

# The Wasp Nest

A STUDY GUIDE

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THE WASP NEST

A Study Guide

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Study Guide by Seth Reichlin\*

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**Narration:**

!Kung women, particularly those who are closely related within a band, spend a great deal of time with each other. Gathering wild foods is a basic subsistence activity in Nyae Nyae. Men distribute the game they kill to everyone living in or visiting a band, and maintain a network of favors and obligations which binds people together. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for providing only for their immediate families.

Wild foods the women gather depend on the season and on the location. At !O, in the mangetti forest, the basic food is mangetti nuts, but the women supplement these with sweet, fresh *lole* berries and *sha* roots. Gathering is a serious, often **exhausting activity, which older women undertake out of necessity.** However, younger women and their friends from other bands often go gathering for fun. One gray day at 10, the following women and children went out on a gathering expedition:

**Di!ai**

**N!ai, Di!ai's daughter**

**Debe, Di!ai's son**

*IiKushay*, Di!ai's cousin

**#Gao**, *IiKushay*'s son

!Ungka, *IiKushay*'s sister

*Kxualla*, a young woman from another band.

\*My thanks are due to Timothy Asch, Lorna Marshall, Frank Galvin, John Marshall, and Richard Lee, for providing information and insights about this film. I would like to thank Curriculum Development Associates of Washington DC for a grant to produce this Study Guide.

N!ai and Kxua//a found a sha root, which they squabbled over laughingly. Later, N!ai found a wasp nest, and led her friend Kxua//a and her relative //Kushay in baiting the insects. As the day wore on, Debe became **restless**. **Di!ai** asked N!ai to take Debe home and mind him, so she could get some work done. N!ai refused, and walked off to join the younger women.

\* \* \*

### Questions and Comments:

#### 1. Introduction

In 1964 there were about 45 thousand Bushmen living in the Kalahari Desert of Southern Africa (Lee 1965:12; see Figure 1). Most of them worked on European farms or Bantu cattle posts, but about 20% of them were full time hunters and gatherers (ibid.:21). The Wasp Nest was filmed in 1957, in a part of South West Africa where the Bushmen all pursued this traditional occupation (see Figures 2 and 3).

About three years after The Wasp Nest was shot, the !Kung Bushmen of Nyae Nyae were removed from their homes and resettled at Tsumkwe, S.W.A., where there is a government post and a mission of the Dutch Reformed Church. The government is trying to teach the !Kung to herd goats and raise small crops of corn (ibid.:32; L. Marshall 1965:273).

## II. THE ECOLOGY OF GATHERING AMONG THE !KUNG BUSHMEN

### A. What is the role of gathering in !Kung Bushman subsistence?

**Like most "hunters and gatherers", the !Kung are mainly gatherers.** Careful studies have shown that wild plants contribute 60 to 80% of their diet (L. Marshall 1960:335; Lee 1968:33). Plant foods are easy to find, relatively easy to collect, and always available. The Kalahari, technically a "semi-desert", supports about 85 species of edible plants, which provide the !Kung with food throughout the year (Story 1958; L. Marshall 1960:335; Lee 1968:35). Game, on the other hand, is relatively rare, and the yields from hunting are quite unpredictable. A hunter has only a 23% chance of killing **a big game animal on a single day, while a woman is always certain** of finding edible plants (Lee 1968:40).

In the Nyae Nyae area, where The Wasp Nest was filmed, the !Kung derive an adequate living from gathering and hunting. By no means do they live luxuriously. All of them are slender, and while they eat a balanced diet, there does not seem to be quite enough food to support their vigorous activity (L. Marshall 1960:335; Truswell and Hansen 1968).

Richard Lee has studied the subsistence of the !Kung Bushmen at Dobe, about 50 km east of the center of Nyae Nyae (see Figure 2). In contrast to the people of Nyae Nyae, the !Kung at Dobe have plenty of food, which they obtain without much effort. In fact, women in the Dobe area only spend about 23% of their time gathering food, or about one day out of every four (Lee 1965:99; 1969). Dobe men spend about 40% of their time hunting. Gathering and hunting combined provide 108% of the minimum daily requirement of calories and 155% of the minimum daily requirement of protein (Lee 1968:39). According to these figures, a !Kung woman who spent only 31.5% of her time gathering could provide an adequate diet for herself, her husband, her children, and her aged **relatives.**

Compared to the !Kung at Nyae Nyae (where this film was made), **the !Kung in Dobe are an "affluent society".** Subsistence is easier at Dobe because Dobe has one basic ecological advantage over Nyae Nyae. The Dobe !Kung obtain most of their food - 59% of their calories and 61% of their protein - from a single source, the mangetti\* nut (ibid.). Near Dobe, many of the mangetti forests are within a half day's walk from permanent water, which means that the !Kung there can (and do) make daily round trips between the waterhole and the mangetti forest.

At Nyae Nyae, on the other hand, the mangetti forests are generally much farther away from the waterholes. For instance, #Toma's band, whose members appear in The Wasp Nest, lived about 25 miles from the nearest mangetti forest. The only way for them to exploit this forest regularly would be for them to carry water to the forest, and hope that the rains would leave some small pools standing in the hollows of trees. To do this would be risky, and hard work as well, so in practice, the Nyae Nyae !Kung depend to a great extent on foods other than the mangetti **nut. Now mangetti nuts are a very "efficient" food; that is, they** have a high nutritive value relative to the amount of work that it takes to collect and prepare them (Lee 1969). Most other !Kung foods are less efficient than mangetti nuts. Therefore, the !Kung in Nyae Nyae had to spend more time gathering than the !Kung in Dobe in order to get the same amount of nutrition.

B. Why are the women collecting at !O?

The Wasp Nest was filmed at !a, in a mangetti forest about 18 miles northwest of Tsumkwe, S.W.A. The women in the film, except for Kxua//a, are members of #Toma's band, which had its permanent waterhole at Gautscha (see Figure 3). During the early summer (February) of 1958, #Toma's band moved north from Gautscha to **Tsumkwe to escape the mosquitos. But Tsumkwe was also malarial,** so the Marshalls took them by truck to !O. Two other bands were at !O at the same time: /Ti!kay's based at Tsumkwe, and Old !Gaishay's, based at Deboragu. Because there was only enough water at !O to support these two bands, the Marshalls trucked in water to give to #Toma's band.

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\*Ricinodendron rautenii

Most !Kung bands (≠Toma's was an exception) have some mangettis in their territory\*, and they generally locate their camps as close to the mangetti groves as possible. This is often difficult, because water and mangettis are seldom found together: mangctti trees grow on the crest of sand dunes, but permanent waterholes are always in the center of the valleys between the dunes. The separation of water from mangettis is mainly a problem in the dry winter, when there is water only at the permanent waterholes. But the summer rains often fill small pans near unexploited sections of the mangetti forests, and they sometimes leave water standing in hollow trees in the forests themselves. When a storm passes over a mangetti forest, the !Kung try to judge where the rain fell, and they set out for that point, hoping to find water caught in the trees. At to, for example, where The Wasp Nest was filmed, enough water had accumulated in the trees to support two of the three bands which were living there.

C. Why are the women collecting these particular plants?

According to Lee, !Kung women generally follow a well-defined strategy when gathering different kinds of plants. Depending on its taste, its nutritional value, and its availability, they rank each plant food on a scale of desirability. Women gathering, he says, will tend to exhaust all the "Class I" foods within a given area before they collect the "Class II" foods, and so on (1965:111, 160). Within a "class", foods which ripen first tend to be eaten first (ibid.:158).

The Wasp Nest shows that Lee's hypothesis does not always apply. lole berries and sha roots\*\* are Class III foods, while mangetti nuts are in Class I (1965:108). If Lee's hypothesis were always true, the women in the film would be collecting these plants because they had exhausted all the Class I and II foods in the neighborhood. But there were still mangetti nuts at !O when The Wasp Nest was made. It seems more likely that the women were collecting lole berries and sha roots for the sake of variety. ≠Toma's band stayed at !O for four days, and most of the time they ate nothing but mangetti nuts. After a while, though, they tired of this steady diet, and the women went out to collect some "dessert" foods. lole berries are sweet and tasty, and sha roots are particularly juicy during the summer.

\*For a discussion of the !territoryll, see below, page 6.

\*\*The scientific name of the lole berry is Grewia sp.; of the sha root, Vigna dinteri (Story 1958:27).

### III. SOCIOLOGY OF GATHERING AMONG !KUNG BUSHMEN

#### A. How important is gathering in the daily life of the !Kung?

Even in Nyae Nyae, the !Kung do not spend most of their time gathering or hunting. Lorna Harshall has said (pers. comm.) that women at Gautscha only gathered about once every other day.

**Much of the rest of their time, she has written, was taken up by talk:**

The !Kung are the most loquacious people I know. Conversation in a !Kung werft (camp) is a constant sound like the sound of a brook••. People cluster together in little groups during the day, talking, perhaps making artifacts at the same time. At night families talk late by their fires, or visit other family fires.... Individual singing of lyrical songs, ... **rhythmical** games, and ceremonial dances occupy the evenings as well, but mostly they are spent in talk (1961:232-3).

Richard Lee found essentially the same pattern among the !Kung of Dobe:

A woman gathers enough food in one day to feed her family for three or four days, and spends the rest of her time in camp, doing embroidery, visiting other **camps, or entertaining visitors from other camps.** **For each day at home, kitchen routines, such as cooking,** cracking nuts, collecting firewood, and fetching water, occupy one to three hours of her time. This rhythm of steady work and steady leisure is maintained throughout the year (1968:37).

#### B. Why does Kxua//a come along with the other women in the film?

Most of the people in The Wasp Nest are members of ~~#~~Toma's band, which was based at Gautscha (see Figure 3). Kxua//a, however, came from Old /Caishay's band, based at Deboragu. People from different bands often visit each other during the summer, when water is abundant and travel is easy. During the dry winter, water can be found only at the permanent waterholes, so that anyone visiting another band must carry all the water he needs for travelling. Because waterholes are often far apart, people generally stay at home during the winter.

Visits between bands have an economic purpose as well as a social one. Membership in !Kung bands is based on kinship: anyone may join a band if he or she is related by blood or marriage to a member of that band (L. Harshall 1960:345).

There is extensive intermarriage among the bands in Nyae Nyae, so that the !Kung in one band usually have relatives in several other bands (ibid.:353). In effect, then, people have considerable choice of bands in which they can live.

Each band has exclusive rights to a certain territory, which always includes a waterhole and the plant foods within reach of it. Different territories have different resources: !ubi, for instance, is well known for baobab fruits; *lai/ai* for wild orange trees; and Oobe for vegetable ivory palms (Lee 1965:138). Each territory has enough food and water to support some people throughout the year, but the number varies from territory to territory and from year to year within a territory.

Here is where the economic function of inter-band visiting becomes important. If one territory is having a bad season, people go off to visit their relatives in other bands which have more productive territories. Similarly, when a couple is deciding where to live after a man finishes his bride service, they often choose on the basis of the food and water available to each band (L. Marshall-1960:345). Because people have close relatives in many other bands, inter-band visiting has the effect of distributing people more or less evenly with respect to food and water; or, looking at it the other way, distributing food and water more or less evenly to all people (L. Marshall ibid.; Lee 1965:139). Both *Kxualla* and Oi!ai's relatives had territorial rights to the mangetti nuts at 10. *Kxualla* accompanied Oilai and Nlai on this particular gathering trip because of her long-standing friendship with Nlai.

C. Why didn't Oi!ai make N!ai take Debe home?

!Kung are very permissive with their children\*. According to Lorna Marshall,

Infants are nursed every time they indicate the slightest desire. Parents kiss their children with smacking kisses and seem never to tire of holding them or letting them climb over them.... The children are never left unattended. Their mothers take them when they go to the waterhole or out into the veld to gather the daily

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\*The Wasp Nest has a companion film, Debe's Tantrum (J. Marshall 1972), which shows Dilai's family getting ready for the gathering trip shown in The Wasp Nest. Debe wanted to be taken along, and when Oi!ai refused, Oebe threw a tantrum. As in The Wasp Nest, Di!ai asked Nlai to discipline Debe, which she tried to do. Debe was intractable, though, and Oi!ai shrugged her shoulders, picked him up, and carried him off. The Study Guide to Debe's Tantrum has more information and discussion about !Kung child rearing.

food, and watch over them constantly . . . . Their fathers and mothers carry them whenever the family moves (1960:341).

!Kung parents are afraid that **if** they discipline their children too harshly, they will become sick. Besides, the !Kung reason, young children don't know what they're doing, so how can one blame them for their actions? (L. Marshall, pers. conun.). The attitude of the !Kung toward confrontation may also influence their child-rearing practices. The !Kung are generally equable and peaceful. They abhor physical or verbal violence: in seventeen months, L. Marshall observed only four "flare-ups of discord" among them (1961:232, 246). This fear of confrontation in general may extend to child rearing as well.

D. Why did N!ai and Kxua//a bait the wasps?

John Marshall has described the attitude of the !Kung towards the dangers of their environment:

Nyae Nyae is not a dangerous place. People get lost, they miscalculate rainfall on long trips, and they step on snakes. There are accidents with poisoned arrows. Sometimes lions harass a village. Neither spiders nor scorpions bite fatally.

!Kung people, by and large, are not excited by the thought of dangerous encounters with each other or with the environment. They do not respect the warrior or admire the struggle against nature. Such follies, they believe, are provoked by the senseless.

**But children,** he says, "before the age of reason, indulge in baiting nature and tempting fate in small ways." (Playing with Scorpions, 1973).

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**Pronunciation Guide:**

The words here are listed in the order they appear in the Study r.l.i.d.e.

Bushman word:	Closest English equivalent:
!Kung	KOONG
Nyae Nyae	NĪ NĪ
!O	OH
/ole	TZOH-lay
sha	SHAH
~Di!ai	DEEK-ni
.N!ai	NI
Debe	DEH-beh
//Kushay	KOO-shay
≠Gao	KHOW
!Ungka	GOONG-kah
Kxua//a	KHWAN-tla
Tsumkwe	TSOOM-kway
Dobe	DOH-bay
≠Toma	TOH-mah
Gautscha	GOUT-shah
/Ti!kay	TWEE-kay
/Gaishay	GUY-shay
Deboragu	DEB-ra-goo

The correct pronunciation of the four !Kung clicks is as follows:

/ The dental click, produced by withdrawing the tip of the tongue from the back of the teeth. English speakers make **this sound to express disapproval: "tch, tch"**.

// The lateral click, produced by withdrawing the sides of the tongue from the sides of the mouth, while holding the tip of the tongue against the alveolar ridge. This *is* the sound English speakers make when clucking to a horse.

**Vowels in !Kung receive the "continentalll pronunciation, taking the same values as they have in French, German, Spanish, or Italian.**

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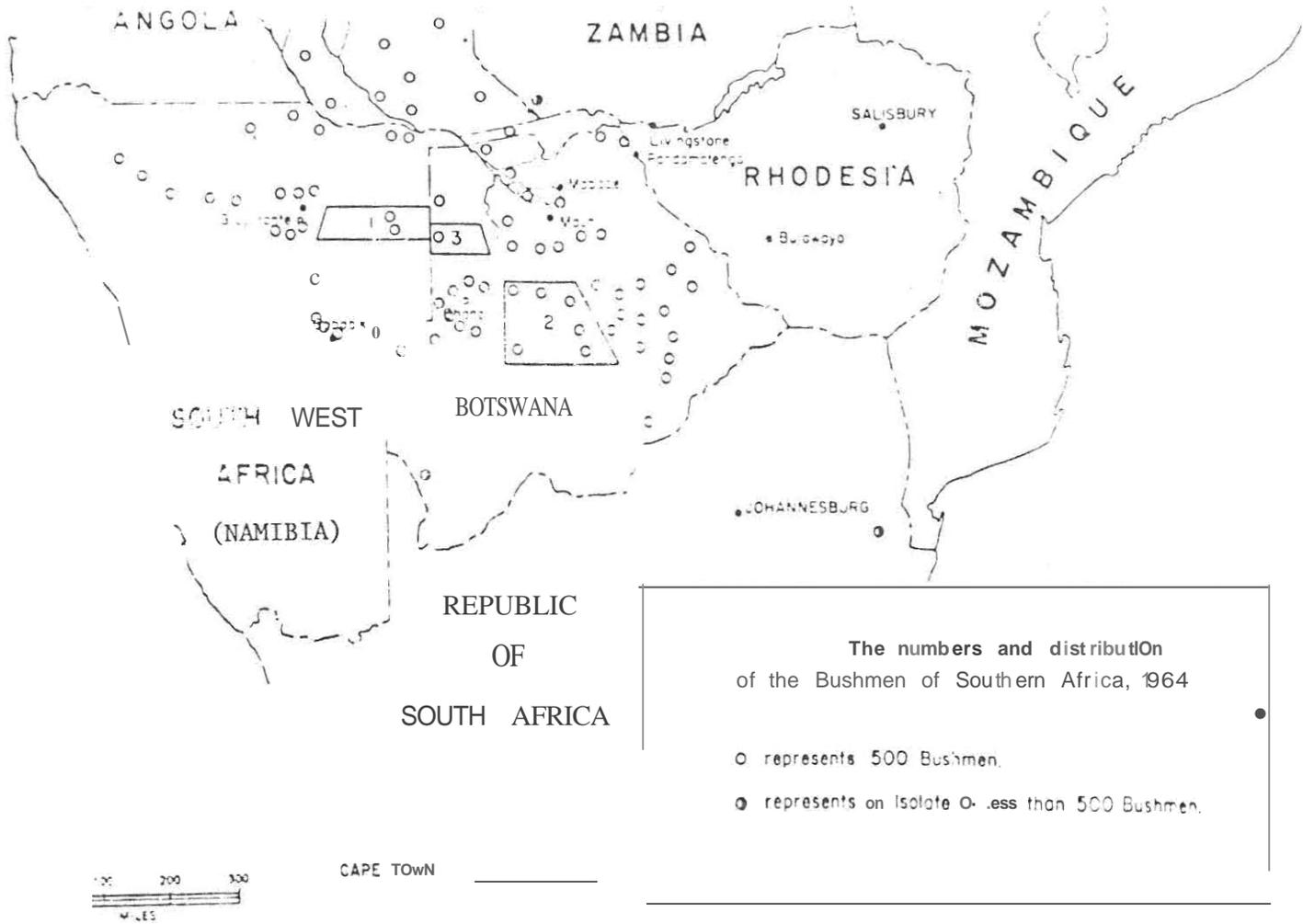


Figure 1: The numbers and distribution of the Bushmen of Southern Africa, 1964. After Lee (1965:14); used with the kind permission of the author.

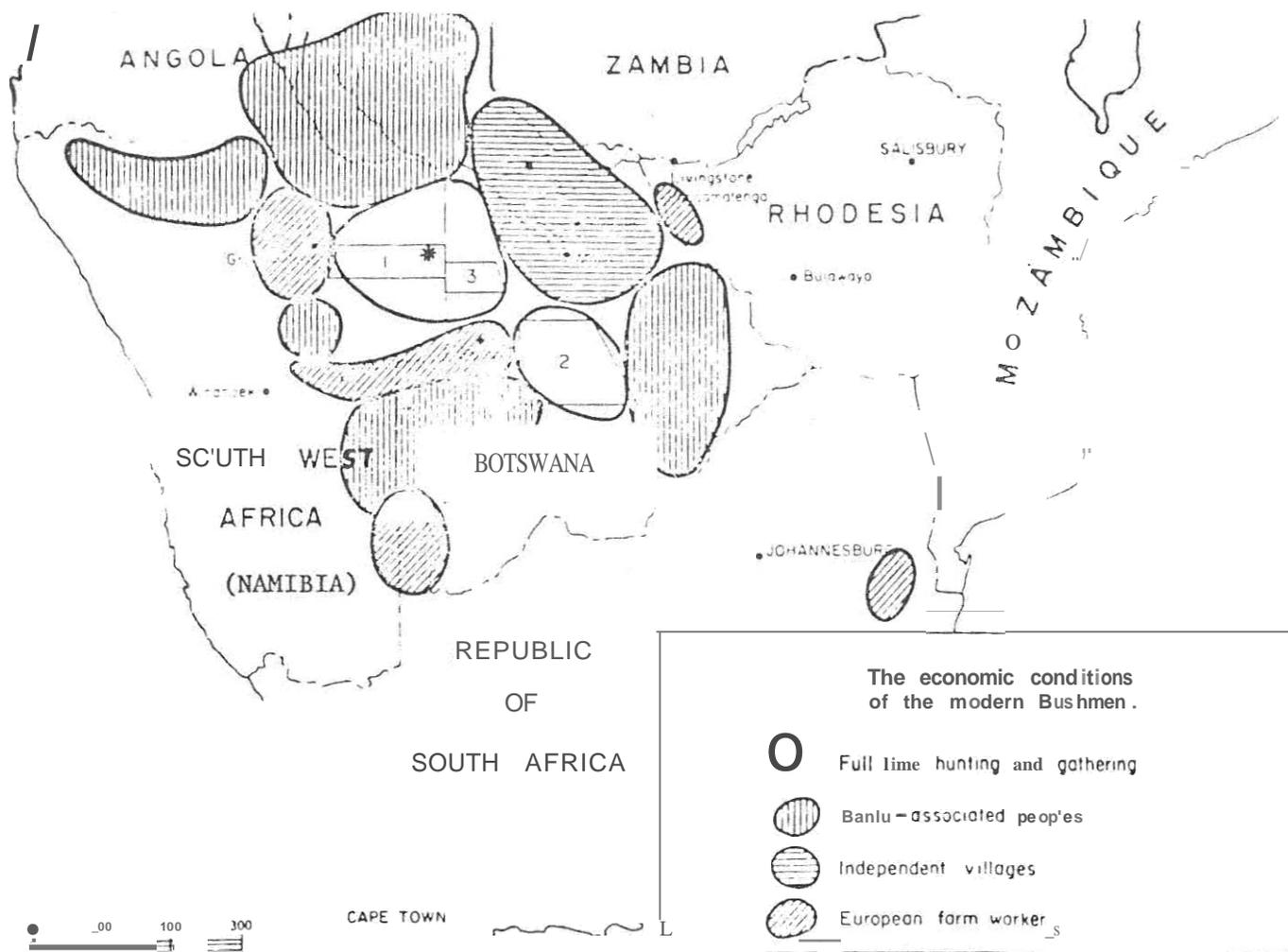


Figure 2: The economic conditions of the Bushmen in 1965. The star (\*) indicates the location of IO, where The Wasp Nest was filmed. After Lee (1965:23); used with the kind permission of the author.

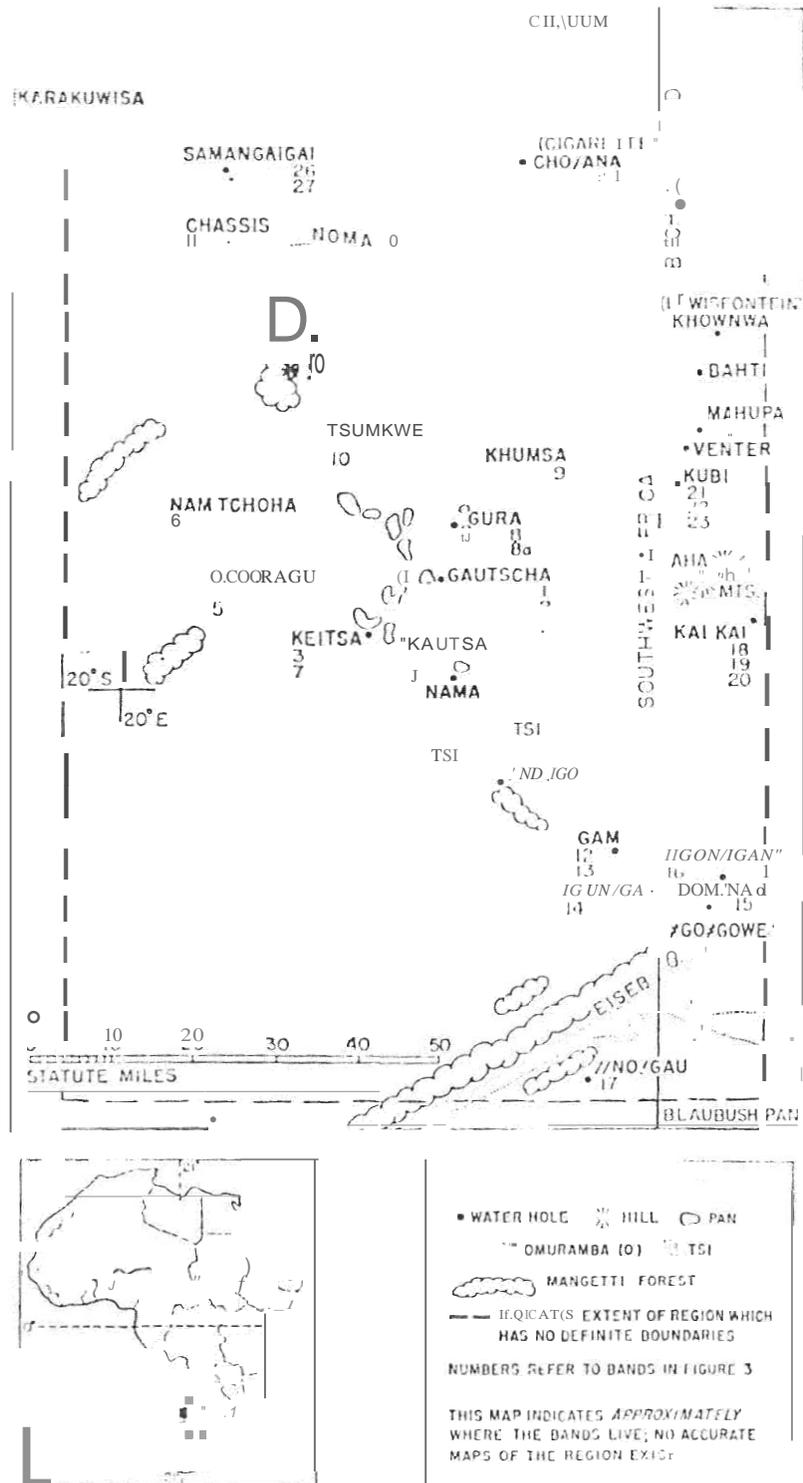


Figure 3: Map of the Nyae Nyae region. The star (\*) indicates the location of !O, where The Wasp Nest was filmed. After L. Harshall (1960:326); used with the kind permission of the author.

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