
Documents

Considering the Evidence: History before Writing: How Do We Know?



Written records have long been the chief source of data for historians seeking to reconstruct the past. But writing is a quite recent innovation in the long journey of humankind, emerging with the advent of the first civilizations only about 5,000 years ago. This absence of written records for earlier phases of human history is one of the reasons many world historians have neglected or avoided the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras.

And yet, all manner of techniques for probing the more distant past have evolved over the last century or so. An emerging field known as genetic anthropology uses DNA analysis to trace the movement of people across the planet. Linking genetic evidence with fossil remains, scholars have reached a general consensus that sub-Saharan Africa was the original home of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Historical linguistics, rooted in the changes that languages undergo, has also aided in tracking human movement and defining the character of particular cultures by analyzing their vocabularies. Our understanding of the widespread cultures of Indo-European- and Bantu-speaking peoples derive largely from such linguistic analysis. Archeologists have contributed much to our grasp of the unwritten past through their study of human fossil remains, tools, pottery, buildings, art, and more.

Yet another, and somewhat controversial, technique for doing history before writing lies in analogies with more recent nonliterate peoples. In the twentieth century, anthropologists and other scholars descended on the few remaining gathering and hunting peoples, studying their cultures and collecting their stories, myths, and oral traditions. For good reasons historians are often skeptical about the usefulness of such material for understanding the distant past of Paleolithic societies. Since all societies change over time, is it reasonable to think that contemporary gathering and hunting societies would resemble in any way their ancestors thousands of years ago? Furthermore, there is the problem of contamination. After all, gatherers and hunters in recent times have often mixed and mingled with agricultural societies, come under European colonial rule, or made contact with elements of modern civilization. Other scholars, and particularly teachers, have embraced these materials, even while recognizing their limitations, for they provide at least a glimpse into ways of living and

thinking that have almost completely vanished from the earth. Document 1.1 allows you to make a judgment about the usefulness of this approach to history before writing.

Document 1.1

A Paleolithic Woman in the Twentieth Century

In 1971 the American anthropologist Marjorie Shostak was conducting research among the San people of the Kalahari Desert on the border of Botswana and South Africa. There she became acquainted with a fifty-year-old woman named Nisa. Although Nisa had interacted with neighboring cattle-keeping people and with Europeans, she had lived most of her life “in the bush,” fully participating in the gathering and hunting culture of her ancestors. Nisa proved willing to share with Shostak the intimate details of her life, including her memories of childhood, her several marriages, the birth of her children, her relationships with various lovers, and the deaths of loved ones. Those interviews became the basis for the remarkable book from which the following excerpts derive.

- How useful do you find Nisa’s account for understanding the life of much earlier Paleolithic people? What evidence of contact with a wider world can you find in her story?
- What does her account indicate about San attitudes toward sex and marriage? How might you compare those attitudes with those of contemporary society?
- How does Nisa understand God, or the divine? How does she understand the purpose of the curing rituals in which she took part?
- How would you describe Nisa’s overall assessment of San life? Do you find it romanticized, realistic, or critical? What evidence from the passages supports your conclusions?

NISA

The Life and Words of an !Kung Woman

1969–1976

Life in the Bush

We are people who live in the bush, and who belong in the bush. We are not village people. I have no goats. I have no cattle. I am a person who owns nothing.

Source: Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of an !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 41, 69, 87–89, 153–55, 166, 210–11, 226–27, 271, 299, 301–2, 316–17.

That's what people say I am: a poor person. . . . No donkey, either. I still carry things myself, in my kaross [an animal hide cloak] when I travel. . . .

We lived and lived, and as I kept growing, I started to carry my little brother around on my shoulders. My heart was happy then; I had grown to love him and carried him everywhere. I'd play with him for a while and whenever he would start to cry, I'd take him to Mother so he could nurse. Then I'd take him back with me and we'd play together again.

That was when Kumsa was little. But once he was older and started to talk and then to run around, that's when we were mean to each other and hit and fought all the time. . . .

We lived in the bush and my father set traps and killed steenbok and duiker and gemsbok and we lived, eating the animals and foods of the bush. We collected food, ground it in a mortar, and ate it. We also ate sweet nin berries and tsin beans. When I was growing up, there were no cows or goats. . . . I had never seen other peoples and didn't know anything other than life in the bush. . . .

Whenever my father killed an animal and I saw him coming home with meat draped over a stick, balanced on one shoulder—that's what made me happy. I'd cry out, "Mommy! Daddy's coming and he's bringing *meat*!" My heart would be happy when I greeted him, "Ho, ho, Daddy! We're going to eat meat!" Or honey. Sometimes he'd go out and come home with honey. I'd be sitting around with my mother and then see something coming from way out in the bush. I'd look hard. Then, "Oooh, Daddy found a beehive! Oh, I'm going to eat honey!" . . . And I'd thank him and call him wonderful names. . . .

When we were living in the bush, some people gave and others stinged. But there were always enough people around who shared, people who liked one another, who were happy living together, and who didn't fight. And even if one person did sting, the other person would just get up and yell about it, whether it was meat or anything else, "What's doing this to you, making you not give us meat?"

When I was growing up, receiving food made my heart happy. There really wasn't anything, other than stingy people, that made me unhappy. I didn't like people who wouldn't give a little of what they had. . . .

It's the same today. Here I am, long since an adult, yet even now, if a person doesn't give something to me, I won't give anything to that person. . . .

Marriage

. . . The day of the wedding, everyone was there. All of Tashay's friends were sitting around, laughing and laughing. His younger brother said, "Tashay, you're too old. Get out of the way so I can marry her. Give her to me." . . . They were all sitting around, talking like that. They all wanted me.

I went to my mother's hut and sat there. I was wearing lots of beads and my hair was completely covered and full with ornaments. . . . That night there was another dance. We danced, and some people fell asleep and others kept dancing. . . .

The next day they started [to build the marriage hut]. There were lots of people there—Tashay's mother, my mother, and my aunt worked on the hut; everyone else sat around, talking. Late in the day, the young men went and brought Tashay to the finished hut. They set him down beside it and stayed there with him, sitting around the fire. . . .

They came and brought me back. Then they laid me down inside the hut. I cried and cried. People told me, "A man is not something that kills you; he is someone who marries you, who becomes like your father or your older brother. He kills animals and gives you things to eat."

I listened and was quiet. Later, we went to sleep. Tashay lay down beside the opening of the hut, near the fire, and I lay down inside; he thought I might try and run away again. He covered himself with a blanket and slept. . . .

We lived and lived, the two of us, together, and after a while I started to really like him and then, to love him. I had finally grown up and had learned how to love. I thought, "A man has sex with you. Yes, that's what a man does. I had thought that perhaps he didn't."

We lived on and I loved him and he loved me. I loved him the way a young adult knows how to love; I just *loved* him. Whenever he went away and I stayed behind, I'd miss him. I'd think, "Oh, when is my husband ever coming home? How come he's been gone so long?" I'd miss him and want him.

When he'd come back my heart would be happy, "Eh, hey! My husband left and once again has come back."

I . . . gave myself to him, gave and gave. We lay with each other and my breasts were very large. I was becoming a woman.

Loss

It was while we were visiting in the Tswana village [of cattle-keeping people] and just after Kxau was born that Tashay died. . . . I lay there and thought, "Why did this happen? The two of us gave so much to each other and lived together so happily. Now I am alone, without a husband. I am already a widow. Why did God trick me and take my husband? God is stingy! He just takes them from you. God's heart is truly far from people." . . .

Then I was without my husband and my heart was miserable. Every night I missed him and every night I cried, "I am without the man I married." I thought, "Where will I see the food that will help my children grow? Who is going to help me raise this newborn? My older brother and my younger brother are far away. Who is going to help me now?"

In your heart, your child, your mother, and your father are all equal. When any one of them dies, your heart feels pain. When your child dies, you think, "How come this little thing I held beside me and watched all that she did, today has died and left me? She was the only child I had with me. . . . This God . . . his ways are foul! Why did he give me a little one and then take her away?" . . .

The death of your parents, husband, or children—they are equal in the amount of pain you feel when you lose them. But when they all die and you have no family left, then you really feel pain. There is no one to take care of you; you are completely alone. . . .

That's the way it is. God is the one who destroys. It isn't people who do it. It is God himself.

Lovers

. . . Besa [Nisa's fourth husband] and I did argue a lot, usually about sex. . . . Every night Besa wanted me and every night he would make love to me. That Besa, something was wrong with his brain! . . . After

a while, I realized I didn't like his ways. That's when I thought, "Perhaps I will leave him. Perhaps I'll find another man and see what he is like."

I didn't leave him, not for many years. But I did have lovers and so did he. . . . Because affairs . . . is something that even people from long ago knew. Even my father's father's father's father knew. There have also always been fights where poison arrows are shot and people are killed because of that. Having affairs is one of the things God gave us. . . .

When you are a woman, you don't just sit still and do nothing—you have lovers. You don't just sit with the man of your hut, with just one man. One man can give you very little. One man gives you only one kind of food to eat. But when you have lovers, one brings you something and another brings you something else. One comes at night with meat, another with money, another with beads. Your husband also does things and gives them to you. But sitting with just one man? We don't do that. Does one man have enough thoughts for you? . . .

A Healing Ritual

. . . N/um—the power to heal—is a very good thing. This is a medicine very much like your medicine because it is strong. As your medicine helps people, our n/um helps people. But to heal with n/um means knowing how to trance. Because, it is in trance that the healing power sitting inside the healer's body—the n/um—starts to work. Both men and women learn how to cure with it, but not everyone wants to. Trance-medicine really hurts! As you begin to trance, the n/um slowly heats inside you and pulls at you. It rises until it grabs your insides and takes your thoughts away. Your mind and your senses leave and you don't think clearly. Things become strange and start to change. You can't listen to people or understand what they say. You look at them and they suddenly become very tiny. You think, "What's happening? Is God doing this?" All that is inside you is the n/um; that is all you can feel.

You touch people, laying on hands, curing those you touch. When you finish, other people hold you and blow around your head and your face. Suddenly your senses go "Phah!" and come back to you.

You think, "Eh hey, there are people here," and you see again as you usually do. . . .

N/um is powerful, but it is also very tricky. Sometimes it helps and sometimes it doesn't, because God doesn't always want a sick person to get better. . . . I was a young woman when my mother and her younger sister started to teach me about drum-medicine. There is a root that helps you learn to trance, which they dug for me. My mother put it in my little leather pouch and said, "Now you will start learning this, because you are a young woman already." She had me keep it in my pouch for a few days. Then one day, she took it and pounded it along with some bulbs and some beans and cooked them together. It had a horrible taste and made my mouth feel foul. I threw some of it up. If she hadn't pounded it with the other foods, my stomach would have been much more upset and I would have thrown it

all up; then it wouldn't have done anything for me. I drank it a number of times and threw up again and again. Finally I started to tremble. People rubbed my body as I sat there, feeling the effect getting stronger and stronger. My body shook harder and I started to cry. I cried while people touched me and helped me with what was happening to me.

Eventually, I learned how to break out of myself and trance. When the drum-medicine songs sounded, that's when I would start. Others would string beads and copper rings into my hair. As I began to trance, the women would say, "She's started to trance, now, so watch her carefully. Don't let her fall." They would take care of me, touching me and helping. If another woman was also in a trance, she laid on hands and helped me. They rubbed oil on my face and I stood there—a lovely young woman, trembling—until I was finished.