



The Last Huntsmen

The Kua tribe struggles to maintain their identity in the heart of ancient Africa.

By Forest Woodward

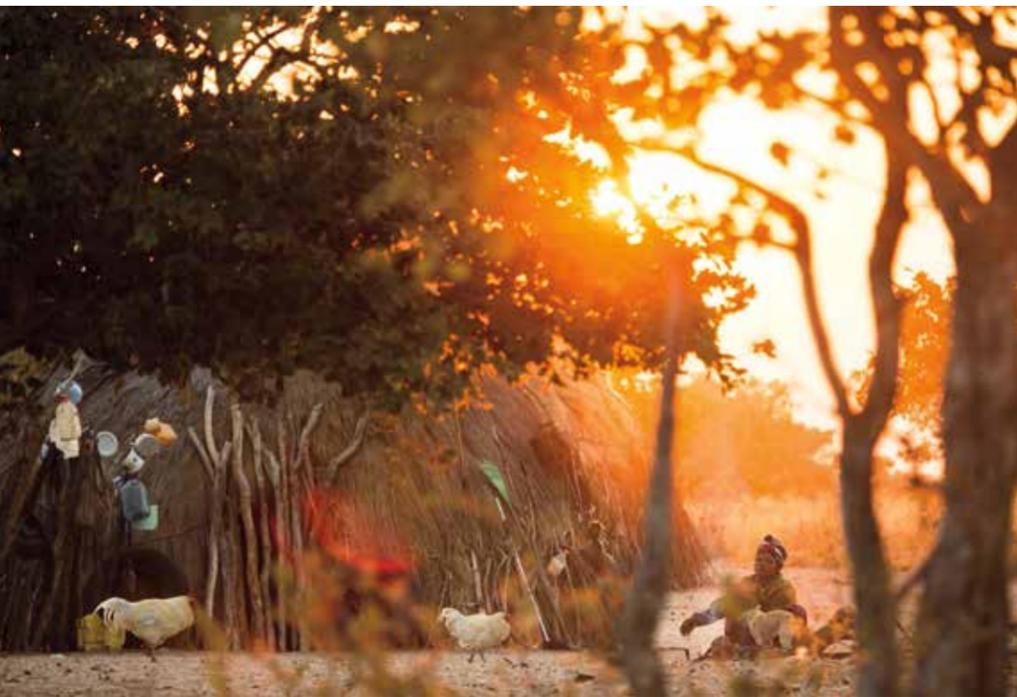


Clockwise from left: The humor of our local Kua fixer's good-natured ribbings regarding the proximity of lions to our camp was rather darkly underscored by the intensity with which he encouraged us to keep a fire burning throughout the night. Setting up camp each night required a careful scrutiny of our surroundings. Stumbling into a small village, we were greeted by a flurry of wide-eyed and wild-haired children. Shy laughter and the sound of music led me to this little gathering of children dancing as the sun went down. With a beaming smile and dirty brown feet calloused and bare, one of the local village children wandered off into the bush in pursuit of a giggling gang of cousins. As we headed south across the salt pan a few kilometers from camp, a pregnant lioness prowled casually past the trucks, tail twitching and powerful sinews rippling. **Opening spread:** The San are reported to be one of the last tenuous links to the ancient tradition of exhaustion hunting. The Bushmen are reticent to talk about it, let alone practice it, with the government ban on hunting and their "shoot first, ask questions later" policy.

A Muslim war photographer, documentarian monk, hippie backwoods filmmaker, Botswana human rights activist, Diné (Navajo) runner, and Kua hunter walk into a bar on the edge of the Kalahari. None of them order a drink, and the bartender refuses to give them the Wi-Fi password. This is not the setup to a joke, but rather the scene at a Ghanzi roadhouse around 4:00 p.m. on a lazy Monday afternoon. After days of chasing our tails around, and eventually through, the bureaucratic hoops and hoopla of local governance, this would be our last access to outside communications, ice cubes, and air conditioning for some time.

Strange as this assortment of individuals appeared, and limited as our ability to converse might have been, we were united by a shared interest in the survival of one of the oldest hunter gatherer tribes in the world: the Kua, members of the San or Bushmen people. Over the course of the next two weeks, the road would become a good deal bumpier, both literally and metaphorically, as we rallied an old Toyota Raider into the heart of the Kalahari.

Earlier in Maun, wrestling jet lag and overstuffed bags, we had sorted camera kits and supplies in preparation for an indeterminate amount of time out in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR). A day of pre-production had stretched into two as we haggled over trucks and made a gluttonous raid on the supermarket, joking that our eight carts of food should be enough to feed an entire village. We would later realize this to be wildly inaccurate as our future friends in the Kua village we visited happened to share war photographer Omar's voracious appetite for ketchup-flavored crisps. Eventually, we straggled out of town and headed into the Kalahari, trucks packed to the gills with filming gear, a motley assortment of camp supplies, two weeks worth of water and fuel, spare tires and parts, and varying degrees of optimism, naïveté, and excitement.



First light in the village rolls red and heavy across the plains, penetrating the few trees that offer shade and revealing cook fires and busy livestock herders going about their morning rituals. A young shepherd playing his homemade instrument draws a curious crowd. **Opposite:** Huntsmen take advantage of the extra perspective provided by the Raider as we searched for game outside the confines of the CKGR. The ancestors of the Kua tribe hunted on the lands in and around the reserve for thousands of years. Now, they are forced to travel long distances in order to track game on lands where hunting is still permitted.

Entering the park we did our best to blend in with the other safari truck tourists. It wasn't hard—our first lion sighting sent us rummaging for our cameras along with the safari neophytes. Lions however, are not what we came to Africa for. We were here to tell the story of the Kua tribe.

Exiled in the late 1990s from their ancestral lands, a small band of Bushmen tribes have litigated and won the right to return to their native game-rich plains on the CKGR a decade later. The court ruling that allowed them to return came, however, with a debilitating caveat: The tribes were banned from hunting.

Our ragtag crew spent 10 days with the tribesmen, observing their now routine yet lengthy journey to hunt outside the reserve. A strange trek, revealing a stark contrast between the enduring essence of a society 30,000 years old and their struggle to thrive, or even just survive in the modern world.

Although there are many factors on which the livelihood and evolution of the Bushmen tribes will hinge, on a most basic level it relies on their ability to carry on the fundamental traditions and practices from which they derive sustenance; in other words, their ability to hunt.

Thus, by track and foot, we followed our guides and the huntsmen into the heart of ancient Africa. Our little group was short on hunting experience, but well-versed in storytelling and critical thinking. Over the course of two weeks we rolled hours upon hours of footage, attempting to weave together the intricate narrative of what many fear may be the final chapter of the oldest huntsmen.

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Clockwise from top left: The local gang gathers round to watch us set up camp, lend a hand, sample our supplies from the city, and pantomime stories of elephants trampling tents. Spears like these, similar in shape to the ancient hunting implements of the tribe, are now fashioned from rebar. A traditional San hut, framed with branches and layered in grass thatch, provides warmth, shelter, and a communal gathering place in the cold of the desert night.

Opposite: “They will conserve the animals with their fences and watering holes and binoculars, but who now will conserve the ways of our people? For longer than you can know we have lived in harmony with the animals, taking only what we need to survive. We were the original conservationists.” – Xani, a Kua tribesman, shares his thoughts regarding the current policies implemented by the Botswana Government and CKGR.

As we scrambled to start a fire and set up tents one night, a group of boys from the village ran to greet us and shyly set about helping to pitch camp. One of the boys, Kebaemetse, spoke English quite well, and between his language skills and my pantomimes, I learned that he believed the area to be frequented by a parade of house-sized (and possibly man-eating) elephants.

Turns out Kabaemetse was right. It’s unheard of for elephants to wander this far south of the Okavango Delta, but following a recently rehydrated riverbed, a parade of big gray beauties had found their way into the vicinity, and coincidentally into our camp. While they were not man-eating elephants as I had (mis)understood initially, their size and interest in the trees around our tents led them to be rather intimidating. After conferring briefly, the Kua suggested we move our camp into the village proper, where we were promptly adopted by our personal pack of guard dogs/four-legged dishwashers.

Dogs are also used for hunting, and they accompanied us on our pursuits for prey. When they would suddenly catch the scent of kudu and begin to run, something in each of us consequently snapped. In a split second, Kal, the Kua hunter in our group, would move out in front, with the boys running behind. Although I sprinted to follow him, he was impossibly fast, always moving through the chest-high thorns and scrub like a feather-weight dancer.

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Clockwise from left: Slow-twitch muscle fibers and three million sweat glands have evolved to allow humans to run distances that exceed the capacity of most four-legged animals. Persistence hunting is figured by some to be the method by which early hominids tracked and hunted quadrupedal prey. Men and dogs alike walk with a spring in their step and pride in their eyes. Tonight their families will eat well. While the eldest of the huntsmen holds the steenbok, one of the younger boys finishes the kill. You can only smoke if you are able to make fire by rubbing two sticks together. The survival (and recreation) skills of the Kua continue to surprise at every turn. Having tracked but eventually spooking a large springbok, the hunters settle for a smaller steenbok.



Clockwise from top left: The Kua are not the only hunters in these parts. In fact, they aren't even at the top of the food chain, evidenced by the remains of a lion kill. Preparation for the hunt, tracking prey, cleaning, and cooking—all of these things take far more energy and time than opening another tin of meat from the government rationed food stipends. Yet over the course of the hunt it becomes apparent that there is more at stake than a simple caloric equation. There is an intimacy between the men, founded in an ancient set of skills which are uniquely theirs to possess and to exercise together. There is a pride in the process, a strength in the execution, a connection to land and to ancestors that is inseparable from their existence. Last light over the Kua camp.

Kal and I talked of many things over the course of our journey, some political and some polite, trying to reweave the threads of a shadowy fight. As the flames flickered and sighed into armchair embers, I asked him how it felt to return to this land. Kal was silent for a time, his face seemingly cut from fire and coal under a moonless sky. He had not been home in 17 years. "It feels like being able to breathe again," he replied at last, the clicks and resonant echoes of his voice relayed to me by our translator. "And I feel sad. Sad that I ever had to leave." For many members of the tribe like Kal, the lack of water and ban on hunting has made return to the reserve a seemingly impossible prospect.

We had hoped to meet members of the San who still hunted in the old way, running their quarry to exhaustion over the course of many miles. Instead we found a people on the edge of giving up, a culture teetering between something age-old and something uncertain—sturdy, sun-hardened shoulders shrugging against the hulking mantle of a society they did not ask to know.

While some of the Kua have chosen to remain in the new relocation community outside of the reserve, others, like Kal and his brothers, have taken advantage of the 2006 court ruling. With the tribe's water sources capped over, and hunting now banned, their subsistence is a constant struggle. Life out here is far from simple, but the people we spoke with made it clear that for them a life of independence on familiar ground was preferable to a life of fences and government handouts in relocation communities.

Author's note: The full story of this trip will be the basis for a large portion of Sanjay Rawal's documentary film *3100*. The names of the San people appearing in this article have been changed to protect their identities. 🌍

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Cartography by David Medeiros (mapbliss.com)

