds; heal sick, share preventive medicine with all present.

Reduces tensions; unites community.
Data

1974: 122 day and 52 night conversations collected July-August and November in 5 camps at /Kae/Kae and one at Dobe.

Conversation with 5+ adults, longer than 15-20 minutes.

Noted: topic, focus, people, setting, time of day, participants initiators, praise and criticism, and if possible outcomes.

2011-2013 recorded stories told at night with emphasis on those from the past. Transcribed and translated by Ju/'hoansi.

Transcription / Translation team trained by Megan Biesele.

Not as easy as it looks...
DAY TALK: TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

Topics of day conversations (n=122)

- Economic: 31%
- Complaint (CCC): 34%
- Joking: 16%
- Land rights: 9%
- Stories: 6%
- Inter-ethnic: 4%

Legend:
- Economic
- Complaint (CCC)
- Joking
- Land rights
- Stories
- Inter-ethnic
WHO PARTICIPATES?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People from</th>
<th># conversations (n=122)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 camp</td>
<td>81 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 camps</td>
<td>31 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 camps</td>
<td>9  (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 camps</td>
<td>1  (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 segment</td>
<td>47 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 segments</td>
<td>21 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 segments</td>
<td>30 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 segments</td>
<td>16 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 segments</td>
<td>8  (6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DAY TALK DRAWS IN WIDE RANGE OF NON-KIN.
CULTURE IS TRANSMITTED IN:

TRAITS & PACKAGES: CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

FOCUS ON TRAITS DURING DAY

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
### ECONOMIC CONVERSATIONS (31% of conversations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th># Conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location of food and digging wells</td>
<td>9 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible areas to visit with resources/exchange ties</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunting</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunting on horses (new technology)</td>
<td>7 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol (recent)</td>
<td>5 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash (new currency)</td>
<td>3 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trucks and repairs (recent)</td>
<td>3 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrow technology (relatively new)</td>
<td>2 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Discussions of new developments centering on traits/new introductions.
SLANDER, GOSSIP AND CRITICISM (34% of conversations)

What does it accomplish?

Unwarranted/fabricated/jealousy 15 cases (25%)

Feeling hunger or pain and blaming others 11 cases (19%)

Norm violation or genuine dispute 33 cases (56%)

Total 59 cases (100%)

Little fact checking! Other agendas.

Target often in groups or within earshot.

(includes all day conversations with some criticism. (N=59)
### GOSSIP, CRITICISM AND KINSHIP

Whom is targeted by number of kin segments in camp (n=59)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 segment</th>
<th>2+ segments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual targets own group</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>7 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target one person in own group</td>
<td>9 (35%)</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target people in other groups</td>
<td>10 (42%)</td>
<td>24 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square = 5.57 ns  
In group/out group : 5.57  p=.018

Camp leaders refrain from criticism in 62% of cases.

**SEGMENTED GROUPS TARGET OUTSIDERS: BUILD UNITY**
CRITICISM AND CO-EXISTENCE

Complaints constant. Vents, exposes and resolves tensions day in and day out.

Cooperation of kin and non-kin. Bonds by targeting those in other camps.

In only approximately 30% of cases criticism is used for norm control.

A good piece of gossip is a gift.

Serves to work out problems and keep camps together.
Important for holding land.
“At times I believe that my feet have been set upon a road which I shall go on following, and that slowly the centre of gravity of my being will shift over from the world of day, from the domain of organizing and regulating universal powers, into the world of Imagination ... with the coming of dusk, with the lighting of the first star and the first candle...” Isak Dinesen
NIGHT TALK

Topics of day conversations (n=122)
- Economic: 31%
- Complaint (CCC): 34%
- Joking: 16%
- Land rights: 9%
- Inter-ethnic: 4%
- Stories: 6%

Topics of night conversations (n=52)
- Stories: 81%
- Economic: 4%
- Complaint (CCC): 7%
- Land: 2%
- Inter-ethnic: 2%
- Myth: 4%
NIGHT ACTIVITIES

- 36 nights, 4 camps: 8 nights music and singing.
- 6 nights trance dances.
- Most evenings some people gather for conversation.

People from  # conversations
1 camp        33 (66%)
2 camps       14 (28)
3 camps       2  (4%)
4 camps       1  (2%)
Harsher mood of day mellows; men, women and children gather around single fires talk and ‘story’.

Stories tell of own experiences or exploits of those not present.

Often rhythmic language affirmed by ‘eh he’.

Listeners stunned with suspense, rolling with laughter or close to tears. Arrive on the same emotional wavelength.
STORYTELLERS

- Men and women; often older.
- Some of the best are blind.
- Compelling stories of own experiences spreads name & reputation.
- Listeners benefit from information and knowledge gained.
- Stories packed with social information.
- Little environmental information.
- Few moral messages.
- Myths play with rules of cultural logic.
DAY: Economics, technology and nitty-gritty of social relations

▪ NIGHT: Stories about imagined communities that are not physically coherent in time and space.

▪ Big picture of how institutions work. Cultural transmission in packages.

▪ Stimulate higher order theory of mind.
Table 1. Cultural institutions at the center of day and night conversations.

(CCC = conversations with criticism, complaint or conflict)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>% with CCC</th>
<th>NIGHT</th>
<th>% with CCC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Equality/leveling</td>
<td>10 (8%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship/dues</td>
<td>18 (15%)</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>11 (9%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>10 (19%)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat sharing</td>
<td>20 (16%)</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land rights</td>
<td>14 (11%)</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xaro exchange</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trance healing</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8 (15%)</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other topics</td>
<td>41 (34%)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>21 (40%)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>122 (100%)</td>
<td>52 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
People on far flung networks brought right to the hearth in stories.

Broader configurations of social ties and gatherings described.

Map. Location of protagonists in stories told by people based in four different bands At /Kae/kae. Several protagonists in each area shown.
MARRIAGE

- Small gatherings involving 2 camps. Elaborate ritual.

- People experience few marriages; stories transmit details of full ceremonies.

- Young are prepared by learning the anxieties of their parents.
EXERPT FROM STORY OF MARRIAGE

They struggled with me, carried me piggy-back and put me down (at the marriage hut). Then people smeared us (with eland fat and red earth) and smeared us. They put beads on me and bedecked me with yellow bark cord ornaments. Then they dispersed and I went home where I asked my peers to take those things off of me. They removed them and put them in a heap to the side.

My mother said, “//Ukxa don’t do that. I gave you a man who hunts so don’t do that!” That’s what my mother said. Then we stayed around and stayed around and later and later they caught me again and let me have it... My mother took a little whip of this size, came and hit me saying, “//Ukxa stop doing that. This is the man I gave you to, your father gave to you, so you must marry him.”

(//ukxa, //aru 2012)
BIG PICTURE OF REGIONAL GATHERINGS, XARO EXCHANGE AND KIN RELATIONS

Seasonal gathering of 6 bands in morama bean season.

Complex details of kinship revealed

Photo form Marshall expedition
“She got the other skin apron and shared it with my late grandmother. She took out another skin apron and gave it to her aunt, the late N=aisa n!a’an. And then she gave out more gifts. It was the beginning of gift giving. He (Kaqece) tried to put the beaded headband on his head and but it didn’t fit… so he took it off his head and gave it to my granny and gave other things to her.

In turn my grandmother took out ostrich eggshell necklaces and gave them to grandfather the late Kaqe n!a’an, who then passed it on to a younger relative. Then he gave an ostrich eggshell necklace to her.… =Oma g!uis was the one who brought it although young men such as his late son /Ukxa was the one who actually carried it.

/’Angn!ao-di-n!a’an, who is now at !’Obaha … people always brought things to him and his kin. His father Gaq'ao-g!o'a from /Du/da was the one who gave out these gifts and ornaments. His hunting bag quiver was always full and he brought many things because he was rich, very, very, very, very rich. Young men from his place worked for him. (N!hakxa n!a of //aru)
OTHER HUNTER-GATHERER SOCIETIES (eHRAF, ethnographies, colleagues)

▪ EHRAF: 38 mentions of sanctioning gossip; none at night.

▪ Economic plans largely discussed by day. Night the time for the imaginary.

▪ For 60 hunter-gatherer societies, mention of song, dance, healing and ceremonies at night. In far north, stories may extend over 2-4 days.

▪ Night stories told in all hunter-gatherer societies.

▪ Transmit big picture of social institutions and ethics, whether via folktales, myth, or dreaming.
SUMMARY

▪ Night stories told in all hunter-gatherer societies: original social media together with gifts.

▪ Give positive reputations to skilled narrators; valuable information to listeners.

▪ Gives information on the character traits and feelings of others.

▪ Transmit big picture of how social institutions work and accompanying norms and values whether via folktales, myth, or dreaming.

▪ Relieve tensions within groups.

▪ Take listeners into the world of the imaginary and maintain networks.
WE APPEAR TO HAVE AN EVOLVED APPETITE FOR STORIES

Novels
Films
Story telling for children
Teaching
Wilderness trips
Therapy
Restorative justice

AND FIREFLIGHT
Danish *hygge*
Candles
Fireplaces
THANKS TO

Thanks to the master story tellers: /Ui N!omdi, /Kunta Boo, N!ani Kxao, /Ang!não Kxao, Sebe Kxao, //Ukxa Kun!oi, plus many others/Ui N!omdi, /Kunta Boo, N!ani Kxao, /Ang!não Kxao, Sebe Kxao, //Ukxa Kun!oi, and many others.

Meagan Biese for training the transcription team.

Beesa Boo, /Ai!ae, Tsemkxao /Ui and Charlie N=aisi for translation and transcription.

Tsao !xoma for many years of support.
SETTLED IN PERMANENT VILLAGES

POVERTY AND HUNGER

MORE TIME FOR DAY TALK
SOME MOVING AHEAD INTO NAMIBIAN MIDDLE CLASS

LEAVING FORMER LIVES BEHIND
INTERNET COMES TO REMOTE AREAS OF BOTSWANA
COMMUNITY BASED NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVANCY FORMED

TROPHY HUNTING BRINGS CASH INCOME
CASH CROPS: PEOPLE GO TO THE VELDT TO HARVEST
MISSION ACTIVITY DISCOURAGES TRANCE HEALING AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS
TOURISM MAKES A COMMODITY OF JU/'HOAN CULTURE

YOUNG MAN DRESSED TO PERFORM A TRANCE DANCE FOR TOURISTS
CELL PHONES ALTER PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION
WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO NIGHT ACTIVITIES?
STORIES ARE STILL TOLD, LARGELY ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS, NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Blind N//ao N!a describing in full detail seductive Bushman girls prostitutes in town in 2013
SHARP DECLINE IN VILLAGE MUSIC MAKING AND DANCING.

WITH TOURISM AND COMMODIZATION OF CULTURE PEOPLE NO LONGER FEEL SUCH ACTIVITIES ARE FOR THEMSELVES AND SHOULD BE PAID FOR.
RAPIDLY GROWNING POPULATION: YOUTH HAVE THEIR OWN COHORTS FOR NIGHT ACTIVITY

REDUCES

REDUCES TRANSMISSION OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE.

DANCING TO MUSIC FROM THE BOOM BOX
YOUTHS ACQUIRE VIDEOS ON LARGE PHONES THAT DRAW THE ATTENTION OF ENTIRE VILLAGE.

PORN AND VIOLENCE INTRODUCE NEW IDEAS.
WHAT NEXT?