

# Film Guide *for A Rite Of Passage*

## TRANSCRIPT OF THE NARRATION

The !Kung are a hunting and gathering People who live in an area they call Nyae Nyae, in the dry grasslands of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana and South West Africa. Vegetable and nut crops which grow wild in the desert comprise most of their food, but hunting has a special importance. The people crave meat. They need skins for clothing and for the bags in which they carry their belongings. Most important, a young man discharges a major social obligation by providing his father-in-law with meat, which is distributed to everyone living in the village. By contrast, the vegetable foods which a woman gathers she shares only with her immediate family and the guests who come to her fire.

The importance of hunting is symbolized in a small ceremony that takes place when a boy has killed his first large antelope. /Ti!kay's ceremony really began when, by himself, he shot an arrow into a wildebeeste on a winter's day. That night he quietly informed his father, who informed a relative named Crooked /Qui. On the next day the two men and /Ti!kay began to track the wildebeeste. The older men found the place where the wildebeeste had left the herd and had turned out by itself to the east.

Photographed and directed by John K. Marshall  
 Edited by Joyce Chopra, Timothy Asch, and Frank Galvin  
 Production Assistants:  
 Timothy Asch, Eliot Tarlin, and Marilyn Wood  
 Produced by Documentary Educational Resources, Inc.

Filmed on a 1952/53 expedition to the Kalahari Desert, led by Laurence K. Marshall and sponsored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard and the Smithsonian Institution.

Film Notes by Seth Reichlin\*

/Ti!kay was thirteen. He had become fairly adept at stalking and shooting, but he had not acquired the knowledge and experience necessary to track a single animal belonging to a large herd. To find a solitary's tracks when it leaves a herd and to follow it across empty, stony land, requires excellent tracking. Kan//a, /Ti!kay's father, was a good tracker, but Crooked /Qui was an excellent tracker. He was invited to join /Ti!kay's father because of his skill.

It was early afternoon when they found the dead wildebeeste. Kan//a removed the arrow. It was one which he had given to his son, and the fact pleased him. The arrow was well placed in the side of the wildebeeste, which explained its early death. It had traveled less than seven miles after being hit.

The men built a fire to cook the liver. /Ti!kay was not permitted to touch the dead wildebeeste. This would be the only time that he would be denied one of the pleasures of the hunt. The men enjoy skinning and cutting up the animals they kill, and discussing the quality of the meat. They also try to foresee the problems, complaints, and jealousies which can arise in distributing the meat to the entire band. A young man has neither the status nor the experience to manage such a significant social event.

After the wildebeeste was cut up, it was hung in a tree to keep it away from hyenas and jackals and vultures. Vultures cannot manage to accommodate themselves around a kill and eat it unless the kill is on the ground.

The killing of his first large antelope marked the beginning of /Ti!kay's social maturity. When a young man has killed a large antelope, he is considered an acceptable son-in-law. Marriages are arranged by the parents of young people but are not consummated until the boy enters bride service and the girl has reached puberty.

The meat was brought home in the afternoon, and the ceremony which the !Kung call "marking" began on the next morning. Women are not supposed to be present when a man is marked, and some of the women took the opportunity to gather grass for thatch. Kan//a brought wood for the necessary fire himself. All of the men in the band had gathered near Kan//a's house to watch the ceremony take place.

In a pot was fat from the flank of the wildebeeste. The fat is boiled until it froths to the top of the pot in a thick foam. Kan//a ground up a pod called !gaowa. !Gaowa is one of the ingredients of the poison used on the arrow. Kan//a fetched the arrow that had killed the wildebeeste. The arrow had been burned clean and washed. After sharpening the arrow on a stone, Kan//a mixed the thick foam of fat from the pot with the ground-up pod and began to cut his son.

Kan//a was assisted in the performance of the ceremony by his sister's husband, another man named /Qui. Kan//a cut /Ti!kay on his left side because the wildebeeste was female. He will be cut again on the right side when he has killed a large male antelope. Into the tiny cuts made in a little row on /Ti!kay's arm, Kan//a smeared the ground-up pod and the fat. When the cut heals, the result is a number of tiny tatoos.

The !Kung ascribe meanings to each of the little cuts. The cuts on the arm are meant to make the arm strong and flexible when pulling the bow. The cut on the upper arm is made to give the arm the rigidity to hold the bow when it is being drawn for the length of time necessary to take careful aim. The cuts on the chest are made to give the heart of the man a quickness for-the hunt. The !Kung say they make the cut so that when a man is sitting indolent at home he will suddenly think, "Why am I sitting here? Why am I not out hunting the big game?"

The cut on the back has different implications. It is meant to calm the animal. It is placed on the boy in a position that would correspond with the withers of the animal, so that when the boy creeps up on the animal, the animal will not grow nervous, shake its withers, and run away. The cut between the eyes is made so that the young man will see game clearly and quickly, even though the antelope may be standing-motionless with the curves of its twisted horns almost corresponding to the small bent branches of the thorny trees.

The remainder of the pod and the fat was collected by /Qui and hidden in the grass close to a small tree, so that passers-by, particularly women, will not step on it.

Although sex divides the participants in the ceremony, and women may not take part in it, the sex of the animal does not affect the significance of the ceremony. The ceremony is important whether the first buck is male or female. It is a ceremony in which older men agree that the young man may participate in their affairs and problems. After the ceremony /Ti!kay will be increasingly judged in terms of adult behavior.

When the cutting was over, the women who had gone to gather grass returned to thatch their houses.

Most of the men who shared the meat in the pot were of full maturity, having had at least three children. It is not thought necessary that all a man's children be alive for him to be considered mature.

One old man had not had three children, but he was considered mature because impotence had prohibited his having children. The oldest men were given the first pieces of meat from the pot. Then the meat was distributed among the younger men.

/Ti!kay has now entered the period of his life in which he may live with his wife in bride service. He will live with his wife's family until, ideally, the couple have had three children. After that, having reached maturity, he need no longer live with his wife's family if he does not wish to. He may return to join the band of his parents, his siblings, or his children. The choice will be his.

## Questions Raised by the Film:

### A. When and where was this film made?

A Rite of Passage was filmed on October 22, 1952, at /Gautscha Pan, South West Africa (see figure 1). The Marshall family spent seventeen and a half months at /Gautscha in the 1950's (L. Marshall 1961:246), and took this film on one of their early expeditions.

In 1952 all the Bushmen in the Nyae Nyae area were full-time gatherers and hunters, but their lives have changed dramatically since then. In 1960 they were resettled in a Reserve at Tsumkwe, S.W.A., where there is a government post and a mission of the Dutch Reformed Church (Lee 1965:32; L. Marshall 1965:273). The !Kung are forbidden to leave the Reserve to look for work, so many of them are now employed by the Government, building roads and repairing fences (Reichlin and Marshall 1974:19). Some people herd cows and goats (Young and Marshall 1974). Because of the changes which have taken place since 1952, these Notes use the convention of the "ethnographic present": the descriptions of the !Kung refer to them as they were in 1952, not as they are now.

The original footage of A Rite of Passage was shot before portable sound-synchronous recording equipment was available. Because of this, the sound track had to be assembled in the studio from tapes recorded at other times and different places.

### B. Was /Ti!kay really hunting by himself?

According to L. Marshall, /Ti!kay and his father were traveling from /Gam to /Gautscha when they saw the wildebeeste. /Ti!kay stalked and shot the animal himself, then went with his father to /Gautscha to get help from Crooked /Qui. In general, !Kung hunting parties are composed of two to five men (L. Marshall 1961:237), but it is not particularly unusual for a man to hunt alone. Crooked /Qui often did (see L. Marshall 1959:363). People usually hunt in groups because tracking is easier and because men do not like to be alone in the bush (L. Marshall 1960:347). Also, one man can guard the kill from jackals and vultures while the others get help in carrying it. And finally, the original hunters have the first claim to the meat of the animal: an incentive for men to hunt together.

## An Interpretation of the Symbolism in *A Rite of Passage*

### A. Why couldn't /Ti!kay eat the wildebeeste he killed?

When Lorna Marshall asked two informants about this, they replied that he could not eat the wildebeeste meat because he was still "learning". If he ate it, they explained, he would not get anything when he hunted. He would lose his luck. "Did the old people ever tell why this was so?" she asked. No, they said, they knew no story to explain these facts, they only knew they were true (Field Notes, October 22, 1952).

At times, the !Kung did interpret the symbolism of their ceremonies in great detail\*, but we have no other record of their analysis of the meat taboo in this ritual. Still, by comparing the ritual in this film with others among the !Kung and in other societies, the anthropologist can begin to interpret its significance. The following is one possible interpretation, by no means the only one, but one which may be useful in pointing out a direction for further analysis of !Kung ritual.\*\*

Nearly seventy years ago, Arnold Van Gennep showed that rites of passage throughout the world have a similar structure (1909, 1960). Most begin, he found, with a "rite of separation", in which the initiate is symbolically broken away from his old status in society. There follows a "liminal" or threshold period, during which the initiate is "suspended" between his old and his new status. Finally, the "liminal period" ends with a "rite of aggregation", in which the subject is formally inducted into a new social category (Van Gennep 1909:14). In many societies, it seemed, a person does not move instantaneously from one stage of life to another, but instead passes through an intermediate period.

Later writers (Douglas 1966, Turner 1967, 1969) have characterized this intermediate period more completely. They seem to agree that during the liminal period, the subject of a rite of passage is temporarily removed from membership in society. As Victor Turner has written, "liminal entities (people) are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (1969:95). The condition of neophytes in the liminal period is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories (1967:97)."

Societies employ a variety of symbols to express the fact that the subject of a rite of passage is temporarily "unsocialized". His liminality is often compared to death, to being in the womb, to darkness, to bisexuality, and to the wilderness (Turner 1967:95-98, 1969:95; Hertz 1960:38). The initiate is often represented as having no possessions, not even clothes – thus in many societies he is required to

go naked during the liminal period (Turner 1967:215, 253; LeVine and LeVine 1963:183-202).

Turner's approach may help us to understand why /Ti!kay was forbidden to eat the wildebeeste he shot.\*\*\* Meat is a core symbol in !Kung ideology. It signifies hunting, and, by extension, maleness; but meat is also an important symbol of social integration. This association derives, in the first place, from the fact that the meat of large animals is always shared by everyone living in or visiting a band (L. Marshall 1961:236-41).\*\*\*\* Plant foods may be eaten alone by the family which collects them, but it would be unthinkable for a person or family to eat meat without sharing it with others (ibid.: 236; 1960:334). Apart from the Medicine Dance (L. Marshall 1969:357), sharing meat is the only institution in !Kung society in which all people in a camp participate at the same time.

Second, meat is a core symbol in the institution of bride service, which binds all the !Kung families in a region together in a web of reciprocal obligations. When a man marries, he always goes to live with his wife's family (L. Marshall 1959:352), whom he is expected to provide with meat (1961:238). He remains in bride service until his wife has had three children -- sometimes as long as ten years (L. Marshall 1959:352). The girl's parents, says L. Marshall, speak constantly about the meat their son-in-law will provide. "We are old, they say, whether it is true or not. "We need a young man to hunt for us. Our daughter's husband must get us some meat" (ibid.:351, 355-6).

But let us look at this statement more carefully. !Kung parents do not really depend on their sons-in-law for food. In the first place, women provide 70 to 80% of the diet of the !Kung (L. Marshall 1960:338; Lee 1968:33). And girls in Nyae Nyae generally married young, often when they were five or six (L. Marshall 1959:350), so a father-in-law would rarely be too old to get meat for himself. Finally, a man in his first few years of bride service depends on his father-in-law and other older men in his wife's band to help him find game in unfamiliar territory (L. Marshall 1960:339).

The meat a hunter provides is important politically as well as nutritionally. Like other gifts among the !Kung and throughout the world, sharing meat creates obligations to the man who distributes it – obligations which must be reciprocated (L. Marshall 1961:244-5; Mauss 1967). The more meat a man distributes, the more closely he and his family are bound in a web of favors and obligations to other families; and the greater is his own family's economic security and social status. The !Kung have a word for this: they say that distributing meat increases the "weight" of a family (Reichlin and Marshall 1974:23).

As a man gets older, the best way he can continue to maintain the "weight" of his family is to marry his daughters to good hunters in other bands. They will give him a large share of every animal they kill (L. Marshall 1961:238), which he can then distribute to other people in the camp. So when the !Kung parents said that they

needed a son-in-law to provide meat, they were really saying metaphorically that they needed a son-in-law to provide status: the status that comes from a strong network of reciprocal favors and obligations. Sharing meat is the way this network is created; and it seems that in this phrase, meat is a symbol for the network itself.

Knowing these symbolic associations of meat, we can now begin to see what it means that /Ti!kay was not allowed to eat any of his first kill. Meat sharing is a very strong symbol of social integration to the !Kung. Being denied meat, therefore, is a very strong way of expressing symbolically that /Ti.kay was temporarily outside of society altogether: that he was in the “liminal period” defined long ago by Van Gennep. As Victor Turner would put it, /Ti!kay was “structurally invisible” (1967:97) – socially non-existent. And clearly, it made no sense to share meat with a person who did not “exist”.\*

Lest this analysis be taken too seriously, it should be pointed out that the !Kung are far less ceremonious than the pastoral and agricultural societies which Turner studied. Among the Ndembu of Zambia, for example, the male initiation rite lasts more than two months (1967:185ff). By contrast, the rite of passage in this film is extremely casual. Besides the fact that the women left during the marking ceremony, activity in the camp continued pretty much as usual. /Ti!kay’s father cut his son in a very matter-of-fact way, without incantations or elaborate preparations; and /Ti!kay himself passed from boyhood to manhood without changing the expression on his face.

The data in this film thus flatly contradict a theory about rites of passage put forward some years ago by Max Gluckman. Gluckman argued, essentially, that these rites are “partitions” which separate the different roles of a single person in tribal societies. He wrote, “in tribal societies persons play several roles in relation to others in the same environs, so that the roles are not differentiated by material conditions and fragmented associations (as they are in a modern city). Hence we find here (in tribal societies) more specific customs of stylized etiquette, more conventions and taboos, and more custom in general (1962:49). ... I suggest that this relatively ‘exaggerated’ development of custom has the effect of marking off and segregating roles in social groups where they may be confounded (ibid.:28). ... I thus see rites of passage as a special development of how custom and ceremonial segregate the roles of people living in the small groups of tribal society (ibid.:30)”.

If Gluckman’s theory were correct, we should expect to find the most complicated rites of passage in societies where roles are the least differentiated -- among the !Kung, for example. A !Kung person spends most of the year living with a group of 30 people or less (Lee 1965), and he may not see a stranger for months. It would be hard to imagine a situation where so few people fill so many social roles, but the !Kung are apparently not confounded by this. They go about their lives without much ceremony, oblivious to the confusion which Gluckman predicts for them.\*\*

## B. Why did the women leave the camp during the “marking” rite?

Normally, a !Kung camp is filled with men, women, and children of all ages. To understand why the women were required to leave during the “marking” ceremony, we have to turn again to the analysis of the symbolic “language” of the !Kung.

An antagonism between women and hunting pervades !Kung ideology. Hunting symbolizes maleness to the !Kung: as this film suggests, hunting is what makes a man a man. Through a number of other beliefs and practices, the !Kung also make it clear that women can corrupt the “male principle” and impair a man’s ability to hunt.\*\*\*

Men and women, for instance, are required to sit on opposite sides of the family fire. The !Kung say that if their genitals were to contact the same spot on the ground, the man would lose his hunting powers, and the woman would contract a serious magical disease in her genito-urinary tract (L. Marshall 1959:354). Sleeping with his wife too often weakens a man’s hunting ability, and the !Kung believe that a woman’s touch can neutralize the force of a man’s hunting weapons (ibid.).

Women are particularly dangerous to hunters when they are in a “liminal” state. When a girl menstruates for the first time, she is required to move out of the camp into a small shelter built by her grandmother (England 1968:583). The girl’s “female principle” seems to be very strong at this time, for the !Kung feel that she is perilous to hunters. A glance from the girl, they say, would make a man visible to animals and destroy his ability to stalk them (ibid.); and if she touched a man’s hunting tools, they would lose their power to kill. Mary Douglas has shown convincingly that throughout the world, people in these liminal states are considered “polluting” and supernaturally dangerous (1966). Since they have no defined status, they cannot be accounted for by the normal model which a society has of its own structure (see Turner 1967:97). And because they people in the liminal period are temporarily outside of society, they lack the protection which a niche in the social structure gives them. They are highly susceptible to corrupting influences.

A Rite of Passage suggests that the !Kung conform to this general rule. A man’s “male principle” is endangered not only by women in marginal states, but also when he himself is “liminal”, Until /Ti!kay was “marked”, he was socially neither a boy nor a man. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that his “male principle” was insecure during this liminal period, and thus particularly susceptible to corruption by women. This may help explain why the women were required to leave the camp during the “marking” not to return until the ceremony was completed and /Ti!kay’s manhood consolidated.

### C. What is the significance of the “cutting”?

!Kung informants did provide a detailed interpretation of the symbolism of the cutting, something they neglected to do when asked why /Ti!kay could not eat the wildebeeste meat. The informants told Lorna Marshall that Kan//a cut /Ti!kay on his left side because the wildebeeste was female; and that when he kills his first large male antelope, he will be cut again on the right side.\* The cuts on the arm were to make the arm strong and flexible when pulling the bow. The cut on the upper arm was made to give the arm the rigidity to hold the bow for the length of time necessary to take careful aim.

The cuts on the chest, were made to give the heart of the boy a quickness for the hunt. The informants said that they made these cuts so that when a man is sitting at home he will suddenly think, “Why am I sitting here? Why am I not out hunting the big game?” The cut on the back was placed on the boy in a position that would correspond with the withers of the animal, so that when the boy creeps up, the animal will not grow nervous, shake its withers, and run away. Finally, the cut between the eyes was made so that the young man will see game clearly and quickly (L. Marshall, field notes; see also the narration to this film).

A psychoanalytic theory of rites of this sort was published about twenty years ago by Bruno Bettelheim. Turning away from structural explanations of rites of-passage (like Van Gennep’s and Gluckman’s), Bettelheim tried to discover what psychological needs are satisfied by these rites. Noting that initiation rites often take place at puberty, he suggested that one basic psychological function they have is “to promote and symbolize full acceptance of the socially prescribed sexual role. At the time of puberty both girls and boys experience great sexual pressures. The pubertal youngster not only tries to master some of these urges and to find satisfaction for others, but he must also discharge, repress, or otherwise deal with those of his sexual desires that are not suited to the socially defined role of his sex (1954:107)”.

In some societies, initiation rites try to minimize the psychological strains of adolescence “by making it possible for him (the adolescent) to satisfy at least partially during the rest of his life both masculine and feminine strivings. ... Other societies may try to rid the person of tendencies ascribed to the opposite sex, so that he will act and feel as if these tendencies no longer existed in him (ibid.: 109)”. ... “Many of the better-known demands made on the pubertal boy ... seem to exemplify the second method. The feats a boy must perform to become a man – such as killing an enemy among head-hunters, or playing football in our society – may well originate in the desire to deny what are socially considered to be feminine tendencies by over-asserting masculinity (ibid.:108)”.

On the face of it, the rite of passage in this film also seems to use the second method, for it emphasizes strongly the roles and expectations of !Kung men. But beyond this, it is very hard to tell whether or not Bettelheim’s theory explains /Ti!kay’s initiation ceremony. In the first place, the “marking” rite is not exclusively a puberty rite: it is performed whenever a man kills his first large antelope. One young man, Lame ≠Gao, did not kill a large animal until he was about sixteen: certainly after he reached puberty (L. Marshall 1960:350). Another man, /Gaishay, had never hunted, so he was never “marked” and could never marry (L. Marshall 1959:351).

It is difficult to evaluate Bettelheim’s hypothesis even if we assume that the “marking” ritual is a puberty rite. We know almost nothing about the feelings of !Kung adolescent boys, since the major studies of !Kung childhood deal with observed behavior or with women (Harpending 1972; Konner, in press; Shostack, MS). It is known that by the time a boy is three or four he spends most of his day with other children, not with his mother; and by the time he is six or seven he plays mostly with children of his own sex (Konner, in press; see the films by J. Marshall: 1973a, b; 1974a, b, d). Boys begin to practice their hunting skills at an early age (J. Marshall 1958), though they do not go hunting with their fathers until they are in their teens (L. Marshall 1959:350). Without more psychological evidence, it seems unproductive to speculate about how /Ti!kay’s rite of passage helped him resolve the conflicts of adolescent sexuality.

To resolve these conflicts, says Bettelheim, is only one of the psychological functions of rites of passage. He devotes most of his book to arguing that certain initiation rites (particularly circumcision and sub-incision), represent men’s “envy” of the ability of women to bear children. Bettelheim supports this hypothesis persuasively with anthropological and psychological data, but he admits that it does not apply to all types of initiation rites. The rite in this film, for instance, has no genital symbolism, and thus seems to fall outside the range of Bettelheim’s analysis.

Until we know more about the psychology of the !Kung, Van Gennep’s original theory about mutilations in rites of passage still seems to be the best: “Cutting the prepuce (circumcision) is exactly equivalent to pulling a tooth; to cutting the last digit of a little finger; to cutting or piercing an earlobe, or the septum of the nose; to tattooing and scarification; and to cutting the hair in a certain manner. In all of these, the mutilated individual is distinguished from common humanity ... and integrated into a particular social group. Since the operations leave indelible traces, the status of the subject is changed definitively. ... It is clear that the human body is treated as a mere chunk of wood, which each society carves or rearranges after its own fashion” (1909:104).

**Map, Pronunciation Guide, and References**

<u>Word:</u>	<u>Closest English equivalent:</u>
!Kung	KOONG
Nyae Nyae	NY NY
/Tilkay	TEE-kay
wildebeest	VILL- de-beast
/Qui	KWEE
Kan//a	KAHN-tla
!gaowa	GOW-a
/Gautscha	GOUT-sha
Tsumkwe	CHOOM-kwee
/Gam	GAHM

**The exact pronunciation of the four !Kung clicks is as follows:**

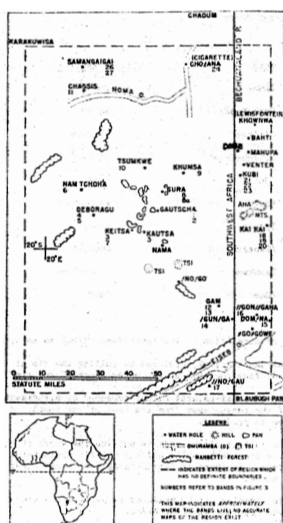
/ The dental click, produced by pulling the tip of the tongue away from the back of the upper teeth ("tch, tch", in English).

! The alveolar-palatal click, produced by withdrawing the tip of the tongue away from the roof of the mouth. A hollow pop is produced.

// The lateral click, made by pulling the sides of the tongue away from the teeth, while holding the tip against the alveolar ridge. Speakers of English make this sound when clucking to a horse.

≠ The alveolar click, produced by pulling the tip of the tongue away from the alveolar ridge.

**Map of the Nyae Nyae Region**



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