Becoming invisible – changing land use practices and identity strategies of the !Xoon in Namibia between the 1920s and 1970s

Gertrud Boden

Abstract

!Xoon are a group of former hunter-gatherers who live in the dry southern Kalahari in eastern Namibia. They have been largely overlooked in both the extensive body of anthropological publications on the San and in Namibian historiography. The documentation of former !Xoon land use patterns presented here was undertaken with the aim of countering the invisibility of the !Xoon and is based on biographical and historical narratives describing how the !Xoon adapted their territories, settlement patterns, subsistence activities and identity strategies during the period under scrutiny. By placing these strategies in academic discussions about San territoriality it will be shown how territorial behaviour was entangled in the historical process. I will then go on to argue that through both geographical and social mobility the !Xoon not only reacted to but also consolidated the expropriation of their lands, reinforced pre-cast ethnic categories and thus contributed to the fashioning of their own invisibility. Current pressures on San in Namibia to conform to stereotypes of ‘Bushmaness’ in order to be visible and eligible for state benefits are an ironic reflection of former pressures on San not to be identifiable as stereotypical Bushmen in order to escape state repression.

Introduction

!Xoon in Namibia belong to the populations classified as San or Bushmen in Southern Africa.¹ They speak a variety of the Taa language, which is the sole living language in the whole Tuu (formerly: Southern Khoisan) language family.² No ethnographic description of them existed before 2004.³ Only then did they become the subject of linguistic and

¹ I am going to use the term ‘San’ when speaking from my own perspective and the term ‘Bushmen’ when referring to statements made in sources using that term (e.g. archival sources, statements by farmers or by San).


³ The ethnonym !Xoon, although often also pronounced as !Xuun, must not be mistaken for that of the better known !Xun (!Kung) in the northern Kalahari, of whom we do have in-depth ethnographies by Lorna Marshall, Richard B. Lee and numerous other researchers. They speak a language from the language family which formerly used to be called ‘Northern Khoisan’ and is nowadays called ‘Kx’a’ (Bernd Heine and Henry Honken, “The Kx’a Family. A New Khoisan Genealogy”, Journal of Asian and African Studies, 79 (3), 2010: 5-36).
anthropological research within the framework of the “Documentation of Endangered
Languages” (DobeS) initiative. The anthropological research within that project focused
on oral history and included the attempt to reconstruct former land use patterns from
the memories of present-day !Xoon in order to render their historical presence on the
land visible.

The period covered consists of the decades between the 1920s and 1970s. These
dates reflect both important historical points in time and the limits of the source
material. Both oral accounts and archival sources are very scarce for periods before the
1920s. The year 1921 is important because the South African Administration declared
that a large portion of the !Xoon settlement area was to become the Aminuis Native
Reserve for resettlement of Herero. During the 1970s, the seizure of !Xoon land in
Namibia was completed and !Xoon lost control over all of their former territories. The
last step in this process was taken when the so-called Corridor, a strip of land between
the Botswana border and the Aminuis Native Reserve, originally intended as a buffer
zone to prevent cattle diseases spreading across the frontier and up to then a refuge
for those living as independent foragers, was allocated to white farmers and Herero
herders as emergency grazing area.

Although the presence of hunter-gatherer San in most parts of Namibia is usually
acknowledged in historical accounts, references to them often seem in passing, as if
there to fill the otherwise empty space with some sort of human presence or as a
customary opening to telling the history of other population groups, as illustrated by the
quote below:

It is generally accepted that the earliest inhabitants of the [Gobabis] area were
San hunter-gatherers who roamed their hunting-ground in small, unstable
bands. Rock engravings on numerous farms in the Nossob Valley […] are all
that remains of these people who lived here hundreds and even thousands of
years ago. They chiselled the central themes of their lives – hunting and game
– into the rock, but apart from showing animals which no longer occur in the
area, such as elephant, lion, blue wildebeest, giraffe and eland, these ancient
works of art tell us little about the early history of the region. Abundant game,
good grazing and the healthy climate gradually also drew other peoples to the
region, such as Mbanderu and the Tswana, and later also the Oorlam and white
hunters and adventurers.  

Paradoxically the apparent former omnipresence of San thus becomes tantamount to
invisibility when one is looking for historic detail. The intention behind the present
documentation was to provide not just evidence of the presence of ‘default Bushmen’
but also as detailed information as possible on how the land was used by the ancestors
of the Namibian !Xoon. It has to be stressed, however, that what is presented here is but

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4 The project was based at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig. Thanks are
due to the Volkswagen Foundation for funding the research. For more information on the project see
http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/projects/taa. Special thanks are due to Monika Feinen at the Institute for African
Studies in Cologne for drawing the maps.

5 Piet H. van Rooyen & Peter Reiner, Gobabis. Brief History of the Town and Region, Gobabis, Municipality of
an initial and preliminary sketch, biased towards the information of my !Xoon informants. This should not be taken as fixed or final but as a starting point for future research which is urgently needed to enlarge the picture and add different perspectives, by including the memories of members from different ethnic or social groups and their histories of the area. Due to the overall funding framework, the research presented here has so far only involved !Xoon, and preferably !Xoon elders who were still fluent in their language and committed to telling the history of their people. Despite these limitations the article provides information on Namibian !Xoon land use practices and their development over time.

In the first section I provide a sketch of the historical background to the position of !Xoon in Namibian history, followed by more information on the research setting and the field methods. I will then present and explicate a series of maps summarizing the changes in !Xoon land use patterns and subsistence activities. I continue by revealing the historicity of San territorial behaviour before turning to argue that through their strategies of physical concealment by moving to remote areas and hiding their Bushmen identity by ‘becoming Nama’ !Xoon not only reacted to but also supported the seizure of their land as well as pre-cast ethnic categories and fashioned their invisibility.

A brief historical sketch

Based on a number of survey trips to Namibia and Botswana by the members of the DoBeS Taa team, the total of more or less fluent speakers of Taa in both countries is estimated to number about 4,000. In Namibia, two different dialects are spoken by about 500 people who call themselves !Xoon or ‘Njoha respectively and of whom about 80% identified themselves as !Xoon and 20% as ‘Njoha. !Xoon have a long history of settlement in Namibia while ‘Njoha did not arrive in greater numbers from Botswana until the 1950s when the area south of the Aminuis Native Reserve was opened up for farming and they were hired as labourers. The settlement area of speakers of Taa in Namibia can be described roughly as the area southeast of Gobabis, bounded by the Trans-Kalahari-Highway running from Gobabis to the Botswana border in the north, the border in the east, and the Nossob River in the south and west. At present, the largest communities are those in the southern part of the so-called Corridor. Others work on commercial farms, most of which are Afrikaaner-owned but increasingly also belonging to Herero. Some also live as squatters and casual workers in town locations, or attached to households and settlements of Herero and Tswana in the communal areas (see map 1).

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7 A previous version of this map was published in Boden, !Qamtee / aα #Kanya : 11. The map also includes information from previous surveys on Taa speakers as given in Dorothea F. Bleek, “The Distribution of Bushman Languages in South Africa”, in: Festschrift Meinhof, Sprachwissenschaftliche und andere Studien, Hamburg, J.J. Augustin, 1927: 55-64, and idem, Comparative Vocabularies of Bushman Languages,
Map 1: Settlement area of the Namibian !Xoon

In the 1840s, Lambert Oorlam, a division of the Nama, had settled in the Nossob valley at Nloasabanbis (present-day Leonardville), Gobabis and at Oas on the Chapman’s river. They controlled the trade routes from the south along the Nossob as well as from the west via Gobabis to Lake Ngami in Botswana and used the Aminuis area for hunting. Between 1880 and 1890, a group of Tswana from Kuruman in South Africa settled at Aminuis. The advent of the Tswana is well remembered because they equipped the !Xoon with hunting dogs and iron traps and made them hunt and work in their fields for little remuneration. The area was also affected by the German-Nama war of 1904 to 1909, which was partly fought in the Aminuis area. However, due to the lack of oral accounts it is impossible to define exactly foraging territories and land use practices during these earlier periods.

For the 1920s, when the resettlement of Herero at Aminuis began, my main informants describe the distribution for the San population in the Aminuis area as follows: from Aminuis to the south and east was !Xoon land, from Aminuis to the north-east was Naro land and from Aminuis to the north-west was the land of Gaináman and Haiijom whose ethnic affiliation remains unclear. Gaináman were said to have been of mixed !Xoon-Nama origin and to have spoken both languages while Haiijom were said to have spoken a totally different language. A German map from 1890 shows the name ‘Geiånams’ written in the immediate south of Aminuis. The surname Gainamseb is very common among Namibian !Xoon as well as Nama living in the southern Gobabis district. While Haiijom are usually associated with the Etosha area in north-central Namibia, the presence of a group called Haiijom in the area between Aminuis and Uichenas is confirmed in a report by the district magistrate in Gobabis from 1928. Both, Gaináman and Haiijom were said to have left the area when Herero came in.

Four pans, namely Aminuis, Hugus, Gubuoms and Njus have water permanently and were referred to as the ‘big places’ of !Xoon to where they always returned from their seasonal foraging expeditions. All four places have Nama names and were said to have been shown to !Xoon by Nama. According to my key informants !Xoon originated from areas further south. Interestingly, linguist Dorothea Bleek met Taa-speakers in places as far north as Tsachas and Uichenas in 1921. Since present-day !Xoon did not claim that they or their ancestors previously occupied territories so far north, these were either not ancestors of the people, who identify themselves as !Xoon today or lived there for only a short period, e.g. as farm workers.

In 1921, the South African Administration declared the Aminuis Native Reserve a reserve for Herero who had previously been living in south-central Namibia on land that was to

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8 Gertrud Boden, “Who were the ancestors of the Namibian !Xoon? A preliminary approach based on oral and selected written sources”, Anthropos, 107, 2 (in press).
9 Paul Langhans, Deutscher Kolonialatlas, Gotha, Perthes, 1897.
be given to white farmers. The Aminuis area was suitable for this purpose because it was considered “virgin and unoccupied country” by the administration. In the beginning, the Herero penetration was confined to the permanent open water sources located in the south-western part of the reserve. With progress in the digging of wells and sinking of boreholes, they gradually expanded their grazing and living areas to the north and east.

Map 2: The expansion of commercial farms into the !Xoon settlement area between 1902 and 1955.

From the late 1940s onwards, the areas south and southwest of the reserve were opened up for farming in order to accommodate ex-combatants from World War II whereby the commercial farm area was expanded onto the foraging territories of !Xoon. By the end of 1955 all land around the reserve and the Corridor had become privately

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owned farm land (see map 2).\textsuperscript{12} Because commercial farms needed labourers, San, Kgalagadi and Tswana farm workers from across the Botswana border as well as contract workers from northern Namibia and even from Angola came into the area. While contract work was organised by the South West African Native Labour Association (SWANLA), oral accounts suggest that local San were often simply captured and recruited for farm labour by force.

In 1964, the Odendaal Commission, which had been appointed to find ways to segregate the ethnic groups more strictly, proposed the transformation of the Corridor into a homeland for Tswana.\textsuperscript{13} However, this plan was never realised. Instead of a Tswana homeland, the Corridor became an emergency grazing area in times of drought. The western half of the strip bordering on the reserve was to serve the needs of Herero herders while the eastern half along the border was for white farmers. Tswana received ten farms around Tjaka-Ben Hur (see map 1), to where some of their !Xoon clients followed them. Other !Xoon came to settle there in order to live with the relatives of their spouses when their working lives as farm labourers came to an end. Farm labour, thus, can be said to have worked as a population whirligig because workers from different ethnic groups met on the farms, married, and after leaving farm work went to live with the relatives of one partner, sometimes in areas hundreds of kilometres away from their place of origin. After Namibian independence, both the reserve and the Corridor became communal land which is in principle open to settlement for all Namibian citizens. Since then, Herero, Tswana and Kgalagadi have increasingly moved into the Corridor.

**Research setting and field methods**

The data presented here are based on a number of methods including a socio-linguistic survey, biographical interviews, recordings of life histories, oral history interviews, a historically oriented cultural mapping project with field trips as well as off-site sessions and archival research. As already mentioned, both the research on oral history and cultural mapping were undertaken because !Xoon have neither a place in Namibian historiography nor on official maps. If at all, history books mention that the area was inhabited by Bushmen before the authors elaborate on the history of other groups. For the mapping of places I worked with a core team of five !Xoon men between 50 and 90 years of age, capable and willing to take me to former places of settlement. Most of the younger people didn’t know the exact location of such places because they had either only heard about them or only frequented them during their childhood and forgotten how to get there. The largest part of this information was collected during field trips, some was obtained off-site with the help of maps issued in the late 1970s, which are available for the whole territory of Namibia at the scale of 1:50.000. For logistical reasons it was impossible to visit every site in person, especially those located in

\textsuperscript{12} A previous version of this map was published in Boden, Iqamtee /aa #Kanya : 14.

commercial farm areas or in Botswana. The geo-referenced information was complemented by data from biographical interviews with almost all household heads, male and female, as well as data from a household census which confirmed narratives of major trends in territorial shifts by approximate birth dates and places of birth. The documented information in both mapping sessions and biographical interviews included the documentation of !Xoon place names which, in most cases, are names for water pans,14 furthermore, information on the availability of water as well as plant and animal resources, on range, reasons and periods of movements, land ownership and rules for land use, and subsistence strategies in general. The major trends emerging from these various sources are exemplary written into a series of maps and the accompanying text in the next section.

In the beginning I had planned to document former land use with members of both groups: !Xoon and 'Njoha. However, while many 'Njoha claimed that they also had a long history of settlement in Namibia (a claim which !Xoon challenged),15 when I was collecting data for the survey, it turned out that even the older 'Njoha were not able or not prepared to guide me to former foraging places and pans except to those in the immediate neighbourhood of their present homesteads. Potential and anticipated debates over land use among members of the !Xoon group, however, were remarkable by their absence in the historical narratives. This might be due to the fact that, as I have discussed in previous publications, the fault-line of difference which Namibian speakers of Taa stress most within current micro-politics — including the micro-politics related to the documentation project — was the boundary between people identifying themselves as !Xoon on the one hand and those identifying themselves as 'Njoha on the other.16 Current competition between these two groups for benefits related to ‘Bushmaness’ possibly provides the reason, not only for projecting the boundary between the two groups into the past and foregrounding it in historical narratives17 but likewise for eclipsing the boundaries between different sections of !Xoon.18 In a previous article I discussed in more detail how the social boundary between !Xoon and 'Njoha in Namibia is defined, marked and maintained in terms of language, land and leadership.19

18 Boden, “Mapping”.
19 Boden, “Western”.
Interestingly, the social boundary between !Xoon and 'Njoha was also indirectly exposed in recordings of their life histories. Since the project objectives included the recording of different text genres for the digital archive, I usually asked the people to tell their life histories on tape after having conducted the biographical interviews. These narratives were often quite different from the information obtained from the interviews. People not only omitted or added details but took the opportunity to speak about their poor lives to their imagined audiences. These ‘histories of suffering’ are not only telling with respect to how people tried to make use of our documentation at the time of its production but also with respect to former land use. When examined in more detail, they fashion further the social boundary between !Xoon and the 'Njoha. People identifying themselves as !Xoon depicted poor living conditions caused by the immigration of other population groups, in particular Tswana, Herero and Boers, while the 'Njoha told stories of continuous suffering beginning with laments about lack of water and harsh conditions for foraging, which were put forward as the reason why they or their parents moved from Botswana into Namibia in order to search for a better life but found equally bad or even worse living conditions there.

Archival sources were consulted in order to obtain as accurate time references for the oral history records as possible, such as, for example, the dates for building fences, sinking wells and boreholes or the periods of office of administration staff. The research area is located in two administrative regions and embraces the southern part of Gobabis District in Omaheke Region and the north-eastern part of Mariental District in Hardap Region. Sources of relevance are the reports by the district magistrates and those by the so-called Welfare Officers (later Superintendents) of the Aminuis Native Reserve. Within the Gobabis district, the police area of Pretorius (today: Leonardville) covered the whole southern part of the district beyond the Trans-Kalahari-Highway. Because my key informants claim that !Xoon originate from further south, the reports from all police areas in the Mariental district would, in principle, be of interest as well. Considerable numbers of Bushmen were, however, only mentioned in the reports for the Arahoab (Aranos) police area.

The main product of the documentation is a series of maps which is presented in the next section. The captions “Reconstruction of !Xoon land use patterns in the 1920s to 1930s”, “1930s to 1940s” and “1950s to 1970s” respectively, indicate that gradual changes were organised into a step-by-step model to allow their representation in two-dimensional, static maps. The indicated time frames have, of course, to be taken as approximates, not as fixed and precise dates. They are based on attempts to calibrate events mentioned in the oral accounts with dates listed in the archival sources. For

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20 Boden, “Interaction”.
example, !Xoon had given up their ‘big place’ Aminuis and retreated to Nluis when they observed the first windmill being erected at Kongowa in the early 1930s.\(^{21}\)

Finally, I would like to point out that the interpretation of Bushmen movements in the archival files turned out to be fundamentally different from those of !Xoon. The former portrayed the movements of Bushmen as being due to their alleged innate unsteady character and as the continuation of age-old patterns of mobility and subsistence strategies, solely dictated by environmental conditions. !Xoon, on the other hand, while also stressing that it had not been their habit to settle permanently at one and the same waterhole until very recently, characterised their movements as increasingly motivated by fear of persecution and shortages as well as becoming ever more constrained both in range and with respect to access to vital resources. The oral accounts are, of course, retrospective narratives interpreting the past from a present perspective. Reading and interpreting them one has to take into account the current political discourse about landless and needy San.\(^{22}\) The representations in the archival files on the other hand, although produced by contemporary witnesses, only provide the perspectives of administration officials and other colonials and codify the discourse about Bushmen and Bushmen policies of the time when they were created.\(^{23}\)

Both of these discourses are broad subjects and limited space only allows a few points to be highlighted here: The German as well as the South African colonial governments promoted the settlement of Whites in the territory and offered extensive aid to farmers. Many farmers were poor and needed cheap labour. They often faced livestock theft and banditry from San and other local residents. The solutions proposed included ‘education to work’ and forced labour. Alternatively the establishment of a Bushman reserve was also considered. All these policies aimed at controlling mobility and binding workers. The vagrancy proclamation of 1920 is a point in case: To move around in the police zone became an offence for non-Whites unless they could show ‘visible lawful means of support’ which were defined as either ten cattle or fifty small stock. This made all Bushmen de facto vagrants and subject to forced labour.\(^{24}\) The hunting of big game and

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hunting with bows and arrows were also banned. Coercive tactics for recruiting labour and handling livestock theft were rationalised by a system of stereotypes centred on the distinction between ‘tame’ and ‘wild’ Bushmen.25 This idea implied that to be suitable for farm work in the long term labourers could not remain ‘real Bushmen’. In 1949, the Commission for the Preservation of Bushmen was appointed to “create conditions where the Bushmen would be able to lead their ordinary lives […] and where they would be given every opportunity to preserve their separate identity”.26 Only the racially pure !Xun in the Nyae Nyae area were considered worthy of preservation in a reserve. The proposal to create a reserve for them was finally taken up and realised in the 1960s, at the time when homelands for ethnic groups were established on the territory of Namibia. The creation of the Bushmen homeland also internalised the perception that the only ‘true’ or ‘pure’ Bushmen/San were to be found in ‘Bushmanland’ a preconception which still persists today. San in other areas, especially farm workers, were no longer considered Bushmen, and their need for a land base was ignored.27

Changing !Xoon land use practices
The map showing the first stage (see map 3) shows a model of !Xoon land use before and immediately after Herero settlement in the Aminuis Native Reserve began.28 At the time, !Xoon lived semi-permanently at the four pans with permanent water in the south-western corner of the reserve.29 In the rainy season when water was also available in other pans they went to camp at these seasonal water supplies. Their foraging trips ranged up to the Nossob River to the west and south, and across the Botswana border to the east.

The main reason for migration was the exploitation of resources combined with the availability of water. However, migration was sometimes a response to harassment. The killing of the !Xoon chief Oujan Mboman and many of his men at !Uu-!om [Gubuoms] by a German trader who lived at Aminuis took place in this period. This event caused many !Xoon to seek refuge across the border in Botswana and featured prominently in the historical narratives of !Xoon. The women and children were abducted, brought to Gobabis and distributed as domestic workers on farms.30 The surviving !Xoon moved to N\n-N\n, one of their places on Botswana territory, but close to the border. They stayed

27 For comparable consequences of stereotypical indigenes in other parts of the world see e.g. Frederic W. Gleach, “Anthropological Professionalization and the Virginia Indians at the Turn of the Century”, American Anthropologist, 104 (2), 2002: 499-507.
28 Maps 3, 4 and 5 are to be found at the end of this article.
29 Although some of these pans are salt pans, fresh water springs are to be found at their edges.
30 For reports about similar instances see Gordon, “Hiding”. 

there for several years and only dared to return after sending messengers to the Tswana at Aminuis to find out how the situation had developed.

The main means of subsistence were hunting and gathering. Hunting included hunting in the service of Tswana. Furthermore, individual !Xoon served Tswana by working in the fields, herding their livestock and doing domestic work. !Xoon apparently relied on Tswana for information on the macro-politics. At the same time the relationship with Tswana was portrayed as slave-like and humiliating. Archival sources give additional evidence that Tswana forced the Bushmen to poach and treated them like slaves.31

!Xoon claimed that the whole area belonged to and was frequented by ‘all !Xoon’ and that effective boundaries only existed in relation to other San groups in the area: Naro, Gainǂaman, Haiǂom and ‘Nǂoha. !Xoon and Naro were said to have visited each other frequently, to have intermarried, to have allowed each other access to resources on their respective lands while the exploitation of resources on the lands of the other three groups would have resulted in conflicts or even fighting.32

The map showing the second stage (see map 4) shows what happened after Herero had occupied the places with permanent water in the south-western part of the reserve. !Xoon now stayed for longer periods at pans where they had formerly lived and only gathered seasonally for foraging expeditions. They now went to their ‘big places’ to fetch water or barter. The range of movement was narrowed and expanded at the same time: The area west of Aminuis was no longer frequented. Instead, !Xoon extended their migrations to the north-east into the area of the Naro. One reason was that the areas formerly used by !Xoon were now occupied by Herero. Another reason was the trading post at Onderombapa where they could sell skins of jackals or bat-eared foxes, ostrich feathers and the like. As in the earlier period, temporary flight to Botswana after police operations against poachers of big game was not uncommon. Prisoners were released if they agreed to accept farm work. !Xoon still lived mainly from hunting and gathering. They hunted for trade, did piece work for Herero and Tswana and increasingly also worked as farm labourers.

In general !Xoon continued to approach Tswana for information on the decisions and actions taken by the administration but they also increasingly made contact with Herero who they had avoided out of fear at first. They went to the places occupied by Herero in order to fetch water, barter animal products and offer piece work. Treatment by Herero in this period was depicted as fair and good compared to that by Tswana or the white farmers. In particular, Herero chief Hosea Kutako was said to have protected !Xoon from coercive and illegal abduction by farmers.

Individual people, usually big men, including some non-!Xoon, were identified as having customarily lived at or ‘owned’ certain places. These men had to be asked if !Xoon from other places wanted to exploit resources in the vicinity of their homesteads. The

32 Boden, “Mapping”.
development of notions of more restricted land rights among Namibian !Xoon, thus, seems to have been linked with the shrinking land base.

The map showing the last stage (see map 5) shows !Xoon land use after the big well-drilling campaign had been carried out during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the areas southwest and south of the reserve were opened up for commercial farming. The farms were fenced and gradually lost as foraging areas for !Xoon. In the reserve, !Xoon were increasingly pressed towards the Botswana border with the development of boreholes to the east and north and the consequent expansion of the Herero land occupation. The !Xoon land base had become very small and they settled almost permanently close to places with permanent water at boreholes. Foraging trips became very limited in range. !Xoon apparently tried to extend their range into Botswana but were stopped by ’Njoha who might also have come further westward to be closer to the farms.

Only short-distance mobility was related to foraging. Long-distance mobility was either for occasional big game poaching in Botswana or for taking up farm work. The latter had become more common by then due to the lack of other means of subsistence. Working conditions also seem to have had improved. Reports on farm labour still told of conflicts with farmers, corporal punishment, low wages and stories of escape, but more people, individuals and families, entered into long-term relationships with farmers, sometimes over years or even decades, interrupted only by periods of ‘resting from work’ and visiting relatives in the reserve. For subsistence, !Xoon now relied on a mixed economy of farm labour, small scale foraging and piece work for Tswana and Herero, including large illegal hunting parties making use of guns and cars.

Individualised land rights seem to have faded again among !Xoon with all !Xoon having access to what was left of !Xoon lands. However, a violent encounter about access to resources between members of the !Xoon and the ’Njoha groups at a place called Siglonku in Botswana was often mentioned by members of both groups.

By the 1970s the loss of !Xoon land in the reserve was complete. The data on birth dates show that the final movement from the south-eastern corner of the reserve into the Corridor took place in the 1970s. The Corridor was then allotted to farmers and Herero as emergency grazing area in years of drought and many San — !Xoon, ’Njoha and Naro — were hired to look after the livestock of Whites who had applied for such emergency grazing.

Mobility and territoriality

The former land use patterns of !Xoon in Namibia as reconstructed in the previous section reveal a step-by-step transformation from an early stage when people gathered at pans with permanent water and dispersed in the rainy season, to a second stage when settlement became resource-based at pans with seasonal or temporary water and people went to fetch water at their former ‘big places’, to a third and last stage when
settlement was water-based again, but at boreholes instead of pans, with a very limited land base and accompanied by a fundamental change in subsistence strategies.

Even the earliest of these three model stages looks very different from the pattern described by Hans-Joachim Heinz for !Xoon in Botswana who used to live in nucleated groups all year round. An obvious explanation is provided by the different ecological environment and a complete lack of surface water in those parts of Botswana compared to the permanent water sources at the 'big places' of !Xoon in Namibia. !Xoon narratives of the earliest stage apparently resemble more closely what Steyn has reconstructed for the immediate neighbours of !Xoon in the south and their closest language relatives: theǂKhomani-ǂ'Auni who lived on the lower Auob and Nossob rivers. Like the Namibian !Xoon, they dispersed during the summer, i.e. the rainy season, but during the dry winter season moved to a place called Kameelsleep on the Nossob River, where Tswana came to barter tobacco for animal skins. Since !Xoon claim that their ancestors originate from areas further south between these same two rivers, one can hypothesize that they once lived according to the same pattern as theǂKhomani-ǂ'Auni and adapted it to the Aminuis area with the permanent springs at salt pans replacing the riverbeds as semi-permanent 'big places'. !Xoon even seem to have practiced this pattern of dry season aggregation and rainy season dispersal during the second stage when permanent water sources were occupied by other population groups instead of nucleating all year round because of the lack of access to water.

Ecological conditions have not only been used to explain settlement patterns but also to explain territorial behaviour. In its widest sense, territoriality means some sort of congruence between social and geographical boundaries and intolerant behaviour with regard to space dependent on the abundance and distribution of resources and the costs of defence. It has been stressed that it is not actually the land and the resources which are defended but the social boundary of people entitled to use them. There seems to be some consensus that, firstly, a certain degree of flexibility in territorial ideology existed among San which permitted the temporary occupation of territories by alien groups and, secondly, that territories were less rigorously defended against

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37 Barnard, Hunters : 228.
people with other subsistence strategies who exploited different ecological niches.\textsuperscript{38} It has also been argued that affine ties were utilised to increase both the geographical range and the quantitative level and variability of natural resources by people moving between fixed food and water resources.\textsuperscript{39}

The territorial behaviour of !Xoon, based on the ethnography of !Xoon in Botswana by Hans-Joachim Heinz, has always been portrayed as unusually rigid when compared to other San.\textsuperscript{40} The accounts of !Xoon in Namibia provide a more complex picture: The most rigid social boundary which appeared in my data was that between !Xoon and 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha, who were said to have occupied different stretches of land, to speak different dialects and would ‘not sit at the same fire’. This actually sounds very similar to Heinz’s description of the territorial behaviour of various !Xoon band clusters (in his terminology ‘nexus’) in Botswana. Given that the ecological conditions and land use patterns were different for !Xoon and 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha, while territorial behaviour appears to have been similar at least for these two groups, the question arises whether the territorial behaviour of speakers of Taa was also partly culturally determined. As I have mentioned already, however, an alternative explanation for the particularly rigid social boundary between !Xoon and 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha in Namibia is the current competition for resources associated with ‘Bushmaness’ such as benefits from cultural performances at a community campsite, craft production and commercial tourist enterprises. The production of a music CD by South African musician Pops Mohammed, who apparently chose the music of 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha as the most authentic Bushman music, led to 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha group performers touring worldwide for significant financial rewards.

In comparison to the relations between !Xoon and 'N\textsuperscript{o}ha, those between !Xoon and Naro were represented as very friendly and supportive and the social boundary between them as having always been soft and permeable. Genealogical data provide evidence of numerous intermarriages. While close kinship ties can account for the permeable boundary between the two groups, there is no real explanation how these kinship ties came into being in the first place, given that !Xoon originate from further south and Naro are usually associated with places further north in the ethnographic record. It is currently an open question to which group of San the Aminuis area used to belong in a more distant past. From the oral accounts of !Xoon, although always referred to as one of their ‘big places’, Aminuis emerges as a centre where people from all population groups met.\textsuperscript{41} My !Xoon informants used to claim that Aminuis was unoccupied at the


\textsuperscript{40} Heinz, “Territoriality”; Cashdan, “Territoriality”; Barnard, Hunters.

\textsuperscript{41} Boden, “Ancestors”.
time when their ancestors arrived, but claims that places were unoccupied before one’s own arrival are legion in historical narratives of immigrants and always have to be treated with caution. It is obvious that such questions cannot be solved with information from representatives of the !Xoon group alone.

Territoriality has further been brought forward as the reason why San did not move away from their ancestral lands when these were occupied by other populations but rather allowed themselves to be absorbed into the dominant societies. One line of thought in such discussions is that they did not have the power to encroach on the territories of other San. The oral history of !Xoon reveals several attempts to do so. First of all they moved into the Aminuis area from the south. Although !Xoon claimed that they were the first settlers at Aminuis, this is hardly conceivable given the obvious advantages of places with permanent surface water in the dry southern Kalahari. Contact with Oorlam groups might even have enabled !Xoon to take over the permanent water places from other San groups. Alternatively, comparatively low pressure on resources at the time or alternative income from participation in trade and raiding networks might have allowed the accommodation of different San groups on the same territory.

When !Xoon had lost their ‘big places’ to Herero in the south-western parts of the reserves, they expanded into the territory which they themselves said belonged to Naro. !Xoon and Naro were said to have frequently visited each other and to have allowed each other access to resources. Whether this was the reason for or a consequence of !Xoon and Naro being on friendly terms is not clear. At least we can be sure that the reason why !Xoon expansion into Naro territory was not lasting, was due not to Naro resistance but rather to government intervention. When water was made available to Herero herders, !Xoon left the Naro territory again and retreated to a corner of their former territory. Thus, only the frustrated attempts of !Xoon to expand their foraging range into ‘Njoha territory in Botswana after their land base had been reduced dramatically as a result of the well-drilling campaign can be attributed to genuine territorial and social boundary defence.

Thus, instead of being due to cultural attributes of hunter-gatherer or !Xoon territoriality, to the powerlessness of San, which is accepted as self-evident, or to the ecological conditions for that matter, !Xoon territorial behaviour during the last century appears from their historical narratives to have been based on their strategies within the social network of relationships which had developed throughout their history. The call for a historical perspective on San societies has long been made and is being progressively

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answered. However, this is not true to the same extent for the increasing number of cultural mapping projects, most often undertaken from an advocacy or community perspective and aiming to make local practices of resource management visible and legible in order to render the ensuing claims easier to assess by the state. Instead, land use patterns as well as territorial boundaries are often represented as traditional, fixed, and separate instead of historic, fluid, and overlapping. While this makes them easier legible it also reinforces the stereotypical image of ‘cultural’ maps, expected to represent pure, static and consent indigenous occupation. Bearing in mind the limitations of the material on which the present documentation is based, I hope to have given at least an impression of the kind of historicity at work and historical contextualisation needed to overcome the subordination of former San land use under static models of timeless “traditional” indigenous territoriality.

Mobility and invisibility

Finally, I will try to show that for !Xoon, to be visible or recognisable has not always been worthwhile or desirable. The narratives of !Xoon often stressed that they moved to other places out of fear in order to escape persecution. They referred to many instances where !Xoon ‘became Nama’, ‘pretended to be Nama’ or ‘wanted to be Nama’ in order to escape discriminatory treatment of ‘Bushmen’ by passing for Nama farm workers. In the archival record this process is phrased as the ‘taming’ or ‘civilisation’ of Bushmen. Geographical or territorial mobility was only one strategy of becoming invisible. When this no longer provided a living, the strategy adopted to escape unwanted treatment as ‘Bushmen’ was to become unrecognisable as ‘Bushmen’. Thus, mobility is understood here as mobility by physical and social movement. While on the one hand involving different normative orders at different localities, both strategies were related to the overarching state policies towards Bushmen, based on pre-cast representations of this social category.

With respect to numbers of Bushmen, the district reports reveal the following information: In the Arahoab police area of Mariental district the number of Bushmen, who according to all probability must have been !Xoon, ranged between 100 and 200. For the Pretorius (nowadays: Leonardville) police area, the total number of Bushmen ranged between 200 and 250 but according to government ethnologist Oswin Köhler

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45 Boden, “Mapping”.

most of them were Naro. Numbers of Bushmen in the Aminuis Native Reserve were documented only from 1940 to 1956. Their numbers ranged between 50 and 240, of which the majority were Haiom. Köhler mentions only 20 Nusan living at Kongowa in the south-eastern part of the reserve. Thus, for the whole period up to the 1960s the total number of San given in the reports was never more than 450. Since most of them were identified as either Naro or Haiom, an estimate of about 200 to 250 !Xoon is realistic. Currently, the total number of people who consider themselves members of either the !Xoon or 'Njoha group in Namibia is about 500. Subtracting the number of 'Njoha who came into the country more recently, the number of !Xoon still amounts to about 400 to 450. Although natural population growth is certainly responsible for a part of the increase, such a high rate is rather unlikely. The administration thus either failed to see !Xoon at all or failed to identify them as Bushmen. In any case, this failure allowed the administration to declare the land of !Xoon to be unoccupied and to allot it to other population groups. Compare the following quote from the archival record to the information included in the map for the 1920s as extracted from the information of my !Xoon informants:

I came across no wild Bushmen, but I am told there are some employed as servants to the Bechuana [Tswana] and in trapping wild animals, [...]. Other than the places mentioned [Aminuis, Huguis, Toasis, Achab] the country is entirely uninhabited.

It is worth noting that the failure to recognise the presence of San in the area was preceded by an earlier period when the colonials evoked a frightening spectre of dangerous Bushmen robbers to justify persecution. Prior to the periods discussed here only individual farms, mission and police posts existed in the area. Reports from these days are full of instances of raids by Bushmen and portray them as omnipresent rather than invisible. That strategy of representation changed when it came to land concessions on a larger scale. Once land was to be given to Herero herders and white

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48 Ibid.
49 N|usan is another ethnonym which linguist Dorothea Bleek used for speakers of Taa at Tsachas, Uichenas and Aminuis (Bleek, “Distribution”; idem, Comparative vocabularies) and, at the same time, apparently a generic Khoekhoe exonym for all San in the southern Kalahari speaking a language from the Taa language family (Tom Güldemann, “The San Languages of Southern Namibia: A Linguistic Appraisal with special Reference to Körlein’s N|ussaa manuscript”, Anthropological Linguistics, 48 (4), 2006: 369-395 (390).
50 The numbers are: 100-200 Bushmen in Arahoab police area (probably !Xoon), 150-250 Bushmen in Pretorius police patrol area, most of them Naro (possibly 50-100 !Xoon), 50-240 Bushmen in Aminuis Native Reserve, most of them Haiom and 20 N|usan at Kongowa.
52 See also Gordon, “Hiding”.

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farmers the presence of San was depicted as ephemeral and the landscape as empty and unoccupied.

Another aspect of the representations of Bushmen in the district reports is their depiction as being driven by a sort of innate nomadism, triggered by rainfall and the availability of bush-food as illustrated by the following excerpt from the annual report on native affairs by the station commander at Aranos in 1934:

They [the Bushmen] do not worry about money and lead a hand-to-mouth existence. They never stop at any one place for any length of time and when they wish to leave nothing can stop them – this is especially true when good rains start to fall. They have no ambition and therefore no worries.53

Absconding from farm labour in particular was represented as a symptom of this instinct-like behaviour. The seizure of their land and bad working conditions are not considered as factors influencing San strategies for seeking and leaving farm labour. In addition, Bushmen were represented as undemanding and non-ambitious, a claim which helped legitimize paying them less than other farm workers. Proof of this was found in the fact that Bushmen often deserted service after some weeks “without worrying about their wages”.54 This overlooks the possibility that employers in need of farm workers might have refused to pay the Bushmen in order to make them stay or that the unbearable working conditions exposed them to violence and humiliation.

Xoon narratives are full of remarks about ‘becoming Nama’, ‘pretending to be Nama’ or ‘want to be Nama’, etc. They hid their Bushmen identities to avoid discrimination. The Nama were said to have been less often victims of coerced farm labour and inhumane treatment. Becoming and being regarded as Nama thus offered the chance to avoid being at the mercy of the farmers as they were when they maintained their Bushman identity. ‘Becoming Nama’ is still a strategy today, in particular employed by San living in towns or on farms. Comments on the Bushmen in the 1950s refer to them as ‘tame’, ‘settled’, ‘performing farm labour’, ‘interbred with the Hottentots’, or ‘absorbed by the Hottentot tribe’, ‘adopting the custom of Hottentots’, ‘associate with the Hottentots’ and the like. In the 1950s the transformation of Bushmen into farm workers seems to have been accomplished to a satisfactory degree: “Bushmen: The nomad type is no more found. Approximately 100 Bushmen are employed as shepherds and as such are satisfactory.”55

Thus, the oral record of Xoon and the archival record agree to a certain extent on the facts, that the former disappeared, first physically, i.e. by confirming the stereotype of the nomad Bushmen and then by giving up that very nomadic life, and no longer conforming to the stereotype of the social category of Bushmen of which the nomadic

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53 Station Commander Arahoa to Magistrate Mariental, 24.11.1943, NAN, LMG 3/1/55, 2/12/1, Annual Reports, Annual Report 1940.
lifestyle was an essential part. However and unsurprisingly, interpretations of these processes are very different. While !Xoon narratives represent their taking up farm work as a necessity for survival resulting from the loss of their land and restricted access to plant and animal resources following the state-facilitated immigration of other population groups onto their land, the archival record sees in it a success of domestication and civilisation.

By representing the settlement area of !Xoon as virgin and unoccupied, by neither counting them as a group of people nor as inhabitants of the country, and by domesticating them into farm labourers who were no longer ‘real Bushmen’ and did not need land of their own, the administration rendered !Xoon invisible. By coercive tactics to recruit Bushmen as farm labour and exposing them to discrimination and inhumane treatment !Xoon were forced to flee to remote areas or across the border and shift their identities to make themselves unrecognisable as Bushmen. At the same time, !Xoon contributed to this misrepresentation by physically moving to remote areas in an effort to escape imprisonment or forced recruitment for farm labour, and by ‘becoming Nama’ and thereby receiving better treatment and better pay as farm workers. These strategies made it easier to confirm the alleged emptiness of the landscape and contributed to recreating the pre-cast ethnic categories of real or wild Bushmen versus tame or civilised non-Bushmen, the very images on which state policies towards Bushmen in Namibia and elsewhere were based.

Parallel to the subjugation of indigenous land use patterns to stereotypical ‘cultural maps’, the forcing of San to appear as stereotypical Bushmen in order to be visible and recordable has recently been stressed, especially in the case of San farm workers. While visibility as ‘true Bushmen’ today means having to adopt a stereotypical cultural image in order to earn a living in ethno-tourism and similar enterprises and being eligible for livelihood support from the government, in the not too distant past invisibility as ‘true Bushmen’ meant escaping prosecution and coercion.

Conclusion

The documentation of !Xoon land use patterns from the 1920s to the 1970s reveals how !Xoon land use was gradually transformed from a mobile water-based, to a mobile resource-based and eventually to a settled water-based pattern. It also revealed !Xoon strategies of dealing with ethno-social categories determined by the state. Ironically my

56 For the Aminuis Native Reserve Köhler reported as late as 1959 that the Bushmen were an unstable element who used to leave the reserve as soon as the first rains made the veldkoss grow and filled the waterholes in the desert (Köhler, Gobabis : 43). However, he simply wrote that the situation at Aminuis was the same as in the Epukiro Reserve in northern Omaheke.


attempts to shed more light on the !Xoon presence on the land actually revealed a number of strategies for hiding or rendering themselves invisible. By moving to out-of-the way places, !Xoon, in a way, confirmed the myth of the empty landscape and by ‘becoming Nama’ they confirmed the myth of the disappearance of the true wild Bushman. Currently many San groups, supported by NGOs, are trying to enhance their visibility with the aim of improving their political position while in the past there were good reasons to remain invisible. While benefits attributed to visibility or invisibility and strategies for exposing or hiding, acknowledging or ignoring change, San visibility and invisibility continue to depend on stereotypical social categories and cultural expressions. These stereotypical social categories and cultural expressions constitute the base on which visibility and recognition are modelled, they continue to be re-enacted by both San and non-San and they continue to play a role in developing policies towards San and by San. They, thus, continue to be powerful determinants for people’s lives.

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