
Karl-Johan Lindholm’s PhD thesis is an in-depth study of the history of a dry section of northeastern Namibia by herders. It documents the archaeology and later historical record of use of wells in the Omaheke, a communal land area, distinct from the mostly white-owned commercial farms of Ghanzi in Botswana, Gobabis and Grootfontein in Namibia which ring the Omaheke to the west and south.

Let me begin by saying that this work is a major *tour de force* as a PhD thesis. Lindholm has done an excellent job of mining the literature, which will be welcome to future researchers in the area. His research and analysis are both well-founded, and his interpretation, with somewhat limited archaeological data, logical.

Lindholm situates his thesis around misrepresentations of the use of the area by pastoral people, and focuses on “the ambiguity of livestock herding in the archaeological record”. It would appear that the author’s ideological direction is to support possible land claims of Herero historical right to the Omaheke. This is done by archaeological interpretation and attempts at ‘reading’ the historic record.

The published work is structured into eight chapters, the second of which looks at the history of research and debates. It also situates Lindholm’s own interests around pastoralism, and attempts to suggest that previous work has poorly understood the relationship of herders with the Omaheke. He goes across the border to look at the Dobe area, and here he uses Wilmsen’s identification of a cow at /Xai/xai as a clue to how much contact probably existed with herders and hunters in the past. The so-called ‘cow’ from /Xai/xai is somewhat problematic. It is an idiosyncratic find around any waterhole (as Lindholm himself would probably admit, since he later in the work describes how little bone does exist around waterholes, and mostly from wild animals). Other researchers have raised doubts about how correct the identification was, but this can no longer be verified, as the bone has been lost.

Lindholm’s survey of the research background to his thesis is first class. He engages with the history of the Great Kalahari Debate, and, not surprising since one of his main sources of encouragement is Ed Wilmsen, there is a slight partisan leaning towards the revisionist side of the argument. In this there is criticism of the Bushman-centred research which he believes gave primacy of direction in favour of the Ju/'hoansi. He is critical of the ‘isolated and pristine’ vision of the Bushmen propounded by the Harvard Research Group, but does recognise that this was an extreme position that even the Harvard Group knew to be incomplete. This could be seen as early as Richard Lee’s PhD thesis from Berkeley in 1964 where he mentioned that some of his Ju/'hoansi informants had worked as herdsmen for Tswana.

In some ways this colours the author’s view of the history of the region, and
allows him to state that interpretation of
the work I did with Richard Lee at
Cho/ana which suggested independence
of Ju/'hoansi towards outsiders until
recently, is our “greatest bias” (p.
139).1

An example of how peripheral the
Ju/'hoansi were to outsiders can be
seen in Marshall where she describes
the police post at Cho/ana in the early
1950s.2 This was the de facto border
with British Bechuanaland and the route
by which Ovambo labour was trans-
ported by the Witwatersrand Native
Labour Association to the mines on the
highveld of South Africa. The post was
controlled by a Tswana man named
Moremi. Marshall (ibid: 7) says: “…a
group of !Kung worked for him, tending
his cornfields and his cattle. Tsho/ana
was also the waterhole of Band 24; the
band lived independently of Moremi’s
post”. Moremi had deepened the
waterhole at Cho/ana by either blasting
or digging (ibid: 73).

She goes on to say (ibid: 8) “Our
contact and that of the !Kung with the
Bantu who passed through Tsho/ana
consisted only of staring at each other
for an hour or so, once every two
weeks, and had no significant influence
upon our life there”. Marshall also
describes how isolated the different
Ju/'hoansi groups were from each other
(ibid: 21), never mind the outside world.

One of our informants, an elder named
N/ani, showed us his campsite from the
1960s at Cho/ana. We mapped the site
that was located behind the remains of
the round huts of the Tswana, presum-
ably Moremi’s family.3 Thus there
was a strict hierarchy in the layout of
the settlement.

Chapter 3 is a good description of the
environment of the Omaheke, with a list
of pasture grasses, and the animals to
be found in the area. Current settlement
patterns and population densities found
during the research are also offered,
along with some discussion on the
Communal Area, and the Nyae Nyae
Conservancy. The latter is described in
rather negative terms, such as
“despair”, “dependency” and “vio-

lence”, without any reference to the
history of SADF use of the area in the
1970s and the introduction of a cash
economy and a liquor store at Tsumkwe
that disrupted the traditional sharing
ethic. The two paragraphs on this give a
sub-text that the pastoralists make
better use of the land, so should have
more rights?

Chapter 4 is a history of the Omaheke,
with the intended purpose to show “how
the assumption of an unsuitable
environment came into being”. The

1 A. B. Smith, & R. B. Lee, “Cho/ana:
archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for
recent hunter-gatherer/agropastoralist contact in
Northern Bushmanland, Namibia”, South African
Archaeological Bulletin 52, 1997: 52-55; A. B.
Smith, “Ethnohistory and archaeology of the
Ju’hoansi Bushmen”, African Study Monographs,
Supplement Issue 26, 2001: 15-27; R. B. Lee,
“Solitude or servitude. Ju’hoansi images of the
colonial encounter”, in: S. Kent, (ed), Ethnicity,
Hunter-gatherers, and the ‘Other’. Association or
Assimilation in Africa, Washington: Smithsonian

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,
1976.

3 A. B. Smith, “The archaeology of the Ju’hoansi
author concludes with the statement (p. 51) that "the common notion of the Omaheke...which implies a dry impassable barrier unsuitable for livestock herding, may be open to question". His reading of the history is that Herero used the entire Omaheke, including the lower reaches of the Epukiro and Eiseb before the German occupation, and not just as a result of being forced away from the richer upper end of this catchment.

Lindholm accepts Passarge’s statement that Tswana cattle were being herded in Nyae Nyae by Bushmen (probably a mafisa arrangement, as documented in Lee), and that Herero “inhabit the sandveld at the upper end of the Epukiro and Eiseb...the Omuramba Omatako”. Passarge also mentions several “colonies” of Herero further east in Kaukauveld. This can be read as the Bushmen were basically in control of the lower Eiseb (i.e. around /Gam), as well as Nyae Nyae and Kaudom. That the southern area had been controlled by Bushmen under the leader ≠Dukuri in the mid-19th century when Baines and Chapman travelled in the area is well documented. Outsiders’ use of the area would have been contingent on negotiation with the Bushmen.

Chapter 5 looks at a different source of information: that of the archaeology of the region. This is done by survey and excavation of a number of wells across a large area from the Epukiro and Eiseb drainages in the south to Dobe Pan north of Tsumkwe. As predicted by the historical data there are huge number of water points in the upper reaches of the Epukiro and Eiseb Valleys. These become fewer elsewhere in the study area, but when combined with hunting blinds the number is augmented. The author admits that “traces of human activities are few and obscure in Omaheke”. This is certainly our experience in doing casual surveys around wells, partially, I believe, because there has been so much disturbance by cattle there. While Later Stone Age materials and pottery are not plentiful, Cho/ana does give some indication that they exist, and I found flaked stone to a depth of 40 cm close to /Gam, as does Lindholm at Otjozondema (pp. 121-128). All this demonstrates prior hunter use of the area.

Chapter 6 offers data on the potential of the Omaheke for pastoral use, and shows that “the assumption that the Omaheke environment cannot sustain livestock herding can be questioned on almost every point” (p. 108). I doubt that any researcher would even question this, especially after the original cattle experiment of John Marshall with the Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative in the 1980s that initially was so successful. As long as the cattle numbers were low and they were protected from lions, they did very well in and around /Gautsha and lao/a, especially after the elephant-proof pump system was in place at the latter.

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well. The problem would be in sustainable use of the land for herding if numbers increased. One could see the area having seasonal potential after the rains, and most likely this would have been the practice in the lower Epukiro and Eiseb drainages in the past by Herero.

Chapter 7 is an attempt at offering a chronology for the Omaheke wells. There is little in the argument by the author to give confidence that the water points in the Nyae Nyae were originally opened up by the Herero, rather than Ju/'hoansi, even when the herders have names for the wells. I think Lindholm is pushing his luck by suggesting that because the origin of the small circular and oval rectangular wells are unknown to his informants this necessarily indicates an earlier phase of pastoral use (p. 121). His use of the data from Otjozondema shows a mixture of flaked stone and undecorated pottery, along with 15 small bone fragments are too amorphous to say much. Wilmsen’s predictive plotting of dates with depth is questionable in the sandy matrix, and should be used with extreme caution. Any dates younger than 500 years are always suspect. At best, there may be a stratified sequence.

One gets the impression that the author wishes to conflate the Omaheke with the area to the north, including the Kaudum and the Omatako Omuramba. He earlier in the work (p. 13) debates the issue of pottery occurrences over this large area, suggesting that previous research had the bias towards pottery as exotic elements in hunting societies. His revision of the archaeology wants to make the pottery the result of pastoralist occupation. He fails to recognise that the pottery found in the Kaudom and Nyae Nyae is mostly cross-hatched ware of Mbukushu origin. The Mbukushu are fisher/farmers on the Kavango River to the north. Kinahan notes the appearance of another pottery type in Nyae Nyae, a comb-stamped ware that is not Mbukushu. In our excavations at Cho/ana, comb-stamped ware was found stratified beneath the Mbukushu pottery, and identified by Tom Huffman as Divyuu ware from the Tsodil area.

As argued by Smith & Lee, and by Lee from the information given by Ju/'hoansi elders, there were no black people in the Kaudom and Nyae Nyae until the late 19th century, a situation that would appear supported by Passarge's notes on the people he met south of the Kavango River in the Kaudom Valley. Passarge does say he saw the Herero "colonies" in the Upper Chaudum (which according to his map would refer to the Nhoma Valley where Cho/ana is located). These he suggested were the result of pressure from warfare, but more likely herders fleeing the rinderpest epidemic.

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8 Kinahan, "Settlement": 115.
9 Smith, "Ethnohistory".
10 Smith/Lee, *Cho/ana* ; Lee, "Solitude"; Wilmsen, Kalahari.
11 Ibid.: 86.
The combination of the ethnohistoric information we were given by our Ju/'hoansi informants and the Passarge journal led us to accept that the Ju/'hoansi, right up to the 1960s were going on trading forays to the Kavango from Cho/ana and to choose when to do this and with whom to trade. Details of the trade have been given by Hautmann Muller in 1911. This has allowed us to suggest a scenario of independence consistent with the picture offered by Lorna Marshall of her observations in the 1950s. All contact would seem to have been with the north, except when refugees on their last legs managed to escape from the Germans and enter the area without stock. Anyone who has travelled through the waterless country and dense vegetation to the west of Cho/ana would recognise the difficulty in getting through, a fact that Mattenklodt found when he almost died trying to get to Grootfontein from Nyae Nyae.

I was fortunate to visit /Gam in 1998 with Polly Wiessner. There we met an old Bushman named /Xao !oma who told us about his life, and who showed us a piece of Mbukushu pottery which had been given to him by his aunt around 1950, before he was ‘blackbirded’, i.e. forced into labour by a white farmer. The pot had been buried, then later broken by cattle after John Marshall arrived (i.e. sometime after 1952). The pot must have travelled over 250 km from its source on the Kavango River, and was a good illustration of the movement of certain exotic commodities being transferred through *xharo* exchange networks. This piece of pottery had been carefully curated, and seen as an important family heirloom. /Xao loma told us where various commodities came from in the past. From the north: pots, copper, wooden bowls, wooden spoons, large white glass beads, spear points, knobkerries (with same decoration as the pottery), a small red nut. From the east (L. Ngami): tobacco, large white glass beads, gourd milk containers, shoes. From the south: ostrich eggshell, strike-a-lights, small red and black glass beads, arrow straighteners, wooden mortars and pestles, metal enamel bowls. From the west (Eiseb): ostrich eggshell beads. The north, thus, was a major source of commodities that had to come through the Kaudom and Nyae Nyae.

What happened in the south, particularly in the Eiseb area, may have been very different. Since pastoralists always take advantage of good pasture conditions when they find them, there is no reason to doubt that pasture forays out of the heart of Herero lands before they were stolen by the Germans would have meant using the Eiseb as an avenue of infiltration towards /Gam. This does not mean, however, that they necessarily spent long periods there, and could easily have made good use of the water

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holes of the Bushmen, enlarging them for animal-watering purposes. It also does not mean that they could be considered the ‘owners’ of the land and water resources. Their tenure would have had to depend on their relations with the Ju/'hoansi.

In the work there was only a limited attempt to ask the Bushmen what their history was, and what they remember of the use of the water holes/wells (p. 119), or to ask the Herero what their relationships were with the Bushmen. Although he might not be aware of it, in spite of his excellent research into the oral traditions around the use of the wells, Lindholm tends to leave the Bushmen out of the equation. In this he would diminish any Bushman claims to aboriginal use of the border area of north-eastern Namibia. This will only pander to those in the corridors of power in Windhoek who wish to settle people from the outside, as has been suggested for Nyae Nyae. Like many assumptions that have gone before, such as the gazetting of the Kaudom as a Nature Reserve, or creating Herero-land East, the Bushmen are seen to be incapable of ‘properly’ using the land and resources, or being the ‘owners’ of the wells. The Ju/'hoansi around /Gam today are really third-class citizens in what was once their own land.

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