

Children Throw Toy Assegais

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CHILDREN THROW TOY ASSEGAIS

Filmed and directed by John K. Marshall

Edited by Frank Galvin

Production Assistants: Timothy Asch, Marilyn Wood

**Produced by Documentary Educational Resources, Inc., 24 Dane Street,
Somerville, Massachusetts 02143.**

Filmed on a 1957/58 expedition to the Kalahari Desert, led by Laurence K. Marshall and sponsored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard and the Smithsonian Institution of Washington.

Film Notes by Seth Reichlin*

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"Assegais" are small spears which the !Kung Bushmen use for hunting¹. Hunters track game animals on foot and shoot **them with arrows coated with a slow-acting nerve poison**. Depending on where they are hit, wounded animals must be tracked for hours or even days². When hunters finally catch up with an animal they have shot, they use their assegais to finish it off³.

Because assegais are mainly used to kill animals that have already been weakened by poisoned arrows, the ability to hit a target with an assegai is relatively unimportant to the !Kung hunter. It is far more important that he be able to **place an arrow in a strategic part of an animal, and to know how to track it after he has shot it**. The game the children in this film are playing is, therefore, just a game.

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1. See the film, !Kung Bushman Hunting Equipment (J. Marshall and Galvin 1966)

2. See the film, The Hunters (J. Marshall 1958)

3. The Hunters has a sequence of shots showing a party of !Kung hunters bringing down a giraffe with assegais. See also the last sequence of !Kung Bushman Hunting Equipment.

Despite its appearance, the "assegai game" is not a competition between the boys. !Kung children do try to excel in games, but they are not encouraged to do so at the expense of other children. "Winners" and "losers" are unknown to them¹. There are two main reasons for this lack of competitive spirit. In the first place, meaningful competition demands that all the players in a game be of roughly equal ability. !Kung bands are quite small², so that there is little chance that a child will have very many playmates of his own age³. As a result, !Kung play groups are almost always composed of children of widely differing ages⁴. Competition in these groups would be almost impossible.

Second, adult !Kung do not value competition very highly. They do not respect the warriors, and fights between bands are unheard of⁶. Competition, the !Kung feel, would create inequality, inequality would breed jealousy, and jealousy could lead to violence. The !Kung abhor physical and verbal violence: they have a number of institutions, such as meat-sharing and reciprocal gift-giving, which serve to prevent social tensions from reaching violent levels⁷. !Kung parents, then, do not provide competitive role models for their children to follow.

While !Kung children do not try to beat each other in games, they do strive to improve their own performances. !Kung boys, for instance, play a stick-throwing game rather similar to this one, the object of which is to bounce a stick as far as possible. But "the boys pay almost no attention to whose stick goes farthest or to which player consistently throws best." Each player becomes absorbed in perfecting his own throwing techniques.

A boy may stop in the middle of the game to wander off into the nearby brush looking for raw materials for a better throwing stick⁸.

1. Harpending 1972:90-93

2. 21.3 people, on the average (L. Marshall 1960:328)

3. For census data, see Harpending 1972

4. Konner, in press; see the films by John Harshall, The Lion Game (1973a), Baobab War (1974a), and Tug of War (1974b).

5. J. Harshall 1973b

6. L. Marshall. 1960:336

7. L. Marshall 1961, passim

8. Harpending 1972:91

Pronunciation Guide:

Word:	<u>Closest English equivalent:</u>
assegai	ASS-se-hi
!Kung	KOONG

Related Films:

BAOBAB WAR (John Marshall 1974; 8 minutes). A group of children and teenagers throw sticks, berries, and leaves at each other from their perches in a large baobab tree. Available from Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 24 Dale Street, Somerville MA 02143.

TUG OF WAR (John Marshall 1974; 6 minutes). Twelve or more boys, in two teams, struggle over a length of rubber hose. Available from DER (see above for address).

THE LION GAME (John Marshall 1973; 3.5 minutes). A young man plays a lion and is "hunted" and "killed" by a group of boys. Available from DER.

PLAYING WITH SCORPIONS (John Marshall 1973; 4 minutes). A group of boys play with scorpions, which cannot sting without striking. Available from DER.

BITTER MELONS (John Marshall 1972; 30 minutes). In one section of this film, !Gwi Bushman children play traditional games, and participate in a dance with the men. Available from DER.

!KO-BUSCHMANNER: FEDERSTABSPIEL DER MANNER (D Heunemann and JH Heinz 1970; 5 minutes). A group of men toss a weighted feather into the air with a stick, in a game which is also played by !Kung boys. Available from The Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Service, University Park PA 16802 (#E-1826).

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1958 The Hunters. Film, produced by L.K. Harshall. Available from Contemporary Films/McGraw-Hill, Princeton Road, Hightstown NJ 08520.

1973a The Lion Game. Film, Produced by Documentary Educational Resources. See page 1 for address.

1973b Playing with Scorpions. Film, Produced by Documentary Educational Resources.

1974a Baobab War. Film, Produced by Documentary Educational **Resources**.

1974b Tug of War. Film, Produced by Documentary Educational **Resources**.

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1960 !Kung Bushman bands. Africa, 30:325-355.

1961 Sharing, talking, and giviilg: relief of social tensions among !Kung Bushmen. Africa, 31:231-249.

Marshall Land F Galvin

1966 !Kung Bushman Hunting Equipment. Film, Produced by Documentary Educational Resources.