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The past of the Etosha National Park – oral history and archaeological evidence.

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Salt pans are a characteristic feature of the landscape in central northern Namibia, of which the largest and most prominent is the Etosha Pan (Figure 1). Like all these depressions, the Etosha Pan is usually dry and is only flooded in the rainy season by water flowing down the Ekuma River. The pan and the surrounding region form the Etosha National Park which covers an area of 22,270 km² and is therefore one of the largest National Parks world-wide. Due to the abundance of wildlife, Etosha is the premier tourist attraction in Namibia. Nowadays, the area seems to be a pristine wilderness, untouched by any human civilization. However, in the past, this region was an important settlement area for the Hai//om people, a hunter-gatherer group generally categorized as one of the “Bushman” or San groups of Namibia.

Since 2000, information on the social and ecological history of the Etosha National Park has been collected and compiled by U. Dieckmann (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cologne). This has taken place within the framework of the “Open Channels Etosha Centenary Project” which aims at bringing to attention the rich heritage of the park - which will be celebrating its centenary in 2007. The collected data comprise, for example, the names, location and meanings of places, the social organization and way of life in former times, the documentation of bush food and game, family trees and life lines and information regarding the changes which have taken place during the 20th Century (Dieckmann 2001, 2003).

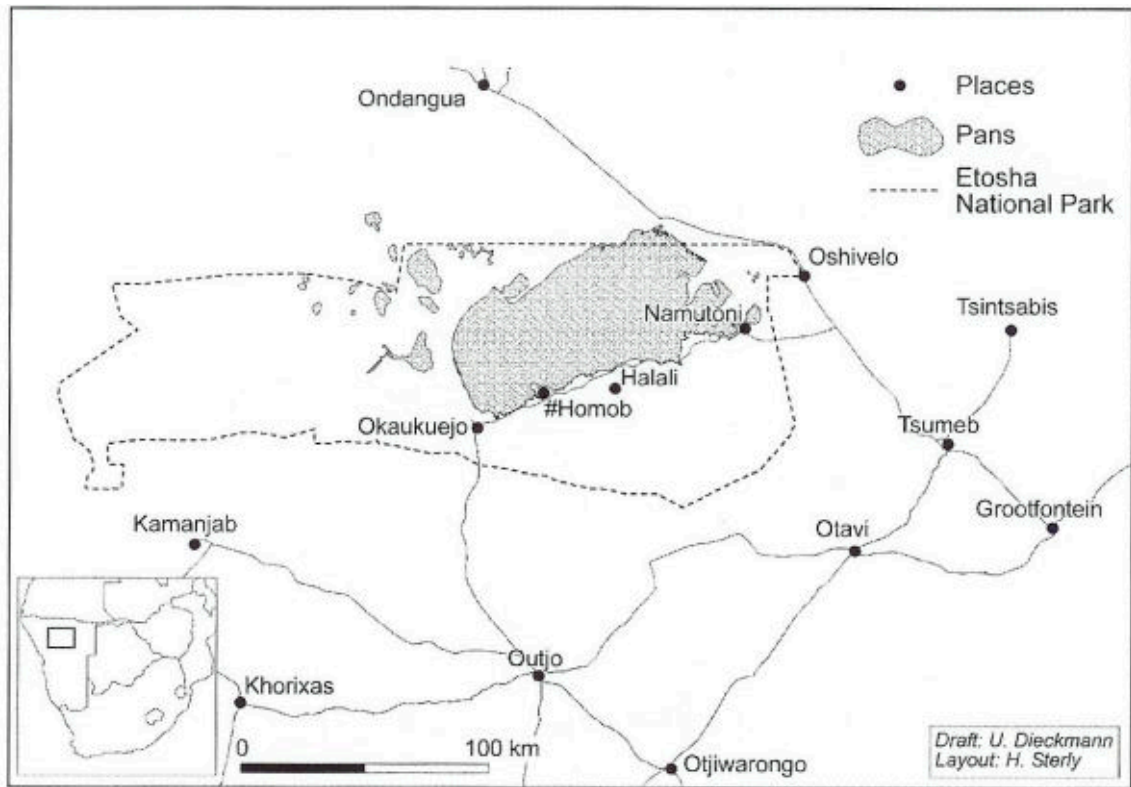
The main source of information comprise interviews with Hai//om informants who had their homesteads in the area until 1954. At this time all inhabit-

ants were forced to leave the national park area, as human occupation did not fit into the governmental concept of a “pristine natural landscape”.

The first results emerging from this field work have been presented, e.g., in form of maps showing the seasonal mobility of hunter-gatherer groups, the availability of food resources, and the location of historical places, e.g. settlement sites, hunting stands, waterholes and graves. In this way a complex space-time-model of the historical use of a landscape can be developed. However, until recently, settlement structures and finds have not been investigated in a systematic way. A first archaeological reconnaissance trip to the Etosha Park area in 2003 was carried out to verify the scientific potential of both sources and has shown that an investigation using archaeological methods would be extremely advantageous. On the one hand, such a study could complement and verify the historical data, and, on the other hand, the existing “non archaeological” sources, such as oral traditions, written documents or photographs, would permit an even more detailed insight into past conditions than a purely archaeological analysis of structures and finds would normally yield. Additionally, the results would lead to the development of new approaches which could be used in the interpretation of archaeological sites in the neighboring Kaokoland and Kavango region - the main Namibian research areas of the multi-disciplinary collaborative research center SFB 389, ACA-CIA at the University of Cologne (Vogelsang et al. 2002).

Such a methodological approach has been common practice since J. E. Yellen’s (1977) pioneering work in the 1970’s on the !Kung settlement structures. Fortunately, the state of preservation of settlement remains in the Etosha National Park is unique. Due to the particular and tragic circumstances that led to the forced abandonment of the settlement area, and the fact that since this event the settlement remains have not experienced any anthropogenic influence, they represent an undisturbed “snapshot” of an entire settlement area. The status of the Etosha region as a National Park will undoubtedly protect the material remains in the future, but the information of the last contemporary witnesses will soon be lost. For this reason, the archaeological documentation of examples of all site categories and the accompanying collection of information from the former inhabitants is most urgent. It is hoped that this knowl-

Figure 1: Etosha National Park and surroundings.



edge will help interpret the archaeological record and reconstruct technological processes of the past.

From the more than 180 localities recorded by U. Dieckmann, 21 have been subject to primary archaeological observations. Of these, the waterhole #Homob and the nearby historical settlement site of the same name were selected for further documentation in 2004. After the three-dimensional recording of the topography and the archaeological features and objects, all characteristic surface-finds were collected. In a last step, a 24 m² area with the remains of two hut circles was excavated down to the solid calcareous crust. The contents was sieved with a 2 mm mesh, the subsequent collection of finds being a very time-consuming task due to the high number of extremely small glass beads.

In 2004, interviews conducted by U. Dieckmann and J. Peters (Institute of Palaeoanatomy, University of Munich) focused on the hunting behaviour of the Hai//om, including aspects such as the dismembering of larger game species and meat transport and distribution in the base camp. For each species, from the shrew to the elephant, this and other information

is recorded in detail - an enormous task that has to be continued in the following years. Within the framework of this topic the traditional way in which the Hai//om dismember larger game animals was filmed and documented. This experiment was conducted on a farm outside the Etosha National Park, the species considered being a greater kudu.

At present, our scientific work in the Etosha National Park area started as an *ad hoc* project, it was neither expected to take place nor systematically planned. Hence a sound research concept is just beginning to emerge. It is, however, an interesting and urgent challenge and any comments, ideas or criticisms of *Nyame Akuma* readers on the ethnological-archaeological approach taken here would be, as always, highly appreciated.

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