

# The !Kung: Bushmen of the Kalahari

Deep in the Kalahari Desert lives a group whose people have been there for tens of thousands of years. This group, known as the !Kung, have managed to survive in the semi-arid climate when others have not. To pronounce "!Kung" one must make a click sound before the 'k' sound, often represented in texts as an exclamation mark.

The !Kung population is located in isolated areas of Botswana, Angola, and Namibia. They are hunter-gatherers, adapting to their semi-arid environment by gathering roots, berries, fruits, and nuts that they gather from the desert, and from the meat provided by the hunters. !Kung men are responsible for providing the meat, although women might occasionally kill small mammals. !Kung women provide the majority of the food, and are very respected. They spend two to three days a week collecting foods that grow wild in the countryside.



!Kung shelter

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/youngrobv/3864579473/>

The women are also responsible for child care, gathering wood for fires, carrying water, and cooking. Their way of life has changed little in the thousands of years that they have existed. This resistance to change has caused many problems for them over the years.

The !Kung first became outcasts and looked down upon when the Europeans first arrived in Africa hundreds of years ago. When Europeans first arrived, they found the !Kung to be untamable and a threat to the European livestock and way of life. For this reason, the Europeans killed off as many of the !Kung as they could. In order to survive, some !Kung were enslaved or sent back to Europe to be entered in the freak shows that were popular during the 1800s.

Today, there are about 85,000 !Kung remaining in Africa, leaving their culture on the brink of extinction. Europeans are no longer a threat, but other, stronger tribes in the area are making it difficult for the !Kung to survive.



<http://photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photo-of-the-day/kalahari-lioness-drinking.html>

A lion drinks at a borehold.

One of the reasons that the !Kung could survive in the Kalahari desert was their ability to find water below the surface when others couldn't. They knew what types of melons have water. They also filled ostrich eggs with water during the wet season, sealed them, and buried them to save for the dry season. Then, in the 1950s, boreholes were found. These holes allow water under ground to be easily accessed from the surface. Because of this, new tribes could move in and take over without worrying that they wouldn't have any water in their new land.



[http://exploringworldview.wikispaces.com/file/view/Kung\\_Bushmen\\_Hunting4.jpg/162008053/Kung\\_Bushmen\\_Hunting4.jpg](http://exploringworldview.wikispaces.com/file/view/Kung_Bushmen_Hunting4.jpg/162008053/Kung_Bushmen_Hunting4.jpg)

The only defense the !Kung have against outside tribes is their use of poisoned arrows. Their poison is strong enough to kill whomever they shoot within 24 hours. The death by poison is usually very painful, since the person who has been poisoned can feel it spreading through their body. However, anyone using modern weapons would be able to attack out of range of the poison arrows and easily defeat the !Kung.

The discovery of diamonds on !Kung land has caused local governments to take over !Kung land. The

!Kung's tribal area includes parts of several different countries in southern Africa. These governments want the profits that come from diamond sales and have forced !Kung to leave their lands and live on isolated and infertile reservations. This has made a lot of money for the government, but has left the !Kung on land without any animals to hunt or food to gather. It has forced them to live off of government handouts and caused many problems within the tribe, mainly depression and alcoholism. Disease such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are also very common.

There is some hope for the !Kung to continue to live as their own separate tribe. With the help of outside organizations, the !Kung have started to lead tours through their natural game parks. Europeans and Americans pay a lot of money to see the wilds of Africa and the !Kung are finally getting a piece of the profit. This money is used to purchase their land back from the government after the diamond mines have run out. The money also helps the !Kung buy their own food instead of taking government handouts. This allows them to get their own food even though hunting is made very difficult by unfriendly neighboring tribes.

Additionally, the !Kung recently won law suits against the governments taking their land away. In 2006 they won the right to go back to their lands. However, the governments are doing anything they can to keep the !Kung away. In some places, they refused to let them use the boreholes they've depended on for water in the past. By taking away their ability to get water, the governments were making it impossible for the !Kung to return. In January of 2011, the Botswana High Court ruled that the government had to allow the !Kung to use the boreholes.

Right now, there are many organizations around the world fighting to help the !Kung return to their ancestral lands. Hopefully, they will soon be able to return to the land that is theirs without government interference. Until then, they are doing whatever they can to survive in the face of the hatred and discrimination coming from the governments around them.