3. Risk, reciprocity and social influences on !Kung San economics

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Introduction

Over the past years, many hunter-gatherer societies have been analysed within an ecological framework based on the underlying hypothesis that, because hunter-gatherers live directly off the land and are not food producers, their economy and social organization can be seen as the direct product of their interaction with the environment. But, although ecological studies provide many important insights into the hunting-gathering way of life, it has become increasingly evident that they yield only a partial understanding of hunter-gatherer economics and social organization. As Lee (1978) points out in summarizing the status of hunter-gatherer studies: 'Only part of the behavior of hunter-gatherers can be accounted for by even the most fine-grained ecological analysis.'

I would like to make two points about !Kung San organization which I hope will add a social dimension to present and past ecological studies of other hunting and gathering societies as well. The first is that the apparent flexibility of organization among the !Kung is not true flexibility in itself, but the product of a structured system of social relations operating according to certain principles. These social relationships open up a range of options to every family when it is confronted with the multitude of risks inherent in the hunting and gathering way of life. In the environments of many hunter-gatherers today, possible mean subsistence income may be high, but so is the variance around the mean, creating a high level of risk and uncertainty. Without a systematic way of ensuring that needs are regularly met, life is indeed precarious. The flexibility of organization can not simply result from spontaneous bending to meet the needs of others as they arise, but must be the product of a structured set of social relations. These relations ensure that a reliable means of reducing risk is always available and can be passed on from generation to generation.

The second point I am making here is that such a social system for reducing risk, and its accompanying ideology, permeate many areas of life, and have their own effects on the economy of hunter-gatherers, effects that can not be predicted from environmental variables alone. There is no justification for the view that, because hunter-gatherers live directly off the land, all aspects of their social organization and economy are more directly predictable from environmental variables than those of agricultural societies.

In the following pages, I will illustrate the above two points by describing the !Kung system of reciprocity called *hxaro* which is used to keep a wide range of contacts and possibilities open in the face of a highly variable environment, and by outlining how the hxaro system in and of itself affects !Kung work effort and distribution of wealth. First, however, it will be necessary to review certain elements of !Kung life.

The !Kung San

The !Kung San today live in northwest Botswana, northeast Namibia, and southeast Angola. Those included in this study are centred in the Dobe/Xai/xai area of Botswana and the Nyae Nyae area across the border in Namibia.[1] Their direct ties of reciprocity, however, extend to more distant !Kung San as well as San of other language groups living within a radius of about 200 kilometres.

The !Kung San are spread out over this region in areas of landrights called n!ores. Each n!ore has enough food and water to sustain at least one band throughout its seasonal rounds in the average year (Marshall 1976), although it is surprising how diverse resources are from n!ore to n!ore. Even adjacent n!ores within a relatively small area are known for certain localized plant and animal foods (Yellen and Lee 1976). Today, the presence of agriculturalists in the Dobe – /Xai/xai area, a settlement scheme in the Nyae Nyae area, and farms in more distant ones have added still more variations among n!ores, with differential access to domestic foods, wage-labour, opportunities to market crafts, schools, clinics, etc.

All persons inherit one n!ore from their mother and one from their father. They do not inherit the land itself, but rather the right to exploit the resources of the land along with others who inherit similar rights. Throughout a person's lifetime, he or she develops a strong hold on the n!ore chosen to live in and maintains a weak hold on that of the other

A !Kung woman, lavishly adorned with beadwork obtained through 'hxaro' (R. Lee)

parent (Marshall 1976; Wiessner 1977). Children, in turn, will inherit rights to the n!ores which each parent held strongly, although in some cases they may trace rights back to their grandparents. If a n!ore is left uninhabited because its owners have moved or died out, others can obtain rights to it by getting permission from those who hold it weakly, and subsequently living there for an extended period of time.

Because a !Kung generally holds rights to two n!ores, can live in a spouse's n!ore (or those of other close affinal relatives), or can obtain rights to a n!ore through prolonged residence, the population distributes itself over the existing n!ores with minimal conflict. Since a person will not utilize the n!ore of others, without having the correct ties to ask for permission, the system allows the !Kung to plan their seasonal rounds on the basis of accurate information about who has been utilizing which resources. A person will not arrive at a place and find the resources unexpectedly used up by others.

Those claiming rights to a n!ore (usually close consanguineous relatives) and their affinal relatives live together in one or more camps or bands. When a !Kung man and woman marry, they often spend several years deciding which camp they can best fit into, but, once established

in a group, they are likely to remain in it for many years. Camp membership is rather stable although frequent extended visiting makes it seem most unstable to the short-term observer. During a ten-year period, from 1964 to 1974, there was a 15 per cent turnover in six camps originally totalling 130 persons. Twelve individuals emigrated for marriage and were replaced by nine who married into the area; nine others emigrated for other reasons (usually accompanying siblings or children who married out) and were replaced by seven immigrants. Not included in the above figure were ten other San who emigrated seeking wage-labour; it was not clear when or if they would return. Of course, cores of close relatives within the /Xai/xai area shifted camps during this time to compensate for demographic events and conflict. This attachment of the !Kung to their n!ores means that when persons form relationships of reciprocity with other adults, they do so with a good idea of where and with whom their partners will be living.

Within their n!ores, the !Kung can hunt and gather a high-subsistence income for moderate work effort. Lee (1969) has shown for the Dobe !Kung that in July–August, which is neither the best nor the worst time of year, the amount of time devoted to the food quest is 12–15 hours a week. Marshall (1976) worked in the Nyae Nyae area, which lacks rich groves of mongongo nuts, and estimated that the !Kung work a little longer – at least half of each week. Medical studies have verified that this work-week is sufficient to keep the !Kung generally well nourished, although they may suffer from a shortage of calories in the dry season (Truswell and Hansen 1976; Wilmsen 1978).

Risk and uncertainty in !Kung life

Although the Kalahari environment can and does provide excellent returns for work effort, it is highly variable from year to year. Drought makes many resources inaccessible for much of the year (Lee 1972), and there are fluctuations in the seasonal and yearly productivity of wild vegetable foods (Wiessner 1977; Wilmsen 1978; Yellen and Lee 1976) as well as variation in game movement and hunting success (Wilmsen 1978; Yellen and Lee 1976). Other risks that are not a product of the environment are compounded by the hunting and gathering way of life, especially demographic fluctuations in sex ratios in small populations (Howell 1979), and periods of individual disability (Wiessner 1977) and conflict.

Such risks are not necessarily greater than those in other societies,

but for hunter-gatherers means of reducing risk commonly used in sedentary societies – prevention of loss, storage, transferal of risk – are not effective. The !Kung to some degree prevent variation in the productivity of wild foods by burning areas to attract game and promote new growth of plant foods, but, by and large, their control over the natural environment is minimal. After a hunting or gathering trip, they do keep a stash of food in their huts to tide them over for a few days, but on the whole storage is not practical; those foods which can be preserved during the dry season are often far from the location of camps. Risk cannot be transferred to any *one* other party, as no one family or band will constantly have the resources to cover the losses of another.

The most efficient method of risk reduction open to hunters and gatherers in environments like that of the !Kung, then, is a social method of pooling risk through storage of social obligations. The method encompasses many principles of any social insurance and hinges on the assumption that the population which pools risk is diverse enough to absorb the losses of any member. In pooling risk, small, certain losses or contributions are substituted for larger, uncertain ones. Among hunter-gatherers, the small contributions cannot be stored in a communal pool, so they must be stored in social obligations. A person creates relationships of mutual reciprocity with others in the population and thereby spreads losses over a unit much larger and more varied than the local band. In times of hardship, a person's losses can be absorbed by others in the population, if risk is well distributed. It might be added that if the system covers most risks in the society, the small contributions (or losses in income) can increase to the point where they lower mean income in exchange for assuring a lower variance around the mean.

The key factor in successfully pooling risk, then, is in distributing it over as many and as independent units as possible. The Kalahari environment is highly amenable to pooling risk, because resources are localized and conditions vary from n!ore to n!ore. Thus, if risk is well distributed, the regional population can absorb most losses. For adequate distribution of risk through storing coverage for losses in social obligations, it is essential for each family to place its social obligations carefully according to the profile of risk it wishes to minimize, depending on its area of residence, its composition, the abilities of its members and so on. For this reason the !Kung cannot rely on flexibility alone, but must have a structured system within which to place their obligations.

The hxaro relationship[2]

Through a system of mutual reciprocity called hxaro, the !Kung San organize themselves in such a way that each family creates ties which distribute its risk over the population and thereby assure that losses will be covered in bad years. In good years, it will have access to the abundant wild crops of other areas. The hxaro relationship involves a balanced, delayed exchange of gifts, whose continuous flow gives both partners information about the underlying status of the relationship – one of a bond of friendship accompanied by mutual reciprocity and access to resources. In addition, each partnership links a person to a broad network of hxaro paths.

A person initiates a hxaro relationship by giving a gift to a prospective partner, who is putatively a consanguineous relative of his mother or father. Approximately half of a person's partners are genealogically traceable (most of these being parents, children or siblings), while the rest are relatives with whom genealogical ties are unclear, but who have been remembered over the years as kindred members. With a few exceptions, hxaro is not done directly with affinal relatives, because a person does not 'know the hearts of his or her affines well enough to do hxaro with them appropriately'. Furthermore, if a quarrel does arise over hxaro between consanguines, the !Kung feel that their common relatives will unite and try to resolve the conflict, while if one arose between affinal relatives, that each person's respective kin would side with their relative and a serious fight would arise between the two kindreds. Therefore, people give a large proportion of the gifts they receive from relatives to their spouses who in turn pass them on to theirs, both spouses maintaining separate spheres of hxaro. This indirect hxaro plays an important role in sustaining a marriage and maintaining smooth relations with affines.

The prospective hxaro partner who receives a gift talks it over with his or her spouse and together they decide whether they are interested in the new relationship and are able to make another commitment. It is an important consideration, because once a relationship is firm, a person is said to '//hai' that person in his or her heart, meaning literally to hold and figuratively to be responsible for the person. A strong bond of friendship is solidified by the hxaro partnership, and, from then on, each partner can call on the other in times of need. If the relationship works out as expected, both partners will come out ahead because the value of goods, resources or assistance to the one who needs is often much greater than the burden that assistance places on the one who has. Relationships may be unbalanced for a few years but often even out over time. Nonetheless, misfortune does not strike all equally, and, in taking on a hxaro relationship, people realize that even if they do come out behind, they cannot drop the relationship without considerable conflict unless both parties lose interest. Thus, a person who does not wish to begin a new partnership will just keep the gift as a token of friendship and say that at the time he or she has nothing to give.

To accept a new relationship, a !Kung returns a gift of similar worth, and after a trial period of at least a year, during which several gift exchanges take place, the relationship is considered firm. Once secure, a balanced, delayed exchange of gifts will continue, but the underlying obligations of the partnership will remain loosely defined so that they can cover a wide range of needs. As Sahlins (1972) has noted for hunter-gatherer reciprocity, returns are not stipulated by quantity, quality or time, but one who has gives to one who needs, *need being relative to the means of both*. Hxaro is geared to unpredictability and returns are measured by their utility to the receiver, rather than by fixed quantity. A person who has given assistance has no desire for an immediate and fixed return that would even the relationship and make it possible for it to be cancelled. Rather, the aim is to store the debt until the situation of have and have not is reversed. Only then will unpredictable losses be covered. On the other hand, the terms of hxaro are so loose that, when partners live far apart, the status of the relationship can become ambiguous. Then a continual balanced flow of gifts is important to let each partner know that the relationship is still intact.

The actual content of a hxaro partnership depends on the abilities and location of both partners. If they are in the same camp, the hxaro relationship generally smooths over income differences with an intense flow of gifts and a strong commitment for mutual assistance. A hxaro partner is likely to be in the 'first wave' of meat sharing (Marshall 1976) and receive a large piece of meat. A person who for some reason cannot gather vegetable foods can count on a hxaro partner in camp to give sustained assistance, even though vegetable foods usually are regularly shared only with those in the nuclear family.[3] A disabled person will get some assistance from many members of a camp, but can only count on hxaro partners for sustained care.

Hxaro partnerships with those in neighbouring camps lead to frequent visits, a share of meat when a large animal is killed, access to a partner's n!ore which, although it may be adjacent, can have different

resources, and an alternate residence if conflict breaks out. In a society where there are many potential partners in reciprocity and much jealousy over giving, the existence of hxaro partnerships justifies giving more to one than another. Few will seriously question what was given to a hxaro partner.

Hxaro relationships with people in different areas allow individuals and their families to make extended visits to a partner's camp lasting from two weeks to two years. While living there, they will have access to the resources of the area and the partner will integrate them into the reciprocal relations within the camp. For the first few days the visitors will be supported, but after that they will be expected to hunt and gather their own living and share any surplus with their host and others as they would in their own camp.

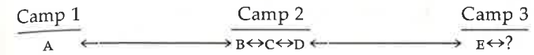
Census data collected by Richard Lee in 1968–9 and by myself in 1974 on the extended visits of 30 adults who were resident at /Xai/xai in both years give an illustration of the importance of hxaro ties for visiting. Of 86 visits made which lasted for more than two weeks, 45 in 1968 and 41 in 1974, to areas outside of persons' own n!ores or those of their spouses, 80 were to areas where nuclear family members had hxaro partners, while only six were to areas where they had none.

Because hxaro partnerships are not economic contracts with set terms, but rather bonds of mutual help, it can be difficult for a person to avoid exploitation. The loose terms of the relationship are well suited to covering a variety of needs, but working out who has and who is in need is the burden of the system. The means a person uses to avoid exploitation, and at the same time keep up the joking spirit appropriate to a relationship, are either to limit work effort so that s/he is not always a 'have', or to be very discreet about what s/he does have. The !Kung do both regularly. Lee (1972) notes that after a man has had a run of successful hunting, he pauses to enjoy some of the reciprocal obligations he has built up. Women gather enough plant foods to feed their family, but rarely more, unless they have some real obligation to a person outside the immediate family. Likewise, families are discreet about the food they have brought in, and it is not unusual to hear a person with a full belly complain that s/he has not had anything to eat and is 'dying of hunger'. Therefore, considerable time is spent in trying to establish who has and who is in need. About 60 per cent of the topics of conversations, recorded in a month, came down to who had what and did or did not give it to whom.

A person who feels badly exploited may turn to deceit, for a lie is a tactful way of telling another that s/he has taken too much and made little effort to reciprocate. If this tactic does not work, a person is free to drop the relationship with no further consequences than the conflict or bad feelings which arise between partners as well as others along their hxaro path.

Hxaro networks

A person who has established a new hxaro relationship ties it into existing networks and gifts frequently pass through two or three sets of hands in a camp before going on to another camp. A typical segment of a hxaro network for any one exchange would look like:



The genealogical relationship of B, C, and D is typically very close with gifts passed to a spouse, sibling, parent or child. A person along the path who wishes to keep a particular gift may replace it with another.

After a period of two weeks to a year has elapsed, E gives a gift from a partner to D, who will give it to C and so on back to A. The flow of gifts along what the !Kung call 'paths for things' means that A's hxaro with B also creates a link between A and others two or three steps down the path. C and D do not feel any direct obligation to A, but, because they have been receiving A's gifts indirectly, they recognize A as a reliable and generous friend. Thus they feel at ease about including A in daily interactions of reciprocity within the camp when A comes to visit. Without this acceptance, it would be trying for A to stay long as a visitor. The relationship created by indirect hxaro works the other way as well, so that, if B goes to visit A, C or D can come too. In this way, hxaro paths extend the bond of a partnership to others in the camp.

Patterns of hxaro paths are highly variable because different relationships have different rates of interaction. Frequency of gift exchange tends to fall off with frequency of contact (although some gifts are sent via other visitors), and those in a camp exchange gifts more frequently than those in different areas. The flexibility in hxaro paths allows a !Kung to balance the need for reciprocating quickly when a relationship must be affirmed, with the need to direct gifts in a way which will make his or her other camp a comfortable alternate residence for a partner. So, if B feels s/he wants to give a gift to his or her spouse, C, in order to main-

tain good relations with his or her affines, and A lives far away and has been slow in reciprocating, B can take a gift from another source and immediately give it to C.

The previous discussion has suggested that close consanguineous relatives are almost automatically hxaro partners and that hxaro marks years of living together and helping one another. In the sample population of 59 !Kung adults, 93% of all parents, siblings and children were hxaro partners and 53% of all grandparents, half-siblings, parents' siblings and parents' siblings' children were hxaro partners. Because close consanguineous relatives are almost always hxaro partners and because they tend to live together hxaro can be best understood as a core of relatives reducing risk. Hxaro paths wind through both camps and cores of these close relatives, thereby making them into nodes in the hxaro network, and travel through many camps over hundreds of kilometres. The !Kung are very aware of this, even though they cannot trace paths more than two or three links in either direction. They give no reason as to why gifts travel so far, 'they just get passed on'. Despite extensive questioning and tracing of items, I also could find no apparent reason for the length of hxaro paths. They do not systematically bring new goods into the area, nor do they create ties beyond those already discussed. However, hxaro networks may have developed out of previous trade networks, speculation that would have to be tested by archaeological research.

Gifts for hxaro

Gifts for hxaro can be any non-food items – beads, arrows, ostrich eggshells, clothing, blankets, bowls, pots, etc. They constitute the bulk of a !Kung's material wealth and there is no non-food item which does not enter the hxaro system. For the 59 !Kung in the sample, 69 per cent of a person's possessions were obtained through hxaro while the remaining 30 per cent were recently made or purchased by the owner, but destined for the hxaro network. Out of over 1,000 possessions of the !Kung in the sample, only four were 'begged' from others who were not hxaro partners. Thus, even though the !Kung say that they can not refuse to give a gift if asked, they also stress that such a situation would rarely arise – a person without the appropriate hxaro ties would not ask, except for a few individuals who ask for everything.

A gift is private property for as long as a person wishes to keep it. A gift is passed on within anywhere from two weeks to two years, and a person who wishes to keep a gift for more than a few months will replace it with another item so as not to disrupt the chain. An item critical to daily life will be kept until a replacement comes along. Women can receive and pass on gifts, normally made and used by men, like arrows, while men can receive and pass on women's aprons.

Hxaro exchange is always delayed and it would be an insult to return a gift immediately. A person either waits quietly for a return, or, may enjoy joking with a partner about a debt. Reviewing the partner's possessions, a person may express an interest in something in particular, thereby establishing a claim on it, if the object is not already on its way to another.

Hxaro gifts are surrounded by an air of appreciation and expectation partially because many are either very pretty or useful and the !Kung enjoy having new things, and partly because they are expressions of a social relationship. An appropriate hxaro gift should be generous, but not overly generous so that it would arouse jealousy in others or indicate that the giver felt he or she was a 'bigshot'. It is said to 'enter a person's heart so that the person knows that he or she is also held in giver's heart'. An inadequate gift, however, with no promise of more to come is an outward sign of tension in a friendship which is brought to the surface by an argument over the gift.

A person plays on the inherent worth of a gift to express affection and concern for a partner, getting as much mileage out of it as possible. For example, a person who gives another a blanket might say that he or she did so out of concern that 'the beloved partner might freeze to death in the winter', ignoring the fact that it is spring and the blanket will probably be in others' hands by winter or that the partner already has four blankets. In asking for a return, one person will not hesitate to remind the other of a most timely, useful, or pretty gift in the past, a way of showing that he or she still cares.

Gifts for hxaro are manufactured in a social context – when !Kung make gifts, they sit in a group, slowly working on their gifts while talking, laughing, putting down their work from time to time to illustrate a story with their hands, picking them up again, stretching them out, admiring them and then beginning work once more. Hxaro gifts are completed in a few weeks or even months. It is as if they grow in social value through conversation after conversation. Others can later recognize their maker and know how much care was put into an item. The work pace contrasts with that when making items to sell, when a person works alone, quickly and with concentration, annoyed at any distur-

bances. After receiving an item via a hxaro path, a person often alters it in some way before passing it on – repairs or makes a hole in it, restrings beads, carves a design on an arrow shaft, etc. – anything that adds a personal touch. For instance, as trade-store, knitted caps make their way along hxaro paths, they are unravelled and reknit into different patterns again and again.

Hxaro and the !Kung lifecycle

A !Kung child is brought into the system of reciprocity by receiving his or her first hxaro beads from a maternal or paternal grandmother between the age of six weeks and six months. Subsequently many people follow suit and give presents to the child. Their collective effort is believed to promote the child's well-being by showing that many people care and thus 'God shouldn't take him or her away.' Although these gifts require no return, sometimes the mother gives a return to certain people she feels might later make good hxaro partners for the child. She carries out hxaro with them in the child's name until the child takes an interest in hxaro and decides for itself whether to continue the relationship.

Symbolic training for hxaro begins between six months and one year, when the grandmother cuts off the child's beads, washes them and puts them in the child's hand to give to a relative. She then replaces them with new ones. From this point on, whether the child agrees or not, the parents or grandparents periodically cut off the child's beads and encourage the child to give them to a grandparent, aunt, uncle or another person who takes an interest in the child. The parents continue to do so until the child does hxaro of its own accord, generally between the ages of five and nine. Although proud mothers give long lists of partners for their children, the children either are not aware of these or take little interest in them, listing four to five hxaro partners as their cryptic hxaro partners ($x = 4.4$, s.d. $= 2.2$, $n = 14$). These are usually parents, grandparents or mature siblings but occasionally more distant relatives. Although, objectively, giving is unbalanced with these partners, the children see themselves as helping their hxaro partners 'a lot'. Children develop hxaro partnerships with their peers quite separately during play. It seems that hxaro partnerships formed in early childhood in an atmosphere of giving freely maintain tolerance for imbalance throughout life.

Between the ages of 10 to 14, 'adolescents' expand their sphere of hxaro to include others both in their camp and in other camps. This hxaro is done with guidance of their parents who help them fit into the

Table 3.1 *Summary statistics of hxaro partners by age category*

Age category	Number of San interviewed	Mean number of hxaro partners per person		Mean number of other areas of hxaro ties		Mean number of hxaro partners in each other area of hxaro	
		x	s.d.	x	s.d.	x	s.d.
Adolescents	6	10	4	1	1.1	1	1.8
Marriageable young adults	4	16	5	2.5	0.6	2.3	0.5
Adults with small children	27	13	7	2.9	3.7	2.4	1.7
Adults with mature children	14	24	8	3.6	1.5	4.4	2
Old partially dependent adults	8	12	6	2.3	1	2.0	1.8

overall hxaro network. Only hxaro between peers is done independently and often a group of adolescents in an area develops its own hxaro chains. Hxaro ties increase gradually in number during adolescence. By marriage, an average person has somewhere between 10 and 16 hxaro partnerships (see Table 3.1) making up the greater part of the partnerships he or she will have during the next twenty years. This well-distributed set of hxaro ties before marriage is most important to both men and women, for it means that, if the marriage breaks up, each person has enough ties to stand on his or her own and can return to his or her group as an adult in a secure position.

With marriage, a son's parents consider him or her a true hxaro partner, and obligations to all relatives become more serious. Still, relatives are lenient with newlyweds and will often help out a couple by giving gifts which they do not expect to be reciprocated for years. The biggest change in hxaro that comes with marriage is the link formed with affinal relatives. Before marriage, an adolescent's gifts were squeezed into already existing chains and backed by parents. After marriage, a large percentage of gifts are supposed to pass to the spouse, and on to the spouse's relatives, creating new paths. These paths cannot be broken without much strife and nobody else can compensate for a person's failure to reciprocate gifts from the spouse's relatives.

As a San's children reach maturity, he or she enters a stage of great vitality, mobility and social influence which lasts as long as good health holds. A person doubles his or her number of hxaro partners from a

previous mean of 13 to one of 24 (see Table 3.1). After visiting other areas for years, a person has made many contacts and can expand in hxaro, because, without the burden of small children, he or she has 'more things to give'. In addition, it is at this stage of life that a person picks up many of his or her parents' contacts. Their expansion of hxaro is not surprising as it coincides with the time in which San are concerned with finding spouses for their children and helping them out while their grandchildren are young.

By the time !Kung become old and partially dependent, they have helped their children through their hardest years, and, with declining strength and mobility, are happy to pass on many of their hxaro partnerships to their children, whom they rely on for necessary support. As one old lady said, 'Just as a medicine man gives over his medicine to a younger man, so we give over our hxaro partners. We are too old, we don't want them anymore. What would we find to give?' An older !Kung does maintain lifelong partnerships and sometimes one or two of those of a deceased spouse, beginning new ones only with grandchildren. When a person dies, some possessions are buried with him or her, but most are passed on to remaining hxaro partners by children with a request for return so that the hxaro network will not be broken.

Distribution of hxaro partnerships

In choosing hxaro relationships, a !Kung is more concerned with obtaining a well-rounded set of partners than a few particularly promising ones. In doing this, a person will be assured of coming out ahead in some, equal in most and perhaps behind in still others, but the set of partners as a whole should be sufficient to cover all critical risks.

Close relatives are almost always hxaro partners and those more distantly related are chosen for their merits. Hxaro relationships 'activate' some of the many potential relationships of reciprocity in the society, allowing certain kin ties to be 'remembered' and others conveniently 'forgotten'.

A person selects hxaro partners first for their personal qualities and then for their location and abilities, disregarding age and sex. Personal qualities are most important because hxaro solidifies a bond of friendship and mutual help, and if two people are not compatible, the hxaro bond is quickly broken.

Location of hxaro partners is important since a key role of hxaro is to give an individual an alternative residence in another area. Table 3.2

Table 3.2 *Distribution of hxaro partners by area for /Xai/xai !Kung*

Area	KM from /Xai/xai	Number of hxaro partners in area	Percentage of hxaro partners in area	Important resources of area
Own camp	—	91	18	—
/Xai/xai area	5–25	123	24	Hunting, gathering, subsistence-labour, possibility to market handicrafts
Nyae Nyae-Due areas	10–40	44	9	Hunting, gathering, wage-labour, steady supply of meal and sugar to workers, transport to points west
N/umsi area	30–40	82	16	Hunting, gathering, store (rarely stocked), school seat of local government, wage-labour (cattle trekking) subsistence-labour, transport to points east.
/Gam area	50+	17	3	Hunting, gathering, some wage-labour??, transport to points west?
Tsumkwe area	75	102	21	Clinic, store, school, agricultural projects, wage-labour (50–80 jobs), assistance for sick and old, handicraft market.
Nxau Nxau area	100+	1	0 (0.002)	Hunting, gathering, subsistence-labour.
Farms in Namibia	150+	12	2	Wage-labour, subsistence-labour, store, clinic, school?, transport
Sehitwa farms	150+	26	5	Store, school, clinic, wage-labour, subsistence-labour with good returns, transport
Ghanzi farms	190+	12	2	Store, school, clinic, subsistence- and wage-labour.
TOTAL		510	100	

gives the distribution of hxaro partners of the 35 /Xai/xai !Kung in the sample by area and by distance. Partners within the camp are usually close relatives who 'back' relationships by integrating the visitor into their camp. Those in a person's own area always live within five kilometres of the /Xai/xai well during the dry season, but have separate wet season n!ores with different resources. These critical contacts serve to open up access to a wide range of resources nearby.

Outside of the /Xai/xai area, hxaro partnerships are more a function of areal quality than of distance. The majority of the partnerships of the /Xai/xai !Kung in the sample were with others residing at Tsumkwe, a settlement scheme in Namibia. Tsumkwe offers wage-labour, a store, a school, and a clinic. Those working there have an ample, steady income so that domestic food is available to support visitors during the dry season. But Tsumkwe has its problems as well. Frequent conflict arises from many !Kung living in one place with no formal method of settling disputes. Therefore many /Xai/xai residents prefer to visit Tsumkwe for only one short season of the year. The Tsumkwe area is favoured over the /Gam area which like /Xai/xai has excellent hunting and gathering, but few other alternatives – a bad year at /Xai/xai is likely to be a bad one at /Gam as well. More partners are found at Tsumkwe than in the Nyae Nyae-Due or N/umsi areas because even though the latter two areas are preferred for living, they cannot guarantee resources to support a huge number of visitors in the dry season.

Of the more distant areas, more than 100 km from /Xai/xai, Nxau Nxau is the closest, but the least desirable, as its resources overlap with those of the /Xai/xai and N/umsi areas. Hxaro partnerships are most common with !Kung to the east in the Sehitwa area, as many of the /Xai/xai !Kung's relatives have recently moved there. In summary, the !Kung in the sample have approximately 70 per cent of their partnerships in their own area and in adjacent ones up to 50 km away, and 30 per cent in more distant ones between 50 and 200 km away. Looking at profiles of hxaro for individual families, rather than for the sample as a whole, there are very few which do not have at least one partner between 150 and 200 km away in an area which is likely to have sufficient resources when /Xai/xai does not.

Age and sex of partners are less relevant than the resources a person has to share and the willingness of a person to welcome visitors and share with them. The proportion of partners in each age category is not significantly different from their occurrence in the population, except for adolescents who are not considered true partners until marriage. Of

the 961 hxaro partners of 59 Dobe, /Xai/xai and Tsumkwe residents, 53 per cent of the men's 424 partners are men and 47 per cent women, while 44 per cent of the women's 537 partnerships are men and 56 per cent other women. Some women express a slight preference for hxaro with other women because of a common interest in beadwork. Women have an average of 14.6 hxaro partnerships (s.d. = 7.7, n = 34), and men an average of 17.0 (s.d. = 9, n = 27). The difference is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, but may be real today when young men are more mobile seeking wage-labour.

Through hxaro, risk is distributed so that, in the case of environmental failure, each family has its own alternatives. Thus the entire population of one area does not descend on any one other area, requiring that the resources be so widely shared that they will be of little use to anybody. A period of environmental failure in 1974 provided an excellent example of how the hxaro system works (Wiessner 1977). At that time, high winds had destroyed most of the mongongo nut crop in groves around /Xai/xai. Because of exceptionally heavy rainfall, game was scattered and gathering and snaring were difficult in the unusually high grasses. Plagues of insects and cattle disease made domestic foods scarce. By August, work effort had decreased as the !Kung said that there was nothing worth hunting or gathering. People spent much time sitting around, talking, making hxaro gifts and handicrafts, and eagerly gathering information about conditions in other areas from those who passed through /Xai/xai. Sharing broke down and those who found something to eat consumed it discreetly, as they knew there were too many others who would try to claim a share. By mid-September, families began to leave to visit relatives in other areas, 'because they missed them and wanted to do hxaro with them'. Within two weeks, 48 per cent of the population of /Xai/xai had scattered to the four winds, relieving the pressure on those who did remain.

Finally, through hxaro, means of reducing risk is effectively reproduced from generation to generation. Hxaro relationships are passed on in a family in a way which permits those who reciprocated well to be continued and those who did not to be quietly dropped and forgotten and still new ones added to meet changing needs.

The effect of hxaro on !Kung economics

Having argued that hxaro is a structured means of pooling risk – one of many possible ways of doing so – I will now return to the second point

made at the beginning of this paper – that hxaro has its own effect on !Kung economics, one that cannot be predicted from environmental variables alone. As a thorough discussion of the effect of hxaro on !Kung life is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly discuss how hxaro affects work effort and division of wealth.

Lee (1969) has shown that the Dobe !Kung enjoy a relatively short work-week of 12–15 hours. Other !Kung in areas with different resources have a slightly longer one (Marshall 1976) but, nonetheless, Lee's point holds – the !Kung do not spend nearly as much time as they could in the food quest. Today, with the introduction of wage-labour and opportunities to purchase highly desired items, the !Kung continue to choose a work strategy which allows them ample 'leisure' time. If the environment had a strong determining influence on the economy, as is frequently hypothesized, then one would expect to find some limiting environmental factor which makes the !Kung 'underproductive'. For instance, a recent analysis of Lee's data by Blurton Jones and Sibly (1978) has shown that the average birth spacing of four years for the Dobe !Kung, in combination with a tempo of gathering one out of every two to three days, is optimal for an individual's reproductive success. However, they point out that their analysis does not explain why women do not gather more nuts at the end of the wet season and store them for the dry season, why the men do not help more with gathering when they are not hunting and so on. More detailed ecological studies may come up with an answer as to why the !Kung enjoy so much leisure all year round, but I doubt it. Instead, I argue that the limits on time the !Kung put into the food quest is partially the result of people preventing themselves from being exploited in their relationships of reciprocity, and is partially due to the amount of time put into the 'business of hxaro'.

First of all, it must be emphasized that, just because only 12–15 hours a week are put into procuring and preparing food, the remaining hours are not necessarily ones of leisure. Many hours are put into maintaining critical social relations. Participating adequately in hxaro involves taking the time to make or remake gifts (some pieces of beadwork take three to seven days of concentrated work), gathering information about who has and who is in need, and finally making sure that one gets one's fair share of goods and resources. Showing interest in a relationship involves collecting, as much as it does giving. The !Kung say that a person must make a debtor want to reciprocate. Thus, studies measuring how much time is spent in the food quest yield a short week, but if

the hours spent in the business of social relations are added to these, a 14-hour work-week can quickly become a 40-hour one.

Secondly, in reciprocal relations, one means that a person uses to prevent being exploited, in a relationship whose terms are merely that the one who has gives to the one who needs, is to prevent him or herself from becoming a 'have' more than his or her share of the time. As mentioned earlier, men who have killed a number of large animals sit back for a pause to enjoy reciprocation. Women gather enough for their families for a few days, but rarely more. Those working for wages in Namibia today hold their jobs for a few months or even a few years, supporting others with their income, but eventually quit work and take time to sit back and 'rest' and let others support them.

And so, in deciding whether or not to work on a certain day, a !Kung may assess debts and debtors, decide how much wild-food harvest will go to family, close relatives and others to whom he or she really wants to reciprocate, versus how much will be claimed by freeloaders. A person may consider whether the extra effort is worthwhile, or if time would be better spent gathering more information about the status of partners and trying to collect from one of them. In the latter case, people will reduce their work effort and either enjoy their leisure time or put more effort into evaluating and reaffirming social relations. Limiting work effort over the long run can result in bringing in a lower-than-possible mean income in exchange for reaffirming a strong hold in social relations necessary for reducing the variance around the mean. Such a mean-variance contradiction would be less likely to occur in a society which depends primarily on private storage to reduce risk. There, an increase in work effort could at once secure a higher mean income with a lower variance.

Distribution of wealth, like work effort, is strongly influenced by hxaro. Today, even though !Kung families in one community make a living in a variety of ways, some having a cash income and others not, 'wealth' is still remarkably evenly distributed. 'Wealth' here is measured by number of possessions, since every person inherits rights to one or two n!ores. It might be added that number of possessions also closely reflects number of hxaro partners – 75 per cent of the variation in number of possessions can be accounted for by number of hxaro partners. Table 3.3 shows the number of possessions by category for each of 14 households in three camps at /Xai/xai. Comparison of number of possessions poses a problem as the !Kung have no set standards of equivalence. To avoid attaching meaningless monetary values to each

item, a household's possessions are put into one of six categories – beadwork, clothing, blankets, hunting-gathering equipment, kitchenware and livestock. These categories are very general and contain goods of varying quality – store-bought and handmade goods, traditional and non-traditional goods, etc. – nonetheless, they should give the reader some approximate idea of the distribution of goods among !Kung households.

As can be seen in Table 3.3, differences in number of possessions among individual households in Camps A and F are minimal. Some of the small differences which do exist can be the result of making a survey at one point in time when some household may have many debts and others many debtors. The residents of both camps have a more traditional life-style than those of other camps at /Xai/xai such as Camp B, whose members regularly engage in wage-labour, sale of crafts and some agriculture, thereby having much higher cash income. Members of Camp B have roughly twice as many items of clothing and blankets as those of A and F and four times as many head of livestock, but similar amounts of beadwork, hunting–gathering equipment and kitchenware. However, Camp B had recently received many visitors from Tsumkwe, the settlement scheme in Namibia, and many items of clothing and blankets were recent gifts. Later these will probably filter out to the rest of the surrounding population.

Table 3.3 shows that many households have more possessions than they can carry (for example six heavy blankets!) and yet still spend four to eight months a year either at other sites in the bush or visiting other areas. When away, they either give away many possessions before leaving or, more frequently, store them with friends until their return. Mobility seems to be a deterrent to accumulating possessions only for members of Camp A who express a desire not to get used to sleeping with more blankets than they can carry into the bush. The most common explanation given by a !Kung today for having a high cash income and an average amount of possessions is that 'my people kill me for things', in other words, my partners in reciprocity are merciless about asking for gifts. Even though exchange of hxaro gifts is supposed to be roughly equal, if one family has much more than others, demands on them increase and they are expected to be more generous than those who have less. (The exceptional case of livestock will be discussed below.)

It cannot be argued today for /Xai/xai residents that 'wealth is a burden' (Sahlins 1968), nor can it be argued that !Kung have little interest

Table 3.3 Possessions of /Xai/xai and residents

	Camp A						Camp B					
Age category,[a] I.D. no. of adult members of household	3	3	4	5	5		3	3	4	4		
	367	557	324	333			518	188	520	512		
	368	572	330	511	329	x	519	341	521	513	x	s.d.
Items						s.d.						
Beadwork	13	11	17	12	12	13	2.4	15	15	15	8	13.3	3.5	11	11	26	12	15	7.4
Clothing	10	5	7	6	6	6.8	1.9	9	8	8	6	7.8	1.3	17	20	13	18	17	2.9
Blankets	2	3	2	2	2	2.2	0.5	4	5	2	4	3.8	1.3	4	6	6	2	4.5	1.9
Hunting and gathering equipment	4	6	4	4	3	4.2	1.1	3	3	8	2	4	2.7	0	2	3	9	3.5	3.9
Kitchenware	10	10	10	9	9	9.6	0.6	8	9	11	8	9	1.4	6	9	21	15	12.8	6.7
Livestock	3	0	0	0	0	0.6	1.3	3	2	0	0	1.3	1.5	3	4	9	4	4.3	3.4

[a] Age category 3 = adults with young children; 4 = adults with mature children; 5 = old, partially dependent adults.
[b] Possessions of 329 were multiplied by 150% to make them equivalent to those in a household with two adult members.

in material possessions. Most possessions, from traditional ostrich egg-shell beads, to shoes, to watches, are highly desired; and many !Kung are really torn between the desire to accumulate goods and the desire to remain within a secure system of mutual help. It is not uncommon to see a person work hard for a while, accumulate goods, come under more and more pressure to give them away in hxaro, and finally give in and redistribute them. The person inevitably gives in (or moves away for work), partially because risk is high and he or she needs to remain within the reciprocity system, and partially because the ideology of generosity and equality is such a strong force in !Kung life. A person who has been stingy for too long feels miserable. There are a few items that can bridge this conflict, like record-players which a person can keep while sharing the music.

The above discussion does not imply that a system like hxaro holds the !Kung society static and impervious to change. Quite the opposite. Today, as new opportunities and priorities are introduced with change, the !Kung are restructuring their means of confronting risk. As some /Xai/xai !Kung begin to engage in agriculture, storage is beginning to play a role in reducing risk. In the recent past when the !Kung first acquired some livestock, they would slaughter them so that the meat could be distributed. Today, livestock has moved out of the system of reciprocity and become an asset like the land. A person can own several cows (see Table 3.3) if milk is shared, can own donkeys if they are lent to others, or if the large nut harvest which can be carried in by donkeys is shared. Some !Kung are now regularly and successfully planting crops and do not meet with social disapproval if they do not share their harvest widely, as long as they maintain their reciprocal obligations in other ways. Thus, more items have moved into the realm of private property and storage exists side by side with hxaro as a means of reducing risk.

At Tsumkwe, the settlement scheme in Namibia, hxaro seems to be undergoing another transformation. Until 1976, the primary source of income for Tsumkwe residents was either welfare or wage-labour. The central problems that face the !Kung living there are insecurity of jobs and serious conflicts arising from many people living in one place with no formal mediation to settle differences. Consequently, many San maintain regular hxaro with relatives in Botswana to keep up alternate residences in times of conflict or unemployment. However, within Tsumkwe itself, the hxaro system appears to be developing into one in which people exchange gifts to smooth over relations rather than to gain access to goods and resources. The number of hxaro partnerships within the area has greatly increased among those frequently employed, who can not just pack up and leave in times of conflict. The flow of gifts between Tsumkwe residents is very intense, and, even though the residents have the cash and available store to purchase their own goods, 65 per cent of the possessions of Tsumkwe residents included in the sample had been received through hxaro. A person does not buy himself a blanket, but rather buys one, gives it to a partner and eventually will receive one in return. It is intriguing to think that hxaro may have changed from a trade network in the past, to a system for giving !Kung access to each others' goods, resources and assistance, and today is undergoing still another transformation at Tsumkwe to a gift exchange which smooths over social conflicts.

As change continues, hxaro, a system which has offered the !Kung security and leisure for generations, will probably continue to operate in more-and-more-limited spheres as the !Kung reorganize to take advantage of new opportunities. As this happens, so will its effects on other spheres of !Kung life be diminished.

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Notes

1 For excellent descriptions of the !Kung in these areas see Lee (1969, 1972), Lee and DeVore (1976) and Marshall (1976).

2 This paper is primarily based on discussions with 59 !Kung San adults and 14 children about hxaro in 1974–5. This sample consists of all cooperative members and visitors of three randomly chosen camps at /Xai/xai, and 14 more individuals selected from their lists of hxaro partners to cross-check the information. Each person was asked about how hxaro operates, how he or she feels about giving and receiving, balance in partnerships, etc. as well as to list each hxaro partner and give their age, sex, location, area of landrights, genealogical relation to ego, kin relation to ego, and intensity of relationship between the two. This information was then supplemented by taking a tally of each person's possessions and determining their origins. The data yielded information on 955 partnerships and 1483 possessions. Data on partnerships were checked again on a return trip in 1977 when people were asked to list

their hxaro partners once more. The two lists were remarkably comparable with only a few alterations. For a more detailed analysis of the data see Wiessner (1977).

3 Here it is difficult to separate cause from effect – hxaro with close relatives in a camp usually marks a relationship of many years of friendship and mutual assistance while that with !Kung in other camps places specific obligations within a population of potential partners.

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4. Descended from father, belonging to country: rights to land in the Australian Western Desert[1]

ANNETTE HAMILTON

In the many debates over allocation of people to land among hunters and gatherers, the Australian evidence has repeatedly been seen as problematic. Lee (1978) has already suggested the outlines of this debate, between proponents of the patrilineal territorial band and those of the flexibly organized bilateral band. He suggests that the 'patrilineal theorists . . . seek to impose an Australian model of clans on the rest of the world'. The purpose of the present paper is to show that the imposition of an Australian model of clans is by no means a *fait accompli* in certain parts of Australia itself, and that the anthropologists' theorizing (fetishing?) at the ideological level mirrors the efforts of Aborigines in certain areas to construct and impose a coherent theory of patrilineal inheritance to sites and to establish patrivirilocally organized local groups, at least at their own ideological level. Why this should be so, and the problems that stand in their way, form the main focus of this discussion.

Without wishing to bore everyone with the outlines of this debate yet again, it might be worthwhile to go back to Stanner's paper, 'Aboriginal territorial organization: estate, range, domain and regime' (1965). Stanner, replying to Hiatt's criticism of Radcliffe-Brown (Hiatt 1962), claimed that what Radcliffe-Brown had presented was an 'ideal-type' model. In spite of the Weberian overtones, we might note that this view is closer to that of Lévi-Strauss, who has repeatedly stressed that the proper concerns of anthropology are with the fundamental structures beneath the superficial distortions and apparent contradictions to be found at the level of mere empirical reality, or even in the 'native model' of reality (Lévi-Strauss 1963:281; 1968:350). He considers that observable phenomena, such as real 'hordes', are at best 'a series of expressions, each partial and incomplete, of the same underlying structure, which they reproduce in several copies without ever com-