

4/Subsistence: Foraging for a Living

The morning after I arrived in Dobe and before I had even set up my camp, my new-found neighbors came to me with a proposition. N!eishi and his son ≠Toma approached me and said, "There is no food in our camp and we are hungry, would the bearded White man take us in his truck to get some food?"

"Isn't there any food around here?" I asked through the interpreter.

"There is some," the answer came back. "A few bitter roots and berries. But we want to show you a place where the food is good and there is plenty."

"But what kind of food?" I asked, reaching for my notebook.

"// gxa," ≠Toma said. "The Tswanas call it mongongo."

I had heard about mongongo, from reading the Marshall research (they called it *mangetti*, the Herero name for it), and the Dobe camp was littered with mounds of empty nutshells. I was keen to see what the trees looked like. A trip there would also put me on good terms with my neighbors.

"How far is it?" I asked, not wanting to get involved in a wild-goose chase.

"Oh, it's not far," N!eishi and ≠Toma assured me. "We'll be there in no time."

Just as the truck started, six women from Dobe camp rushed forward and asked if they could come too. They hopped onto the back, and as we set out they broke out in a song, a rousing chorus with a pleasant melody sung in complex rhythms. I later learned that this was the truck song (*dotsi*), sung whenever the Ju'hoansi got a lift on one. The joyous words to celebrate the luxury of high-speed transportation go something like this: "*do si bereka, moseliseliyana*" (while the truck does the work we sit around and get fat).

I also liked the lyric to another verse that went "Those who work for a living, that's their problem!" Despite the song, the travel was anything but high-speed, and our destination was anything but near. We ground along for hours in four-wheel drive at a walking pace where no truck had ever been before, swerving to avoid ant bear holes and circumventing fallen trees.

At several points along the way I spotted trees that looked familiar.

"Isn't that a mongongo tree?" I asked. "And what are those little nuts lying on the ground?"

"Yes, that's mongongo, all right," ≠Toma replied, "but those groves are almost finished. Keep going."

It was noon before ≠Toma signaled that we had reached our destination. It was worth waiting for. We stood on the top of the dune in the middle of a large grove of mongongo trees that stretched east and west to the horizon. The fallen nuts densely covered the ground. This was a fresh grove, unpicked this season. I reckoned we were about 10 miles north of Dobe.

