

## 5/Kinship and Social Organization

One day in March 1964, I was visiting a !Xabe village, when Hwan//a, a woman about my age who was married to one of the Tswana Headman Isak's three sons, playfully began to call to me, "Uncle, uncle, /Tontah, come see me."

Puzzled, I drew closer; until that time the Ju had referred to me simply as the White Man (/Ton) or the bearded one, *Tsikoie* (*Mandavo*, in Herero). Hwan//a smiled and said, "You are all alone here and I have no children, so I will name you /Tontah after my *tsu* /Tontah who is dead, and, as I have named you, you shall call me mother."

Pleased, I asked Hwan//a to tell me how she decided on the name /Tontah. She explained that I was a European, a "/ton," and the traditional Ju name /Tontah sounds like it. Since her late *tsu* had no namesake, she decided to name me /Tontah to do honor to him and to my exotic status.<sup>1</sup>

It was hard for me to think of the young and attractive Hwan//a, not yet 30, as my mother, but I was happy to have a name other than White Man.

This was the famous name relationship—the Ju/hoan custom of naming everyone after an older person according to a repertoire of personal names. I had read about it in the writings of Lorna Marshall (1957) and I was excited to be named in this way.

The name stuck. Soon people all over the Dobe area were calling me /Tontah, and I began to sense some of the possibilities of the name relationship when a very beautiful woman, on whom I had a terrible crush, playfully said, "Your old name called me *tsiu* [wife], so I will call you *mi!kwah*, my husband."

But there was more to come. A few weeks later, back at the Dobe camp, I was sitting in the shade working on some notes when N!eishi; his son ≠Toma, the hunter; and N!eishi's ex-wife, the redoubtable //Gumi; approached me with some ceremony and sat down.

"*Mba*," N!eishi began, calling me by the term "father," a not uncommon form of greeting, "*Mba*, we see that you are all alone here; your family is far away, and we too are all alone. We have no family. No one pays attention to us. So from now on I am your father, and //Gumi here is your mother, and ≠Toma is your older brother. From now on call me '*mba*.'"

<sup>1</sup>Often elders have several people named after them. Years later I was to meet another namesake of the late /Tontah, a prominent member of the /Gausa group that was studied by the Marshall family and featured in many of their films. This was /Tontah, the husband of N!ai of *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman*. This younger /Tontah, a man in his fifties, took our name relation seriously, befriended me, and taught me much about conditions on the Namibian side of the border (see Chapter 12).

