

!Nara Harvesters of the Northern Namib: a Cultural History through Three Photographed Encounters

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Abstracts

English

We report on Indigenous cultural heritage and histories associated with the northern Namib desert, designated since 1971 as the Skeleton Coast National Park. Review of historical documents and oral histories from elderly people with direct and familial memories of accessing and living in the northern Namib show how places and resources were used here by Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples in the past. A focus of this use was the availability of valued foods, especially melons of the !nara (*Acanthosicyos horridus*). Three photographed encounters provide focus for a narrative connecting memories about the northern Namib that stretch back to the first European colonial journeys into this remote area of north-west Namibia. In ‘repeopling’ the northern Namib, we aim to also ‘rehumanise’ documented colonial encounters that objectified and diminished the peoples who knew, accessed and dwelled in this now protected area.

Khoekhoegowab

Nēba ta ge !hūli khoen di !hao!nabe !naedigu tsī !ularus !awas!khab Namib !Gowas dib hīna ge 1971 li gurib !nā !ūihesa !khaib ase !anheb xara !nuri. !U!arusi xoa-ain tsī kai khoen hīna !aokhoesi !gaellarede Namib !nā ge !gan hā-ī khoen !kha ge uhā in di !gaethoan ge ra !gau Khoekhoegowaba ra !hoa khoen ge !awas Namib disa !haru ge !aeb !nā ge re sisen u !khaisa. Nē sisen-us ge lo-aisase !garob !ūn, !gosasa !naran (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) di hās tsī hohes ai ge !gao!gaosa i. !Nona !holnahege a ai-isigu ge ra !apolapo tsī ra !haolhao !nā !āihodi tamas gara io mūnanaidi !awas Namib disa !oa hāde hīna !guro !urikhoen Europapa xu hān gere nē kaise a !nū !awas-hurib !khab Namibiab dis !na !narima !aeba !oa. Sida di ditsās khoena !awas Namib dis !kha !gaellares !nā da ge ra si!nā !gao, nē !kharib xa a xoasa !ularus !urikhoenxas hīna !nāba ge hā tsī !nabara hohe huisen-uxuna gere sisen u khoena xoalaulau tsī !khari!gōasa di unusa.

This article is dedicated to the late Michael !Amigu Ganaseb, who shared his memories of the northern Namib with us. !Amigu passed away on 30 April 2022.



Portrait of
Michael !Amigu Ganaseb,
by Oliver Halsey,
Sesfontein!/Nani!aus,
25 May 2019

“The !Narenin people are the people of Sarusas and down there in Hoanib, but the !Ubun people are the people who are coming from Walvis Bay. Now along the ocean there are the huts of the !Ubun people they built with ribs of the whale. So the !Narenin are this side—Purros side. ... The !Ubun, they move from the !Uniab to the Hoanib, and the !Narenin are also moving from Sarusas [north of the Hoarusib] where they are, to the Hoanib.”

(Christophine Daumū Tauros and Michael !Amigu Ganaseb (!Nū!arus), 7 April 2014)

Introduction

The quote above is from a recorded conversation about the diversity of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples now concentrated in the Sesfontein area of north-west Namibia, who were once associated with the northern Namib, and with !nara melons from the near-endemic cucurbit *Acanthosicyos horridus* Welw. ex Hook.f. Their histories have tended to be overlooked in the better known links between !nara and the peoples of the !Khuiseb further south (Budack 1977; Henschel et al. 2004). Perceptions of the northern Namib as an uninhabited and desolate place, consolidated now by restrictions on access afforded by its protected status as the Skeleton Coast National Park (SCNP), also works against awareness of its use and habitation up to the recent past. The many archaeological sites found in the SCNP, however, reveal that the northern Namib desert was important to people in the past (J. Kinahan and J.H.A. Kinahan 1984; Blümel et al. 2009; Vogelsang and Eichhorn 2011). Rather than being historically unpopulated, the landscape has instead been emptied of human presence through historical processes and events.

The paper draws on oral history, heritage mapping and ethnographic research to clarify the meanings of our opening quote, which speaks of diverse groupings of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples moving through and utilising areas of north-west Namibia now uninhabited by local people. Such peoples have often been portrayed in almost mythical terms as ‘strandlopers’ seen emerging through the Namib fog by various European travellers along Namibia’s Atlantic Coast. For example:

“[s]hips travelling to India in the sixteenth century via the Cape were so fearful of the coastline that they travelled 250 miles offshore to avoid its hidden rocks and treacherous currents. The Dutch, the master navigators of their age, dared to come closer, as they headed to their empire in the East Indies. Their sailors reported that, when peering through the fog, they could on occasion spot black figures on the shores staring back at their ships. The Dutch called these unknown people *strandloopers*—beach runners. From the fifteenth to the end of the eighteenth century this was the limit of human contact between the peoples of south-western Africa and Europe”
(Olusoga and Erichsen, 2010:18)¹.

To distil a much larger story (see Sullivan 2021), we use three photographed encounters—from the late 1800s, the mid-20th century and the present—to open up complex cultural histories that ‘repeople’ the northern Namib, and ‘rehumanise’ otherwise objectified accounts of their presence.

¹ Following the sixteenth century there was in fact rather more interaction between the coastal peoples of Namibia and explorers and traders from afar than indicated in this quote.

Methods and Sources

The material shared below comes from three main threads of research:

1. Iterative review of historical literatures and archive sources regarding *!nara* harvesting and harvesting peoples connected with Namibian coastal areas, collated in the following timelines:
 - *Archaeological and historical records that mention !nara use in Namibia*, linked at <https://www.futurepasts.net/nara-in-archaeology-and-history>, plus map of references to *!nara* use, online at <https://www.futurepasts.net/archaeological-historical-nara-refs>;
 - *Historical references to habitation of the !Khuiseb delta*, linked at <https://www.futurepasts.net/khuiseb-historical-habitation>.
2. Oral histories and interviews with primarily Khoekhoegowab-speaking individuals now living in the Sesfontein area, carried out intermittently since initial fieldwork was undertaken in 1992 on plant-use in Kowareb settlement on the Hoanib River (Sullivan 1998).
3. On-site oral histories and heritage mapping journeys with elderly individuals who remember living in, moving through, and harvesting from a wide area of north-west Namibia connecting the Palmwag Concession, Sesfontein, Anabeb and Purros Conservancies, and adjacent areas of the northern Namib (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021). Journeys within the SCNP were undertaken as part of a project led by Dr Gillian Maggs-Kölling, Gobabeb Namib Research Institute, on *The significance of the Namib Desert endemic !nara (Acanthosicyos horridus) as a keystone species in ecology, phenology, culture and horticultural potential*.

All interviews from field research were carried out by both authors. Interview transcriptions in Khoekhoegowab and translations from Khoekhoegowab to English were led by Ganuses. We worked on interpretations of this material together, as well as iteratively with our local research collaborators. Sullivan carried out the literature review and drafting of this article, with Ganuses checking the work. All field research journeys were guided by Mr Filemon |Nuab, a ‘Rhino Ranger’ based in Sesfontein whose knowledge of the north-west Namibian landscape is renowned. Field research benefitted from oversight by the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority and the Sesfontein Conservancy.

Findings: A History of *!Nara* Use in the Northern Namib, Through Three Photographed Encounters

As mentioned above and shown in Figure 1, *!nara* is not restricted to the !Khuiseb valley where its use and cultural significance are well documented. Given its utility as a significant—even staple—food source in a challenging environment, it is unsurprising to find

that archaeological and historical literatures report the use of *!nara* in the Namib desert south and north of the !Khuiseb River, as shown in Figure 2.

A map published in 1852 of the cartographic work undertaken by British explorer Francis Galton during his travels in 1850–51, clearly positions a grouping of people denoted as ‘Nareneen’ to the west of ‘Kaoko’ mountains west of Outjo and Etosha (Galton 1852)—see Figure 3. This ethnonym is suggestive of *!nara*-harvesting ‘!Narenin-Dama/ #Nūkhoen’, as mentioned in the quote that opens in this paper:

“[t]he !Narenin people are the people of Sarusas and down there in Hoanib ...”

Also,

“[t]he !Narenin were staying to the north of the Hoanib, and the !Ukun people were staying in !Uniab in the south. And they knew that when the *!naras* get ripe then we come together—!Narenin and !Ukun—and we collect together.”
(Franz !Haen !Hoëb, (#Os, near Sesfontein), 6 April 2014)

This presence of *!nara* harvesters in the northern Namib is elaborated further through three photographed historical and contemporary encounters.

1 ‘Seebuschmänner’, Hoanib and Hoarusib Rivers, 1895–96

In the midst of broader colonial carving up of the territory as sources of exploitable resources, a large area of the north-west, including the northern Namib, was claimed for the Kaoko Land and Mining Company (Kaoko-Land- und Minen-Gesellschaft—KLMG). The KLMG was represented in Deutsch-Südwestafrika by German geographer and surveyor Georg Hartmann² in strategic alliance with the German colonial governor Leutwein (Rizzo 2012: 63–64). It was in service to the KLMG that the first systematic surveys of the northern Namib—in 1894 and 1895–96—were financed and attempted.

The second of these surveys includes a startling photograph—see Figure 4. It is labelled as of a ‘Group of sea-bushmen [“Seebuschmänner”, named “Hottentotten”³ in Hartmann (1902/03: 413)] at Hoanib mouth; captain with a woman in the foreground’ (Hartmann 1897: 129⁴). This image conveys a group of people whose body language in facing up to

² It is this Hartmann that both the ‘Hartmann’s Valley’ in Kaokoveld, and the Hartmann’s mountain zebra (*Equus zebra hartmannae*) of north-west Namibia and south-west Angola are named after.

³ This term is today considered derogatory (Elphick 1977: xv). No offence is meant by its occasional inclusion when quoting directly from historical texts, in which the term denotes a specific ethnic and cultural identity for Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples, usually pastoralists known today as Nama or Khoe/Khoikhoi. It is included in this text *only* when quoting directly from historical material, with the intention of drawing into focus the past presence of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples who are often marginalised in work concerning north-west Namibia.

⁴ All German to English translations by Sullivan with the help of the DeepL Translator app.

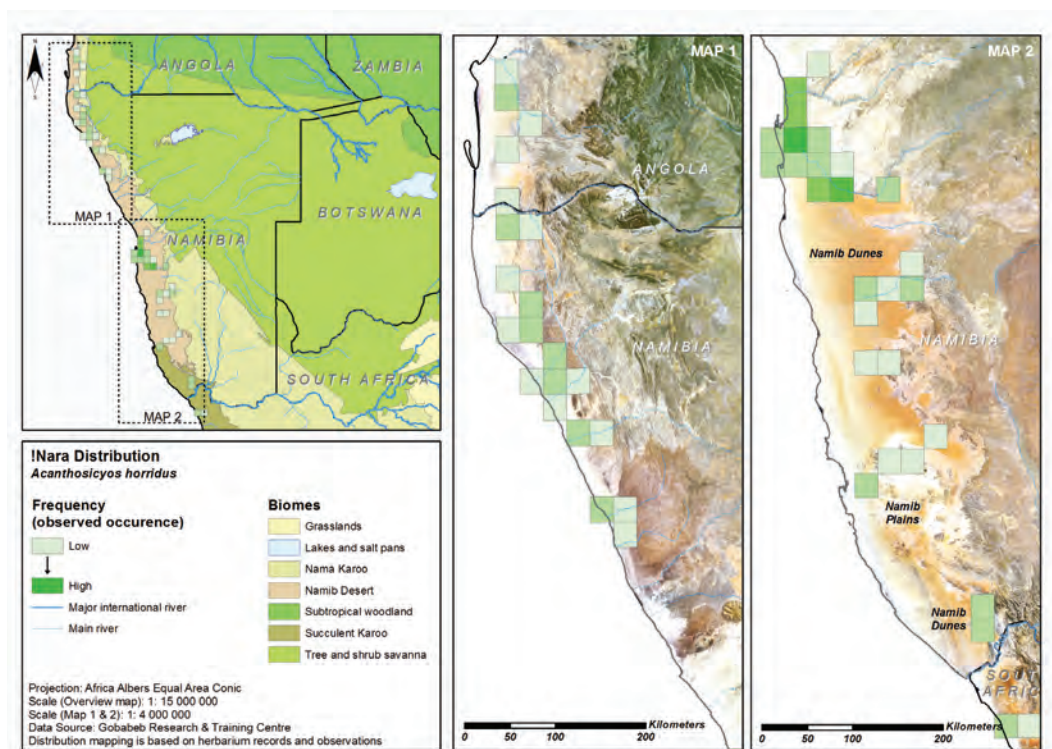


Figure 1: Distribution of *Acanthosicyos horridus* Welw. ex Hook.f. or 'Inara' in south-western Africa. Source: Created by Sylvia Thompson of the Southern African Science Service Centre for Climate Change and Adaptive Land Management (SASSCAL - <http://www.sasscal.org>), based on data provided by Dr Gillian Maggs-Kölling and used with permission.

Hartmann's photographer appears proud and defiant. Their attire is a combination of what look like springbok and seal skins, as well as a hat worn by their 'captain' that seems to be of European design. Knives used perhaps for scooping out *Inara* melon flesh, amongst other things, are worn around their necks. Hartmann's text speaks of this group of photographed people as a 'decimated tribe', described in rather derogatory and objectifying terms as 'the apparently bastardized Hottentot or crossbreeds between Hottentotten and Berg-Damara', living 'at the mouths of the [Uni]ab-river [!Uniab] up to the Hoarusib and sleep[ing] where in the dunes the #Naras [*Inaras*] fruit is to be found' (Hartmann 1897: 138).⁵ In a second image (Figure 5), 'Seebuschmänner' huts assumed to be abandoned are photographed at 'Rietgrasfontein' close to the mouth of the Hoarusib (Hartmann 1897: 127). It is tempting

⁵ Bollig and Heinemann-Bollig (2005: 271-272) reproduce an image of only the man and woman at the forefront of the photograph, but omit additional qualifying information.



Figure 2: Archaeological and historical records of !nara use. Placemarks from north and south of the !Khuiseb are: 1. Sechomib River 1988 (Jacobsohn 1995: 117–118); 2. Sesfontein 1953 (Knobel in Dart 1955: 175); 3. Sesfontein 1977 (Dentlinger 1977: 28; du Pisani 1983: 5); 4. !Uniab mouth, 1896 (Von Estorff in Jacobson and Noli 1987: 174); 5. Brandberg West, early 1950s (Haythornthwaite 1956: 101); 6. Natas Mine, 1850s (Kinahan and Vogel 1982: 45); 7. ‘Mount Murray’ near ‘Ababis’ on ‘Chuntop-Rivier’ (i.e. Tsondeb-River), 1837 (Alexander 2006[1838] vol. 2, pp. 18–19); 8. Sossusvlei, 1909 (Gondwana Collection Namibia 2011: 30–31); 9. Awasis-Gorrasis Basin, ca. 700BP (J. Kinahan and J.H.A. Kinahan 2006); 10. Angra Pequena, 1829 (Morrell 2014[1832]: 315); 11. Skorpion Cave, 1340±60BP & 180±15BP (J. Kinahan and J.H.A. Kinahan 2003); Rosh Pinar shelter, 5,000BP (Sievers 1984: 36–37)



to wonder if perhaps the inhabitants of these shelters had absented themselves so as to avoid Hartmann's expedition.

Several additional observations from this period report people using, moving through and inhabiting the northern Namib. As part of Hartmann's 1895–96 expedition, Schutztruppe officer Ludwig von Estorff observed 'deserted, circular reed huts at the Uniab River mouth', and on return a month later finds here 'a band of 30 "Bushmen" who had just arrived from the Hoanib River' and who 'were living off narra for the most part', with one 'narra knife' reportedly 'made from elephant rib at the Hoarusib River' (Jacobson and Noli 1987: 174 and references therein). Ten years later, on a 1906 expedition to seek northern deposits of guano, George Elers built a road north of the Koigab and Huab rivers to enable travel northwards towards Sesfontein, doing this with 'a large number of Berg-Damaras who live in this [sic] Velds' who showed him where water may be found (Elers' 1907 report quoted in Jacobson and Noli 1987: 173). At Sesfontein, by now a German military post with a brick fort under the command of a Lieut. Schmidt, Elers was informed that travel further north is ill-advised because of drought. Nonetheless, and with local guides, he proceeded westwards down the Hoanib, finding in between the Hoanib and the Hoarusib, 'some Berg-Damaras and Bushman who live close to the sea' who were



Figure 4: 'Group of sea-bushmen at Hoanib mouth; captain with a woman in the foreground'. Source: Hartmann 1897: 129 (out of copyright)



Figure 5: 'Rietgrasfontein close to the mouth of the Hoarusib, on the north side of the spring, protected from the southwest wind, abandoned huts of the Seebuschmanner; two servants of Dr Hartmann with horses'. Source: Hartmann 1897: 127 (out of copyright)

“constantly walking up and down the coast in search for whales that come ashore, *you will find their Kraals all the way to Khumib and also a long way south to the Hoanib*”

(Elers’ 1907 report quoted in Jacobson and Noli 1987: 173, emphasis added).

In 1910, geologist Kuntz similarly meets ‘Bergdamaras’ upstream on the !Uniab returning from the !Uniab mouth, where presumably they had been harvesting *!nara*⁶.

The northern Namib explored by these colonial actors in the late 1800s and early 1900s was clearly inhabited and utilised by Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples who moved both between the different westward-flowing ephemeral rivers of the north-west, and between the resources of both the coast and areas inland.

2 ‘Strandlopers’, Sesfontein, 1953

Continuity with Hartmann’s images is indicated in several sources from the 1950s—a time when Namibia as ‘South West Africa’ was administered essentially as a 5th province of South Africa. Bernhard Carp, a businessman who financed a 1951 scientific collecting expedition to Kaokoveld (Macdonald and Hall 1957), thus writes to the Administrator of South West Africa of encountering ‘foragers’ at the Hoanib River mouth, comprising:

“3 bushmen, 2 bushwomen, 3 Damas and 3 Dama-women and ... called Sandloopers [*sic?*] as they lived in the sand and also part of the year on the beaches of the coast, where they ate dead fish etc. Inland their diet consisted of grass veldkos and anything they could catch. They lived in scherms, no proper huts and had a very primitive life”

(quoted in Bollig 2020: 22⁷).

A government ethnologist for the former Dept. of Bantu Administration based in Pretoria states in the early 1950s that ‘[t]his group of Bushmen calls itself Kubun (with click ! ubun)’—i.e. ‘!Ubun’—and that ‘the informant said they originally came from a place called !kuseb which is south of Walvis Bay, near the sea’, with himself (called !Hu-!gaob) and his nephew [Nanimab ‘born where the !Uniab flows into the sea, about seven days walk from Sesfontein’ (Van Warmelo 1962[1951]: 45). At Brandberg West mine near the Ugab River in the early 1950s, the Anglican Rector for Walvis Bay and Northern Areas observed ‘Berg Dama’ living there with some goats and working at the mine, who ‘use the naras where they can find it’ (Haythornthwaite 1956: 61).

⁶ NAN.A.327 Krause and Kuntz, Kuntz 25/8/1910, report to KLMG.

⁷ Referencing NAN SWAA Kaokoveld A522.

In May 1953 a Mr Louis Knobel from Pretoria, in the company of Dr P.J. Schoeman—‘the Game Warden of South West Africa’—photographed a group of people in Sesfontein later described by archaeologist Raymond Dart in a dated and (again) somewhat derogatory text as:

“a small group of coastal Bush-Hottentot folk consisting of three males and an ancient doddering female, said to be their mother, who were reported by the Topnaar Hottentot elders, their overlords, to be the last remnants of what was once a large body of Strandlopers. It was the custom of the Hottentots to allow these Strandloper retainers to go down to the coast each year when the *narra* fruit was ripe. ... On the coast this Strandloper group still subsists for several months on these fruit and the sea food found along the coast ..., especially on the rocks about the mouth of such rivers as the Kumib and Hoarusib. This group, however, were not being allowed by the Hottentots to go to the coast for the past three or four years because of the bad seasons” (Dart 1955: 175).

Knobel’s photographs (Figure 6), form the basis of Raymond Dart’s 1955 hierarchised account of this encounter. Schoeman additionally reports that,

“according to these Strandlopers’ own story, their stock had branched off from a Name [*sic*] Hottentot tribe, somewhere near the Brandberg ... in the Kaokoveld, but their predecessors had lived along the Skeleton Coast and up towards Rocky Point for hundreds of years” (Dart 1955: 175).

The three ‘Strandloper’ men photographed in Sesfontein stand before a circular hut made of ‘pieces of wood, branches and palm fronds’ and are described as

“clad in front and back aprons of buck-skin suspended from a girdle string, ear-rings and in one case a necklet of the type usually encountered amongst Bush peoples [perhaps of ostrich egg-shell beads?] as well as rude sandals tied about their ankles with leather thongs” (Dart 1955: 175-177).

Dart’s paper proceeds with a very objectifying account of the physical characteristics of the photographed men.

In May 2019, and again in March 2022, these images were discussed with Sesfontein resident Franz |Haen |Hoëb, born *ca.* 1935 at Auses in the lower Hoanib and who grew-up as a *!nara* harvester of the northern Namib. Franz recognised one of the men photographed here as called |Gabenaeb, known to be an enthusiastic dancer of |*gais* praise songs. In



Figure 6: (L) 'Three Strandlopers of Sesfontein S.W.A., standing in front of their rude hut built of wood, bark, palm fronds and grass'; (R) 'The same three Strandlopers seated or squatting, the tall one on the right side of the previous picture having changed over to the left side in this picture'. Source: Dart 1955: 176 (out of copyright)

Figure 6, this man is seated on the right, and also standing in the centre of the image on the left. His full name is Werner |Gabenaeb |Hoëb, and he is an uncle of Franz: Franz's father David |Gero |Hoëb is the brother of |Gabenaeb—indicated in the genealogy shared in Figure 7.

What is extraordinary is that |Gabenaeb, pictured in these images from the 1950s, and recognised in field research some 60 years later, was also recorded in Sesfontein in 1999 as an elderly man playing multiple 'bow-songs' (*goma-khās*), a musical genre formerly commonly played, often simply for 'self-delectation' (Mans and Olivier 2005: 30-31): i.e. for pleasure, delight, amusement and meditation (Figure 8). These recordings, made by ethnomusicologists Emmanuelle Olivier and Minette Mans have ended up being deposited in the British Library Sound Archive as part of Emmanuelle Olivier's broader Namibia archive of research recordings (<http://cadensa.bl.uk/C1709>). In March 2022 we managed to return the full-set of Sesfontein recordings, including 15 recordings of |Gabenaeb playing the *goma-khās*, to Sesfontein for safe-keeping by the Nami-Daman Traditional Authority. The image in Figure 8 is of |Gabenaeb, photographed in the early 1950s as an unnamed 'strandloper', playing *goma-khās* in Sesfontein in 1999. In the notes accompanying the Olivier/Mans recordings from 1999, the late Werner |Gabenaeb |Hoëb plays songs whose names are suggestive of his preoccupations at this time: 'Should I stay alone?', 'The camp has moved', 'Homesick', 'Who will cry', 'We move towards Namib', 'Springbok', 'I was left alone in the bush at Tcelami', 'We will meet during the rainy season', 'Waterhole', ...

When pursuing this conversation with Franz in March 2022 more information about these men came to light. The images are not in fact of exactly the same men, as conveyed

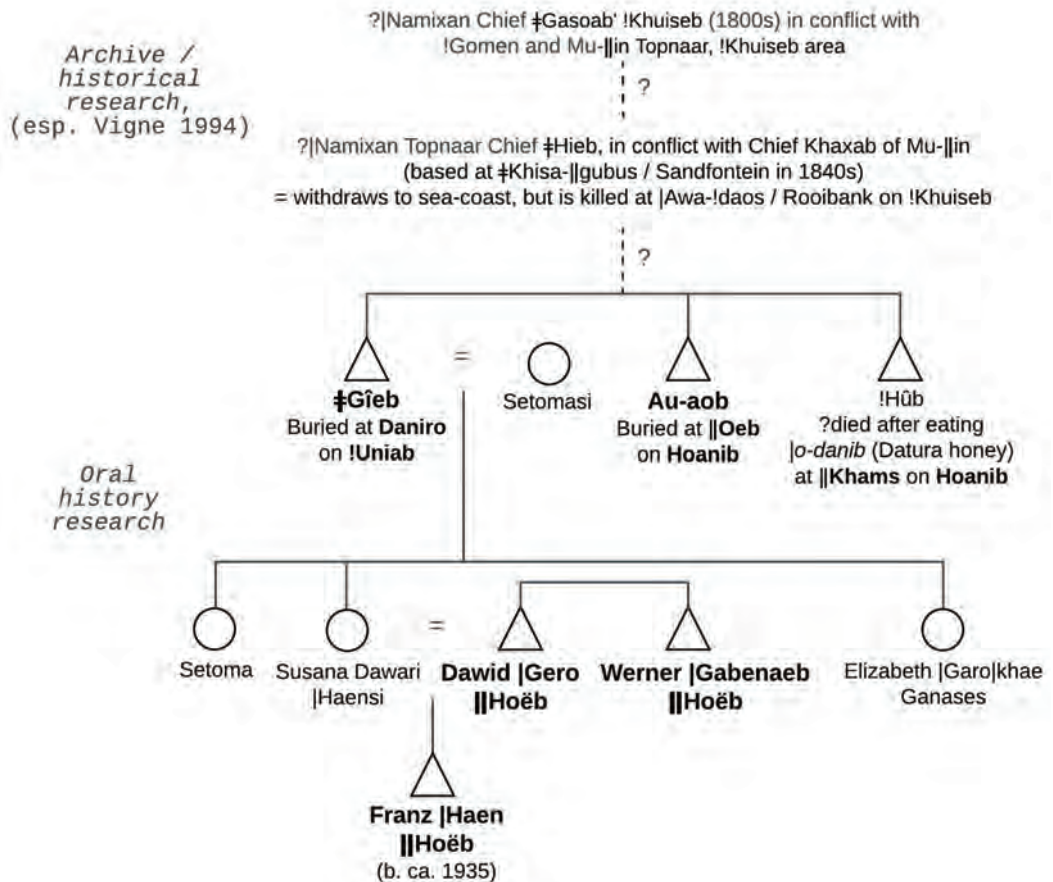


Figure 7: Reconstructed genealogy of remembered ||Ukun leader ‡Gieb, drawing on oral histories with especially Franz |Haen ||Hoëb, now resident in Sesfontein, and historical material in Vigne (1994: 8)

in Dart's 1955 paper. The man standing to the left in Figure 6 is Alfred |Nabunab, recalled—like |Gabenaeb—as someone who loved to dance |gais praise songs: but he is not photographed in the image on the right. |Nabunab is described by Franz as mostly staying with |Namimab (Huiseb) Xam-khaob, !Hûnib and Au-aob, the third of these men being a brother of ‡Gieb, who we will meet again below. All these men referred to ‡Gieb as their elder: as *da kai*. It is tempting to speculate that '|Namimab' named here may have been the man referred to by Van Warmelo above as '|Nanimab', 'born where the !Uniab flows into the sea, about seven days walk from Sesfontein'.

It seems clear that in the 1950s it was not uncommon for a network of individuals connected with the nodal settlement of Sesfontein to move between the coast and inland, in part so as to harvest !nara in the lower reaches of several rivers traversing the Northern



Figure 8: Werner |Gabenaeb |Hoëb (d.) plays goma-khās in Sesfontein. Photo: Emmanuelle Olivier 1999 (no. 37), digitised by Sian Sullivan March 2018, identification of musician made by W.S. Ganuses and S. Sullivan May 2018. Used with permission.

Namib: the Khumib, Hoarusib, Hoanib, !Uniab and Ugab are all mentioned, spanning a north-south distance of more than 200kms. Nonetheless, less than two decades later in a report commissioned by the Wildlife Society of South Africa about shifts to the then boundaries of Game Reserve no. 2 and Etosha Game Park, Etosha ecologist Ken Tinley (1971: 4) was able to speak of ‘recently extinct Strandlopers along the coast’.

Tinley (1971: 4–5) describes the previous distribution of these ‘Strandlopers’ as ‘discontinuous as they were governed by the occurrence of freshwater in the mouths of the seasonal rivers crossing the Namib Desert’: although ‘they also extended up some of the rivers traversing the desert’, writing that they ‘are extinct today except for one or two very old individuals living in Sesfontein’. He overlooks the role played in their ‘extinction’ by the establishment of mining concessions for diamond and semi-precious stones through the northern Namib from the 1950s onwards: at Sarusas in the Khumib River, Möwe Bay, Terrace Bay and Toscanini (Mansfield 2006). In creating the northern Namib as an area restricted for mining, peoples using coastal resources were increasingly advised that they could no longer access these areas and must become more permanently settled in the formal settlement area of Sesfontein. These circumstances are invoked in a short film in which Sesfontein resident Hildegart |Nuas tells of how Nama headmen from Sesfontein

came to those living in the Hoanib west of Sesfontein saying, ‘you cannot stay here alone, you have to move to Sesfontein so that the government can recognise you’ (Figure 9: full video online at <https://vimeo.com/380044842>). Hildegaart’s parents, and also her husband, the late Manasse |Nuab, continued to go to the Hoanib *!naras* at the time of the year when they became ripe, bringing *!nara* cakes back to Sesfontein (see Sullivan 2019). At least some of those removed from the northern Namib found their way back there as labourers for the mines, including Franz |Hoëb mentioned above.

Iterative clearances of people and livestock from landscapes west and also south of Sesfontein acted to facilitate shifts in the boundaries of ‘Game Reserve no. 2’. Under the German colonial regime from 1907, this Game Reserve connected Etosha Pan in the east with ‘Kaokoveld’ in the north-west—an area incorporating the northern Namib from the Hoarusib to the Kunene rivers (Figure 10)—creating a landscape wherein access to what is called ‘game’ was restricted locally, and access to the area overall was restricted from the outside. With Ordinance 18 of 1958, a radical shift in the boundaries of Game Reserve no. 2 took place. It now included the area south of Sesfontein towards the Ugab River westwards to the coast, and north of the 1955 Police Zone boundary (see Figure 10). The protected area thereby incorporated the northern Namib from the Ugab to the Hoanib rivers, with the area around Etosha Pan in the east proclaimed as ‘Etosha Game Park’⁸. The



Figure 9: Screenshot for short film from 2019 of Hildegaart |Nuas describing harvesting *!nara* in the dune fields of the Hoanib: see <https://vimeo.com/380044842>

⁸ The southern boundary of Game Reserve no. 2 was shifted again in 1967, moving slightly northwards to lie between the Koigab and !Uniab Rivers.



‘Kaokoveld Native Reserve’ in the north-west remained part of Game Reserve no. 2 until the ‘Kaokoland Homeland’ was established after 1970, at which point all western areas stretching to the coast were removed from the new boundaries of ‘Etosha National Park’, established as a protected area (with some adjustments) along the lines of the 1958 ‘Etosha Game Park’.

Enacted in connection with the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission (Odendaal Report 1964), these boundary changes were perceived by conservationists to have ‘sacrificed’ the protected area of Game Reserve no. 2 ‘to the land needs of Owambo, Kaokoland and Damaraland’ (De la Bat 1982: 20): even though the area west of Etosha had only been incorporated as part of Game Reserve no. 2 for 12 years. Various proposals were made at this time to further remove people from areas of north-west Namibia in which they had long histories. Tinley (1971: 5, 14), for example, lumps together ‘the Nama people at Sesfontein and Warmquella, the extinct Strandlopers, and the Heiquam “Bushmen”’ as ‘all of the Hottentot or Nama stock and shar[ing] the same language’: stating that ‘[o]ne homeland should suffice, as they are a single language group’, and advocating that ‘[t]he Nama people at Sesfontein and in the adjacent country should be moved to the same homeland area as the Fransfontein people’. Inexplicably, Tinley omits mention of the presence of Damara / #Nūkhoen, despite their being documented as the most populous of Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples of the Sesfontein Native Reserve and surrounding area in these decades⁹.

These boundary changes and reorganisations of people and livestock eventually cleared the way for proclamation of what was already a restricted area: in 1971 the Skeleton Coast National Park was established, encompassing the northern Namib from the Ugab (!Uḡāb) to the Kunene rivers, from which people were banned from entering without a permit.

3 Re-locating #Gieb’s grave in the Skeleton Coast National Park, 2019

As noted above, Franz |Haen |Hoëb, who identifies as of !Uḡun descent, connects celebrated |ḡais dancer Alfred |Nabunab, standing to the left of the image in Figure 6, as mostly staying with several men, one of whom is #Gieb, denoted as *da kai*, i.e. as their elder. In the quote that opens this paper, Khoekhoegowab-speaking !Uḡun are identified as those who built huts with ribs of the whale. Whalebone huts and shell middens have been well documented for a settlement located south of the Ugab River mouth, made from the ribs and mandibles of the Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*) with ceramics from this site dated between 600BP and 200BP (J Kinahan and JHA Kinahan 1984: 70; J. Kinahan 2020: 318-319). Whale bone material is also reported in association with hut circles north of the Munutum in the northern Namib (Vogelsang and Eichhorn 2011: 172–173). It is possible that northern Namib settlements constructed in part of whalebones may have looked something like an image linked with surveyor Carel Brink. He accompanied a 1761–62 expedition north of the Orange River from the Cape Colony led by Hendrik Hop. A map from this journey includes a sketch of a ‘Strand Bosjemans’ (‘Beach Bushmen’) village constructed of whale bones, on the coast north of the Orange (then !Garieb) River (Figure 11). In the image, the huts are placed very close to each other, the family grouping

⁹ See population figures in Van Warmelo (1962[1951]: 40), UN Special Committee for South West Africa (1962: 13) and National Planning Commission (1991); also summary in Sullivan 1998: 46.



Figure 11: Detail of ‘Strand Bosjmans’ village from ‘Historical map, Orange River to Karas Mts., SWA’, apparently created as a composite of multiple sources of information from different expeditions, including that led by Hendrik Hop in 1761–62 accompanied by surveyor Carel Brink. Adapted from Mossop 1947: opp. p. 50

is accompanied by several dogs, a beached whale is being butchered to the left of the huts, and a human figure in the centre is carrying on their back a bag filled with ostrich eggs used for storing potable water.

||Ubun are Khoekhoegowab-speakers sometimes referred to as ‘Nama’ and at other times as ‘Bushmen’, living on the ocean side of the Namib north of the !Khuiseb, reportedly for generations¹⁰. They are likely to be amongst those coastal peoples associated with the term ‘Strandloper’ in historical texts. Their presence in the northern Namib is inscribed on an 1893 *Deutscher Kolonial Atlas* map in which the name ‘Hubun’ appears across the vicinity of the Hoarusib and Hoanib rivers near the coast. In recent generations, ||Ubun moved between !nara fields in the !Uniab and Hoanib river mouths via Kai-as and Hûnkab springs, now in the Palmwag Tourism Concession.¹¹ They also stayed at Dumita in the lower Hoarusib where there is a spring¹². It seems possible that contemporary ||Ubun are connected with a ‘Topnaar group’ called |Namixan, who in the 1800s under their ‘Chief †Gasoab, lived in the !Khuiseb’, coming into conflict with Topnaar groups called !Gomen and Mu-lin, which continued ‘between †Gasoab’s successor, Chief †Hieb, and Chief Khaxab of the Mu-lin’ (Vigne 1994: 8, emphasis added¹³; also Hoernlé (1985[1925]: 47).

¹⁰ Franz |Haen |Hoëb (Kai-as), 25 November 2015.

¹¹ Documented through journeys with Franz |Hoëb and Noag Ganaseb, 20–26 November 2015, and Franz |Haen |Hoëb 5–9 May 2019.

¹² Hildegaart |Gugowa |Nuas (née Ganuses) |Nuas, (Sesfontein), 6 April 2014.

¹³ Vigne (1994) draws on an archived late 1800s statement by “Piet !Haibeb”, son of Mu-lin “Topnaar” leader Frederick Khaxab, to an agent of German colonial settler Adolf Lüderitz.

The |Namixan reportedly withdrew ‘to the sea-coast’ from where ‘Chief †Hieb and two companions travelled secretly to Rooibank [in the lower !Khuseb] to look for any of his people left there’, being ‘surprised at a Mu-lin werf [settlement] by a commando which attacked from the dunes rather than approaching them along the river, killing Chief †Hieb and his companions’ (Vigne 1994: 8). The |Namixan were again driven away ‘*under Chief †Hieb’s son*’ (Vigne 1994: 8, emphasis added).

Given known naming practices in which sons of lineage leaders may be named after their fathers, the possibility exists that ‘Chief †Hieb’s son’ mentioned above is the maternal grand-father †Gîeb remembered by the elderly !Ubun man Franz !Hoëb, born at the *!nara* fields near Auses/!Uilgams in the lower Hoanib river and now living in the vicinity of Sesfontein / !Nani|aus: see reconstructed genealogy in Figure 7.

In May 2019, Franz led us to this grave of his grand-father †Gîeb in the lower !Uniab river, located exactly as mentioned in prior interactions, in the present-day Skeleton Coast National Park on the south side of the !Uniab, inland of the coastal dunes (see Figure 12). †Gîeb’s grave is next to the former dwelling site called Daniro (the place of honey, *danib*). Here †Gîeb and others first encountered German men travelling down the !Uniab, described to Franz as being the first occasion when these !Ubun had seen white men and encountered food in tins. This encounter was perhaps the 1896 journey by L. von Estorff mentioned above, which found ‘deserted, circular reed huts at the Uniab River mouth’ and on return a month later encounters here ‘a band of 30 “Bushmen” who had just arrived from the



Figure 12: Franz |Haen !Hoëb stands at the grave of his grand-father †Gîeb, having told us repeatedly about this grave in previous interviews. The footsteps from a recent sports run across the desert are clearly visible around the grave. The dwelling place of Daniro (the place of honey/danib), where !Ubun lived in the past, is close to the !Uniab River on the right of the image.

Hoanib River. They were living off narra for the most part ...' (in Jacobson and Noli 1987: 174).

When we located this grave spoken of in previous interviews, there were imprints of footsteps all around it which we later learned were from a running event of around 40(?) people across the park, held in April 2019. It would mean a lot to descendants of #G!eb living in the Sesfontein area today for this grave to be marked and protected from human and animal disturbance into the future.

Concluding Remarks

For the duration of written accounts about the northern Namib, overlapping into the pasts recorded in archaeological research, diverse Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples accessed, used and inhabited the northern Namib. The historical influences and boundary changes ushered in by European colonial venture, acted increasingly to fix new, bounded conceptions of the landscapes of the northern Namib that restricted and contained prior mobilities, whilst creating new regimes of access, governance and use. We have attempted to bring into focus ways that the northern Namib was once accessed and utilised by contemporary Indigenous Namibians, drawing on their own accounts of who they are and why the coastal resources were important to them. In juxtaposing these accounts with the rather objectifying and often derogatory narratives of encounter left by various colonial European actors, the gulf between both sets of accounts seems stark. We can only imagine how different the information bequeathed in the historical texts might have been had the peoples of the northern Namib been met and engaged with as complex persons with names, histories and agency. What rich stories they might have shared about why living in the northern Namib was important to them, and how they managed to thrive in such an extreme environment.

Intersecting archaeology research and historical documentation with contemporary oral history and ethnographic voice(s) demonstrates Namibian pasts to be resistant to, and refractory of, typologies of peoples, key resources and places that have become reified in archaeology, historical and ethnographic analyses. This generative methodology may assist with recovering complexity in Namibian pasts, so as to support diverse perspectives on environmental and cultural concerns into the future.

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