



GENDER LESSONS

Of all my years of field research among the Basarwa, or “Bushmen” peoples of southern Africa, a casual conversation is among my most vivid recollections. Offhandedly, during lunch, I offered additional food to my native-born field assistant. I told him that he could finish my meal because men need more food than women. My assistant looked at me as though I were



crazy. Why would he need extra food from me? He said he could not imagine why either sex would need more or less nourishment than the other. Subsequently, every one of the Basarwa I interviewed on this subject, without exception and regardless of sex, said boys, girls and all adults need the same amount of food. Why would anyone think otherwise?

FROM THE KALAHARI

It is in our nature to make assumptions. Our distant ancestors lived by rules of thumb: quick reactions to threatening situations usually meant the difference between life and death. Today we live in a far different world, one in which the general, useful suppositions of the past are often misleading or wrong, perhaps even dangerous or damaging. Western girls, for example, are cautioned not to eat too much because of their figures. Their brothers suffer no such prohibition; it is accepted that growing boys need more food than girls. Western eating disorders such as anorexia are not found in Africa and other parts of the world. ■ Science teaches us to be suspicious of our assumptions, to test and retest them in order to find some approximation of the truth — or a version of the truth that, to the best of available knowledge, can hold up to the harshest scrutiny.

BY SUSAN KENT WITH JAMES SCHULTZ

Basarwa men and women come together to chop up melons at one of their camps. Photos courtesy of Susan Kent.



Using a spear as a pestle, a Basarwa woman chops up meat. Photo courtesy of Susan Kent.

My years of studying the formerly nomadic peoples of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa have persuaded me that certain of our Western assumptions about the “natural” roles of men and women in society are just that: cultural constructs that have little to do with biology, however different that biology may superficially appear. There is no innate program, no biological imperative that dictates gender interactions and drives behavior. We are as free, or as imprisoned, by culturally imposed gender assumptions as we allow ourselves to be.

A DIFFERENT LIFE IN THE BUSH

Since 1987 I've spent considerable time in rural Botswana, a country bordered by Zimbabwe on the north, South Africa to the south and east, and Namibia to the west. The Basarwa people with whom I have lived occupy the central portion of the Kalahari Desert, near the Central Kalahari

Game Reserve. Since 1995 Botswana government policies have encouraged the formerly nomadic hunter-gatherer Basarwa into settlement and limited pastoralism. Although their lives may be judged bleak by affluent Western society, I find them a warm, engaging people from whom all of us have something to learn.

Material culture among Basarwa is not linked to gender, as it tends to be in highly developed Western societies. There is an absence of gender-specific objects, and gender differences are not emphasized. For example, men and women do not keep their belongings in separate containers. Nor are tools tied to gender. A digging stick is no more a female tool than it is a male tool. Both sexes use it in a variety of ways: as a walking stick, hunting club, pestle or digging stick. Spears are technically associated with hunting and males, but are multipurpose in function and non-sex-specific in use. Women occasionally use their husbands' spears for a wide range of tasks, from stirring porridge, to cutting a piece of hide, to trimming toenails.



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(Left) After the hunt, a Basarwa woman extracts bone marrow from the bounty. (Right) A Basarwa woman pounds cucumbers while her daughter sits nearby. Photos courtesy of Susan Kent.

A few activities are considered more in the male or the female domain. There is, however, great flexibility within these categories, and there is no stigma when boundaries are crossed. For instance, even though the gathering of plants is a task often associated with women, a male hunter rarely returns, successful or not, without at least one wild plant of some kind. In fact, men collect about 40 percent of all wild plants. And while women do not generally hunt with bows and arrows, hunting is not exclusively a male activity. While hunting, women kill small animals with snares or use digging sticks as clubs.

HEAVEN ON EARTH?

Have the Basarwa created a kind of paradise, albeit sparse and impoverished? Certainly not. There are problems, just as in any human society. One of the chief difficulties is absence of established authority to settle disputes (official government visits to the bush are infrequent). In the past, disgruntled individuals simply moved away; as nomads, they were going to move in any case. Now they travel in different directions to stay with different groups. Today, because the Basarwa are more settled and move less often, unsolved problems between people commonly escalate into verbal or physical violence.

Males in Western society hit females to intimidate and dominate, which ultimately translates into social, political and economic ascendancy. My observation is that Basarwa men hit Basarwa women for the same reasons they fight with men: for revenge, to settle simmering disputes and during drinking bouts. Fights between Basarwa women are almost as frequent



and occur for the same reasons. Women also start fights and hit men and other women about as often as men do. After fighting with men, Basarwa women do not necessarily acquiesce to their will or vice versa.

In 1993, I polled 65 students at Old Dominion and 31 of the Basarwa to determine infant gender preferences. Only 11 percent of the American students said they had no gender preference, whereas 87 percent of the Basarwa said the sex of their child didn't matter. The preferred sex of the child was significantly different between male and female students but wasn't different at all between male and female Basarwa.

Gender preference and gender bias pervade our culture. There is no ideal culture, of course, but some are more inherently equal than others. As we in the West move toward more diversity in our schools, our work, and even in our families, we will be forced to confront the realities of other cultures and the problems of our own. If gender equality is a goal that Westerners desire, then we can work to achieve it. There is nothing to stop us.



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