

## Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts | Histoire...



CHILDHOOD MEMORY, CONSERVATION, EVICTION, MEMORY, NAMIBIA, ORAL HISTORY

# 'OUR HEARTS WERE HAPPY HERE' – RECOLLECTING ACTS OF DWELLING AND ACTS OF CLEARANCE THROUGH ORAL HISTORIES IN WEST NAMIBIA

08/03/2017 | SIAN | 1 COMMENT

By Sian Sullivan

It was when doing [field research for my PhD in the mid-1990s](#) that I first learned of local histories embedded in the broader landscape around the settlement of Sesfontein / !Nani|aus, north-west Namibia. This is an area known today for its spectacular landscapes



and desert-adapted black rhino and elephant. It is a sought after tourism destination now catered for by luxury eco-lodges linked to locally-run conservancies. But I have come to learn that the landscapes described as 'wilderness' in tourism brochures advertising the area are also full of the traces of former dwelling places and the graves of known ancestors. And that people alive today were amongst those who lived at these places and who remember what they were like in times past.

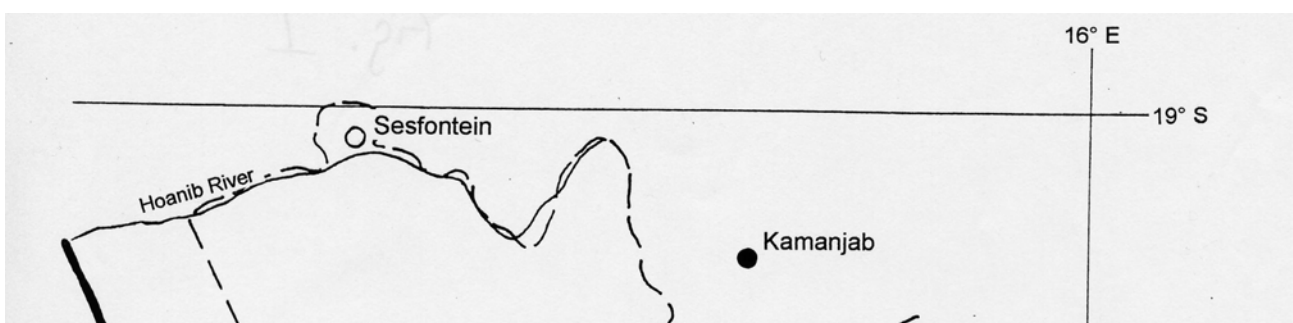


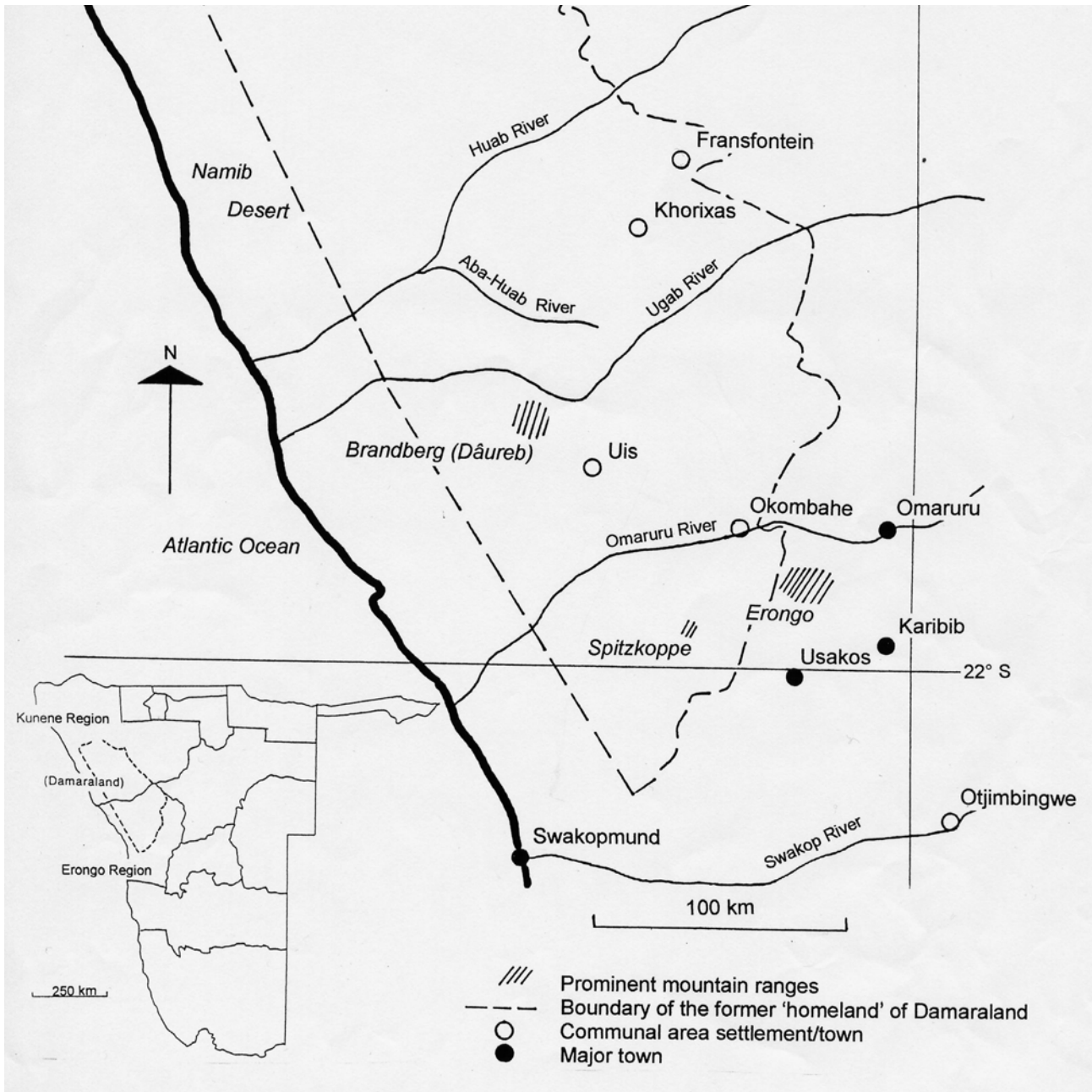
Desert-adapted Black rhino, *Diceros bicornis* (photo: Sian Sullivan, 251115)



Map showing the boundaries of current tourism concessions with surrounding communal area conservancies and state protected areas in southern Kunene Region, west Namibia (created by Jeff Muntifering, 050316).

I started recording oral histories in the area in 1999. I borrowed an old cassette recorder from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London where I was then working, and recorded some 885 minutes of oral history interviews with Damara / #Nūkhoen[1] individuals known to me through my PhD research. These individuals lived throughout the former Namibian 'homeland' of 'Damaraland': in Sesfontein / !Nani|aus; on redistributed former Afrikaans settler farms near the Aba-||Huab river; and in settlements along the !U#gāb river.





Map showing the boundary of the former 'homeland' of 'Damaraland' established in 1970 on the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission in 1964, in relation to Namibia's post-independence administrative regions (inset).

### 'I was born in Sixori in Hurubes'

The first of these interviews, on 15th April 1999, was with the grandmother of Suro Ganuses, a ≠Nūkhoen woman from Sesfontein who in 1994 had become my companion and translator whilst carrying out ethnographic field research for my PhD. Suro's grandmother, Philippine |Hairo ||Nowaxas, pictured here in 1999 outside her home in Sesfontein, opened her narrative by saying,

*I was born at Sixori in Hurubes.*

She goes on to say,

*We moved around and moved around. My father was*





really from this place [!Nani|aus] and my mother was from Hurubes, really she's from Hurubes; she's ||Khaa-a Damara.

And she begins to list various places saying,

This is Sixori, this is Tsaugugam, this is Oronguari, this is the home of Xoms, here is the field [!garob]. I move to and sleep at the places where the rain falls, because the food is there.



Philippine |Hairo ||Nowaxas in Sesfontein / !Nani|aus (photo: Sian Sullivan, 150499)

I have now studied multiple maps from the German colonial rule of Namibia that started formally in 1884, until the present time. None of these named places and land areas appear on any printed map I have seen of the area. It is as if these personal histories and experiences simply do not exist in formal representations of the territory. But they are known and spoken about locally. They linger in the memories of now elderly people dwelling in settlements to which they became constrained after they were cleared from this dry and mountainous corner of west Namibia.

## Clearances

These clearances were enacted for several reasons:

- \* to periodically create a livestock-free zone north of the veterinary fence that dissects Namibia from east to west, so as to control the movement of animals from communal areas in the north to settler commercial farming areas in the south[2];
- \* to make available relief grazing under Namibia's South African administration, which went mostly to Afrikaans livestock farmers in the 1950s[3];



Map showing the westwards expansion of Etosha National Park from 1958-1971[4].

\*in 1958 in the course of extending the boundary of Etosha National Park westwards along to the coast, and following the Hoanib River in the north and the Ugab River in the south (see map);

\*and, in the 1970s, as the Odendaal plan for establishing 'Homeland' areas for different Namibian groups was enacted. At this time, the 'Damaraland Homeland' was created, providing re-settlement opportunities for many Damara / ≠Nūkhoen in other parts of Namibia. In the southern parts of the Homeland territory in particular, surveyed farms settled by predominantly Afrikaans settler

farmers were 'communalised' (i.e. turned into communal land) through their (re)allocation to Damara herders. Simultaneously, however, much of the land areas (!hūs) known as ≠Khari

||Hurubes, !Nau ||Hurubes, Aogubus, and Namib (see map below) became consolidated as a **wildlife hunting, and then tourism, concession known as Palmwag**. At this time, ||Khao-a Dama of ≠Khari ||Hurubes were mostly consolidated in the northern settlements of Sesfontein / !Nani|aus, Anabeb, Warmquelle and Kowareb. Dâure-Dama of the more southerly !Nau ||Hurubes concentrated mostly in the vicinity of the Ugab River to the south of the concession.



Land areas (!hūs) and associated Khoe-speaking lineages (!haoti) in west Namibia.

People were understandably reluctant to leave places they considered home. Some oral histories indicate that coercion accompanied this movement. In November 2014 I sat at the waterhole of ≠Habaka, now in the Palmwag concession, with Ruben Saunaeib Sanib, a formerly renowned hunter of the |Awise ||Khao-a Damara family associated with ||Hurubes and surrounding areas.

He recalled:

*The government said this is now the wildlife area and you cannot move in here. We had to move to the other side of the mountains – to Tsabididi [the area also known today as Mbakondja]. Ok, now government police from Kamanjab and*



*Fransfontein told the people to move from here. And the people move some of the cattles already to Sesfontein area, but they leave some of the cattles [for the people still in Hurubes and Aogubus] to drink the milk. Those are the cattles the government came and shot to make the people move.*

Ruben Sauneib Sanib, at the spring Sanibe||gams associated with his father, demonstrates how once he hunted with bow and arrow (photo: Sian Sullivan, 100315)

Some of these cattle belonged to an elder (or 'grandfather') of Ruben called Sabuemib:

*And Sabuemib took one of the bulls into a cave and he shot it there with a bow and arrow [so that they would at least be able to eat the meat and prevent the animal being killed by the authorities]. Other cattle were collected together with those of Hereros [also herding in the area] and were shot by the government people at Gomagorras [named after the word goman for cattle and located in the hills south of Tsabididi]. Some of Sabuemib's cattle were killed in this way.[5]*

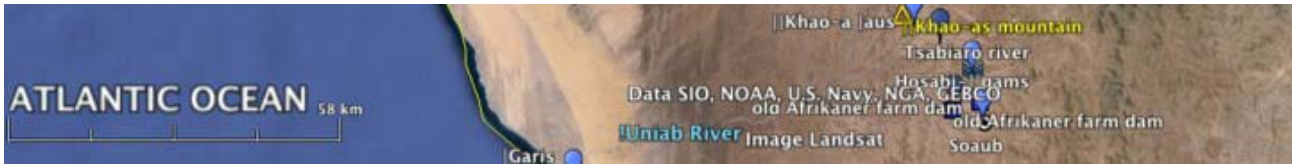
### 'Our hearts were happy here'

[Hairo and several other people I worked with in the 1990s have since passed away. In the course of a different AHRC Care for the Future project [Future Pasts], however, Suro and I have been working back in west Namibia with those who remember past places in which they lived, so as to put these places 'on the map'. In doing so, we are recovering and creating a record of place names, lived experiences and genealogies embedded in the landscape that disrupts some of the written archived narratives and maps associated with the area.

This on-site oral history research is enabling the mapping of remembered places and associated names through GPS logging of coordinates, as indicated in the map below.







Preliminary map of place names in the land areas of (mainly) #Khari ||Hurubes, Aogobus and Hoanib recorded through on-site oral histories in 2014 and 2015 and building on oral histories recorded in 1999. The blue markers indicated natural springs, and the black dots are former dwelling sites.

Returning to the traces of particular dwelling structures as well as of graves at many of these remembered places stimulates memories for those who once lived there. At times returning to these places has been emotional. People are reminded of friends and relatives who have now passed on. And they remember assumed futures altered by broader historical processes that are not of their choosing.

At the permanent clear waters of Kai-as spring in November 2014, for example, Sanib and Sophia Obi |Awises recalled how people from different areas gathered at this place to play their healing dances called *arus* and praise songs called |gais. These were times when young men and women would meet each other. Times when different foods gathered in different areas were shared between the people. And when much honey beer (!khari), made from the potent foods of *sâui* (*Stipagrostis* spp. grass seeds collected from harvester ants nests) and *danib* (honey), was consumed.

As Sanib and Sophia described:

*our hearts were happy here.*

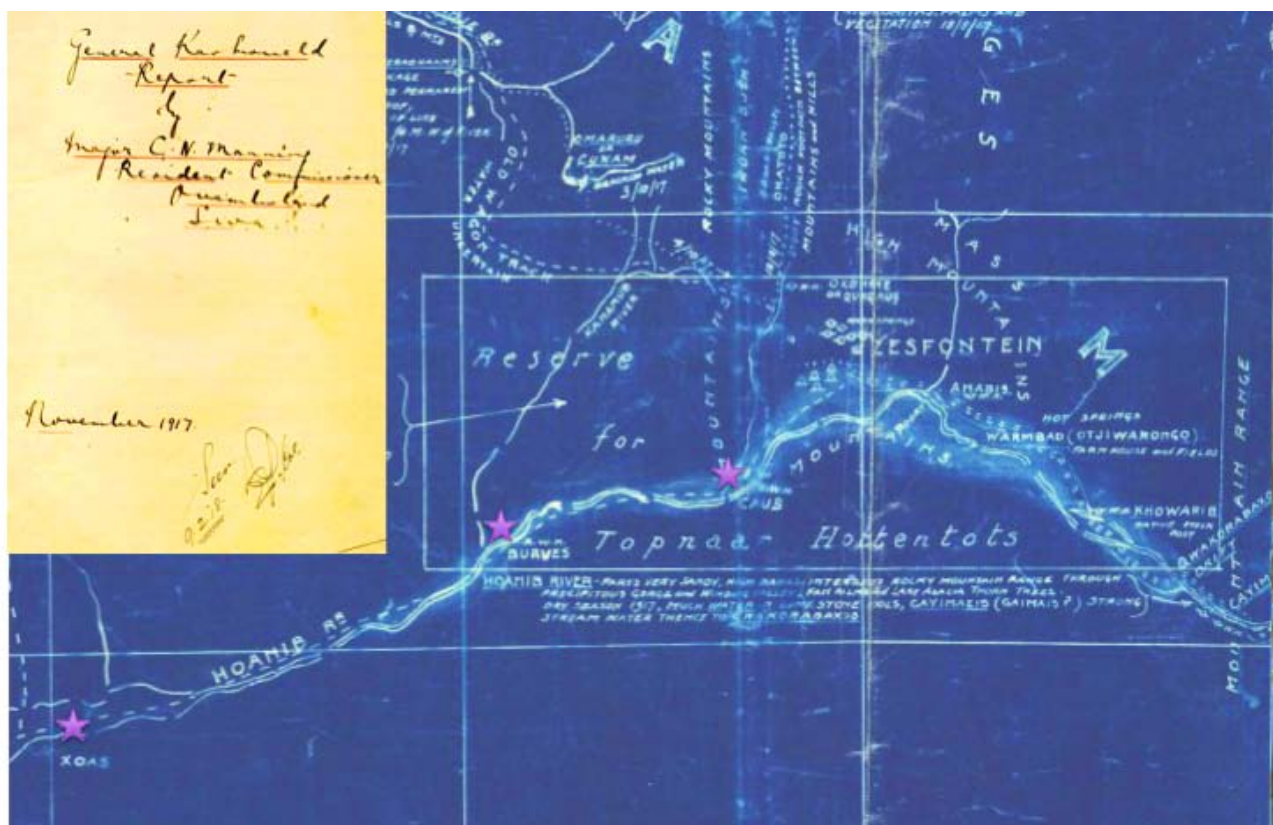


Ruben Sanib at circle of stones marking the dwelling of a family he remembers living at Kai-as (photo: Sian Sullivan, 231114).

## Historical archives

Through *Disrupted Histories, Recovered Pasts* this on-site oral history research is being complemented and extended so as to more explicitly connect and juxtapose these oral histories with a range of written and recorded archival sources. Case research is connecting these memories with written archival documents and new historiography[7] that map and document land use and indigenous presence in west Namibia. The following avenues are being pursued in particular.

First is close review of the General Kaokoveld Report and accompanying map by Major Charles John Manning in November 1917 (National Archives of Namibia (NAN) ADM 156 W 32) and Manning's follow-on report of 1919, in connection with oral histories for part of the area that Manning travelled through. This research suggests direct connections between families encountered by Manning and their elderly descendants in the area today.



Section of Kaokoveld map made in 1917 by Major Charles John Manning, the first Resident Commissioner of Owamboland, showing Sesfontein and the Hoanib River. The asterixes mark place names that do not appear on current maps of the area but that are remembered by elderly inhabitants of Sesfontein and environs.

For example, two ||Ukun individuals (cousins Franz ||Hoëb and Noag Ganaseb) have spoken in recorded interviews of living in the past in the westward reaches of the Hoanib River, and of moving southwards from there to Kai-as and the !Uniab River. In November 2015, we

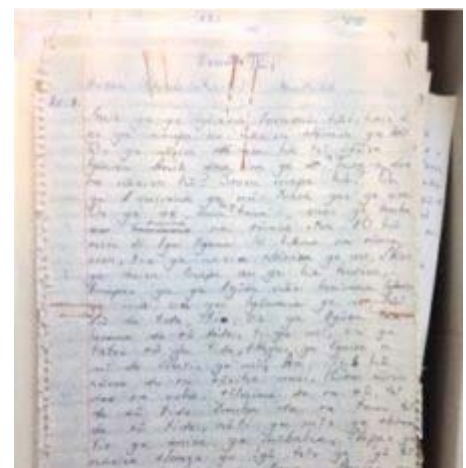


travelled together down the Hoanib River to locations marked on the map sketched by Manning, recording information about a number of former dwelling places and other key sites on the way to Möwe Bay on the coast. Notable are the *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) fields near the waterhole of Auses / !Ui||gams whose fruits were once harvested under careful management and ownership structures. But in the 1950s the coastal dunes were opened for diamond mining and then in 1971 the lower Hoanib was gazetted as part of the Skeleton Coast National Park. As these areas became opened for industry and conservation, they became closed to habitation by those who had dwelled there.



*Cousins Franz ||Hoëb (L) and Noag Ganaseb find their bearings as we re-visit former dwelling places in the lower reaches of the Hoanib River (photo: Sian Sullivan, 221115).*

Secondly, archival research at the Namibia Resource Centre of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) in Switzerland is underway so as to more fully engage with written transcripts and sound recordings made in the 1950s by the German Africanist scholar and theologian Prof. Ernst Dammann (1904-2003) and his wife Ruth Damman (née Scholtisek, 1911-1995) (Inventory PA.39, Carton F (Khoekhoegowab), Folders 1-9, and Cassettes



32-41). Initial exploration from a visit to BAB in 2014 indicates that these written and recorded sources include comment on shifting historical claims to land, as well as expressing a series of folkloric representations of culture-nature relationships that are remembered in and relevant to present contexts of displacement. Further archival research at BAB will permit enquiry into past audio recordings and the contexts of their documentation, in part through recovering contemporary responses to these colonial recordings in Namibian contexts.



A page from the 1950s Damman archive, held at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) in Switzerland.

FILE NAME	Name from BAB files	Title of piece
Richard Garoeb, BAB, trans 221014 33(1)	Richard   Garoeb IV, Nr.2	'Xamoâgura xa' female lion & her child
Heitsi etc.:	1. Christian Baumann: Verbesserung ['improvement'] von Wandres-Meinhof, Seite 174 Nr.23	Kawa Heitsi-Eibeb xa The Heitsi-Eibeb
	2. H. Vedder 1909: Archiv für Otjiherero und Nama, Nr.9, 1909, H. Vedder, S.13	Girib tsî sore-gûs tsîra The jackal and the Sore-gus (sun-sheep). **nb. Also mentioned in Manning 1919 report, p. 30.
	3. (?) Nr.3	Danis (!Habugu oms) Honey song = a  geis?
Lena Venter 1. hunter etc. go to Gauab's hse; 2. man looking for wife at Gauab's hse 79(1)	Lena Venter IV, 5, Nr 14 (or Nr 19?)	The hunter, engineer and others go to   Gâuab's house
	Lena Venter IV, Nr. 15	Man looking for wife at house of   Gâuab
BAB jackal & hyaena, Lena Venter	Lena Venter IV	Jackal and hyena
Lena Venter jackal & porcupine	Lena Venter III IV, Nr. 1	Jackal and porcupine
Anton !Khaib birds & hyena	Anton !Khaib Cassette IV, Nr. 1	Birds and hyena
BAB Adam Horaeb Hyena & Goat 45(1)	Adam   Horaeb IV, Nr. 9	Hyena and the goat
BAB Adam Horaeb Damara and Herero 46(1)	Adam   Horaeb IV, Nr. 10	Damara and Herero

Table of initial texts being worked with from the Damman archive at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien.

### Finding Sixori

To return to Sixori. After several false starts we eventually made it to the spring Sixori that in 1999 started this thread of research. Sixori is named after the *xoris* (*Salvadora persica*) bushes that grow around a permanent spring of clear, sweet water and whose fruit provide a filling dry season food. This spring is located in the deeply incised landscape to the south-west of Sesfontein. Finding it on a brutally hot day in March 2015 required triangulating the orientation skills of Sanib – who remembered Sixori from past visits – and Filemon |Nuab – a younger man and well-known rhino tracker, who knew from recent patrols in the area the location of the spring, but had not known its name of 'Sixori'.



As we sat in the shade of a rocky overhang close to the spring Sanib told us of harvesting honey from a hive in the vicinity of the Sixori. He was with Aukhoeb |Awiseb (also called ||Oe-sib after his daughter ||Oemi), Seibetomab and Am-!nasib (also known as Kano). Aukhoeb was the brother of |Hairo's mother (Juligen ||Hūri |Awises). He was living at Sixori, and ||Hūri was visiting him when she gave birth to |Hairo, Suro's grandmother. The honey cave was west of Sixori and Sanib and companions travelled there to *sam* (to pull) the honey out, and then came to Sixori to make *sāu* beer with that honey. From Sixori they walked back to Sesfontein through the pass that is called ≠Au-daos. At that time they didn't have a donkey so they carried the honey in big tins on their shoulders.



*Circular stone shelters near the spring known in the past as Sixori, south-west of Sesfontein. For shelter they would have been covered with foliage from *Petalidium* spp. known as ||ōna (photo: Sian Sullivan, 080315).*

Returning to these places stimulates memories of practices, people and events, providing a window into how people lived here in the past. It can also be eye-opening for people in the present.

To give the last word to Suro – as we were at the place where her grand-mother was born, she commented,

*I said in my mind I will go and see where my grandmother is born. And I have to tell also my children, and even the others who are not here and don't know where my*



grandmother is born. I will tell them that my grandmother was born here and there is water surrounded by *Salvadoras*. So it is very wonderful, and I am very happy to be here because she is the one who taught me a lot of things – she is my hero! I'm very happy to be here.



At Sixori. From left to right, Suro Ganuses, Ezeziel |Awarab (behind), Filemon |Nuab (in front) and Ruben Saunaeib Sanib (photo: Sian Sullivan, 080315).

## Notes

*Disclaimer:* (Re)inscribing place names is, of course, a significantly political act, given a complex context of historically overlapping claims to land, as well as the links between acts of 'naming' and acts of 'claiming' where land is concerned. An additional politics not emphasised here relates to overlapping and contested ≠Nūkhoen and ovaHerero claiming of land and pastures, in a context wherein Herero historically both lost access to immense tracts of land into which they were expanding, and deploy naming through praise songs (sing. *omitandu*; pl. *omutandu*) as one means of claiming places and spaces [8]. Further, contemporary processes of land redistribution in Namibia are also shaped by contentious claims for historical and ancestral restitution. The information shared in this post is intended to report on oral history research as it is documenting childhood memories of times past, before this information is lost to the future. This research is not being conducted with any links to groups concerned with a politics of restitution in Namibia.

[1] In this context, so-called Damara Khoe-speaking people tend to refer to themselves as ≠Nūkhoen, meaning literally 'black' or 'real' people and thus distinguished from *Nau khoen* or 'other people' (fieldnotes).

- [2] As documented in Miescher, G. 2012 *Namibia's Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [3] As documented in Kambatuku, J. 1996 Historical profile of farms in former Damaraland: notes from the archival files. *DRFN Occasional Paper* 4.
- [4] Dieckmann, U. 2012 *Born in Etosha: Living and Learning in the Wild*. Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre, p. v; also Tinley, K.L. 1971 The case for saving Etosha *African Wild Life* (supplement) 25: 3–14.
- [5] Bob Hitchcock and colleagues record similar reports for the northern British Protectorate Crown Lands of Botswana in the late 1940s, describing the purposeful shooting by camel-mounted police of domestic livestock belonging to Tshwa Bushmen (Hitchcock, R.K., Acheson-Brown, D., Self, E. and Kelly, M.C. 2017 Disappearance and displacement: the San, the Bamangwato, and the British in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1943-1945. *South African Historical Journal* DOI: 10.1080/02582473.2017.1293717 p. 14).
- [6] Officially the language is referred to as Khoekhoegowab. When speaking with people locally, however, they tend to refer to the language by the autonym 'ǀNūkhoen', hence this usage here. The Dâure Daman Traditional Authority also refers to the 'Dâure Daman regional dialect of Khoekhoegowab' as 'ǀNūkhoegowab' (see Dâure Daman Traditional Authority 2013 The Dâure Daman Traditional Authority / Dâure Daman di !Hoa!nasi ǀGaeǀguis, pp. 184–215 in Hinz, M.O. and Gairiseb, A. (eds.) *Customary Law Ascertained Volume 2: The Customary Law of the Bakgalagari, Batswana and Damara Communities of Namibia*. Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, p. 200).
- [7] Especially relevant are Miescher, 2012 *op. cit.* and Rizzo, L. 2012 *Gender and Colonialism: A History of North-western Namibia*. Basle: BAB).
- [8] Hoffman, A. 2009c Finding words (of anger), pp. 115–143 in Hoffman, A. (ed.) *What We See: Reconsidering an Anthropometrical Collection from Southern Africa – Images, Voices and Versioning*. Basle: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, p. 117.

