

African Odyssey

By JOHN SEDGWICK

It was June 1951 and the family of Laurence Marshall, the retired president of Massachusetts' Raytheon Company, had just arrived in Africa for a vacation trek in the Kalahari Desert. As the Marshalls prepared to set off on the great plain, the residents of Windhoek (the capital of South West Africa—now Namibia—which borders on the Kalahari) warned them of the "wild Bushmen" who lived there—a treacherous, bloodthirsty lot who loved to sneak up on white people and shoot them with tiny poisoned arrows.

But the Marshalls pressed on. Near a watering hole they encountered a tribe called the !Kung San (the exclamation point designates a clicking noise that is a staple of their language; thus the pronunciation would be roughly "click-Kung"). The !Kung proved to be a gentle people who reserved their poisoned arrows for the wildebeests that were one of the few luxuries of their hunter-gatherer existence. As Laurence Marshall's daughter Elizabeth later wrote: "At first only a few Bushmen were at the watering hole, but as the news spread that we were friendly, more and more people came to visit us and receive presents of tobacco and salt.... Also, most of the Bushmen had never seen a European before. None had ever seen a European woman, and they came by dozens to sit together to observe my mother [Lorna] and me."

The Marshalls were doing some observing themselves. And one member of the !Kung stood out—a charming, bright-eyed girl named N!ai (the exclamation point again designates a click). N!ai learned to play "Pease Porridge Hot" with Elizabeth. "She was full of laughter and games," recalls Mrs. Marshall.

Over the next 28 years the Marshalls returned to the bush seven times. N!ai grew up to adulthood; and the !Kung were reined in on a government settlement and "civilized." Throughout, son John Marshall was shooting miles of film. Now, John's filmed record, edited to 58 minutes and featuring N!ai's translated narration as a voice-over, is scheduled to appear on PBS this month as "N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman," the second episode of a new series called *Odyssey*. The

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12-week series is the brainchild of independent producer Michael Ambrosino, also the creator of PBS's *Nova*. In other weeks, as its name implies, the series will range far and wide, exploring such topics as the Inca Empire in Peru and the work of anthropologist Franz Boas.

The pictures on these pages suggest the intimacy that grew between the Marshalls and the !Kung. Having lived with the !Kung off and on for a total of three years, John Marshall feels he has taken on some of the !Kung's character, including some of the sense of loneliness instilled by centuries of desert living.

At the start of each visit, the !Kung would fill the Marshalls in on all the tribal news (including divorces, which were quite common). That's not to say that all barriers broke down. Only John really learned the language. As he filmed, John found that the Bushmen expressed little self-consciousness in front of the camera. At first they had little idea what the strange black box on the tripod was doing. And in their view it would have been impolite for them to ask.

N!ai quickly established herself as the star of the long-running production. John filmed her marriage at age 8 to a 13-year-

Two generations of a Boston family spent three decades filming a tribe in transition

The Laurence Marshall family went from Boston to the bush to compile a 28-year filmed record of their relationship with the !Kung San. That relationship, chronicled in the *Odyssey* episode "N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman," became an intimate one, as evidenced by the photo on the opposite page of Laurence's wife Lorna giving a ride to a !Kung child. Right and far right: N!ai (shown here as a youngster and in early womanhood), the !Kung girl who grew to adulthood before the Marshalls' camera and who symbolizes the changes that "civilization" brought to the !Kung. While living with the gentle tribe, the Marshalls coped with the lack of amenities. At bottom right, father Laurence peers from his home in the bush. Below, son John Marshall prepares to film while a Bushman acts as photographer's assistant.



old medicine man named Gunda. Later he filmed her first menstruation dance, during which she was closed up in a grass hut while other women danced outside. (Usually the women bared their bottoms for the ritual, but they wouldn't in front of John.) On John's last visit to the !Kung in 1978, he set N!ai in front of the camera to talk about her life. A confessional stream poured out—about how she had been dead set against getting married, how she refused to sleep with her husband, how she later had affairs with other !Kung but finally came to appreciate her husband and be faithful to him. For the !Kung San,

such candor is not unusual. "They're like a big encounter group," says John.

Using N!ai as the focus, the film flashes back to life in the bush when she was a girl and contrasts it with her existence today. By the early Sixties, the South African government, under its apartheid policy, had begun to establish reservations for the Bushmen. The Bushmen's lands, once 15,000 acres, are now only 3000. The Dutch Reformed Church has built schools that the !Kung children are expected to attend. The Bushmen are no longer hunters and gatherers; their food is an unpleasant "mealie meal" purchased at a grocery

store. They wear Western-style shirts and trousers instead of breechcloths. Rather than calling out N!ai's medicine-man husband to dance the fearsome "half-death" (a rite shown in Marshall's film), which is supposed to ward off evil spirits and cure disease, the !Kung repair to the local clinic. They earn trinket money by bartering handmade bows and arrows.

And what of N!ai now? She supports herself in part by being filmed by tourists—much to the envy of her fellow !Kung. That the tourists are there at all is due to the vacation the Laurence Marshall family took three decades ago. ■