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CBNRM, national parks, elites, and ethnography: a comment on (mis)representations

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Response

ABSTRACT

I respond to a recently published article in Ecology and Society, namely “Can the center hold? Boundary actors and marginality in a community-based natural resource management network” (Snorek and Bolger 2022). I provide additional information for three dimensions of this article: (1) historical context regarding the different and varied roots of contemporary marginalization of peoples along the !Khuseb River, (2) the positioning and framing of the article in the context of Namibian community-based natural resources management (CBNRM), and (3) the authors’ representation of early ethnographic research with inhabitants of the !Khuseb valley.

INTRODUCTION

The article “Can the center hold? Boundary actors and marginality in a community-based natural resource management network” (Snorek and Bolger 2022) provides a useful analysis of boundary actors regarding natural resource management and institutional structures for the lower !Khuseb River valley, west Namibia. This area sits within the Namib-Naukluft National Park in which, unusually for Namibia and following strong resistance to removal, Indigenous peoples (predominantly #Aonin or Topnaar Nama, as well as Damara / #Nükhoen) managed to retain rights of habitation (Jones 1992). In this response I do three things: (1) I add historical context regarding the different and varied roots of contemporary marginalization of peoples along the !Khuseb; (2) I make two observations concerning the framing of the article; and (3) I comment on the authors’

representation of early ethnographic research with inhabitants of the !Khuseb valley.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Today's Namib-Naukluft National Park began life under German colonial rule in 1907 as "Game Reserve No. 3," located south of the Swakop River and east of the British enclave of Walvis Bay (Bridgeford 2018:13). Without consultation, the reserve restricted the lifestyle and mobility of people living along the !Khuseb, ruling hunting in the park illegal, although #Aonin already controlled hunting through an established traditional hunting season (*!amis*). Importantly, herding and all other activities became restricted to the !Khuseb and Swakop Rivers, and official ownership of the land and resources was shifted to the state (Budack 1977:4; Botelle and Kowalski 1995:2,12-13,18). *Schutztruppen* custom posts (i.e., stations manned by German colonial protection troops) were positioned in what was considered to be "Topnaar territory" (Kinahan 2017:307), controlling mobilities across the then German-British border of the British-governed "Walvis Bay enclave" (now the southern part of Dorob National Park). The reserve was renamed the Namib Game Reserve under later South African rule (Grunkowski and Henschel 2004:43, Botha 2005:182), and a much-expanded area became Namib-Naukluft National Park in 1979. Repeated changes in park regulations brought #Aonin lifestyles, their customary resource access practices, and their leadership structures into engagement and conflict with park management as well as other arms of government (see detailed timeline at <https://www.futurepasts.net/khuseb-historical-habitation>). From this complex and dynamic history it can be gleaned that a diversity of apparently Khoekhoegowab-speaking peoples (and others) inhabited and utilized the !Khuseb area over at least the last several centuries, becoming "cut off" from other Nama and #Nūkhoe groupings through the 1800s as ovaHerero pastoralists with large herds of cattle migrated from the northwest into the pastures of what is now central Namibia (Alexander 2006 [1838], Galton 1890 [1853], Raper 2010, !lGaroos 2021). Their historical circumstances were thus associated with marginalization prior even to German colonial rule, adding context to the statement that "Topnaar have faced significant marginalization, forged over the course of more than a century of colonial and apartheid processes and their persistent and systemic vestiges" (Snorek and Bolger 2022:2).

FRAMING

Snorek and Bolger's article is positioned within the context of Namibia's well-known community-based natural resources management

(CBNRM) program (Snorek and Bolger 2022:1-2). Herein lies the rub. Namibia's CBNRM program is built around policy designed to enable communities in remaining "communally-managed areas" to establish formally recognized natural resource management institutions called conservancies (community forest areas may also be recognized; Durbin et al. 1997, Sullivan 2002, Hoole 2010, Mosimane and Silva 2014). The emphasis of conservancies is mostly on developing pathways to benefit from income generated by commodifying wildlife and land access within conservancy boundaries, through formalizing various forms of external investment for lodge development, ecotourism, shoot-and-sell of indigenous fauna by commercial butchers, and trophy hunting (Sullivan 2006, Bollig 2016, Kalvelage et al. 2022). As detailed above, however, the lower !Khuseb River valley is positioned within a national park in which consumptive use of wildlife tends not to be permitted. As such, it does not represent conventional Namibian CBNRM structures. This important context is only mentioned in passing in the final three paragraphs of the paper where we learn that the closest parallel to the !Khuseb situation is in fact the Kyaramacan Association in Bwabwata National Park, where Indigenous Khwe are permitted to live and retain some resource access rights (Paksi and Pyhälä 2018). Snorek and Bolger's paper would have made more sense if it had been framed around this parallel situation to consider possible opportunities and constraints for the similar circumstances of the !Khuseb inhabitants of Namib-Naukluft National Park, rather than positioning the circumstances of the !Khuseb within Namibia's CBNRM program for communal land areas.

An additional key framing proposition is that "[a]s a result of their elite position in CBNRM, traditional authorities in Namibia, and elsewhere, are often accused of capturing and corporatizing the community's natural and cultural heritage" (Snorek and Bolger 2022:2). The one citation here to support this specific assertion, however, is a conceptual piece about "[n]etwork governance for large-scale natural resource conservation" (Bixler et al. 2016:165), which does not focus on either CBNRM or Namibian CBNRM contexts: most of the paper's examples are from the U.S., where circumstances differ markedly from Namibia's communal land areas. In Namibia, a conservancy is in fact required to establish a new management institution, an elected Conservancy Committee, on which a Traditional Authority (TA) may be represented but does not dominate. Indeed, analysis of conservancy structures and management shows instead that it is these new institutions that may act as elite structures that capture and corporatize a community's natural resources via contracts with investors (Schneider

2022). A concern has thus been that TAs and their land management and cultural heritage remit are marginalized through these post-independence CBNRM structures. As Nuulimba and Taylor (2015:99) write:

[A] key axis of contestation concerns the relationship between existing Traditional Authorities and new CBNRM institutions. CBNRM policy and legislation do not formally provide for traditional leaders to be involved in conservancies and there is no requirement for conservancy committees to be sanctioned by local or regional political structures. This presents complications given Traditional Authorities' role in ensuring sustainable resource use.

Additional tensions may arise between processes of commodification and market access by investors in communal lands and cultural heritage practices normally considered the remit of Traditional Authorities, given that priming land and resources for external access and investment may impinge on Indigenous access and use (Sullivan and Ganuses 2021). In other words, circumstances in Namibian CBNRM tend rather toward the opposite of the conceptual frame acting as the explanatory anchor for the network analysis presented by Snorek and Bolger (2022), even if elite capture of resource access and use by the Topnaar TA may be of concern to the wider !Khuseb community.

REPRESENTING EARLY ETHNOGRAPHY

On these issues of (mis)representation I make one final observation regarding the paper's presentation of anthropologist Winifred Hoernlé's work in the early 20th century with peoples associated with the !Khuseb. Snorek and Bolger (2022:2) write that "[p]rejudicial accounts have also stemmed from anthropologists, including being labeled 'probably the most miserable of all the remnants of the Nama'" (Hoernlé 1985 [1925]). To understand this statement made almost 100 years ago by Hoernlé, however, it is necessary to consider the fuller statement within which it is embedded, and to note its positioning within some of the most detailed and respectful research amongst various Nama groupings (Carstens 1985, Bank 2016). The fuller quote shows that Hoernlé was drawing attention to the impoverishment and marginalization of \neq Aonin and other Nama because of colonial processes. She writes (Hoernlé 1985 [1925]:47):

The Topnaar tribe is to-day divided in to two sections. One of these lives far away to the north in the

Kaokoveld whither it retired after the defeat ... by the Herero in the sixties of the last century. The other section lives in the dunes around Walvis Bay and in the bed of the Kuisib river at various places. The people in the north are reduced to a mere handful and those in the south are probably the most miserable of all the remnants of the Nama, though in Sir James Alexander's time they were described as being fine, handsome people (Alexander 1838(1):72). My information about these people was obtained from the daughter of one of the last chiefs, an intelligent old woman, Khaxas, and from some of the headmen of the last recognized chief of the tribe, Piet //Eibib, who had himself died before I visited the tribe in 1912. According to the information of these old people, the tribe originally lived far to the north in the region to which one branch has again retired. When they first came to Walvis Bay another Nama people, the !Namixan, were in control, one of the sibs of this people being called the #Ai //Kumsin. These people were completely defeated ...

Far from concocting static, timeless, encapsulated, and “prejudicial” constructions of Nama ethnicity, Hoernlé both historicizes and spatializes the circumstances of people who shared with her their stories and lifeworlds. She paid close attention to historical realities related orally that complexified and disrupted the formal historical descriptions and explanations of the day, and which remain challenging to contemporary analyses. She conveyed dynamic pasts and presents in narratives infused with the diverse agencies of her named interlocutors and their ancestors. Importantly, Hoernlé also did what she could to disrupt the power relations of her time in favor of the people she learned from and about, at a cost to herself and her own career, and amid the harsh realities and isolation of her in situ engagements with people living along the !Khuseb and elsewhere (Carstens 1985:xiii). Her findings “did not sit well with the South African officials,” who somewhat ironically dismissed her work as “Politics not Science,” thereby damaging her academic reputation (Bank 2016:36, citing Gordon 1987:75). As Jill Kinahan (2017:316) writes, “[i]n the early twentieth century, Hoernlé tried to ameliorate the conditions of the destitute Topnaar, only to be condemned for her ‘politics’ by those in power.”

We need more, rather than less, research embodying the integrity of Hoernlé’s detailed

and respectful engagement, and more accurate representation of such efforts.

RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

Responses to this article are invited. If accepted for publication, your response will be hyperlinked to the article. [To submit a response, follow this link.](#) [To read responses already accepted, follow this link.](#)

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