

THE DOBE-AREA !KUNG

“an ethnologic analysis”

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of an individual study of the !Kung bushmen society. The first five chapters were presented as separate papers in the course Anthropology 414 Ethnology of Africa.

The original goal of the course -comparing the present-day !Kung society with the traditional one— could not be met for two reasons. First the ethnographic framework —the 1980's and early 70's- is too close to the present and secondly as a consequence of that, there is insufficient literature on the present-day !Kung to derive a complete picture. In the final chapter some remarks are made on the direction in which the change will go.

The study concentrated on the Dobe-area !Kung because they are well documented by Howell, Lee and Devore. These three people were part of a team that worked in the Dobe-area from 1968 till 1972 (not continuously). When parts of this paper are based on literature from other writers, this is indicated in the text.

One final word on the reason why the !Kung were picked for this study. As the main interest of the writer is in stone age archeology, in particular paleolithic European cultures, the primary attention was to be focused on a band level society. As the !Kung were so well documented, and the remains of !Kung were archeologically investigated (by Yellen) specifically to shed some light on prehistoric hunters, the !Kung were chosen above the Pigmy's.

CHAPTER 1 PHYSICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

A society hardly ever is an isolated entity. So we start out by looking at the San in a wide perspective, socio-cultural as well as environmental. In the following part we will take a close look at the aspects of the physical environment in the Dobe-area.

Geographical location

The present !Kung San are living in the area embracing the western half of Botswana, the eastern part of Namibia and the southern part of Angola. The Dobe-area King live exactly in the Namibia-Botswana border area.

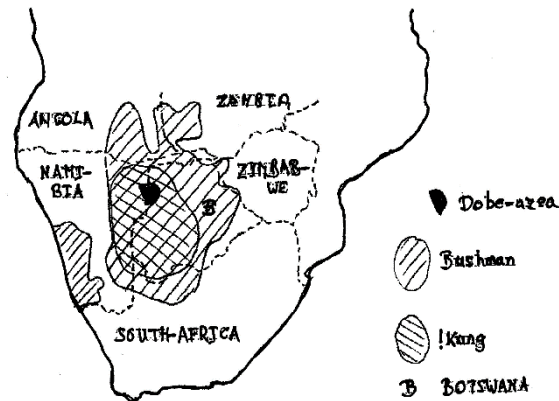


Figure 1. Geographic location

Neighboring populations

Since the latter quarter of the nineteenth century the !Kung had contact with and were visited by the TSWANA, living north-east of the !Kung-territory. The Tswana came to the !Kung-area for hunting, using (compelling) the !Kung as trackers and carriers of the killed game. Later in time the Tswana let the !Kung herd their cattle. The Tswana-!Kung relation can be categorized as an exchange of goods for services rendered.

West of the Bushmen live, or more exactly lived the HERERO. At the beginning of the twentieth century this people rose against the Germans that occupied South—West Africa at that time. The Germans slaughtered most of the Herero causing many of the remaining Herero to flee through the !Kung country. These displaced persons started to work for the Tswana as cattle herders.

By 1948 about 150 non-Bushmen blacks lived in the Dobe area with approx. 2000 cattle in three villages along the KONGWODUM.

Since the fifties the Tswana started to exercise their tribal government in the Dobe-area, mainly to prevent conflicts between the Tswana/Herero people living in the Dobe-area and their !Kung hired hands.

Wide scope physical environment

When we look at the southern part of the African continent, we see a number of climatic zones. A desert-climate on the west coast, protruding further inland as you go further south, except for the coastal zone in South Africa which has a Mediterranean climate. Further to the north and on the east coast we find a tropical climate.

The present San territory encompasses mainly the semi-desert area in the central part of the south African continent. Looking at the big rivers, we see that the San live exactly in the part that does not water to the oceans.

There is a big river, the OKAVANGO, but it ends in a swamp. So the San are living in a rather dry, bowl-like area, that is covered by sand.

Dobe area

The Dobe-area is characterized by west-east oriented river beds, dry river beds that is. There are three main dry river beds that have developed into so-called hardpan areas. Between these main dry streambeds there are many secondary ones, separated by west-east oriented dune-ridges. The whole area looks a bit like corrugated-iron, except for a hilly part in the west.

The corrugated-iron look is the main feature, because of its influence on other geological aspects and on the vegetation. The water running down the dunes has sorted out the soil particles, leaving the sands to the dunes and taking the smaller particles down the dune—sides. This results in three different soil zones, each with a different vegetation.

Together with the hardpan areas, this gives four different micro-environments:

1. Loose sandy soils on the dune tops, carrying an open tree forest with among others the mongongo-nut-tree. This zone does not carry water, although after showers water can be found in bowl-like parts of the nut-trees.
2. The more compacted sands on the plains between the dune tops and the riverbeds. The vegetation is a combination of shrubs and trees.
3. The compact soils in the streambeds, called molapo's. Although this zone contains the seasonal and permanent water basins and waterholes, the soil itself is much dryer to the flora than the higher situated sands. The vegetation is for a large part thorny brushes, but also has more grass-like parts around the water basins, in particular in the more wet seasons.
4. The combination of compact soil areas, bare rock and hard crust soils of the hardpan area, has -in the more favorable parts- the same kind of vegetation as the molapo's.

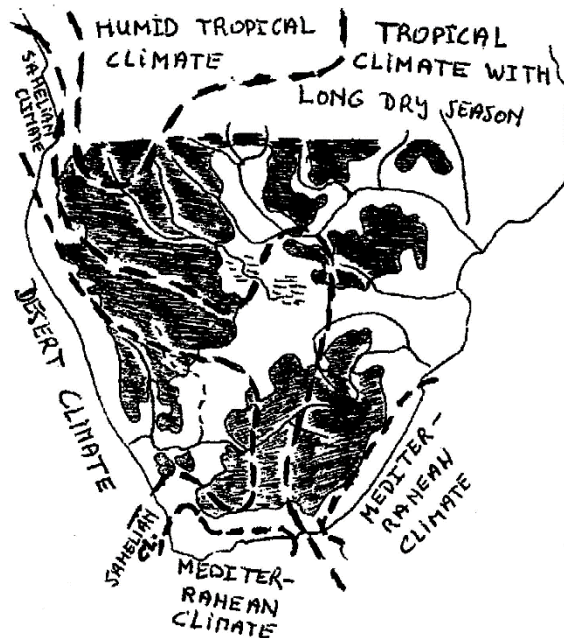


Figure 3. Climate zones in Southern Africa

Fauna

The Dobe area has a rich fauna, about 60 species of mammals, of which some are quite common: steenbok, kudu, wildebeest and gemsbok, but also lions, leopards and other meat eating species. Among the common birds that play an important role for the !Kung are ducks, korhaan, doves and ostriches. The last not to be hunted, but for their eggs, that serve as water-containers. Because of the lack of permanent water there are no fish.

In general mammals and (water—)fowl are much more abundant in the wet season than in the dry seasons.

Seasons

Seasons in the Dobe-area are based on differences in temperature, and on rainfall. The latter being the most important. We can distinguish:

- a hot rainy season (December through March)
- a cooler and dryer "autumn (April and May)
- a cool and very dry "winter" (June through August)
- a hot and dry season (September through October)
- a hot and dry season with some rain thunderstorms (October and November)

Although there is this regularity in rainfall seasons, the total amount of rainfall can differ very much from year to year, or in periods of several years.

Summing up the environment of the !Kung Bushmen we see three things:

1. The influence of other peoples on the !Kung have been minor.
2. The little influence is mainly caused by the relatively unattractiveness of the whole area.
3. The !Kung area consists of a number of quite different geological and vegetational areas, which offer many possibilities for adaptation to different seasons and periods of drought for a foraging society.

CHAPTER 2 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

In this part we will take a look at the groups of people as they live together. To understand these structures we need to take a look at some economic aspects as well. Finally to understand the importance of the social organization we will take a look at the value of it in an adaptability sense for the !Kung way of life.

Life cycle and marriage ¹

After a child is born the mother decides whether the child has a good chance for survival. If it does, the nuclear family takes care of it, if not infanticide is practiced. At approx. the age of eleven the boys start sleeping apart at a so-called boys-fire. At the same age girls start sleeping with a grandmother or widow.

A boy can marry as soon as he has become a hunter, after having killed a big animal, normally at the age of 22 to 30. Girls are much younger when they marry, 14-17 years old. After marriage the couple lives with the bride's family. The man has to give bride service - hunting- to his wife's family until the third child is born, which can take up to 10 years. After that time the couple is free to go. Sometimes they go with their children to the camp of the man's parents, or to a camp where one of them has siblings.

When people get old, they are taken care of by their offspring, or just by another person.

Bands are not exogamous or endogamous. You just cannot marry immediate family or people considered immediate family, such as people who have the same name as immediate biological family.

We need to define now the phrase "take care of". Although in a sense an economic aspect, we have to understand the food-sharing of the !Kung. Gathered food and meat from hunted animals is not only shared by the members of the nuclear or extended family, but also with the other families of a village (camp) and sometimes with people from other camps. More in general !Kung try to forego owning stuff, they make a cult of giving things away.

Villages

Lee (1979, p. 39 e.v.) describes the existence of two different kinds of "villages", or groups of people living together: "camps" and "client-groups". The latter is a group, numbering 1-30 people, who are attached to a non-bushman settlement, mainly black cattle-posts. A client group is fully or partially dependent on the cattle post for subsistence.

¹ Based mainly on Lorna Marshall, 1965

Lee defines a camp as: “a non-corporate, bilaterally organized group of people, who live in a single settlement and who move together for at least part of the year. During some time in the winter up to 200 people from different camps can live together.”

A camp, called band by many anthropologists, is an economic entity and consists of 10 to 30 people. These people normally are all kin or affines. The core is formed by siblings, male and or female. Further you find the spouses of these siblings, the latter’ s siblings and their spouses etc. Besides these people of one generation, there are members of their parental generation and you find their offspring.

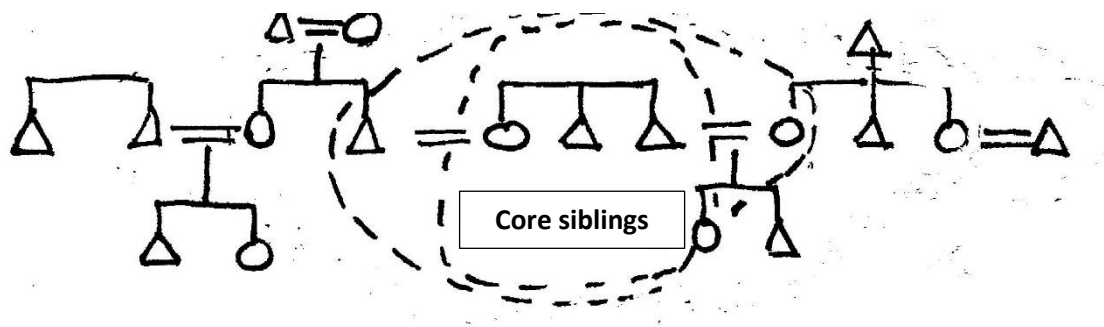


Figure 3. Social organization: members of a band = inhabitants of a camp

Importance of family-, band- and kinship-ties

From an economic perspective the membership of a camp (“bandship”) is the most important level of social organization, the nuclear family nearly equaling it in importance. Looking over the total lifetime of an individual, kinship, as the basis for bandship, is the most important factor.

The band being the factor tying people together in day-to-day life, there is no union that can act as defense for the !Kung against outside pressure of interference.

Again, as with the physical environment, the key aspect of the !Kung social organization is its adaptability. Adaptability in the sense that people can join different bands, not only as post-marital residence, but during their whole life.

This variability in band-membership gives possibilities for adapting to changes in the environment. The disadvantage of these loose ties is that the !Kung are highly susceptible to pressure from surrounding cultures.

CHAPTER 3 ECONOMIC ASPECTS

The economic aspects of the !Kung life are centered mainly around subsistence. We have already seen the importance of two things: the relative shortness of water and the importance of food sharing among family- and camp-members.

Band owning

In the social organization chapter we have seen, that a band has a core, mostly consisting of siblings. These core members function as a kind of caretakers for the band. They “own” the waterhole and the territory around it. Not that this territory is important, far more the vegetable food resources in the territory are the valuables.

If a non-bandmember or another band is moving into the bands territory, he or they should ask the core members permission to gather. Permission is granted depending on the closeness of the stranger(s) to people in the band and the amount of food resources available to the “owning” band, as well as the planned duration of the visit. A visiting band is expected to host the other band sometime in the future.

Family owning

A family owns the place it is living in: the hut with the fire in front of it. The family also owns the food gathered in the day, the vegetable food and the small game. The process of food sharing distributes it among the family members and to other families with less able gatherers.

Meat sharing

The meat of large game animals is not owned by the family of the hunter, but by the owner of the first arrow that penetrated the animal. The owner can be the hunter that shot the arrow, or anybody else in the band, including women and old people.

In the process of sharing, all the hunters of the hunting party (2-5) get a large share, the rest goes to the owner of the arrow. In the secondary distribution the first receivers give portions to their relatives: parents-in-law, parents, spouse and offspring, siblings, etc. In a third round portions can be given away by the secondary recipients to their relatives and or friends. (See fig. 4) So if the animal is big enough, relative to the size of the band, every individual gets some meat. If the animal is relatively small, only the people closest to the hunters and the arrow owner get a piece.

Individual owning

Individuals in the !Kung society hardly own anything. The things they do own normally are not owned for a long time. Like in the old Dutch saying: “small gifts maintain friendship”, the

!Kung do anything to maintain friendly relations with camp members as well as with relatives in other camps, by giving things away. Keeping a valuable item, like a knife, only can lead to envy, so you better give it away!

Network trading

The custom of giving away things results in network trading. A person can have up to a few dozen of partners, who might see each other less than once a year (p.e. at a winter gathering). A person gives something to a partner and gets something back a few months or a few years later. It results not only in maintaining good relations, but it also blocks the accumulation of wealth. A third aspect is that items from neighboring cultures, in particular iron, are distributed through the !Kung territory.

Summing up the !Kung economy is characterized by general reciprocity within the family and the band, in particular in food sharing, but also in non-food items, in the band tending to balanced reciprocity.

Among members of different bands and among bands as a whole, balanced reciprocity is the rule. Again this refers to non-food items given by individuals and to food in the form of access to resources in a bands territory.

As the social organization has particular survival value for the !Kung way of life, so has the economic system particular survival value for the individuals in the !Kung society.

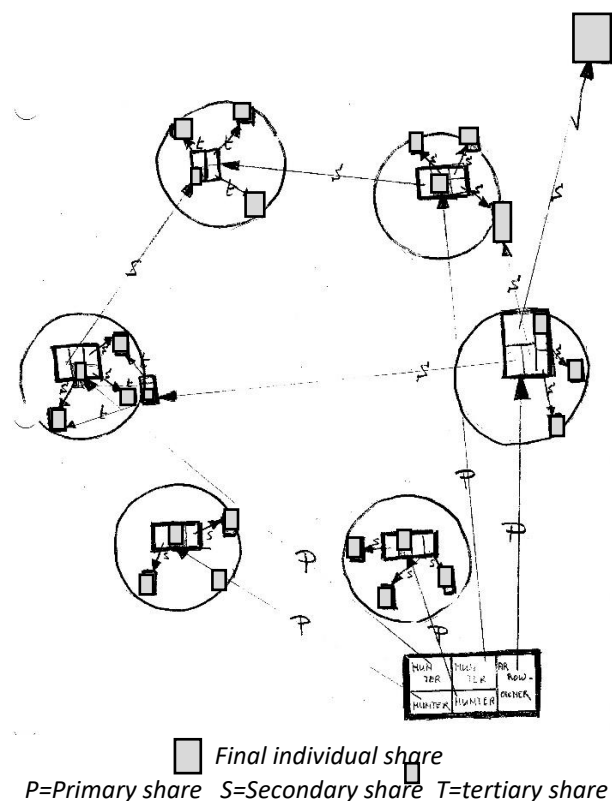


Figure 4. Distribution of meat of a large animal in a six household camp

CHAPTER 4 POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Before we start out with this chapters subject we recollect some of the things we have seen so far.

In the Dobe-area live approx.. 400 !Kung together with 150 non-bushmen blacks.

The traditional bushmen live in bands of 10 – 30 people, seasonally shifting their village to a place where the most desirable food-resources are available. Normally the band stays within the bands “territory”, which is “owned” by the core siblings.

The men hunt in groups of 4 or 5 and the women do the gathering, also in groups. The food is shared within the nuclear family and within the band by following some culturally prescribed rules, leaving individuals possibilities to be selective in the sharing.

Leadership

Leadership in a band-level society is very rudimentary. Kottak (1979, p. 162) generalizes: “There is little differential power among foragers; band leaders are merely first among equals and can employ no means of enforcing decisions”.

The description in the situation in the Dobe area by Lee (1979) conforms to this generalization. Bandleaders are not the decision makers. The band as a whole decides when and where to go. What distinguishes a band leader from the other members is, that his arguments apparently have more weight than those from other people; he is recognized as a wise man.

Lee mentions four aspects contributing to leadership-status: seniority, core-membership, marriage to a core member and personal qualities. One does not become “leader of the band” by one of these aspects alone. Core-membership or marriage to a core-member is a prerequisite and personal qualities contribute more than seniority. Typically gender is absent in the aspects contributing to leadership status.

Bandleaders do not share a certain personality type, some are excellent speakers, some are soft-spoken, some are strong personalities, some are grandmotherly. What bandleaders do have in common is the absence of arrogance, overbearing, boasting and aloof. They also lack a desire for wealth.

The leader of a band does not play any specific role in the easing of tensions, like a mediator or such. Conflict normally arises between persons, no between groups. The cause can be adultery, unjust food sharing and these kind of interactions between individuals. After a talk stage which includes name calling and insulting, people can start fighting -a mix between boxing and wrestling- or after that engage in a fight on life and death. Sometimes the conflict is solved in the first or second stage by letting the band split in two bands.

In other settings, like hunting parties and ceremonial aspects etc. personal qualities, including experience, are uniquely leading to leadership status. Here again, it is first among equals; or better said, one person is better qualified to advise the group, the group itself makes the decisions.

Leadership in after-contact times

In the modern setting problems are often solved and progress made by people or groups opposing each other. At the end one person or group, the strongest, wins. Representatives of groups need to have strong personalities therefore and diplomatic qualities. If necessary the representative must be aggressive.

This description of a leader is quite contrasting with the traditional bandleader. For this reason !Kung people have often lost disputes or legal battles with their Tswana neighbors and the modern state in which they live. The most severe ones being the loss of their territory and water rights.

Another consequence of these opposing leadership qualities, is that many groups have one person as internal leader and another as external leader. The latter is often not trusted by the bandmembers.

Conclusions

The !Kung people have an egalitarian society with a very rudimentary political system, the band being the highest level of political organization. The band leader is more an advisor, a wise man, not a leader in our modern western sense. The culturally required personality of a leader makes him or her generally unfit to deal with external -outside the !Kung society- problems.

CHAPTER 5 RELIGION ²

!Kung religion has three aspects; an individual aspect, a shamanic aspect and a communal aspect. The latter aspect is normally not found among hunter-gatherers, but among pastoralists and extensive agriculturalists.³

The fact that the !Kung believe in gods is something that also sets them apart from most foragers. So is the form the gods are believed to have; anthropomorphic.

The !Kung believe that there are two gods. One in the east who created himself, the other god (in the west), who created the world, the animals, the women and the men. He created everything in the form as the !Kung experience it now. Everything the !Kung know, they have learned from their gods. Both gods can be good and bad, bring favors or misfortune and they control the world with everything in it.

The !Kung believe that when a person dies, his spirit is taken away by the god and brought to the camp of the spirits. They also think, that the spirits of the dead wanted dearly to have this person with them. The !Kung do not worship their ancestors however.

Individualistic aspect

The !Kung pray to their gods. They can do this where and when they want. Prayers often are concerned with hunger (rain for vegetable food or hunting-success), sickness and death.

Shamanic aspect

The function of the part time religious practitioners is only curing ill people. The medicine-men do not engage in witchcraft or sorcery. In fact nearly all men can be a medicine man, especially when they are older. The curing is done by the laying on of hands, drawing out the sickness that way.

The curing is aided by a substance that the gods gave to man.

Communal aspect

The communal aspect of the !Kung religion is the trance dance. All the people of a band participate in it: the women sit around a fire and sing and clap their hands; the men dance around the women until one of them reaches a trance-state. The trance-state releases the power of the healing substance the man "carries in the pit of his stomach". Normally other men will also reach the trance-state and the curing can go on for four days!

² Based mainly on Lorna Marshall 1965

³ Kottak 1974: 195

Particularly valued by the !Kung are the trance curing dances during the large winter gatherings. Then 15 - 20 curers could go into trance at the same time.

Conclusions

The religious beliefs of the !Kung help them to live through bad times. If the environment lets them down, they can 'blame' one of their gods; if a person dies, its spirit will join those of the dead, who apparently wanted him or her to join them".

Besides this psychological aspect there is also a social one. The practice of cure dancing helps to strengthen ties within the band. It underlines its cohesion. Remember that the 'band' is the prime factor for survival of the !Kung's way of life. The cure-dancing practice even helps them to strengthen relations with other groups.

CHAPTER 6 OVERVIEW TRADITIONAL CULTURE

We start out by summing up the results of the first five chapters by grouping the separate conclusions under six headings.

Natural and social environment

1. The influence of other peoples on the !Kung has been minor.
2. The Dobe area consists of a number of quite different geological and vegetational areas, which offer many possibilities for adaption to different seasons and periods of drought for a foraging society.

Economy

1. The nuclear family is marked by general reciprocity
2. The band is also marked by general reciprocity, tending to balanced reciprocity. The system of food sharing has a particular survival value for the individual in the !Kung society and strengthens ties within the band as it creates a form of interdependence.
3. Between different bands balanced reciprocity in the form of access to each other's resources is the rule.

Social organization

1. The band with a continuous changing membership is the basic level of social organization consisting of building blocks of nuclear families.
2. Kinship is very important as it is the base for band membership. It makes changing of membership from one band to another possible.
3. There is no level of social organization above the band-level, which makes the !Kung culture susceptible to external social pressures.

Ideological pattern

1. Religious believes help the !Kung to relieve psychological stress caused by the environment (generally hunger) and caused by sickness and death of their members.
2. Religious practices help to strengthen ties within the band.
3. The !Kung society stresses the individual responsibility to contribute to band survival by easing tensions within the band. Individuality should not lead to dominance over other bandmembers.
4. Ownership often shifts from one person to another to forego tension over unequal distribution of wealth.

Material culture

1. Material culture is geared to hunting and gathering.

2. Material culture is minimal to facilitate movement of the band.
3. With exception of iron that is introduced through network trading, all raw materials are from local origin.

Technology

1. !Kung technology is characterized by simplicity. Basically it is restricted to extracting activities, food preparing and very primitive housing.

Analysis

The above mentioned six headings are chosen to facilitate analysis of the !Kung society by using the following model:

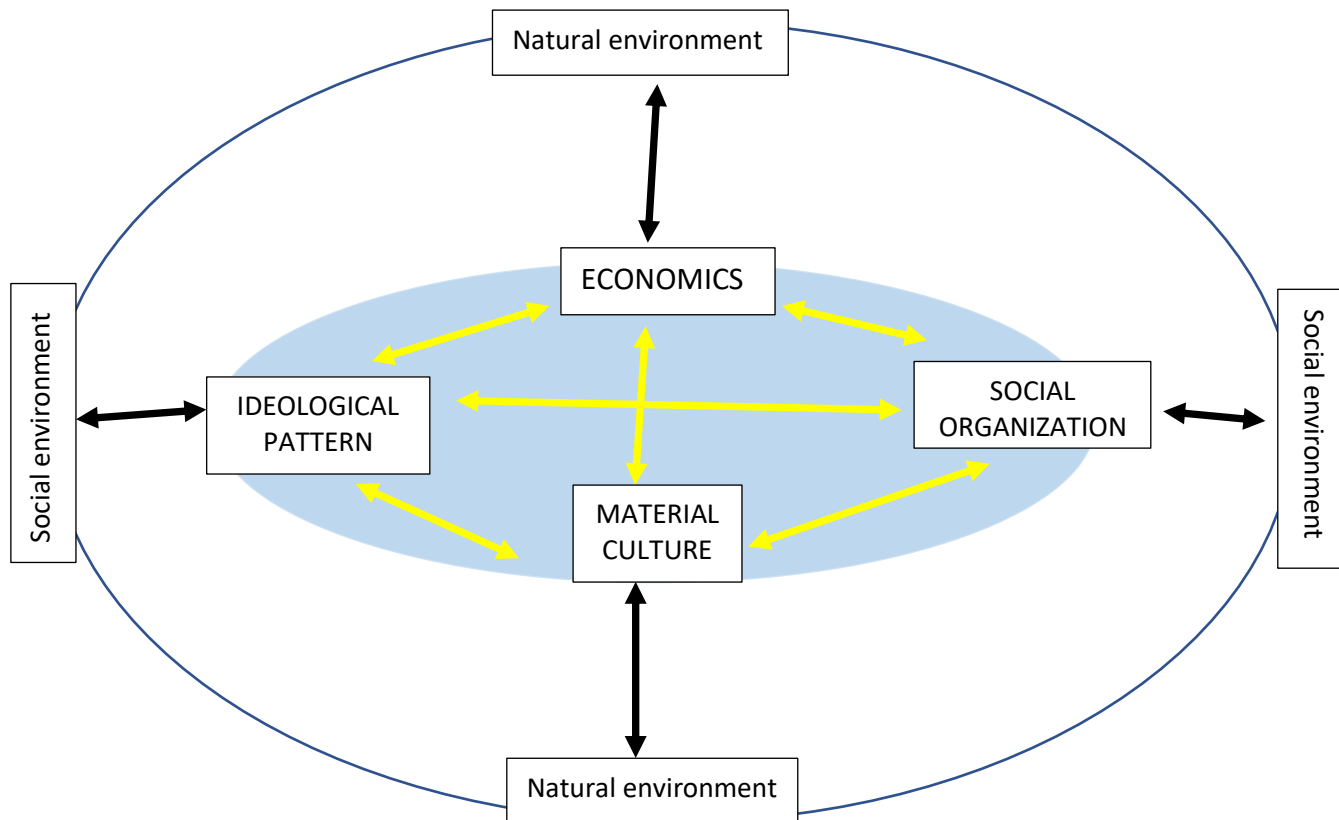


Figure 5. A Systemic view of culture.

The !Kung society is herewith depicted as a system in internal equilibrium. This equilibrium is found on two levels: the Dobe area !Kung as a whole in which the individual bands relate to each other as billiard balls, running into each other and separating again without damage to either one of them. The individual band is the other level of internal equilibrium.

The internal "organs" of the system differ very much in importance. "Economy" and "Social organization" are very developed and active parts. The "Ideological pattern" works

very much as a flywheel, it helps to maintain the band structure and also strengthens the economic organ in the sense that it stresses the sharing and therefore the flow of food and non-food items. The "Material culture" is very underdeveloped and in fact it only plays the role of not being a hobble for other processes.

Externally the system is in a state of equilibrium with the natural environment. The main factor that helps to keep this equilibrium is a negative feedback loop from the natural environment through the economic part to the social organization part. The "patched" distribution of vegetable resources in the natural environment and the flexibility of the social organization (concentration, dispersion and individual or nuclear family migration) form this negative feedback loop.⁴

The other link with the natural environment through material culture can be looked at as not existing, due to the fact that the material culture and level of technology is so minimal that the !Kung way of life only has a negligible impact on the environment.

So we can redraw our model as:

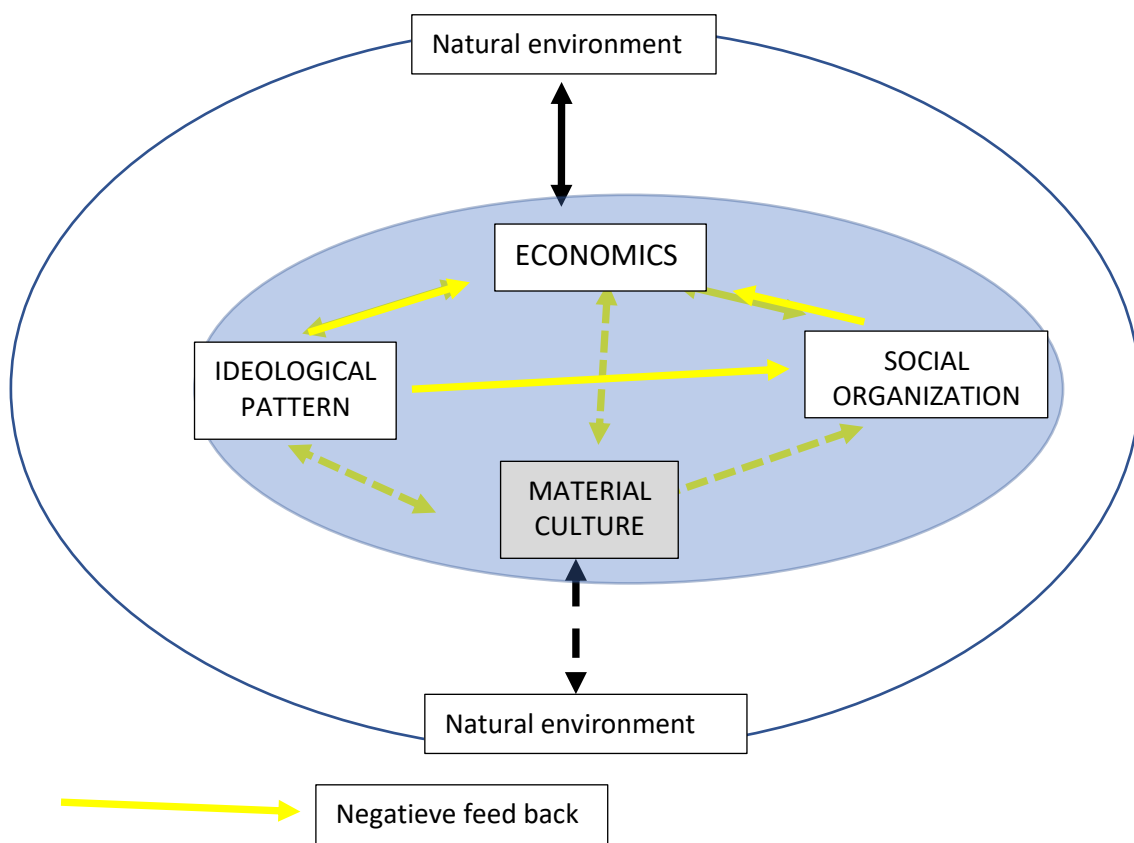


Figure 5. Relation to Natural environment adapted to !Kung

⁴ Negative feedback is here to be seen, that the !Kung chose the resources they want to exploit, not that they change the environment.

The picture of the social environment is quite different from that of the natural environment. Because of high dependence on the natural environment and the low level of technology the ideological module stresses exactly those aspects that make it difficult to work at maintaining a state of equilibrium under stress from the social environment. In fact all connections are positive feedback loops. Put in other words, social pressure can only be absorbed to the limit of the available resources of the natural environment, limits which do not only consist of the resources itself, but also of a shrinking geographical boundary. So the !Kung culture will try to resist social pressure, but quickly the equilibrium state is broken and another state of equilibrium will be found. The content of the internal organs will have quite another content than.

We can redraw our model in the social environment in the following way:

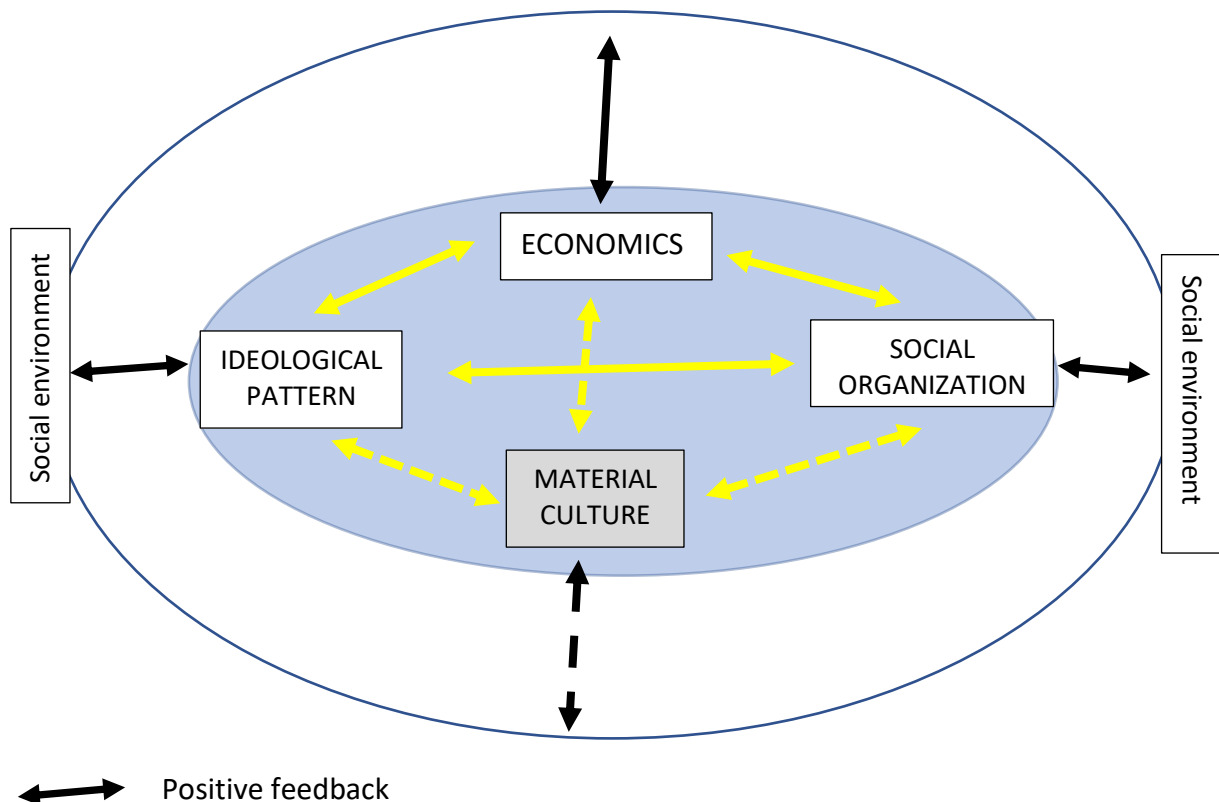


Figure 6. Relation to Social environment adapted to !Kung

CHAPTER 7 RECENT CHANGE

Over the last 10 years or so, a slow process of sedentarisation among the !Kung is taking place. The driving factor behind this is the social environment and as an indirect result of the social environment the shrinking natural environmental niche exploited by the !Kung. In general free roaming meat resources are slowly replaced by herds of cattle, owned by non-!Kung. Hand in hand with this process goes a process of acculturation. Acculturation from Herero and Tswana neighbors, but also from the white people settling in the area.

Sedentarisation has a number of consequences however. It makes it possible to own more things, it creates new needs therefore (tools for agriculture, nice western things like radios etc.). The fulfilling of new needs necessitate deeper involvement with non-bushman economic systems, such as growing cash crops (not very important yet) development of craftsmanship, migrating laborers, rendering services as soldiers.

Another well researched and documented consequence of sedentarisation is a reduced birth spacing, leading to accelerated population growth. The population growth in itself will intensify the need for a shift from foraging to food producing. Sedentarisation also leads to an intensification of social life among the !Kung and between the !Kung and others. This will lead to higher occurrence of conflict and violence, with less possibilities to react in the traditional way: splitting up the group, or one person moving away.

All the above mentioned changes in the economic and social sphere accompanied by a rising importance of material culture and technology will sooner or later have their impact on the ideological sphere. The expectation seems to be justified, that the internal equilibrium state of the !Kung society will be totally disturbed in the near future. What kind of new equilibrium will develop remains to be seen, we can say for sure, that it will not be an only-!Kung system.

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