

Film Guide *for Tug of War*

Synopsis of the Film

In this film, a group of !Kung boys between the ages of eight and fifteen improvise a tug of war with a piece of castoff rubber hose. A tug of war in our society is highly competitive: each side tries to pull the other over a line in order to win. But !Kung children do not see games this way. Though they strive to improve their own performance in games, they are not encouraged to do so at the expense of other children. “Winners” and “losers” are unknown to them (1).

There are two main reasons for the lack of competitive spirit in !Kung games. In the first place, meaningful competition demands that all the players in a game be of roughly equal ability. !Kung bands are quite small(2), so the chances are small that a child will have many age-mates within his band. As a result, !Kung play groups are almost always composed of children of widely differing ages(3). Competition in these groups would have no purpose.

Second, !Kung adults do not value competition very highly. They do not respect the warrior(1), and fights between bands are unheard of(2). Competition, they feel, would create inequality, inequality would breed jealousy, and jealousy could lead to violence. The !Kung abhor physical and verbal violence: they have several institutions, such as meat-sharing and reciprocal gift-giving, which serve to prevent social tensions from reaching violent levels(3). !Kung parents, then, do not provide competitive role models for their children to follow.

There is a !Kung myth which tells how the fate of the Bushmen was once decided by a tug of war. “Long long ago the Bushmen and the black people [the Bantu] were one nation. One day the Creator commanded them to have a tug of war. The black people were on one side, the Bushmen on the other, in equal numbers. The rope the Creator made for them to pull on had two parts to it, which were knotted together in the middle. One part of the rope, the part given to the black people to pull on, was made of the hides of animals, which had been cut into long, pliable strips and twisted together. (Such a rope is called a riem, in Afrikaans.) The half of the rope that was given to the Bushmen was made of -!gwi (Sansevieria fibers). The tug of war began, and the rope broke. The black people had the riem end, the Bushmen had the -!gwi end. This, we were told, meant that the black people got the best things: they got cattle, sheep, goats, and milk to drink; they also got the knowledge of hoeing and planting. The Bushmen got the less-good things: they make their living as best they can with -!gwi. They make bowstrings and snares with it, and thus they live. /Qui, telling this story to us one day, said that the Bushmen had been foolish to take the fiber end of the rope, Laughing, he said that he wished the pulling could be repeated now, He would see that the Bushmen took the riem end(4).”

1. Harpending 1972:90-93
 2. 21.3 people, on the average (L. Marshall 1960:328)
 3. Konner i.p.; see the films by John Marshall (1973a, 1974a, 1974b)

1, John Marshall (1973b)
 2. L. Marshall 1960:336
 3. L. Marshall 1961, passim
 4. L. Marshall, pers. Comm. But see Thomas (1959:23) for a slightly abridged version of this same myth.

Pronunciation Guide

! Kung	KOONG
riem	REEM
-! Gwi	GWEE
/Qui	KWEE

References

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1972 !Kung Bushman Childhood. PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University.

Konner MJ

i.p. Maternal care, infant behavior, and development among the Zhun/twa !Kung] Bushmen. In RB Lee and I DeVore, editors, *Studies of Bushman Hunter-Gatherers*; Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Marshall J

1973a The Lion Game. Film, Documentary Educational Resources (D.E.R.)

1973b Playing with Scorpions. Film, D.E.R.

1974a Baobab Play. Film, D.E.R.

1974b Children Throw Toy Assegais. Film, D.E.R.

Marshall L

1960 !Kung Bushman bands. *Africa*, 30:325-355.

1961 Sharing, talking, and giving: relief of social tensions among !Kung Bushmen, *Africa*, 31:231-249.

Thomas, E Marshall

1959 *The Harmless People*. New York, Alfred Knopf.

Related Films

BAOBAB PLAY

(John Marshall 1974, 8 minutes).

A group of boys throw sticks, leaves and berries at each other from their perches in a large baobab tree. Available from D.E.R. (see inside front cover for address).

CHILDREN THROW TOY ASSEGAI

(John Marshall 1974, 4 minutes)

A group of boys throw toy spears at a tree, trying to stick them into the bark. Available from D.E.R.

THE LION GAME

(John Marshall 1973, 3.5 minutes). A young man plays a lion and is "hunted" and "killed" by the younger boys. Available from D.E.R.

PLAYING WITH SCORPIONS

(John Marshall 1973, 3 minutes).

A group of boys play with scorpions, knowing that they cannot sting without striking. Available from D.E.R.

Photographed and Directed by John K. Marshall
Edited by Frank Galvin

Production Assistants: Timothy Asch, Marilyn Wood
 Produced by Documentary Educational Resources.

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Film Notes by Seth Reichlin

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