

Research note

Diversity and transition of stepfamilies among the G|ui and Gllana

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Abstract: This paper examines how the nuclear family of G|ui and Gllana, the two socio-culturally closely related hunter-gatherer groups of the San, has been (re)constructed and functioned since their resettlement in late 1990s. As with other hunter-gatherer groups, divorce and remarriage have been not uncommon among the G|ui/Gllana. Extra-marital relationships, known as *dzáá-kù*, have also been semi-socially recognised. Consequently, the G|ui/Gllana exhibit several stepfamily configurations. As in other San populations, the G|ui/Gllana are known for their close mother–child relationships. However, it should be noted that non-maternal relatives have also been active participants in child-rearing. Children of stepfamilies are usually well informed about their origins and are not disconnected from their relatives, including divorced parents. The G|ui/Gllana settlement established in late 1990s not only reduced group mobility, which had been characterised by fission and fusion of residential groups, but also led to a rapid increase in population density and fertility rates. Subsequently, the G|ui/Gllana society has been modified in response to various difficulties. However, relationships with relatives, including divorced parents, continue to be an important social resource in this process.

Keywords: San, family, (re)marriage and divorce, child-rearing, socialisation

Introduction

How has the nuclear family, ie a married couple and their dependent children, of G|ui and Gllana been (re)constructed and functioned in the process of sedentarisation? Through answering this question, this paper characterises the diversity and transition of stepfamilies among the G|ui and Gllana based on the rich ethnographic material and field data collected by the authors and their colleagues. Both the G|ui and Gllana are positioned as sub-groups of the San, well-known indigenous and hunter-gatherer societies in Southern Africa. The

G|ui and Gllana are closely related in terms of kinship, language, rituals and folk knowledge, and there are many intermarriages between the two groups (eg Tanaka 1980). Therefore, this paper treats the G|ui/Gllana as a single entity. Detailed ethnographic descriptions already exist on the G|ui/Gllana (see Tanaka 2014), and consequently the G|ui/Gllana history of family structures is brief and limited to matters related to the theme of this paper.

The G|ui/Gllana have long lived a nomadic life in the central part of the Kalahari Desert, in what is now called Botswana. Their living area roughly overlaps with the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) which covers a total area of 52,000 km². This is because in 1961, Silberbauer, an anthropologist and government San researcher, demarcated the boundaries of the CKGR to cover G|ui/Gllana living areas so that their livelihoods could be maintained (Silberbauer 1965:132–138). Then, given the implementation of the Remote Area Development Program,¹ from the late 1970s, the G|ui/Gllana began to congregate in settlements established within the CKGR. Among them, 'Úi!ùm̀ (administratively called Xade), where various infrastructures were established, became the largest settlement of the G|ui/Gllana. There were fewer opportunities for people to move around and group mobility declined. Furthermore, in 1997, legislation was implemented to relocate residents within the CKGR outside of it, and the majority of people living in 'Úi!ùm̀ were relocated to settlements established outside the CKGR, such as Qx'úisà-kínì (administratively called New Xade). Viewing this as forced displacement, an international protest movement was launched, and in 2006, some residents were given court approval to live in the settlements within the CKGR. However, the migration trend has continued and the majority of people living in settlements within the CKGR have now moved their livelihoods to settled areas such as Qx'úisà-kínì.

One of the fundamental features of G|ui/Gllana society, which has lived a nomadic lifestyle for many years, is the camp, where several families linked by parent–child and sibling relationships, repeats fission and fusion, ie the frequent shifts in the composition of the residential group with the nuclear family as the basic unit (Tanaka 1980:92–95, 116). In other words, the number of families in a camp changes frequently because they lead a mobile life, but the nuclear family always works together. Camp members engage flexibly and jointly in daily activities such as subsistence activities and child-rearing, and vital food resources acquired during the day are distributed equally among all camp members. For these reasons, G|ui/Gllana society has been represented as

1. The RADP is a governmental program intended as an initiative towards rural development introduced in 1974 (Cassidy et al 2001:37).

an egalitarian society. In addition, many hunter-gatherer societies have been regarded as egalitarian societies, and this has attracted the attention of many researchers as this is an important feature of the evolutionary and historical development of human societies in general.

Family construction of G|ui/Gilana

As mentioned above, the nuclear family forms the basis of G|ui/Gilana society. Marriage (*séè-kù*; lit. take each other) usually takes the form of a marriage proposal by a boy of suitable age to a daughter often several years younger. In the days of nomadic life, it was often the case that a boy would leave his parents' home and propose marriage to a girl he had found on a visit to a distant camp. Married life began when the man was about 25 years old and the woman about 18 years old, but the promise of marriage was often made many years before the marriage took place (Tanaka 1980:106). A simple ceremony was said to take place at the time of marriage (Silberbauer 1963).

Although the majority of the G|ui/Gilana were monogamous, there were also quite a few cases of polygyny. In 1967 when the G|ui/Gilana still lived a nomadic lifestyle, Tanaka (1989:155) observed 10 cases (18.5%) of polygamous marriage out of 54 marriage cases. Nine of these men had two wives and the remaining one had four. According to Tanaka (1989:161), KR, the man who took these four wives, had a short stature as the G|ui/Gilana males and did not have high subsistence skills or financial properties. However, he was very enthusiastic in his approach to women and skilled at attracting their attention. Levirate marriages (where a man marries his deceased brother's wife) and sororate marriages (where a man marries his deceased wife's sister or niece) were also practised among the G|ui/Gilana, and in such cases when a parent died, the children were often raised by their parents' same-sex sibling.

These trends continued after they settled in !'Úì!ù̀. Tanaka (1980:106–107) showed that of the 44 couples observed in !'Úì!ù̀, eight couples (18%), consisted of one man and two or more wives. NS, the man who took the largest number of wives (six), also did not have particularly high subsistence skills or financial properties, but he was very enthusiastic about approaching women even after he got old. In total, he had 13 children with his six wives (Tanaka 1989:161–162). However, while neighbouring agropastoralist societies have extensive property accumulation and social stratification, and try to arrange polygynous marriages through financial resources and social institutions, the G|ui/Gilana society, where these contexts are rare, requires constant communication between the

spouses to maintain care and support. Under these circumstances, G|ui/Gllana polygyny marriages were rarely stable. KR and NS mentioned above also kept meeting and separating with many women. Most G|ui/Gllana people said that having many wives would be terribly tiring and that it would be best that one man has only one wife (Tanaka 1989:161, 163).

As mentioned above, it is not uncommon for G|ui/Gllana men and women to have sexual relations with more than one partner at the same time. However, the majority of formal spouses were composed of one husband and one wife. Male–female relationships that have not led to formal marital statuses are called (*dzáã-kù*: lit. love each other) and have been translated as love-relationships. *Dzáã-kù* was also often found among camp members in their nomadic lifestyle (Tanaka 1989:153). Although the folk term *dzáã-kù* refers broadly to partnerships that do not lead to marriage and is used not only in cases of sustained sexual relations, but also in cases of mutual fondness and same-sex friendships, we use it as love-relationships in this article, following relevant literature (eg Tanaka 1980; 1989; Sugawara 1998).

An interesting practice reported in G|ui/Gllana concerning male–female relationships is mate ‘swapping’ (Tanaka 1980:106–107). This is where two married couples agree to swap partners and have sexual relations with each other; it is seen as the ultimate form of their friendships. The relationship may last for months or even years. The child born is considered the child of the birth mother and the male partner of her marriage.

Furthermore, as with other hunter-gatherer groups, divorce and remarriage are common in G|ui/Gllana society. Some people stay with the same partner for the rest of their lives, but many more do not. In the nomadic lifestyle, where there was little institutional social security other than extensive cooperation and sharing, the division of labour between men and women in daily life was the basis of livelihood, so divorced men and women were motivated to seek new partners. Note that in G|ui/Gllana societies, divorce itself is rarely a negative stigma. In traditional G|ui/Gllana marriages, men used to give gifts such as antelopes they killed to the guardians of the female who he wished to marry, as a sign of their hunting prowess. However, the G|ui/Gllana rarely accumulated property, and the division of property on divorce was not an issue. In extreme cases, one could get a divorce simply by leaving the area and one’s partner behind (Tanaka 1989:155). If the child was very young, he/she usually followed the mother. This is because only mothers were allowed to breastfeed and thus no allomaternal nursing was observed in this community. Moreover, the nursing period was long (three to four years) given that solid food was difficult to obtain during the nomadic life (Takada 2020:70–76). As in other San populations, the

G|ui/G|lana are known for their close mother–child relationships but fathers and other relatives have also been active participants in child-rearing (Takada 2020:98–104, 126–130, 176–178).

A trend towards low fertility among G|ui/G|lana existed during the nomadic period. According to Tanaka (1980:80–88), the average number of births (including those who died) for G|ui/G|lana females around 1970 was 0.95, 2.93, 4.17 and 3.17 for those aged 15–24, 25–34, 35–44 and 45+, respectively. These are less than those in Ju|'hoan (Howell 1979:117–166), which is a San group well-known for its low fertility. The birth interval in Ju|'hoan was reported to have been four to five years (Lee 1979:320–325). Precise records of birth intervals in G|ui/G|lana in !'Úi!ùṁ have not been reported but are assumed to have been similar to or longer than those of the Ju|'hoan. Widows with children in such societies indicate abundant fertility and are less of an impediment to remarriage. Remarried partners are also said to have taken good care of their stepchildren. After a long period of nursing, children shift the object of their attachment to multi-aged child groups, where children spend most of their daily hours and learn a lot about wild animals and plants, social relationships and community morals (Takada 2020:176–178, 202–204). According to Tanaka (1989:155), by the time they reach 10 years of age, they become independent of their parents in terms of their attachment relationships. However, children remained dependent on their parents in terms of food security, as in most hunter-gatherer groups (cf Kaplan et al 2000). This is one of the reasons why young men could not marry until they reached the age of about 25 years, while girls married as early as their late teenage years, in the nomadic lifestyle of G|ui/G|lana (Takada 2020:202–204). Because divorce and remarriage can take place easily, in addition to the biological fathers and mothers (*bàā* and *ḡiē*), more stepfathers and stepmothers (*bàā lúā́* and *ḡiē lúā́*) are added to one's circle of kin as the caretakers of children.

Settled life since the 1970s has reduced the birth intervals of the G|ui/G|lana (Sugawara 1993:193). Unfortunately, exact statistics on the number of births and birth intervals in !'Úi!ùṁ have not been reported, but it is thought that the stable supply of water and food through the construction and distribution of wells, settlement patterns that did not require frequent migration, and the introduction of modern medicine through the establishment of clinics, resulted in an increase in the number of births and life expectancy. These trends were further accelerated after relocation to QX'úisà-kínī (Takada 2002), and the authors are currently investigating them in more detail.

Reflecting the characteristics of the above sexual, marital and familial relationships, the G|ui/G|lana have many different forms of stepfamilies.

Children of stepfamilies are usually well informed about their origins and are not disconnected from their relatives, including divorced parents. The first author started his fieldwork among/with the G|ui/Gllana immediately after the G|ui/Gllana moved to Qx'úisà-kínī in the late 1990s, while the second author started a quarter of a century later, in 2022. The following is a preliminary research report on the characteristics of the G|ui/Gllana stepfamilies in Qx'úisà-kínī acquired during these long-term field projects.

Stepfamilies at Qx'úisà-kínī

The G|ui/Gllana resettlement to Qx'úisà-kínī not only reduced group mobility, which had been characterised by fission and fusion of residential groups, but also led to a rapid increase in population density and fertility rates, and the degradation of the residential environment. Subsequently, the G|ui/Gllana society has restructured in response to the various difficulties. However, relationships with relatives, including divorced parents, continue to be important social resources in responding to the changes.

In Qx'úisà-kínī, the government has established residential plots for inhabitants to live. Government officials allocate which plots to live in based on residents' declared ethnicity and the place of origin. Nuclear families that shared a livelihood often lived on the same plot. However, the past relationships of kinship and friendship in their nomadic lifestyle were not fully reflected in this plot arrangement, which was determined in a short period of time by government officials (Takada 2002). Subsequently, people have often exchanged plots or set up small camps outside of plot areas in pursuit of a settlement style that better reflects their social relationships and ethics (Maruyama 2010).

After the relocation to Qx'úisà-kínī, the G|ui/Gllana began to live outside their 'traditional' living area, making it extremely difficult for them to maintain a lifestyle based on hunting and gathering. It is therefore important to ask again the following question: How has the nuclear family been (re)constructed and functioned after the resettlement in Qx'úisà-kínī? The first author conducted a survey of the mothers and fathers for each child who lived in Qx'úisà-kínī in 1999–2000, shortly after the relocation to Qx'úisà-kínī occurred. This demographic data shows that out of 190 births by 119 mothers, 65 children (approximately 34%) from 45 mothers did not live with both birthparents or live with siblings who had different birthparents. It includes families in which children lived in stepfamilies, single mothers or other forms of the household. This may appear to be a fairly high percentage, but an understandable value considering that 35% and 55% of

households among Mbuti (Turnbull 1965) and Paliyan (Gardner 1988), two other hunter-gatherer societies, were single-parent or stepparent households, respectively. Note that the above G|ui/G!ana data was collected basically to examine trends in children's weight and health status (Takada 2002) and thus does not tell us whether the children that were already independent had a different mother or father from their siblings. These families include cases where the child's birth father did not live with the child, but another man lived with the mother and was considered the social father of the child (stepfather), or the mother and child(ren) lived back in the mother's parents' home. Caregivers including stepparents generally looked after the children well. If the divorced ex-spouse (the birth parent from the child's perspective) still lived within the Qx'úǝ̀sà-kínĩ, the social relationship was not broken.

Further substructure is also observed within the nuclear family. The close mother-child bond has been regarded as one of the key features of San societies, including the G|ui/G!ana society. This trend has continued after the relocation to Qx'úǝ̀sà-kínĩ, but some important changes have been also observed. Although the exclusive breastfeeding of infants by the mothers has been maintained, the availability of rationed food has increased, and weaning has occurred earlier than during the nomadic period (Takada 2020:70–76). Consequently, it is not unusual to see young children being weaned at one year of age. In addition, the number and variety of caregivers available around the child has increased significantly because of increases in the size of the settlement and population concentration, resulting in more care of infants and toddlers by older children who live in close proximity to the infants and toddlers (Takada 2020:98–104, 126–130, 151–156, 176–178). On the other hand, the care and support provided by non-parental adult camp members, which was said to have been characteristic of the San living a nomadic life, appears to be decreasing relatively (Draper 1976; Konner 1976; Tanaka 1980).² This may have an impact on patterns of attachment formation among G|ui/G!ana children.

Since the relocation policy was implemented in 1997, about a quarter of a century has passed. The second author is currently investigating familial relationships in the context of the ongoing restructuring of social life in Qx'úǝ̀sà-kínĩ. Access to the nearest town, Ghanzi, has improved drastically. Consequently, there is an increasing number of love-relationships between residents of Qx'úǝ̀sà-kínĩ and those living in Ghanzi and other towns. This is often a relationship between a G|ui/G!ana woman from Qx'úǝ̀sà-kínĩ (who is

2. Takada (2020:104–107, 130–135, 156–158, 178–182) found this trend among the sedentarised !Xun San, but we need more systematic investigation to examine this for the G|ui/G!ana.

often already married to a resident of Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ or is a student at a secondary school) and a Tswana man living in a town such as Ghanzi, and it rarely leads to formal marriages.

Statistical and demographic research on this situation has not yet been completed, but some interesting examples, which help us better understand their familial relationships, have already been obtained. Let's look at the life story of ZL, a man in his twenties who was born in Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ. ZL was born in Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ in 2003 and entered primary school in Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ in 2010. His father, KN, was an intelligent and sociable man who had worked as an assistant to Japanese researchers. After ZL started primary school, KN often taught him Tswana and English languages, and according to ZL, 'when I was in the primary school, what I spoke in *kúā* (ie G|ui language), KN translated into English and made me write it down'. That is to say, when there was English assignment at the primary school, KN translated what ZL answered in G|ui into English and wrote it down in the answer sheet (interview by the second author, 15 February 2024). According to him, 'In the fourth grade, I was the best student. The teacher was afraid of me, since I was too brilliant' (interview by the second author).

Nevertheless, ZL's mother later left him and her husband KN and moved to the town of Ghanzi, about 100 km away from Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ. According to an informant KK, 'ZL's mother drinks a lot. She then left the man (ZL's father, KN) and moved to Ghanzi'. Subsequently in 2013, ZL moved to Kacgae (a town on the main road, about 85 km away from Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ), where his maternal grandmother lived, and started attending the primary school in Kacgae. He then returned to Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ in 2014 and went back to attend primary school. As soon as he graduated from the primary school in 2017 he enrolled in secondary school in Ghanzi. However, he dropped out of this secondary school in 2019. ZL said that he could not afford the stationery such as notebooks, which hindered his studies and led to corporal punishment by the teachers.

Around that time, ZL's father KN had left Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ and started working in the tourism sector in Maun, a town located 270 km north of Ghanzi. When KN returns to Qx'úĩsà-kínĩ, eg during the Christmas holidays, he usually stays at the plot of a woman who is in love-relationship with him (and who is not ZL's birth mother). During this time, ZL often visits KN at her plot (interview by the second author, 30 December 2023).

On the other hand, ZL's birth mother still lives in Ghanzi with another man. ZL also kept in touch with them. ZL usually refers to KN as *bàā* (father), whereas the man who currently lives with his birth mother is called *suteppu fadzara* (English term 'stepfather' pronounced with a local accent). The man's

children are not called *cīā-χō* (classificatory elder brother in G|ui language), but *buradzera* (English term 'brother' pronounced with a local accent). ZL says 'I worry about the mother living in Ghanzi. Someone told me that my stepfather beat her and kicked her out of the house. He then went back to the house with only her bag. I want my mother to be back in New Xade (Qχ'úǝsà-kínī). In the near future (ʔū-sì), I want her to live in a house in New Xade, so that I can see her more often. I would get rid of the men' (interview by second author).

Remarks

The above-mentioned case of ZL shows considerable similarity and continuity with the settled life in !'Úi!ùǝ̀ and even the nomadic life before that, in that the relationships with the divorced parents do not cease and continue as a social resource after the divorce and remarriage. On the other hand, towns such as Ghanzi and Maun have been increasingly included in the sphere of life for the G|ui/G|lana people in Qχ'úǝsà-kínī. Subsequently, the G|ui/G|lana are increasingly involved with people from other ethnic groups who do not necessarily share family and sexual norms with them. Moreover, the G|ui/G|lana are irreversibly losing the flexibility of group composition through fission and fusion of residential groups, which had been a characteristic of their nomadic lifestyle. These appear to make it difficult for the G|ui/G|lana to resolve social conflicts and associated emotional entanglements.

In the nomadic lifestyle of G|ui/G|lana, which has been described as an egalitarian society, the nuclear family was regarded as the basic unit of social activity and cooperation (eg Tanaka 1980). Substantial cooperation and sharing took place in residential groups (camps) consisting of several close nuclear families. This article reveals that similar principles can also be applied to stepfamilies. Divorced and remarried partners and those in love-relationships actively cooperate in social activities such as subsistence activities, child-rearing and everyday conversation. As Tanaka (1989:162) pointed, 'various sexual relationships such as marriage and the love-relationship also play important roles in determining the framework of the group and in uniting people'. Thus, the fission and fusion of familial units, a characteristic feature of G|ui/G|lana camps, seems to be analogous to the members of separated nuclear families. They do not completely detach from their relationships, but repeatedly meet and part ways with them, making the relationships important resources for their social life. However, this does not indicate that their emotional life, such as with love and grief, is a simple one with few waves. The fact that they have

complex feelings about stepfamilies can be seen in ZL's narrative in the previous section. It is too early to conclude whether these complex feelings are new emotional experiences brought to the G|ui/Gllana by recent social changes, or whether they reflect a life world that has persisted since the nomadic period. Through a more detailed and careful examination of their daily interactions (eg Sugawara 1998; 2002; Takada 2020; Noguchi & Takada 2024), the subtleties of the emotional lives of the members in such stepfamilies will be clarified.

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