

Thinking with relations in nature conservation? A case study of the Etosha National Park and Hailom

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The area of the Etosha National Park in Namibia has been inhabited for many centuries by Hailom, a group of (now former) hunter-gatherers. In 1907, Etosha was proclaimed as a game reserve, although Hailom were still allowed to live in the area until they were expelled in the 1950s due to then-dominant ideas of fortress conservation. In recent years, Hailom have been provided with several resettlement farms by the Namibian government as a reaction to the colonial land dispossession. In this article, I explore the onto-epistemology of Hailom (i.e. their being in and knowing the Etosha area), focusing on their relations with the land and with human and beyond-the-human beings before their eviction. I argue that the eviction implies not only economic marginalization but also social deprivation, which is inadequately addressed with resettlement. I suggest that thinking with relations, illustrated with the Hailom case, would call for other solutions in the context of measures taken for past land dispossessions and would open new paths for Namibia's nature conservation initiatives.

The Etosha National Park, covering an area of 22,935 km², is Namibia's premier tourist attraction. Etosha, now promoted as 'Namibia's greatest wildlife sanctuary', has long been the home of Hailom,¹ commonly referred to as one of the 'Bushman' or San groups in Namibia, whose ancestors lived across the region for some time before the major immigrations of Bantu-speakers during the last 500 years of the second millennium (Suzman 2004: 223). At the onset of the colonial period, their presence was documented for the whole region of northern-central Namibia. The German Colonial Administration created 'Game Reserve No. 2' in 1907, including today's Etosha National Park, as well as the northwestern area of Namibia (South West Africa at the time), an area of 93,240 km² (de la Bat 1982: 12). Initially, Hailom were accepted as residents. While white settlers increasingly occupied the surrounding area, the game reserve became the last refuge where Hailom were still allowed to practise a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle. Changing ideas of nature conservation, however, combined with the settlement policy of the colonial government and the need for cheap farm workers

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by white settlers, resulted in the eviction of Hailom from Etosha in 1954. Only a few Hailom, henceforth Park employees, were allowed to stay in the park (Dieckmann 2007).² After several boundary alterations, name changes, and a considerable decrease in size, Game Reserve No. 2 became finally the Etosha National Park in 1967 (Berry 1997: 4).

At the time of Namibia's independence in 1990, Hailom found themselves to be altogether dispossessed of their ancestral land. Hailom are nowadays living dispersed in northern central Namibia and experience a high level of marginalization and poverty (Dieckmann 2014).

Around 2007, the time of the centenary celebrations of the Etosha National Park, the government commenced some efforts to 'compensate' Hailom for the loss of land by purchasing several farms for them in the vicinity of the park. Since 2008, at least eight farms, seven of them bordering Etosha in the south, were bought for the resettlement of Hailom. Importantly, the government employed a group resettlement scheme for this purpose, despite the serious concerns that his scheme had already raised.³ Werner and Odendaal, for example, noted that 'the group resettlement approach as implemented thus far is fundamentally a welfare intervention' (2010: 169). Although the shortcomings of the group resettlement model were well known to the Namibian government (see Republic of Namibia 2010), it was still applied to tackle the land dispossession of Hailom and other San groups in Namibia (see Dieckmann 2014: 232; Dieckmann & Dirx 2014a: 452).

Initially (around 2007), one of the primary target groups for resettlement was the Hailom community still residing within the Etosha National Park, of whom only a minority were employed. However, most of the Hailom residents in the Etosha National Park resisted their relocation, fearing that they would lose all access to the park (i.e. their ancestral land) once they had agreed to be resettled on the farms (Dieckmann 2011: 172-3).

Additionally, in 2012, a tourism concession to the specific area around the !Gobaub waterhole in Etosha was granted to Hailom. Despite several recommendations for a broader approach, including from the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in his report on the situation in Namibia (Anaya 2013), the concession was only granted to Hailom residing on the resettlement farms (Ministry of Environment and Tourism 2012). This meant that the people who decided to stay in Etosha, as well as other Hailom who had lost land during the colonial period but did not stay on the resettlement farms, were excluded from any potential benefits arising from the !Gobaub concession. Moreover, the rights of the concessionaire were very limited (for further details, see Dieckmann 2020: 107-8).

In 2015, after years of preparation initiated by Hailom still living in Etosha, a large group of Hailom from various areas, being dissatisfied with the government's resettlement approach, launched a legal claim to parts of their ancestral land – mainly the Etosha National Park (Dieckmann 2020; Koot & Hitchcock 2019; Odendaal, Gilbert & Vermeulen 2020).

In this article, I look at these developments from a specific angle by addressing the following questions: How can this course of events be interpreted when viewed in light of the onto-epistemology of Hailom who formerly lived in Etosha? What could recognition of their onto-epistemology have meant concerning the actions taken? And more generally, what would recognition of indigenous⁴ onto-epistemologies mean for conservation in Namibia and beyond? In other words, what would the being in

and thinking with relations that Hailom formerly living in Etosha experienced and practised entail for the compensation measures taken and for nature conservation in Namibia?

I use the term 'onto-epistemology' (or the adjective 'onto-epistemological'), instead of 'ontology', to stress that the conceptual separation of how we know from what we know, the separation of knowledge from situation (Haraway 1988), knowledge from 'reality' (Burman 2017: 925), knowledge from being in the world (Ingold 2000), is embedded, broadly speaking, in a Euro-American lifeworld, and does not necessarily reflect experiences and knowledges of many social groupings, often subsumed under the general label of indigenous peoples, including Hailom.

Two decades ago, Karen Barad, a trained theoretical physicist, noted:

The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistem-ology – the study of practices of knowing in being – is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter (2003: 829).

Indeed, the inseparability of the two is an essential feature of so-called relational ontologies (or, rather, relational onto-epistemologies). In relational ontologies, what primarily exists are relations, and relationships constitute beings (including beyond-the-human beings), persons/selves, and things. This understanding implies the potential agency of nonhumans and 'that sociality and historicity are indisputably inclusive of non-human others' (Dussart & Poirier 2017: 9). It stands in stark contrast to 'atomistic' or 'substantivist' ontologies, where 'entities' are, rather, the principal ontological units.

I insist on the somewhat unwieldy term 'onto-epistemology' to counter the risk of falling back into the trap of using the term 'ontology' as 'just another word for culture' (Carrithers, Candea, Sykes, Holbraad & Venkatesan 2010), as another word for 'worldview' or 'representation', since all these readings or usages are embedded in the familiar dichotomies of Cartesian thought (nature-culture, body-mind, matter-representation, etc.): that is, in a very particular onto-epistemology.

In the following, I will first briefly describe how I came to know and the knowledge communicated, illustrated with some place-related knowledges. I will then outline what I understand as aspects of Hailom being in and knowing the world (i.e. their onto-epistemology), describing their relations to land, humans, and beyond-the-human others. I use Tim Ingold's 'meshwork' – that is, 'the web of life' woven by the co-responsive becoming of occurrent beings (Ingold 2012: 435, 437) – as a concept to convey my understanding of their way of being in and knowing the world. In light of this onto-epistemology, I will reassess the issue of land dispossession and the efforts of compensation, stressing the need for, and suggesting, alternative paths to be taken. Finally, I promote the integration of relational onto-epistemologies and local knowledges in reparation processes, conservation initiatives, and 'development' in general. Thereby, I follow the political ontology framework promoted by Mario Blaser (2013) and others (e.g. Burman 2017; de la Cadena & Blaser 2018a). Political ontology implies a 'political sensibility' (as a commitment to ontological multiplicity), 'a problem space' (referring to the dynamics when different onto-epistemologies or 'worldings' meet, interact, and mingle), and 'a modality of analysis' engaged with 'reality making' (Blaser 2013: 552; see the final section for further discussion).

The approach I have taken was inspired by the works of Karen Barad (2003; 2007), Nurit Bird-David (2017; 2018), Tim Ingold (e.g. 2000; 2007; 2011), Deborah Bird Rose (e.g. 2005; 2013; 2015), and by many others who have either published on specific cases of hunter-gatherer ecologies, ontologies, and animisms or contributed to theoretical debates in the fields of relational ontologies and new animism, as well as by scholars from the fields of posthumanism, multispecies studies, and environmental humanities. I also drew on writers who have engaged with ontologies of other KhoeSan groups in Southern Africa (Guenther, 2015; 2020a; 2020b; Hannis & Sullivan 2018; Low 2007; 2012; 2014; Ninkova 2022; Schnegg 2019; 2021; Sullivan, 2013; 2017). With this new academic equipment, I revisited the material gathered between 2000 and 2006 (interviews, field notes, field trip protocols, and datasets on plants and places) and looked at it in new light.

Experiencing Etosha

I went to Etosha for various research periods between 2000 and 2006 to explore the history of Hailom as part of my Ph.D. research. In 2001, I became involved in a project which was aimed at the documentation of Hailom cultural heritage in Etosha and the creation of cultural maps documenting the historical presence of Hailom within the area, in order to deconstruct the image of Etosha as an untouched and timeless wilderness.⁵ During the project, other researchers were temporarily involved in various ways.⁶

We worked mainly with a group of elderly Hailom men: Kadisen IKhumub (1940-2012), Willem Dauxab (1938-2008), Jacob Uibeb (1935-2006), Jan Tsumib (b. 1945), Hans Haneb (1929-2006), Tobias Haneb (1925-2005), and Axarob IOreseb (1940-2007). All of them were born in Etosha at various settlements in different areas and had worked in Etosha and on farms in the vicinity in the years after Hailom were evicted.⁷

We regularly undertook journeys in the park to visit places of meaning for Hailom. The trips offered an opportunity for Hailom men to be in Etosha again, outside the rest camp/staff location and outside of the formal working contexts. Furthermore, we worked at the research camp at Okaukuejo in the Etosha National Park to deepen and revise the documented information. The work in this core team was complemented by trips and interviews with other elderly Hailom in and outside of Etosha.

Walking (and partly driving) through the landscape and 'meeting' places together with the people who formerly inhabited the area was a productive way to learn about Hailom's past in Etosha. On the one hand, this revived their memories and animated their pasts; on the other, by being there with Hailom elders, I also got an embodied understanding of the Hailom landscape: what evolved was a web of people, places, flora and fauna, spirit beings and ancestors, of events and developments, entangled with each other. A few examples of 'meeting' places are described to illustrate our work and the knowledge which emerged from this.

At *Bikab* (officially Ombika), a fountain, Kadisen IKhumub and Willem Dauxab explained that the men used to wait in hunting shelters (*!goadi*) close to the waterhole. They pointed to an area which had been the settlement (nowadays the main road runs in-between the waterhole and the former settlement). They also related the families (i.e. the surnames) staying in this area and explained that people from *Bikab* used to go to different places outside today's park borders: they have, for example, collected bushfood at *!Gaunguxas* (situated on a neighbouring farm with the name Oberland



Figure 1. Ticky !Noboses explaining to her husband John !Noboseb her birthplace and the arrangement of the former settlement at *Bikab*. (Photo by the author.)

today). Willem Dauxab mentioned a water snake formerly living at *Bikab* and explained that the water dried up when the snake had been killed. This had happened sometime before the new borehole providing regular water was built. We undertook another trip to *Bikab* with an elderly lady, Ticky !Noboses, who was born there around 1940. She showed us the exact locations of the four former huts, explained who had been living in them, and identified former fireplaces (see Fig. 1). She talked about her father, who had been working at #*Huiob* (officially Okaukuejo), a police station during that time, today one of the main rest camps. We also found the lid from an old tin of German bully beef ('*Rindfleisch*') there.

Not far from *Bikab* was a plain called |*Hunibi!khubub*. During the right time of the year, *uinan* plants (*Cyanella* sp.) were abundant there, as Willem and Kadisen explained during another trip. *Uinan* was a valued food and the people from *Bikab* and #*Huiop* (Okaukuejo) used to come there during the rainy season for some days, staying in a bushfood camp (*!haros*) to collect *uinan* in sufficient quantities to store it at the permanent settlements.

Sore#axab was a place with a well (*tsaub*), which we visited several times. A man with the surname |*Nuaiseb*, Kadisen's father-in-law, was the headman of a larger area (see also the next paragraph), who stayed with his close family mostly at |*Nububes* or |*Nasoneb*. He had assigned this well to a man with the surname |*Oreseb*: 'They were always together'. People needed to take care of the well (i.e. clean it) to get water. Reportedly, the first settlement was close to the well, but in the year of disease, |*osikurib*, many people died there and therefore people moved to a new settlement, called |*Noabas*, some distance away. Accordingly, there were also a lot of graves in the area, and



Figure 2. Visiting *Kaikhoetsaub* during our research. (Photo by the author.)

people could name the surnames (remembering the individuals) who had died there. *Sore#axab* was a bushy area and was also known for the abundance of lions hardly visible between the shrubs. Families staying at #*Homob* (near the Etosha salt pan) used to come to visit the people at !*Noabas*, because they were families. The people staying here used to hunt near the pan, at #*Kharitsaub*, *Kaikhoetsaub* (see Fig. 2), #*Huibdis*, |*Arabdis* (all springs), up to |*Aoxadom* (riverbed).

In the rainy season, more people moved to stay at *Tsinab* (close to the rest camp Halali), because of #*huin*, the drupes of *Berchemia discolor*, which could be stored for several months. During certain seasons, people from !*Noabas* also went to !*Nae!gûdi* close to the Etosha pan for !*haros!*!*hamis* (hunting and bushfood camps) and also to collect salt at the pan. While staying at !*Nae!gûdi*, the people had to get water at #*Kharitsaub*. The men staying at !*Noabas* also went hunting with their dogs at |*Nubiaib*, a bushy area. This was a place where once a fight had taken place between two men with the surnames !*Gauseb* and |*Khumub* and an old lion; both men and the old lion survived.

!*Nasoneb* (Rietfontein) is another place (with an open fountain) illustrating the historicity of the landscape and the entanglement of people and places. Kadisen |*Khumub* was born at !*Nasoneb* in 1940. The area guarded by Kadisen's father-in-law, the headman |*Nuaiseb* (see above), included several waterholes, one being !*Nasoneb* and another !*Nububes*, and also the fringe of the pan. Kadisen explained that his family group was living in permanent settlements at both !*Nububes* and !*Nasoneb*; and family ties always ensured access to other areas as well, for example !*Gobaub*, where Kadisen's father's father was headman, or *Tsinab*, whose people were said to be 'nearly the same group'.



Figure 3. Exploring a former enclosure for goats at *INasoneb*. (Photo by the author.)

The following story is connected to *INububes*: there was an elephant that chased the people and roamed around the settlements. The people called the *!gaiob* (shaman/healer) Elias *!Khumub*, Kadisen's father, and he discovered that the elephant was ridden by a *!gamab* (spirit being; see the section 'Being with *!gamagu*'); in this case, the spirit of a man with the surname Subeb, apparently a 'naughty' man during his lifetime, who created unrest at *INububes*. Elias took his bow and arrow and shot the spirit being off the elephant; the elephant disappeared and peace returned to *INububes*.

Hunting from *INububes* and *INasoneb* was mainly done at wells at the edge of the Etosha pan, therefore the settlements at both waterholes were not far from the water. Franz *!Nuaiseb* and Franz *!Khumub*, two men with their close family and some goats, had been living in separate settlements at *INasoneb* (Fig. 3). When Franz *!Khumub* died there, his closer family moved to Franz *!Nuaiseb*'s settlement. *INasoneb* was also an important gathering point for Hailom and outsiders before the eviction because it was relatively easy to access as a road passed close by. According to Kadisen, the tourists came during the winter season to the place, offering sweets and oranges to the children, tobacco and sometimes clothes to the adults. The officials working at Okaukuejo or Namutoni came to this place when they needed Hailom workers. Before the eviction, Hailom from the surrounding area were told to move to *INasoneb*, where they could easily be picked up and transported to either the police stations or to farms outside the park.

Being in Etosha

The cases above illustrate that being and remembering at a place invoked manifold memories. A place itself emerges as an integrated web of interconnected inhabitants,

human and beyond-the-human, past and present, embedded in a wider meshwork of interrelated places, humans, and other beings.

In the following, I detail some of these relations to illuminate – according to my understanding – some aspects of what it meant for Hailom to be and to know in Etosha: that is, aspects of their onto-epistemology.⁸

*Being with land/places*⁹

People and land/places were connected and personal identities belonged to the land. On a regional level, Hailom used to ‘cluster’ themselves according to the geographical areas they were living in, named after physical characteristics of the land or the occurrence of specific plants: for example, *Xomkhoen* were the people living south of the Etosha pan; *xom* referring to the Etosha pan, *khoen* translating as people.¹⁰ This ‘land-cum-people terminology’ (Widlok 2008: 366) constituted one crucial aspect of identity and was regularly used to refer to other Hailom. Dwelling in a certain area provided a strong sense of identity (among other aspects); at least the *Xomkhoen* seemed to be proud exactly because of that: being the people of the pan.

On a local scale, family groups and surnames were linked to specific areas/settlements/water places, as the examples of *Bikab* and *!Nasoneb* above illustrated.¹¹ The family groups were headed by elders, who were said to ‘listen’ and mediate in case of conflicts and to take care of and take decisions for the people, the land, and other elements of the ecology. The position of a leader/steward was not an inherited formal role but rather a position evolving from the relations of the person with the environment and other beings.

The boundaries of the family-group areas were well known to Hailom and sometimes marked with beacons (e.g. rocks put in trees). Specific rules were in place in case a person without kinship ties entered the area. The existence of these outlined areas was an indication that family groups were tied to specific patches of land and had guardianship in the area. Apart from living elders, ancestors and spirit beings also took care of the land and its inhabitants.

Kinship *networks* played a major role in the organization of land/people and criss-crossed area boundaries. Mobility of individuals and families, moving from one place/group to another, as evident in the *!Nasoneb* example, entailed the enactment of family relations. The extensive knowledge of family relations was thereby inextricably woven into the landscape¹² and surnames formed a relevant and organizing part of this knowledge. Kinship ties implied spatial connections and guided movements. They established *common ground* (Dieckmann 2021: 111–14).

The examples above also illustrate that temporality and history were woven into the land, the land itself was ‘pregnant with the past’ (Ingold 2000: 189), and the seasonality of bushfood and game was woven into the land and connected to specific places (e.g. the *uinan* plants at *!Hunibil!khubub* or the seasonal hunting and bushfood camps at *!Nae!Gûdi*). Colonial history was part of it too (e.g. the possibility to move to areas outside of today’s national park mentioned at *Bikab*). The graves of deceased Hailom (e.g. at *Sore#axab*) were kinship ties across generations engrained in the landscape. Metal pieces and shards found all over Etosha (like the bully beef tin lid at *Bikab*) or ruins of stone houses at various places represented further tangible remnants of colonial history.

Travelling through the land with Hailom evoked numerous stories, both oral histories and personal memories: for example, about conflicts with other groups, about

particular human and beyond-the-human individuals (e.g. !Khumub, !Gauseb and the lion at !Nubiaib, or the spirit being riding an elephant at !Nububes). New stories and new memories were constantly woven into the land. Even the reminiscence of the eviction became integrated into specific places (e.g. at !Nasoneb as the place where Hailom were gathered and picked up by the police and by farmers in need of labourers).

Being with animals

Hailom did not relate to animals (at least not all species or all individuals) as mere resources, or as objects. In this respect, they do not differ from what has been reported for some other KhoeSan groups in Southern Africa (e.g. Guenther 2015; Low 2014; Ninkova 2022) and many other indigenous groups around the world. These human-animal relations are one particular expression of what has been called ‘animism’ or ‘new animism’ (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2006; Willerslev 2013). A few examples will illustrate this.

Lions were considered colleagues and equals (see also Suzman 2004: 223-4). Lion meat was usually not eaten. Also, one of the Hailom spirit beings (!gamagu, m. pl., !gamab, m. sg.)¹³ is a *xam!gamab* (a lion spirit), which can pass its spirit to individuals who can – if treated by other healers/shamans – become healers/shamans themselves (Dieckmann 2021: 118-19).

Other meat taboos existed as well. For instance, the secretary bird (*khoeseb*) was not eaten because it ‘walked like a human’. The pied crow (!kha-nub) was not eaten either because it brought back the rain after it had been taken away by the elephant, the animal ‘married to the rain’. For non-carnivorous prey animals, a specific ritual (!hâson) had to be carried out by the hunter after the kill before processing the animal. This ritual indicated that prey was not regarded as a mere resource (Dieckmann 2021: 117-18; Peters, Dieckmann & Vogelsang 2009: 132-3).

Willem Dauxab’s note on the water snake at *Bikab* also alludes to the fact that the ontological status of snakes deserves further exploration. It was reported that every waterhole had a water snake. Being alive, the snake would not trouble the people, but when the snake died or was killed, the water dried up. Furthermore, some stories involved ‘mega’-snakes, almost the width of a road.¹⁴ Snake spirits were reportedly also among the different !gamagu, the spirit beings which populate the world of Hailom and which can transfer their potency or spirit to healers/shamans.

*Being with !gamagu (spirit beings)*¹⁵

Spirit beings were an integral part of the ecology. They could do good but could also do harm. They could be moral guardians supervising the following of taboo rules (*sôxa*) and ecological sustainability by preventing overexploitation.

The most potent spirit being (!gamab) was the spirit of the rain (!nanus) (see also Sullivan & Low 2014: 232). There was also the spirit of the lion (*xam!gamab*), the spirits of snakes (either !gau!gub ‘big snake’ or !gam!aob ‘water snake’) (see also Hoff 1997; Sullivan & Low 2014), and the spirit being of *Kaindaus* (see also Schatz 1993: 8; Wagner-Robertz 1977: 7-8). The latter was described to me as a malicious female being who would fall in love with and rape a man. Besides these spirit beings, the spirits of specific ancestors (also called !gamagu) were also in evidence.

Each spirit being had and provided a different potency/spirit/wind (!gais) to a person, transferred through (traumatic) events, where the person encountered the spirit being.

When a person got the potency/spirit/wind, they would first turn mad, and would need to be treated by a *!gaibob/!gaios* (healer/shaman) to become a *!gaibob/!gaios* themselves.

Spirit beings could also take the form of prey animals. Therefore, if a hunted animal behaved in an unfamiliar or ‘un-species-like’ way, it might be a spirit being and should be avoided instead of being further processed and consumed (Peters *et al.* 2009: 132). During the healing/trance dance, the shamans/healers could communicate and negotiate with a specific spirit being. They therefore had a wide array of skills/tasks: for example, healing diseases, treating bad luck in hunting, or bringing rain.¹⁶

Hailom being with ... and being without: the issue of land dispossession

It is obvious from the above descriptions that Hailom in Etosha entertained a variety of relations with the land, other Hailom, other humans, and beings-beyond-the-human, and that these relations were constitutive of their being, or, in Bird-David’s words:

Against ‘I think, therefore I am’ stand ‘I relate, therefore I am’ and ‘I know as I relate’. Against materialistic framing of the environment as discrete things stands relationally framing the environment as nested relatednesses. Both ways are real and valid. Each has its limits and its strengths (1999: S78).

Land and family relations are intertwined and inseparable. Relationships with space established identities, as did relationships with people and animals. Relationships with animals also revealed that animals were or could become beings/persons and that they could also carry or *be* specific spirit beings. Relations with spirit beings could transform an ‘ordinary’ Hailom into a shaman/healer.

In the described onto-epistemology, there is no strict boundary between the natural and the supernatural, material and spiritual, the real and the mythical, animated and the unanimated beings. By the same token, the Hailom connection to the land is not appositely captured as ‘ownership’ in the sense of legal possession and control over ‘property’, the latter understood as a set of rights over ‘things’. I argue that this conceptualization of ownership and property was/is not possible in their onto-epistemology. Experiencing oneself as part of a wider ecology with diverse beings rather than as controllers of ‘nature’ prevents ideas of (exclusively human) ownership of ‘things’ in the same way as egalitarian values prevent the establishment of formal, hierarchical leadership structures.¹⁷

Ingold’s ‘meshwork’ is a suitable concept capturing Hailom’s being in Etosha as being in relations. Ingold argues that it is the ‘dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence’ (2011: 68). Accordingly, the texture of the lifeworld is a meshwork of interwoven lines constituted of organisms in a relational field; organisms being trails of movement and growth and not entities set off against the environment. The environment, Ingold envisages, is ‘a domain of entanglement’:

This tangle is the texture of the world. In the animic ontology, beings do not simply occupy the world, they *inhabit* it, and in so doing – in threading their own paths through the meshwork – they contribute to its ever-evolving weave ... The animic world is in perpetual flux, as the beings that participate in it go their various ways (2011: 71, original emphasis).

The concept of a meshwork embraces the manifold relations of human and other-than-human inhabitants with each other and with the land. From this perspective, the idea and practice of involuntary and abrupt removal of humans from land and its other

inhabitants are highly problematic – like pulling various threads suddenly out of the texture of the area. At the same time, the image of the meshwork is open and allows new weaving and gradual transformation.

Viewed in the light of a Hailom onto-epistemology, or their entanglement in the meshwork, the eviction might be captured as relational ablation rather than as ‘mere’ land dispossession and deprivation of resources. In other words, the impacts of the eviction should be understood as social impoverishment and a threat to Hailom (relational) identity rather than as solely economic impoverishment.

Taking relational onto-epistemologies seriously

This specific lens makes a difference when considering any kind of compensation for past land dispossessions due to nature conservation, both for Hailom and in other contexts involving indigenous peoples. It also opens new and promising outlooks for planning future nature conservation initiatives in the mentioned context and beyond.

Thereby I am thinking in terms of a political ontology framework promoted by Blaser *et al.* (e.g. Blaser 2013; Burman 2017; de la Cadena & Blaser 2018b). De la Cadena and Blaser suggest:

[P]olitical ontology wants to enable political thought and practice beyond the onto-epistemic limits of modern politics and what its practice allows. We capitalize the concept – therefore Political Ontology – to call attention to the specificity of the imaginary that we propose here, namely, the consideration of the pluriverse as a possibility. Political Ontology, as we are using it here, operates on the presumption of divergent worldings constantly coming about through negotiations, enmeshments, crossings, and interruptions. It asks how those practices transpire and with what consequences. Political Ontology thus simultaneously stands for reworking an imaginary of politics (the pluriverse), for a field of study and intervention (the power-charged terrain of entangled worldings and their dynamics), and for a modality of analysis and critique that is permanently concerned with its own effects as a worlding practice (2018b: 6).

With the above description of aspects of Hailom’s relational onto-epistemology, I exposed glimpses of an alternative worlding. I tried ‘to carve out a space to listen carefully to what other worldings propose’ (Blaser 2013: 559) for them to be taken seriously and considered carefully in the political context of land dispossession and nature conservation in Namibia (outlined below) and thereby to contribute to the reworking of an imaginary of politics, the pluriverse, described by Escobar as ‘a world where many worlds fit’ (2011: 139). Onto-epistemology should thus be understood not as a closed and independent unit but as a ‘dynamic configuration of premises regarding the nature of being and reality’ (Burman 2017: 931) enmeshed in unequal power relations also, but not only, shaped by colonialism. It is part of a partially connected and overlapping pluriverse of transforming and transformative worldings.

Alternative visions for Hailom?

Until 1947, the area where the southern resettlement farms for Hailom are located was part of Game Reserve No. 2, the predecessor of the Etosha National Park (Fig. 4). In other words, the area was integrated into a wider Etosha meshwork until only seven years before the eviction – with Hailom inhabitants, families and surnames, bushfood, animals and spirit beings associated with the area – also testified in Hailom place names. This fact is (almost) forgotten or ignored today, not least in the official discussions on resettlement.

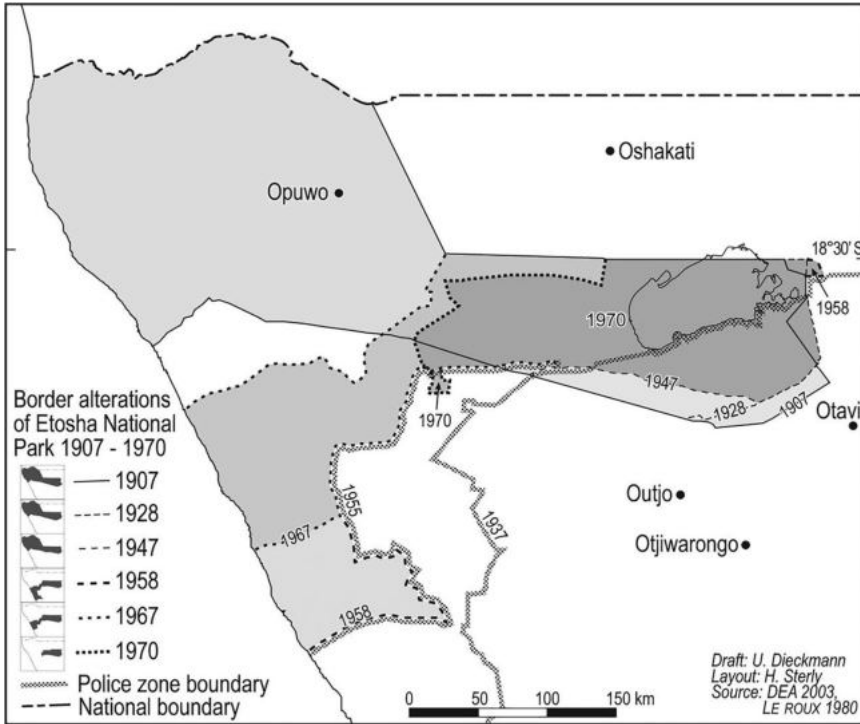


Figure 4. Etosha conservation area. (Reproduced with permission.)

Resettlement on (formerly white-owned) farms is the dominant approach used by the Namibian government in the commercial farming sector to address land dispossession. Other models are employed in Namibia's communal areas.¹⁸ Noteworthy is the conservancy model within the Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) Programme. To get registered as a conservancy, a community needs to meet certain conditions (for details, see Jones 1999: 5). The conservancy thereby acquires use rights over game and tourism within its boundaries, potentially enabling the conservancy to derive income and other benefits – such as trophy hunting and other tourism activities. This could have been modified further to help restore Hailom relations to the Etosha ecology. In comparison to the group resettlement model employed in the Hailom case, a conservancy-like institution, established on the land of the resettlement farms, would offer many advantages in line with my argumentation.

Conservancies allow for more local participation and, unlike resettlement farms, they are not focused on agriculture and livestock, combined with small-scale income-generating projects, but allow for a variety of livelihood strategies: for example, tourism and gathering bush food. Wildlife, while potentially challenging for agricultural enterprises, is an important asset for conservancies. These are all important factors in the context of restoring past relations to land and other-than-human inhabitants. On the border of the Etosha National Park, even tourism could play a significant role in this regard, if it were to be focused not only on viewing wildlife, but also on the Hailom historical-cultural-ecological heritage.



Figure 5. A woman and her house at Toevlug, one of the resettlement farms. (Photo: Ben Begbie-Clench.)

A conservancy model was promoted in the initial consultations regarding Hailom land dispossession and development (Ministry of Environment and Tourism 2007), but it was not implemented when it came to the actual resettlement of Hailom (for details, see Dieckmann 2014: 202-6). For various – partly unknown – reasons, Hailom were first resettled before, four years later, in 2012, a strategy and action plan was developed (Lawry, Begbie-Clench & Hitchcock 2012). Today, fifteen years after the initial resettlement, the livelihoods on the farms are far from sustainable and residents depend to a considerable degree on government-funded food aid and welfare grants (Fig. 5). The tourism concession to *!Gobaub* might have been a promising idea, but it was developed without proper consultation and significantly depends on the business plans of outside investors. Although in 2021 an operator contract was finally signed with a huge lodge in the vicinity, Ongava Game Reserve (Pty) Ltd, various issues still impede the smooth implementation of its development plans. There is a long way to go yet until (the resettled) Hailom will receive any sustainable benefit based on the concession granted eleven years ago and it is questionable whether the investor's plans provide space for alternative worldings and the revitalization of relations.

Certainly, the conservancy model is not a panacea to reconcile conservation interests with local communities' needs and desires (see, e.g., Koot, Hebinck & Sullivan 2023; Schnegg & Kiaka 2018; Sullivan 2002). It also evolved from ideas on rural development which are primarily based on a paradigm of economic progress and concerns about the protection of wildlife (grounded in the conviction that *economic* benefits serve as incentives to protect wildlife) while 'cultural and historical dimensions of land-use and value remain relatively weakly entangled with conservation concerns' (Sullivan 2022: para. 27). It is embedded in a particular worlding (anthropocentric, utilitarian, objectifying with a clear culture-nature dualism). Still, despite its shortcomings,

compared to the group resettlement model applied in the Hailom case, it would have offered more space to think with for doing justice to the relational onto-epistemology of Hailom and a more holistic redress of past losses.

Alternative visions for conservation and beyond? Thinking with relations, thinking with Hailom

The acknowledgement of relational onto-epistemologies needs to enter the Namibian political arena. The alternative vision presented above – though far from being a ‘perfect’ solution – served as one example of a possible path to be taken when trying to accommodate specific relational onto-epistemologies in reparation processes, conservation initiatives, and development (see also Blaser 2014; Burman 2017). If relational onto-epistemologies were taken seriously, then this would deter the imposition of concepts of development or values entrenched in dominant ontologies on to the very people whose losses – or even damages – are intended to be alleviated.

This might sound almost platitudinous for scholars working in Australia, Canada, and Latin America, where strong indigenous organizations and voices are much more outspoken and recognized than in Southern Africa. On other continents and in other regions, the relational onto-epistemologies of indigenous peoples – resulting in particular environmental knowledges – are more actively promoted by indigenous scholars (e.g. Black 2011; Umeek 2014; Wildcat 2013) and integrated into discussions on environmental issues and climate change (e.g. Blaser 2009; Cochran *et al.* 2013; Cruikshank 2012; Goldman, Daly & Lovell 2016; Yeh 2016). Their relational onto-epistemologies are therefore at times included in conservation planning, environmental management, reparation measures, and legislation (e.g. Muller, Hemming & Rigney 2019; Salmond 2012).

Yet San communities in Namibia are struggling with the establishment of recognized and influential political organizations and with discrimination based on a disparaging of their (former) ways of being and knowing. The notion that the San traditional way of life is ‘primitive’ and that they need to be ‘civilized’ is prevalent among Namibians generally (Dieckmann & Dirx 2014b: 503–4). Concepts of economic and social development ignore San’s alternative onto-epistemologies as valid principles providing the bedrock of diverging livelihoods. The Namibian government refers to Namibia’s indigenous peoples as ‘marginalized communities’ and they are supported by the Division of Disability Affairs and Marginalized Communities within the Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication, and Social Welfare (2021: 1).

Importantly, the main objective of this support is to ensure their integration into the ‘*mainstream* economy’ (Republic of Namibia 2017: 77, emphasis added). Namibia’s Fifth National Development Plan, for instance, mentions the ‘neglect to build social institutions and leadership structures of the Marginalized [*sic*] communities’ and the ‘lack of culture to keep and accumulate assets’ (Republic of Namibia 2017: 77) as among the challenges to their integration into the mainstream economy. Both ‘challenges’ imply deficiencies of indigenous communities, ignoring the fact that they make perfect sense in egalitarian societies with relational onto-epistemologies. It is not surprising therefore that indigenous worldings have not entered the arena of conservation discourse. This is true not only in the context of reparation for colonial wrongs of conservation practices and resulting land dispossession but also concerning future conservation efforts.

Several scholars have already connected onto-epistemological or phenomenological case studies from Namibia (≠Nūkhoen/Damara communities) with environmental

issues (e.g. Hannis & Sullivan 2018; Schnegg 2021; Sullivan 2013), but within a philosophical framework. I argue that it is time for Namibia's indigenous onto-epistemologies to be integrated into the current discourse on the nation's conservation politics and practices.

Mabele, Krauss, and Kiwango (2022) put forward a somewhat similar yet broader suggestion in a discussion on 'convivial conservation' in Southern Africa. 'Convivial conservation' is promoted as a 'post-capitalist approach to conservation that promotes radical equity, structural transformation and environmental justice' (Büscher & Fletcher 2019: 283). In an attempt to decolonize conservation, Mabele *et al.* have suggested a Southern African *Ubuntu* philosophy, 'anchored on the ethical principle of promoting life through mutual caring and sharing between and among humans and nonhumans' (2022: 92) in the implementation of 'promoted areas', the latter being an important element of convivial conservation. Yet, as the authors admit, the operationalization of *Ubuntu* in promoted areas is still lacking (Mabele *et al.* 2022: 98). Furthermore, though similarities of *Ubuntu* with ethic-ecological principles of KhoeSan-speaking groups need further exploration, given the centuries of domination of KhoeSan by Bantu-speaking groups in Southern Africa, one should not subsume or merge KhoeSan ethic-ecological principles with *Ubuntu* from the start.

Integrating the experiences of Hailom opens the possibility of repositioning humans within ecology. The need for humans to conserve *nature*, which is focused on the sustainability of human existence embedded in a 'utilitarian, exploitative, dominion-over-nature worldview' (Muller *et al.* 2019: 400), would be replaced with the responsibility of humans to care for the whole *eco-system* (including humans). Humans endowed with relational onto-epistemologies don't need to be separated from nature to conserve it. A (re)animation of nature would mean that the maintenance of ethical and mutual relationships with nonhuman others would become a necessity of living(-with).

The concept of onto-epistemology also stresses the importance of place and situation for knowledge evolution. Therefore, local knowledge *systems* inevitably need to be integrated into the management of protected areas, including national parks.¹⁹

Taking Hailom (and other) onto-epistemologies seriously in the Namibian context could also result in some of the other beings or even relations becoming legal persons in the nation's jurisdiction. This is the case in other countries already: for example, the constitution of Ecuador grants inalienable, substantive rights to nature (de la Cadena 2010: 335); New Zealand has recognized the legal personhood of a river system based on Māori onto-epistemologies (Salmond 2014) and granted legal personhood to national parks; and in Australia, following Ngarrindjeri negotiations with the government, the environment became a recognized water user to be prioritized (Muller *et al.* 2019: 406-7).

Integrating Hailom and other indigenous onto-epistemologies in the Namibian conservation discourse would open a variety of alternative paths to be further explored. It would be without doubt a significant step to increased empowerment and participation of indigenous peoples in Namibia and greater environmental justice (e.g. Burman 2017; Goldman *et al.* 2016). It would also be a step towards decolonizing conservation (Muller *et al.* 2019). Taking relational onto-epistemologies seriously would, however, not only be important in the context of environmental justice or decolonization, but would also be a vital step in the face of current ecological-societal problems. As Sullivan has noted, '[t]he current global socio-ecological cul-de-sac in which collectively we find ourselves suggests that continued dismissal of

such different culture/nature ontologies is a luxury we can ill afford' (2013: 61). Indeed, the 're-activation of animist relational onto-epistemologies concerned with maintaining good relations between all entities/actants in each moment, rather than conserving-via-capitalising specific objectified and thus transcendent natures' (2013: 55), might be a promising path to be taken when facing this current cul-de-sac.

In the words of Daniel R. Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma, and professor at the Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas:

Can you imagine a world where nature is understood as full of relatives not resources, where inalienable rights are balanced with inalienable responsibilities and where wealth itself is measured not by resource ownership and control, but by the number of good relationships we maintain in the complex and diverse life-systems of this blue green planet? I can (Wildcat 2013: 515).

What would nature conservation in Namibia and elsewhere look like when we imagine a world as described above?

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NOTES

¹ Hailom language is a dialect of the Khoekhoegowab dialect continuum. The symbols |, l, ! and † in Khoekhoegowab words indicate consonants that sound like clicks: | = dental click, l = lateral click, ! = alveolar click, and † = palatal click.

² Due to rising employment opportunities within Etosha, a few more families could return in the later 1950s and early 1960s.

³ An alternative approach, also part of the land reform programme of the Namibian government, was a farm unit resettlement scheme whereby farm units were allocated to individuals or families in line with the minimum size of a viable commercial (or subsistence) unit in a particular agro-ecological zone.

⁴ The term 'indigenous' is controversial in the African context. I use the term in the Namibian context following the characterization of indigenous people in Africa by the African Commission's Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities (2005: 89).

⁵ See <https://www.xoms-omis.org/>. The project had been initiated by Hugh Brody, the main funding was provided by Comic Relief via Open Channels (in the United Kingdom), and the anthropologist James Suzman had started explorative field research.

⁶ Geographer Harald Sterly, archaeologist Ralf Vogelsang, and archaeo-botanist Barbara Eichhorn, all from the University of Cologne, and archaeo-zoologist Joris Peters, from the University of Munich.

⁷ Women were in general less proficient in Afrikaans, our lingua franca. Additionally, being employed as domestic workers and cleaners at the resettlement camps, they did not have the opportunity to revitalize their space-related knowledge after the eviction.

⁸ I use the past tense as the discussed time (mainly the 1930s/40s) and the research are situated in the past. Yet much of the information/way of understanding is alive today.

⁹ I am aware that the categorization (land/places, animals, spirit beings) follows my own onto-epistemology. Hailom onto-epistemology seems to be more ambiguous and fluid: for example, spirit beings could turn into (specific) animals; humans could transform into animals.

¹⁰ These groups, with slight variations, were also mentioned by other missionaries and researchers (e.g. Friederich 2009: 49; Widlok 1999: 82).

¹¹ The surname was passed on by cross-descent, from father to daughter and mother to son (see also Widlok 1999: 194-7). Given flexible post-marital settlement patterns, this means that specific surnames were not tied to specific areas but formed connections in the region.

¹² This does not mean that Hailom have a purely genealogical understanding of kinship. It is a flexible system with strong relational aspects (Widlok 1999: chap. 6).

¹³ Any translation of *lgamab* seems inadequate. Reportedly, there were also female spirit beings, but the interviewees mainly use the masculine forms.

¹⁴ The existence of 'great snakes' and 'water snakes' was reported for other KhoeSan groups as well (e.g. Hoff 1997; Sullivan & Low 2014).

¹⁵ Others report on only one *lgamab*, sometimes translating it as 'god' (e.g. Low 2012; Wagner-Robertz 1977). Hailom I worked with described several *lgamagu*. They have another single deity, which is called *Elof* or *!Khüb*. The relationships between *lgamagu* and *Elof* or *!Khüb* were not explained in detail.

¹⁶ For the basic structure of these healing dances, see Widlok (1999: 240-1).

¹⁷ Though indigenous land claims around the world demonstrate that the meaning of 'land ownership' can be negotiated in court, the proof of 'ownership' still remains the reference point for legal argumentation.

¹⁸ With Independence, Namibia inherited two agricultural sub-sectors from the colonial era, namely communal and commercial agriculture. While the commercial areas consist of the land which had been allocated to white commercial agriculture during colonial times, the communal areas are the former 'homelands' which had been allocated to the various Namibian groups under the South African administration.

¹⁹ For an example from Canada, see Enns & Littlechild (2018). For the Southern African context, using a case study of the #Khomani San, Koot and Büscher (2019) argue that questions of land compensation to previously dispossessed people need to take their worldviews into account.

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Penser avec les relations pour protéger la nature ? Le cas du Parc national d'Etosha et des Hailom

Résumé

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La région du Parc national d'Etosha, en Namibie, est habitée depuis des siècles par les Hailom, un groupe de chasseurs-cueilleurs désormais sédentarisé. Quand Etosha a été déclaré réserve naturelle en 1907, les Hailom ont été autorisés à y demeurer... jusqu'à leur expulsion dans les années 1950, lorsque l'idée de *fortress conservation* s'est imposée. Depuis quelques années, le gouvernement de Namibie a mis à la disposition des Hailom plusieurs fermes de repeuplement, en réaction à leur dépossession par la colonisation. L'autrice explore ici l'onto-épistémologie des Hailom (c'est-à-dire leur présence et leur connaissance de la région d'Etosha), en se concentrant sur leurs relations à la terre et aux êtres humains et autres-qu'humains avant leur expulsion. Elle avance que l'éviction implique non seulement une marginalisation économique mais aussi une privation sociale, que la réinstallation ne corrige pas de façon adéquate. Une pensée relationnelle, illustrée par le cas des Hailom, appellerait d'autres solutions dans le contexte de mesures prises après les dépossession foncières du passé et ouvrirait de nouvelles perspectives aux initiatives de protection de la nature en Namibie.

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