
Ute Dieckmann’s historical and anthropological study of the Hai||om experience under colonialism is a significant contribution to Africa’s recovery of its past. Dieckmann combines a thorough interrogation of archival material with a more subtle and respectful engagement with Hai||om informants living today.

An appealing feature of the book is its ability to deal with a painful history without sliding into several pitfalls known to the genre, namely: romanticism, impersonal documentation or unnecessarily getting side tracked with academic debates about whether San people exist or not. Dieckmann has produced a ‘post’ postmodern book, which draws on the heritage of classical anthropological investigation (an outsider visits and describes a community), then places this picture within a historical and political-economic context (through good use of archival material) and finally also recognises that Dieckmann is an actor in the events and dynamics. Dieckmann does not attempt to speak on behalf of the Hai||om themselves. Through the effective use of interviews and quotations, she allows us to hear different voices, to see one story from different angles, and to come to our own conclusions.

Dieckmann explains at the beginning of the book that it was not her intention to spend so much time with archival material. A serious road accident at the start of her visit to Namibia caused her to withdraw from the field and open the door to a more detailed consideration of historical texts. She traces over time the different voices, intentions and perceptions of colonial and settler authors. She sets these into temporal Zeitgeist – dominant ideologies and perspectives of the times. She shows that even the dominant sources of power were divided in their ethics, opinions and actions.

After a careful consideration of colonial sources, Dieckmann returns to the source itself: Hai||om informants living in locations, on farms and at Etosha National Park. In this way, she is able to examine the interface between colonial and indigenous memory. Dieckmann facilitates Hai||om being authors of their own experience and history, even when this does not affirm a politically attractive version of history.

There is a long tradition of outsiders documenting the histories and experiences of indigenous peoples in Southern Africa (for example Fritsch 1872, Passarge 1907, Vedder 1953, Lee 1965, Heinz 1966, Köhler 1971, Marshall 1976, Silberbauer 1981, Widlok 1999). Dieckmann’s work is an interesting contribution for a number of reasons. Firstly, the status of the Hai||om as ‘a people’, and more particularly as a ‘San people’, has not been consistently recognised or appreciated. In part, due to racial stereotyping and confusion over the links between language and identity, the Hai||om have regularly been

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challenged about their identity. Whereas Ju|’hoansi, !Xun, Naro, |Xam, !Xóõ and other first peoples of the region have been able to easily identify with a greater macro identity of ‘San’ peoples, others who share the heritage and origins have not had it so easy. The Khwe, Hai||om, and the ‡Khomani peoples have had to struggle to claim their ‘rights’ to this umbrella identity, being rebuffed repeatedly by external experts who influenced state policy. For readers interested in colonial history, Dieckmann’s book will be a gold mine of information about colonial governance and the complex dynamics of recognising peoples (or not), which have shaped our current circumstances of inequality and poverty. She skilfully traces the emergence of different paradigms of ethnicity and power, using the voices of the different colonial authorities.

An important aspect of Dieckmann’s work is her insistence on uncovering ‘agency’. It is evident that the Hai||om are in a highly vulnerable situation. They are dealing not only with poverty and landlessness; they are spread over a large territory with little capacity to consolidate networks or institutions. It is difficult for Hai||om communities to represent themselves and secure the attention of the state or others sources to allow them to build a better future. Dieckmann traces various failed attempts by educated Hai||om to create a unified body and strategy for engaging with the government.

A major ordeal involved efforts to establish a recognised traditional authority. Not only was the process difficult logistically and politically, but the quality of the outcome was unacceptable for most Hai||om people, creating as many problems as it had hoped to resolve. It is tempting to see the Hai||om as victims of history; it is a favourite theme of White southern Africans to cast the San in a tragic light – a pre-historic people who cannot cope with the exigencies of modern life (for example Uys 1980). Darwinism and modernity have proclaimed the fate of hunter-gatherer peoples – they are hapless victims (either innocent or wicked, depending who you ask). Dieckmann shows that different Hai||om families tried their best to make strategic decisions necessary for survival in the absence of the capacity for armed resistance or retreat into the bush. Some people have been victims, others have been opportunists, and others have found symbioses with the dominant forces around them.

An interesting section of the book focuses on the relationship between the Hai||om on the ground and the various levels of the national and international human rights and indigenous peoples’ rights movements. As is the case with many indigenous peoples throughout Africa, the debates, the long processes of setting standards of human rights specific to indigenous peoples, the establishment of mechanisms and forums to hear human rights complaints and even the technical breakthroughs at the United Nations seem a world apart for those barely surviving poverty and marginalisation in the townships and farms.

With the 2006 High Court ruling in Botswana on San rights in the Central
Kalahari, it is evident that UN human rights standards for indigenous peoples may still have a direct impact on the ground, but overall there is a great chasm between what happens in New York and Geneva and the reality of Outjo and Okaucuejo.

It is one of the disturbing aspects of the international rights process that although there is high level attention being given to the issue of indigenous and local peoples’ knowledge of biological diversity, this has not reached the lives of those who are holders of this knowledge. Dieckmann confirms that the Hai||om, like other African hunter-gatherers, are losing faith and interest in their traditional knowledge of biodiversity, and not recognising that its value is soaring in terms of the ‘knowledge’ market internationally (p. 298).

For many readers, the most engaging part of the book is likely to be that which deals with issues of identity. There have been some intense and volatile academic discussions about San identity over the centuries and the past two decades particularly (viz. the Great Kalahari debate see amongst others Lee 1992; Lee and Guenther 1993; Wilmsen 1989). Some writers may want to recognise a romantic picture of indigenous peoples in isolation from the political economy. Others have applied a European Marxist analysis to the various San peoples, without necessarily recognising the distinctiveness of hunter-gatherer and post-hunter-gatherer social (and hence political) organising. Dieckmann strikes a balance in this. She recognises that the Hai||om have been under intense pressure to enter into the farm labour economy — a marginal and vulnerable corner of the capitalist class system. Yet, at the same time, people have carried out subsistence activities and sometimes escaped or at least navigated their relationship between the labouring and subsistence modes. Contemporary Hai||om identity is neither solely a class identity nor a cultural heritage identity; it is a complex interaction of both.

Dieckmann’s experiences are familiar to me from my years of working with ‡Khomani people in the southern Kalahari. Like the Hai||om, the cluster of peoples known as ‡Khomani was caught between the establishment of a national park (which exploited their knowledge, skills and labour) and state sanctioned land grabbing by White, Baster and Coloured settlers. The stories told by Hai||om people to Dieckmann mirror those of the southern Kalahari: the problems of racism on all sides, of the loss of land, of confusion about history and identity, and also the pressure from outsiders to have a fixed identity and a fixed story. In the south, being ‘San’ or ‘Boesman’ is often associated with dodging or exploiting other people’s agendas and ‘fixed’ realities.

In the early days of my work with ‡Khomani people no one knew what the word ‡Khomani meant or to whom it applied, but that did not discourage people from using it effectively in a land claim process (Crawhall 2005). Dieckmann and I followed similar processes of creating opportunities for elders to talk about their identities without assuming there was a fixed macro
identity to which people naturally affiliated. Outsiders believed that the ‡Khomani San social institutions and customs had crumbled, but a careful process of investigation and ‘cultural inventory’ helped surface important intangible heritage, knowledge systems, belief systems and even traces of old family-based territorial systems (see Crawhall 2001).

There is an almost comic section in Dieckmann’s book where Hai||om informants try to figure out whether they are San or not (pp. 301-302). Saan is apparently a word of Khoekhoe origin mobilised by Europeans to distinguish non-herding aboriginal people. Both the Hai||om and the ‡Khomani peoples speak varieties of Khoekhoe yet neither group appears to have used the word Saan in reference to themselves, though they share the same terms to designate Whites and Blacks. Now that the term San is taking on a new value and meaning (associated with certain resources and rights), speakers of San languages are trying to get their heads around what exactly the term is meant to imply. Dieckmann concludes without compunction: “‘San’ does not mean much for the majority of Hai||om staying in the squatter camps in Outjo” (p. 306).

In keeping with contemporary anthropological norms, Dieckmann argues that the ethnic identity ‘Hai||om’ is a result of historical forces and events (things that happened to the Hai||om) and their ability to access resources and economic opportunities (things the Hai||om did to survive). According to Dieckmann, the colonial and particularly the apartheid governance systems forced the Hai||om into legal and policy channels based on ethnicity, and this has shaped the contemporary mobilisation of Hai||om around their indigenous identity, rather than as a rural and peri-urban sub-proletariat.

I would ask whether to suggest that Dieckmann’s discomfort with ethnicity as a point of organisation in relating to the state causes her to skip over the origins and source of in-group identity formation which underpin Hai||om identity, though she does a good job of showing the historical forces acting on that foundation.

Dieckmann defines herself as a constructivist; looking at how historical processes and the perceptions of others can shape and influence the identity of a particular group. She says at one point: “I can only explore how those individuals who consider themselves Hai||om represent their identity, it is impossible for an outsider to reconstruct what they really are.” (p. 295). Though one can appreciate her not wanting to abscond with other people’s experience, it would seem precisely the function of the social scientist to engage with people and look for patterns which are not necessarily self-evident to those living the identity. As a linguist, I know that speakers of a language are the ones that must interpret and give value to speech acts, but they themselves often do not notice what they are doing when they speak and do not have a metalanguage for explaining the patterns which define their linguistic identities.

A fair point of departure would be to say that the Hai||om are humans like
everyone else. As humans, we all belong to the cluster of primates. Primates have behaviour patterns which include in-group identification and management. Dunbar (1996) puts forward the argument that there is a direct relationship between the depth of neo-cortex in primates and the size of ‘band’ or social group which different primate species can actively manage. As the neurologically most advanced primate, we can handle larger number of social relations than other primates. All primates, including humans, have the problem of ‘free-rider’ opportunists.

Dunbar puts forward a theory that humans use language as a more complex form of grooming and group management. We modify our speech as a way of filtering who is part of our inner group, and who is related but an outsider.

The point being made by Dunbar is that we as humans are already hard wired with instincts about social management and with the capacity for language. Whether one accepts Dunbar’s grooming thesis or not, it remains the case that instincts precede their cultural expression, and that languages are intimate and highly tuned systems to generate, manage and define in-group and out-group identities. All of this hard wired capacity predates the emergence of economic classes, the state, colonialism, apartheid or post-colonial political economy.

When talking about ethnicity it is worth being more careful about where we assign causality. Dieckmann says: “Ethnic consciousness in the case of the Hai||om is strongly interlinked with socio-economic patterns, which – as a legacy of apartheid — still run along ethnic lines.” (p. 304). This ignores that identity as expressed relationally as ‘ethnicity’ is common to all humans. Moreover, if apartheid had a legacy for San peoples it was to confuse whether they had any right to identity, territory or languages. With the exception of the Ju||hoansi, most indigenous peoples were peripheralised under apartheid. Lewis (2001) describes clearly a situation of indigenous conceptualisation of ethnic differences as Yaka (civilised forest foragers) and Bilo (oaf-like dangerous people who live in villages) which has nothing to do with apartheid or post-colonial economics.

Widlok (2000) provides a fascinating discussion about how the ḋAkhoe Hai||om maintain a family naming system that is both distinct to themselves and has convertible equivalence in Owambo culture. Dieckmann is primarily arguing that the Hai||om identity today is more about poverty and marginalisation than about knowledge and the heritage of hunting and gathering. And yet Widlok is presenting to us a unique naming system which all Hai||om understand and which defines marriage options and reciprocity rights – not necessarily tightly, but which are an important aspect of identity that emerges from a hunter-gatherer economy and the particular dynamics which gave rise to a culture now labelled Hai||om.

That the Hai||om do not have a tight sense of ethnic identity speaks to their geographic and economic context, but it does not follow that their identity is by origin derived primarily by external forces of the state, the owners of the
means of production, or other recent aspects of political economy. Ethnicity is not a late nineteenth century invention of colonialism, and even less an invention of apartheid governance. In-group identities are fundamental to human social organising and reproduction.

Anthropology as a discipline seems to keep linguistics and primatology at arms length when applying its methodology. Dieckmann has presented a subtle and well-balanced picture of Hai|om identity but still shows the tendency amongst anthropologists to prefer theories of constructed identities rather than to examine socio-biological aspects which gained such a bad reputation in the twentieth century. One wonders if this is from Dieckmann’s own convictions or a reaction to Kuper’s attack on ethnicity as a point of organising by indigenous peoples.

Overall, Dieckmann has made an impressive contribution to Namibian ethnography and history. The book, along with Thomas Widlok’s work, will form a cornerstone for further writing and discussion of Hai|om circumstances, identity and history. Dieckmann has evidently been a good listener. She has let people tell their own story and define themselves without her interference or agenda. Bold in telling the story, she is simultaneously sensitive to the people she is engaging with. She has been guarded in her handling of identity issues, and perhaps too trapped in orthodoxies of contemporary anthropology to unpack fully the origins and influences on this aspect of life which is so important to all Namibians.

Nigel Crawhall
Visiting scholar, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Tromsø, Norway

References


