



Out of Place: Postcolonial Legacy and Indigenous Heritage in South Africa

16

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples the world over are speaking out for their rights in former colonial societies. The term Indigenous, derived from Latin, means within, originating where it is found, or belonging to a particular place by birth or origin, a temporal claim to a place. In an archaeological sense, the San can claim to be the true Indigenous people in all of southern Africa, having lived in the region for thousands of years, before any migrations, and well before any colonial onslaught. Yet in the Northern Cape, South Africa, well-known for a significant concentration of rock engravings and archaeological sites, the current San inhabitants are the most recent arrivals, with no record of an Indigenous population since at least the mid-nineteenth century. In 1999 the South African government resettled some 400 formerly military !Xu and Khwe families of different origins, language backgrounds, and histories in Platfontein without any deliberations about their relation to local boundaries, history or heritage. Indigeneity here is far more complicated and vexing. In this chapter I probe the quest for an authentic Indigenous past of ancient images, to show that the complex history of postcolonial locales demands that archaeologists attend to the dislocations and violence of global forces of the past hundreds of years. The insistence on ancient roots of Indigenous people in a place can effectively deprive them of a role in global history, and of agency in political events. Contested spaces, centuries of conflict, truce, and temporary agreements that fester and erupt with unsurprising regularity are all a part of the context that frames ancient images. We should account for this context when studying them, in order to avoid one-dimensional, simplistic notions of Indigenous heritage.

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Six thousand people were brought here in 1999, now there are nine thousand of them, and they come to *my* land to hunt *my* antelopes (Interview with a landowner near Nooitgedacht, Northern Cape, South Africa. July 2017.) Despite the specificity of the claim by the white landowner, the resettlement happened in 2003 and it was much smaller than six thousand people.

The San, who are famed for their tracking abilities, fought fiercely against encroachment by white settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries but were defeated. Culturally rich but technologically primitive and declining in numbers, they are estimated to total 50,000. “If they weren’t in the army, there’d be nothing else for them to do,” a South African lieutenant, Ben Wolff, said. (The New York Times, Feb. 24, 1981).

16.1 Introduction: Degrees of Separation

Historical injustices towards indigenous peoples are in most parts of the world finally acknowledged without much dispute, although resistance to the discussion of the extent of the harm, complicity of settlers, and rights to restitution continue to be seriously contentious (see e.g. Wolf 1982; Robins 2001; Kuper 2003; Niezen 2003; Barnard 2007; Clifford 2013; Hitchcock 2017). Many native groups found their voice, or a way to be heard in public spaces, through indigenous rights movements (see e.g. Warren 1998). Besides human rights NGOs, anthropologists, and more recently archaeologists, have been participating in collaborations with local people through community engagement projects, in the service of native communities, assist with conflict resolution, bridge the power differential between governments and disenfranchised marginal groups, and provide expert witness testimonies and knowledge (Warren 1998; Starn

1999; Robins 2001; Niezen 2003; Waldman 2007; Hamilakis 2016). Nevertheless, as Adam Kuper pointed out, again (see Kuper 1988 for the original argument), an uncritical “return of the native” risks “fostering essentialist ideologies of culture and identity, [they] may have dangerous political consequences’ (Kuper 2003:395, see also Gordon 1992, 2000). Kuper’s questioning of the relationship between the rights of indigenous people that evokes and relies on an essentialized “primitive”, no matter the political gains, did not go unchallenged (e.g. Robins 2003, Barnard 2019,). Similarly in archaeology, a vigorous discussion of Indigenous archaeology engaged some of the same themes and mainly disagreements (McGhee 2008; Croes 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Silliman 2010; Wilcox 2010). McGhee (2008: 583) outlined his concern over “aboriginality”:

Identification with local lands, a profound understanding and commitment to stewardship of local environments, and the creation and transmission of deep historical and cultural knowledge, are generally understood as arising from countless generations of persistent occupation in a specific region. The projection of current ethnic definitions and identities into the past, as well as the assumption that local societies have been historically stable and enduring over great periods of time, may be psychologically rewarding to contemporary communities. It has also proved legally useful in negotiations regarding land use and ownership.

McGhee argues that “The Aboriginal” is a construct, invented by anthropologists, and cognate disciplines, over the past two centuries. He offers a detailed history of the encounters with difference, and the desire to see such patterns in a particular light, depending on the intellectual and philosophical foundations of the day (McGhee 2008: 586–88). My own research on encounters with Indigenous peoples in Siberia by the various cast of explorers from the seventeenth century on aligns with this history of exploration, colonialism, and anthropology (Tomášková 2013). Even more important is McGhee’s point that there is a vast variety and diversity of thinking, concepts, and histories *within* “traditional” or Indigenous peoples the world over (McGhee 2008:590). However, where I entirely part ways with that author, and concur with the responses to his piece (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; McGhee 2010; Silliman 2010; Wilcox 2010), is in his assertion that scientific archaeology is the harbinger of truth and facts, the objective guardian of heritage and the past. McGhee’s dismissal of Indigenous archaeology as if a processual version of archaeology offered the only path towards understanding the past is based on a simplistic binary opposition of western/non-western, or science and religion, that he seems to denounce as ahistorical. I argue that the social construction of the “essential San” is made out of the same cloth as the “essential scientific fact”, shown by many historians and anthropologists to be an

enduring phenomenon, while it lasts (see e.g. Latour 1993, 1999). In this chapter I therefore contribute to the debate by illustrating the complexity of the clash of indigenous identities and political realities with the case of two distinct groups of San¹ people who live in close proximity to an archaeological site, Wildebeest Kuil, in the Northern Cape of South Africa. On one hand, I offer this case as an interesting, unique, and potentially extreme case that defies the notion of ancestral inhabitants. On the other hand, I suggest that its exceptional nature is an invitation to archaeologists in other locales to engage with present day politics, to avoid generalizations, and to consider the particulars of every place, the communities that live there, and those that may have occupied the space for centuries before. I offer the case of Wildebeest Kuil to reflect on the complexity of the term “deep time”, the theme of this volume, and suggest that multivocality, complicated, political and slow as it may be, is the path forward.

An archaeological site of international renown, Wildbeest Kuil is a location of a large number of spectacular prehistoric engravings, claimed to have been made by ancestral San (see Fig. 16.1). Having worked on a research project at the site since 2014, I offer a perspective on both, the archaeological site, and a place where social facts, history, politics, and science all reside in permanent tension in the same terrain. Wildebeest Kuil is almost a textbook example of history and the present in conflict, one that archaeologists in other parts of the world might consider as instructive. Furthermore, this particular case nudges prehistorians towards a recognition that indeed science, including archaeology, is inevitably political, as it simultaneously shapes, and is shaped by, soci-



Fig. 16.1 Wildebeest Kuil, Northern Cape, South Africa, archaeological site and rock art center. (Photo by author)

¹For a discussion of the use of the term San, Bushmen, or Khoikhoi see Barnard 2019.

ety in which it fulfils a particular role. I suggest that a conversation about archaeology and its role in society is not new historically. Moreover, many authors convincingly argue that having such discussion is essential for a thriving discipline (see e.g. Bernbeck and McGuire 2011; Gero 2015; Meskell 1998, 2018). Understanding deep-time imagery and rock art in the global context must include discussions of the politics of the past and the present as part of the interpretive process.

However, I also wish to stress that I probe the quest for an authentic indigenous past, not to equivocate, or to contribute to a denial of land claims in places like South Africa. To the contrary, I show that the complex history of postcolonial locales demands that archaeologists account for the dislocations and violence of global forces against indigenous people the world over. By keeping indigenous people “in a place”, as if they never moved or migrated only in a circumscribed radius, essentializes them to their own detriment and places them outside history. In Kuper’s words, the “return of the native” deprives them of a role in global history and of active agency in political events, past and present. Their role in many of these historical events is complicated, messy, and not that different from the lives of many groups of people who faced existential dilemmas. A continued insistence on San ancient past as their most salient, or even only, distinguishable characteristic, frozen in time, relegates their role to serve as illustrations of anthropological or archaeological imaginaries of collective human past (Gordon 1992; Kuper 1988, 2003; Wessels 2010). I also wish to argue that delegation of indigenous groups to the corner of human past, no matter how ancient, perpetuates their marginalization in modern society, such as South Africa, and thereby avoids any current structural solutions of their poverty. This chapter is written in that spirit, having spent the past decade working in the Northern Cape, with respect to the resilience and creativity of the people, and seriously troubled by the continuing economic disparities that one cannot, and should not, look away from.

16.2 The Land, the People, the Past

The Northern Cape of South Africa, perceived for centuries, or even today, as a vast, mostly empty space, is not a neutral territory. On the one hand, the region appears to have been occupied by some of the earliest humans in prehistory, as evidenced by archaeological materials from 1.8 million years ago in Wonderwerk cave near Kuruman (Chazan et al. 2020). On the other hand, Kimberley, the current capital, came into being in haste quite recently, with the discovery of diamonds, and the rush of many to get rich in the 1870’s. Cecil Rhodes got his start here, and some of the first sums that made the foundation of the University of Cape Town possible, came

directly from the diamond wealth of Kimberley (Weiss 2007, 2012; Morris 2014; Tomášková 2015, 2020). While De Beers continues to have its headquarters in town, the central diamond mine, the Big Hole, now a major tourist attraction, closed any activity in 1914. The last mine with any diamond extraction closed in 2005. The province struggles economically, with high unemployment rates and very few employment opportunities, which leads to periodic flashes of public imagination of diamond prospects, and outbursts of conflict over land claims. The contentious arguments surrounding archaeological sites are very much part of this conversation, as something is imagined to be hidden in the ground, be that diamonds or prehistoric sites, waiting to be discovered by geologists, prospectors, and archaeologists.

The Northern Cape is the largest province in South Africa (372,889 km²), with the smallest, and thereby highly dispersed, population (1.2 million), and sufficient economic hardship (close to 40% unemployment rate) to compete with the Eastern Cape for the position of the country’s poorest province (SA Census 2011).² The late nineteenth century accumulation of wealth from the extraction of minerals is a part of a much longer history of colonial extraction of any and all resources from the region, southern Africa, and from the continent in general. As Terreblanche noted, the region has been a subject of exploitation by every wave of colonial settlers since the seventeenth century. Whether the desired resource took the form of minerals, plants, animals, or people, it all served as raw material available for the taking, turned into a profitable commodity elsewhere (Terreblanche 2002). An additional compounding factor is its geographic location. The Northern Cape represents a special “frontier zone” in settler colonialism. It was an area of repeatedly contested territory from the early eighteenth century on; a frontier that was movable and often moved, not necessarily a destination but a way towards somewhere else, or a refuge from somewhere else, from the perspective of those pushed to marginal lands (for a detailed history of the region see Penn 2006, Wessels 2010). This history is reflected in the fact that at present 53.8% of the population of the province considers Afrikaans as their primary language, followed by 33.1% Setswana speakers, while English is the “mother tongue” of only 3.4% inhabitants (SA Census 2011). Yet in the classification by race, however fraught that may be in South Africa, half (50.4%) of the population identifies as “Black Africans”, followed by “Coloured” (40.3%). In all other provinces IsiZulu and IsiXhosa are the most common languages of black people. Afrikaans has been traditionally

²The Covid pandemic affected the Northern Cape the least of all South African provinces precisely because of the low density of population and the low number of migrant workers. Tuberculosis and HIV, unfortunately, continue to be far greater causes of mortality than the corona virus. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report%2000-80-05/Report%2000-80-052020.pdf>

the language of former Dutch settlers, later adopted by those labeled, or self-identified, as “coloured”. This linguistic identification in the Northern Cape reflects a recent history, the result of migrations into the province for employment, mainly in the mining industry. Yet at the same time, the census, and particularly the category “coloured”, masks the complexity of intermixed and layered identities of many “traditional” people of the Northern Cape who can be the descendants of any combination of indigenous Khoi, and San peoples, escaped slaves of African descent, Boer frontiers people, Africans of Tswana heritage, and fairly recent European settlers. Unsurprisingly then, the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in primary schools continues to be deeply resented by the resettled San communities near Wildebeest Kuil. They perceive the official use of the language as an example of the ongoing cultural injury, exploitation, and willful lack of recognition of their history, despite, or possibly because, of their very recent arrival onto this cultural landscape (interviews of local leaders by the author, 2017). Both the !Xun and the Khwe in Platfontein refer to the white people and blacks in their vicinity as “they”, seeing them as other, which only further strains their relationships with the local communities, and contributes to their marginal status. The relationship with the black neighbors is particularly complicated by the recent history of the road the San took to come to the Northern Cape. There is no solidarity between them on any level, as I experienced during an interview when both the councilwoman from Galeshwe, N., and my assistant M., black South Africans, became so upset with the responses of the !Xun representative that a shouting match ensued. As Bahta noted,

The San at Platfontein do not have a clear-cut view of their own racial identity. In their responses to interview questions, all members of the community referred to other people as “white” or “black”, distancing themselves from both (Bahta 2014:45).

The physical and cultural geography of the region, economics, and recent history of the Northern Cape are all especially poignant here, as they were the main reason why the San communities were resettled in Platfontien, some five kilometers away from Wildebeest Kuil. Deemed by politicians, and the South African Defense Force, as an empty and available land, some 400 formerly military !Xun and Khwe families of distinct origins, language backgrounds, and histories were brought to Platfontein in 2003 (Robbins 2006). The decision was rooted in political and expedient justifications, central among them the imagined sparseness of the land. Very little consideration or deliberations were given to local boundaries, history, ancestral ties, or heritage. It was deemed a fortuitous coincidence that they were “reunited with their ancestral heritage”, the ancient engravings at Wildebeest Kuil, as close as an indigenous population ever lived to an archaeological site in the area (Weiss 2007, 2012).

The Indigenous, derived from Latin, means within, originating where it is found, or belonging to a particular place by birth or origin, a temporal claim to a place (Niezen 2003). Indigenous identity is then inextricably tied to a specific geographic place, land where the people are rooted or where they originated, where they belong. Yet in the case of Wildebeest Kuil and the San people in its vicinity, ancient prehistory and very recent twentieth century history collide in a most spectacular and instructive fashion. The claim of ancestral land and the present-day indigenous groups here do not align neatly, challenging the very definition of “indigenous”, native, or local. The South African San are, in an archaeological sense, the true indigenous people in all southern Africa, who lived throughout the continent for thousands of years, before any migrations, and well before any colonial onslaught (for a detailed account of the history of “bushmen”, and their entanglement with anthropologists see Barnard 2019, also Wessels 2010, Barbash 2016). Yet in the Northern Cape the San settled in Platfontein are the most recent arrivals, with no record of indigenous people living in the region since at least the mid-nineteenth century; these particular people from Angola and Namibia are strangers in a new land. An origin story in a place such as South Africa may be motivated by a desire for a territorial emplacement, a “cradle of humanity” for dispersed, dislocated, and marginalized groups. Nevertheless, contested spaces, centuries of conflict, truce, and temporary agreements that fester and erupt with unsurprising regularity are all a part of the context which frames the study of human past in Africa, including the study of ancient images (for a particularly insightful account of land and belonging in a different part of South Africa see Steinberg 2002). How to disentangle recent conflicts of modern liberatory struggles and ancient prehistory of the “ancestral San”? This is the issue I wish to address while also offer a word of caution shared by many anthropologists who work in this area, there is no simple solution.³

16.3 Prehistoric Images

Wildebeest Kuil is currently an archaeological site, a rock art tourist center, and a popular destination for day trips from the capital Kimberley (see Fig. 16.1). Located some 15 km away from the city, the site consists of two smaller, natural

³A suggestion that the San and/or Khoisan are the “most likely descendants” for Later Stone Age sites (at least), in all of southern Africa, and therefore could be declared the rightful owners of all archaeological sites, including those in the Karoo, may offer a parsimonious solution. Yet, history and politics strongly indicate otherwise. The acrimonious divide between the two San groups currently residing in the area poses one of the many challenges. Many well intentioned have tried, so far in vain.

mounds that are literally covered with boulders, the majority engraved with images, abstract as well as representational, animal and human figurines. The long-term research project involves mapping and recording the engravings, using photogrammetry and 3D computer-generated models to allow multiple angles and close ups to uncover traces of manufacture (for a detailed discussion of methods see Tomášková 2020). Although the two mounds are adjacent, there is a stark distinction and contrast between them. The first mound, site 1 in our study (see Fig. 16.2), contains 245 engravings, where 80% are representational images of animals, humans, and some abstract motifs, while 20% comprise just pecking and rubbing (see Fig. 16.3). The engravings were carried out in a wide range of distinct styles, different techniques, some carefully pecked out, some scraped out, and some chiseled into the boulder. These were quite clearly disparate image making events, most certainly not carried out by the same individuals, judging by the techniques alone. An additional interesting feature of site 1 were images that at first glance appeared “unfinished” (see Fig. 16.4). However, this interpretation is easily countered by a suggestion that the image is that of an animal amidst a leap, thus the image is “finished”, while the leap is not. Nevertheless, some 25% of engravings carry this feature of “thought in motion.”

Site 2 consists of 318 engravings on almost every boulder of the mound (see Fig. 16.5). It contrasts with site 1, as the representational aspect is completely different, with 90% pecking and rubbing, and only 10% are figurative images. Site 2 contains incomplete engravings and multiple images on one rock using different techniques, but there is no overlapping or overwriting of engravings, a common feature at other sites. This particular location is a large area filled with boulders, adjacent, only some 100 meters away, from site 1, yet the two hills are spaces of very different image making events and/or traditions. For now, I settled on two possible interpretations that are still only working hypotheses, not



Fig. 16.3 Wildebeest Kuil, Northern Cape, South Africa, Site 1, engraving of a rhino. (Photo by the author)



Fig. 16.4 Wildebeest Kuil, Northern Cape, South Africa, Site 1, an “unfinished” engraving of an antelope. (Photo by the author)



Fig. 16.2 Wildebeest Kuil, Northern Cape, South Africa, Site 1. (Photo by the author)



Fig. 16.5 Wildebeest Kuil, Northern Cape, South Africa, Site 2. (Photo by the author)

discussed in detail as they are not the purpose of this chapter:

1. site 2 was a place of learning, where practice of technique was the central goal, not image making, while site 1 was the location of complete mastery of image making.
2. site 2 was a space that was never intended for images, rather the sound of stones hitting or scraping the boulders was the main purpose, a soundscape of sorts.

At this stage of the project, these two hypotheses will have to be tested and supported by more evidence, it is very much work in progress. However, the engagement with stones on each mound was distinct and visually different. While temporal scales certainly need to be considered, time difference alone cannot explain the dramatic contrast. The separation of activities in the two areas is quite clear. The next step in this project is assessment of the level of skill and duration of each activity. In this chapter I only sketch an outline of the material presence of the prehistoric engravings at Wildebeest Kuil, so as to provide a sense of the heritage that is at stake here. My attention therefore turns to the San people who live in the nearby community of Platfontein, the supposed ancestral people of the region, with deep connections to these engraved images.

16.4 The Ancient Past and Postcolonial Liberation Struggles

If archaeologists take the ethical turn seriously and afford indigenous people a say in discussions of heritage, we must pay attention to the contexts of global, regional, and local interactions, their disruptions, and account for them in our work. The Northern Cape, particularly the San people who currently live near multiple archaeological sites in the Kimberley area are an excellent illustration of the dilemma that heritage as an identity practice poses to both indigenous people and archaeologists (besides Wildebeest Kuil, also Nootgedacht, Driekopsland and many individual dispersed engravings on farms in the vicinity). Robert Hitchcock based on decades of lived experience in the region, and extensive work with multiple Kalahari San communities in Botswana and Namibia, convincingly argues that historical discontinuities are as common among “traditional peoples”, and crucial to examine, as pauses in the archaeological record,

The Ju/'hoansi and !Xóõ case studies demonstrate the complexities in the ways that societies behave and adapt to variability in their natural and social environments, and they also show some of the kinds of pressures that people are and were operating under over time which affected the kinds of strategies they pursued. (Hitchcock 2012: 12)

While working at Wildebeest Kuil over the years, my assistant and I got to know the people in nearby townships and

settlements, developed local relationships, engaged in extended conversations, and acquired a deeper understanding of the complicated history of the place where we worked. Galeshewe is the closest township, with an interesting architectural style of houses, some of them dating back to the early twentieth century and mining history, others are rows of brick “RDP houses”,⁴ as well as very recent, and increasingly most numerous, metal shacks made by individuals and families desperate for any housing.⁵ Built originally in the nineteenth century for diamond miners, Galeshewe is now a township nestled right against the architecturally striking Northern Cape parliament building, symbol of the “new democratic South Africa”. It was also the very first Black controlled municipality in South Africa (1983). Early into our fieldwork we were invited to Galeshewe, and that was where we heard the first time about Platfontein and the San people, the recent newcomers to the area. The context in which they were mentioned was inevitably complaints about housing, a commodity in high demand, serious shortage, and urgently needed by multi-generational families. The Platfontein settlement was built at an impressive speed by the South African government in 2002 and the San community took occupancy the following year. “You must speak with them”, the councilwoman N., who became a friend, told me insistently and offered to be an interpreter. We scheduled a visit, only to find out that we needed entirely separate visits for the two different groups, the !Xun and the Khwe, as while they live in one village, they are not only not related, but even more, they are neither neighbors, nor one community. My education just begun.

In order to describe the history of the San people and how they ended up in Platfontein, I need to offer the reader at least an outline of the military conflicts and proxy wars in the greater southern Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, starting first further north in Angola. James (2018) summarizes the history of Angola in seemingly stark but unfortunately accurate terms,

Dominated and exploited by Portugal for almost five centuries, Angola achieved independence in 1975 after a bitter struggle. This was followed by an even nastier civil war, which lasted for 26 years. The situation was further complicated by the Cold War, and conflict continued even after that was over, ending only in 2002. (James 2018: 1)

When Portugal refused calls for independence, a bloody suppression of the Angolan liberation struggle begun in the early 1960's. The Portuguese military hired the !Xun, a San ethnic group, as trackers, so called “Flechas” (arrows), to assist

⁴Reconstruction and Development Programme, modest, government paid family houses that are much coveted and highly political due to their shortage. In many parts of South Africa, RDP houses have become a reward system of the political party in power.

⁵<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:829647/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

them with the counterinsurgency. The!Xun, a linguistically distinct group of Khoisan speakers, were originally from the Monengue area in southern Angola (Barnard 2019; Robbins 2007). They were willing to work for the Portuguese army for complex historical and present-day reasons that are not all too surprising in any post-colonial setting. The Khoisan people were the original groups that inhabited the region for thousands of years but with the southward movement of the Bantu speakers, ethnic conflicts arose, and the Bushmen were on the losing end much of the time (for a recent in-depth history of the Bushman see Barnard 2007, 2019). The settled farmers captured many San, sold them as slaves or exploited their labor. By the twentieth century, the hunting and gathering groups, pushed out of traditional hunting grounds to the margins, experienced severe economic impoverishment, and their persistent marginalization afforded very few sustainable employment opportunities. As Barnard pointed out,

It should go without saying that Bushmen have lived in the environments they have for a very long time. Contrary to what is often said, they are not constantly migrating. They are transhumant, but they do not generally leave their territories to move to other ones. As Hugh Brody (2001: 7, 86–90) once put it, it is farmers who throughout prehistory and history have been the migrants. They move about every five generations in search of new pastures and planting grounds, whereas hunter-gatherers tend to retain an attachment to land. This is for its local resources, but it is also for its symbolic value. (Barnard 2019: 44)

In their stories the!Xun, much later on, far away from their Angolan homeland, in South Africa, explained their involvement in the Angola conflict as the hand they were dealt, they joined the Portuguese army for the meager pay given, coerced by both the military and by poverty (see Robbins 2006, interviews in Platfontein by the author 2017, James 2018, for a different view see Douglas 1997). Prolonged fighting paused only when Portugal went through a political change after the coup in 1974 and finally withdrew from Angola. In fear of retaliation and reprisal, the!Xun retreated south to, what was then, Southwest Africa, present-day Namibia. Their tracking skills, recommended by the Portuguese military, were already on the radar of the South African Defense Force, namely Commandant Delville Linford who re-trained them for the purposes of a range of conflicts the military was involved in (Robbins 2007; Van Wyk 2014; Linford 2015). The SADF was active in the region in, what was then called “the border war”, a wider regional conflict and a proxy of the Cold War, fueled by both the former Soviet Union and the US (Robbins 2007, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 1998).

The Khwe, the second Platfontein community, came from the Caprivi region, a thin sliver of land in the northeastern corner of Namibia, geography that only colonial history could have created. However, such statement seriously simplifies the far more complicated history (for an account of

the San Namibia history and present see Hitchcock 2012, for an exceptional Caprivi account see Taylor 2012). West Caprivi strip was declared an exclusive military zone in 1970 and served the South African military as a launching pad for excursions into Angola. Commandant Linford, a South African professional soldier at the time, set up a training camp in the zone and recruited San residents of the area to join his battalion, adding the!Xun to the mix when they were relocated out of Angola. Linguistically, culturally, and historically, the two groups, the Khwe and the!Xun, had nothing in common, sharing only their former economic subsistence, present day hardship, and social marginalization in both Angola and Namibia. The “bush-war” originally took place in southern Angola and northern Namibia, but it eventually metastasized into a much broader area, with regular insurgency against the South African Defense Force in adjacent Zambia, Botswana, Mozambique, even Lesotho and Swaziland (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 1998). The tracker unit was essential to all the battles, as a telegram from one of the commanders to other units spells out quite clearly,

Commander do not underestimate tactical effectiveness of Bushmen unit in Boer Orbit – 31 Battalion. Lethal to anybody moving beyond trenced positions. They have the best field tactical skills on the planet in this theater. Most of them are of Angolan origin: have excellent personal knowledge of 5 & 6 military regions; Cmdrs 66, 59 and 25 Brigades ignore their deployment at own cost by following the superstitions of Fapla colleagues – they will pay the price of many volunteers lost. End Trans (Wildebeest Kuil exhibit, SADF archives)

However, as Hitchcock noted, many such statements were based on the confluence of entirely stereotypical notions of who the Bushmen were prior to joining the SADF, their imagined primitive lifestyles, as well as the San self-promotion to gain employment (Hitchcock 2012). The persistent skirmishes and back-and-forth armed conflict without any clear goal continued for long twenty-three years (!). It came to an end only as a result of a mix of political pressures throughout southern Africa and in Eastern Europe, and unsurprising historical coincidence, considering the heavy involvement of former colonial powers and the Soviet Union. Before the actual fall of the Berlin Wall and the final collapse of the communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe, the leadership of the Soviet Union begun to gradually decrease their financial support of liberation struggles in developing countries, including those in Africa. Due to serious economic issues at home, the Soviet government cut back on arms shipments and financial support of Cuba, which acted on their behalf in Angola (George 2005; Liebenberg et al. 2015; Schubert 2017). By 1989 political instability in multiple regions of the world simultaneously, and a serious push for liberation and independence in South-West Africa forced the SADF to pull back even further south and retreat into South

Africa proper itself. Namibia, with the assistance of the UN, conducted almost immediately impressive democratic elections and without much violence declared a birth of a new independent country in 1990,

No elections in Africa have been so thoroughly prepared, so meticulously covered and carefully monitored as these. Despite the large territory, Namibia was sparsely populated and apart from the liberation struggles fought against colonial/occupying forces, Namibians themselves, though culturally different, for the most part were not a deeply divided society, which probably assisted in the process once the occupier and common enemy had left. The elections took place in November 1989, the constitution was drafted within two months and Namibians became independent with festivities held in Windhoek on the 31st of March, attended by Western and non-aligned glitterati alike. A war that could have been prevented as early as 1946 came to an end after much blood had been spilt. (Liebenberg et al. 2015: 39–40).

This is an overly rosy picture of an undivided country, as Hitchcock documented in discussions of land ownership and poverty (Hitchcock 2012). Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the transition was far more peaceful and far less plagued by subsequent outbursts of violence than most countries in Africa that emerged from similar processes at this time. The new democratic Namibian government, with the assistance of the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG), offered the San fighters of the 31st Battalion the option to remain in the newly founded country. Only about a half of the military regiment trusted the offer, and 500 veterans and their dependents (some 3500 additional people) followed the South African Defense Force to an army camp in Schmidtsdrift, Northern Cape in March 1990 (Douglas 1997; Hitchcock 2012; Beyene 2014; Van Wyk 2014). The purpose of this move was unclear to the former trackers, except that their presence *as soldiers* in Namibia was not only not needed, but even more not welcomed. Moreover, most newly formed countries in the region, with success in the anti-colonial liberation struggle took the opportunity to build new societies by re-defining identities along ethnic lines that differed from colonial era categories and crosscut in strange ways former racial classifications (Battistoni and Taylor 2009; Taylor 2012). The San did not fit any such groupings in Namibia (or anywhere else), and rightfully weary of government authorities, despite their democratic nature, reluctantly opted to move, again. The South African military, for their part, tried to convince the trackers to remain in Namibia, even when any economic support, livelihoods, or integration into society were far from clear. The next stage of the precarious existence of the !Xun and the Khwe begun in yet another military camp, on the payroll of the South African Defense Force, with newly acquired South African citizenship, just as the anti-apartheid struggle was finally reaching a resolution, and a democratic transition to a new society in South Africa was becoming a reality (Douglas 1997). The

31st Battalion was disbanded by president W. De Klerk in March 1993 at a public ceremony under the most ironic justification—to cut down on violence in the country, on the eve of the 1994 elections. Shortly after moving them to the territory in 1990, the South African military tried various ways to stop paying the San as soldiers, even though they continued to live in a tent city on a military base in Schmidtsdrift. The first attempt was a !Xun and Khwe Trust, created in 1993, an effort to shift at least some responsibility to the outgoing apartheid government of the National Party of W. De Klerk. This received absolutely no commitment as the Government of National Unity, led by the ANC (African National Congress) was the obvious winner of the first free elections in 1994. Once the ANC came to power, their reluctance to take on any responsibility for the former soldiers of the apartheid era South African Defense Force, who actively assisted in military actions against liberation efforts in both Angola and Namibia, became apparent (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 1998). To complicate matters further, the new government in an effort to address land ownership and access, as one of the most vexing roots of inequality in all post-colonial countries, opened doors to claims from previously displaced communities. The first group to make a claim for return of their land in Schmidtsdrift were the original owners, a Thlaping (Tswana-speaking) group that had been forcibly evicted in the late 1960s to make way for the SADF military base (Douglas 1997: 47). While the return of the land was approved, what to do with the !Xun and the Khwe families was not addressed until 1995 when the Department of Land Reform established a commission to study the issue and come up with a solution for the “Schmidtsdrift bushmen”, their need to move again undisputed (Robbins 2006, 2007). The decades of being part of a conflict, participating in a conflict, moved and moving but unrelated to even traces of their ancestral lifestyle, economic subsistence or heritage relentlessly continued,

By the time they got to Schmidtsdrift, their obedience to the army was complete. Then the army was taken from them. People were negative, defeatist, or at most sad, bitterly unhappy, but often too polite to express any real anger about their situation. In any event, military training represses individuality. This passive tendency washed over into all the families. They knew they were unhappy, but they were essentially fatalistic. They didn't even realise they had human rights. If there were 'angry young men', they didn't show their anger. (Robbins 2007: 39)

16.5 The Heritage Conundrum: Ancestral Links and Stewardship

The purchase of several farms in Platfontein and the construction of permanent brick houses was in the end paid by the ANC government, and it is now owned by the San community, the !Xun and the Khwe who met for the first time

some 30 years earlier in a military zone on the Caprivi strip in northeastern Namibia. Their proximity to the archaeological site at Wildebeest Kuil may be at least a metaphorical return to some ancestral past, thousands of years old, as distant as the unfinished engravings of an eland in mid-leap. But that is obviously an unsatisfying response for an archaeologist trained in methods, analysis of material remains with scientific methods using highly sophisticated, and expensive equipment. As David Morris, in discussion of the site Biesje Poort remarked,

...connecting the dots (as happened at Biesje Poort) from rock art to stone artefacts and pottery, to colonial era objects, to histories of conquest and on to contemporary indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and community rock art and landscape interpretation, comes rather more easily and coherently than it would for an archaeologist cautious about evidence and causality (Morris 2014: 649)

The simple answer in this case would be that neither the !Xun, nor the Khwe from Platfontein have any direct ancestral connection to the engravings at Wildebeest Kuil. They moved to the area only two decades ago, the result of violent conflicts in which they were enmeshed, but also participated. Morris further notes, that judging by all historical evidence, most likely the remaining San of the Karoo of the Northern Cape who survived disease and conquest were absorbed into surrounding societies as underclass, part of the “coloured” population (Morris 2014: 656).

Following Kuper’s argument with which I started this essay, questioning or a denial of the accuracy of a claim of the San groups as unchanging, traditional hunter gatherers has political implications. Central among them is a denial of a direct line from the past to the present, and consequently any title to heritage in the form of archaeological sites, such as Wildebeest Kuil. This principled stand positions western science, in the form of archaeology, on one side and communities, indigenous or otherwise, as their opponents. McGhee argues that “the advantages of accommodating a scientific discipline to the desires of a specific nonscientific community are not at all clear.” (2008: 590). In his view, the choice is unequivocal, and oppositional; scientific truth and nonscientific beliefs, the well-known contrast of science and religion/myth, the soul food of anthropology for well over a century. While I suggest that the opposition of a “scientific discipline” and a “nonscientific community” is a red herring, and an unproductive one at that, I will also argue that the contrast is a political move aimed to disempower certain groups. Archaeology as a scientific practice is, and has always been, embedded in power structures of education, resources, methods, and equipment (Tomášková 2015). This insight from Wildebeest Kuil, and its San neighbors, is applicable in global conversations of rock art. If multivocality is to gain any ground in archaeological interpretations, a model of science versus indigenous knowledge is unsustainable.

Western forms of knowing the world cannot claim to be open to alternatives when the only goal is to translate indigenous knowledge into another, different version of a single narrative. Discontinuity, ambiguity and at times incommensurable story lines may travel on parallel tracks, not necessarily embroiled in a struggle over their truth value (Gero 2015). Yet in the case of Wildebeest Kuil, and many other archaeological sites throughout South Africa and elsewhere, the material outcome of these claims is land ownership and heritage, ancestry being the recognized chain links. As Robins convincingly argues, strategic essentialism, deployed by the San in several instances, resulted in successful acquisition of land rights, as that was the only strategy that the governmental Department of Land Reform or NGOs working for indigenous communities recognized, understood, and connected with on an emotional level (Robins 2001, 2003). I am aware of the profound, ongoing stark inequality in the Northern Cape, and South Africa in general. Nevertheless, I would still like to argue against land ownership as the only legitimate criterium by which to judge archaeological sites. As Morris suggested in the case of Biesje Poort, stewardship and landscape rather than site may open more opportunities to a conversation that would involve multiple partners, not just archaeologists and their immediate neighbors, in this case the !Xun and the Khwe (Morris 2014). The young generation in Platfontein is bringing back their native languages through hip-hop as their own cultural form, as I witnessed while interviewing the elders. The new and ancient merge in a hybrid form and give all an opportunity to turn the page on understanding of heritage. Rather than genetic links, we should invite multiple voices to consider landscape, art forms, images and sounds at Wildebeest Kuil. People from Galeshewe and from Platfontein should be invited to participate in the work of exploring and questioning the past at Wildebeest Kuil. If we are to take our archaeological research of the traces of the past seriously, and not as just another in a long history of extractive industries, we must begin by trying to engage surrounding communities.

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