

## The Khwe Collection in the Academic Legacy of Oswin Kohler : Formation and Potential Future

著者 (英)	Gertrud Boden
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## **The Khwe Collection in the Academic Legacy of Oswin Köhler: Formation and Potential Future**

Gertrud Boden

*Goethe University Frankfurt*

### **ABSTRACT**

Oswin R. A. Köhler (1911–1996) was one of the most distinguished representatives of the second generation of German professionals of *Afrikanistik*. His Khwe collection has been built up during more than 30 years of intensive research on Khwe language and culture, and it constitutes a comprehensive documentation, composed of vernacular texts, music, images, objects, and dossiers. Mainly based on the research expeditions and interviews with Khwe, this chapter describes and contextualizes the formation of the collection in relation to Köhler's research interests and program, the contemporary political context, the role of individual Khwe, and the practical or logistic conditions of Köhler's fieldwork. It discusses the implications of the collection's formation process for defining Khwe cultural heritage and argues that a responsible way of dealing with and publishing the collection requires both an academic examination of the context and a dialogue with the Khwe themselves.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Oswin Köhler's Khwe collection, on which I started to work in March 2015, is a comprehensive documentation of Khwe cultural practices in written and spoken vernacular texts, images, objects, and dossiers. In this chapter, I will first describe the formation of this collection and will do so in the spirit of Clifford Geertz's plea that '[i]f you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do' (1973: 5). Subsequently, I will ask a number of questions arising from this process for future use. These questions might also be relevant for other such collections in a time when indigenous minorities are increasingly using academic work on past expressions of their cultures to define their cultural heritages. I argue that a responsible way of dealing with and publishing this material requires both an academic examination of the context and a dialogue with the Khwe.

This chapter is mainly based on the dossiers from Köhler's research expeditions (OKW 321–341), which contain reports on his academic findings, reports on the external conditions of his trips, and occasional letters in relation to their organization. The article is further informed by a small number of interviews with Khwe, conducted in January 2012. Respondents included five people in Mutc'iku, where Köhler worked during the early years of his research, and the Khwe man Gombo, the sole of Köhler's authorities on Khwe culture who is still alive. The five Khwe in Mutc'iku were not directly involved in the language work, but witnessed Köhler's field stays close to their homestead. Gombo was born in Angola and joined the inner circle of Köhler's informants from 1974 onwards, when Köhler was working in Dikundu. Gombo was the last source for determining the final contents of Köhler's compiled Khwe oral traditions after the previously eldest informant, Kafuro, died in 1980 (Köhler 1989: 46). Fieldwork practices in Mutc'iku and Dikundu were significantly different, and the shift in place also meant an increasing restriction in the number of informants and in work practices. As many other written and oral sources exist which still need to be accessed and examined, this chapter should be understood as a work-in-progress report.

### **OSWIN KÖHLER'S KHWE COLLECTION – THE STATE OF AFFAIRS**

Professor Dr. Oswin Köhler (1911–1996) devoted large parts of his life to the documentation of Khwe language and culture. Between 1959 and 1992, he went on 22 expeditions to the Khwe in Namibia where he spent a total of almost six years. In accomplishing what he once called his 'life-task' (OKW 326-a), he was actively supported by his wife, Ruth, who accompanied him during all but one of his fieldtrips to the Okavango.

Oswin Köhler died in 1996 at the age of 85 without having finished his magnum opus on the Khwe, an encyclopaedia covering all aspects of Khwe culture in vernacular texts, titled 'The World of the Khwe Bushmen, a self-portrayal in their own language, with translations, annotations and comments by Oswin Köhler'. The actual title in German is 'Die Welt der Kxoé-Buschleute. Eine Selbstdarstellung in ihrer eigenen Sprache mit Übersetzung, Anmerkungen und Kommentaren von Oswin Köhler'. Note that Köhler spelled the ethnonym 'Kxoé', while in the meantime, the Khwe themselves have decided on 'Khwe' as the proper spelling of their name. Of the encyclopaedia, three out of five volumes have been published so far, covering four out of twelve subject areas: Khwe groups and their ethnic environment (Köhler 1989), subsistence (1991), and material culture and the homestead (1997). Volumes 4 and 5 would have covered the following subjects: family and society, customary law and social norms, dreams, omens, spells and magic, and religious beliefs (vol. 4), plus healing, myths and tales, music and play, and knowledge on nature (vol. 5). It is tragic that Köhler himself considered the subject areas of volumes 4 and 5 to be much more

interesting than those which he was actually able to finalize during his lifetime (OKW 331-a).

The translations, annotations, and comments within the encyclopaedia are in German. Köhler, although known among his colleagues and among the Khwe to be an exceptionally gifted genius of languages, felt that he had the required level of language command for an adequate translation only in his mother tongue, German. The Khwe described his command of Khwe to have been of the same or even higher level as theirs. The publication of the oeuvre in Khwe and German (instead of English), together with the bulkiness and high prices of the volumes, is certainly among the reasons that it has not received the same degree of attention as, for example, the |Xam material in the digital Bleek and Lloyd collection, which in recent years has been extensively analyzed by linguists, ethnologists, historians, research historians, and archaeologists (cf. McGranaghan 2014: 672). The work of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd on the |Xam was an inspiration for Köhler (1989: Xif., 15), and he considered equally detailed research like Bleek and Lloyd's on the |Xam and his own on the Khwe as a necessary precondition for comparing and understanding the historical and genetic relationships between Khoisan languages and cultures, another of his main research interests (see, e.g., Köhler 1975).

In 2000, Ruth Köhler donated the academic legacy of her husband to the Institute of African Studies at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, then headed by Professor Dr. Rainer Voßen, one of Oswin Köhler's students and most acknowledged experts on Khoisan languages in Germany. Besides language material on various other San and non-San groups in Africa, Köhler's academic legacy in the Oswin Köhler archive contains the following:

- 112 folders with Khwe texts in different stages of processing: handwritten, handwritten with corrections, typed, typed with corrections, corrected typed versions with new corrections, with or without translation, 78 of them mostly disordered raw material for the outstanding two volumes of the encyclopaedia;
- about 50,000 photographic objects, likewise disordered and with very little metadata such as an occasional specification of year and place. Only a small but as yet unknown fraction of the photos show Khwe people or Khwe culture or scenes from Köhler's research camps. Approximately 200 photos have been published in the first three volumes of the encyclopaedia (Köhler 1989; 1991; 1997), and about 9,000 photos have been digitized so far;
- about one hour of 16mm film footage, partly in black and white and partly in colour, showing Khwe cultural practices (music, rituals, or crafting of material culture). About half of the films have no sound; the other half have been cut and furnished with German comments spoken by Köhler. The films were digitized in 2015 and were shown to and discussed with

- members of the Khwe community in February/March 2016;
- hundreds of analogue magnetophone tape recordings with an estimated total length of 61,000 metres of different languages, without meaningful written metadata. How many of those contain Khwe language is unknown, and no funding for the digitization has yet been secured;
  - about 300 drawings by Khwe individuals, mainly of animals and plants, but also illustrations for tales and stories, accessible online at <http://oka.uni-frankfurt.de/>. A small number of drawings have also served to illustrate a recent edition of texts on Khwe family names (Boden ed. 2014);
  - about 500 ethnographic objects, including a unique collection of animal sculptures made from wax, plus weapons, containers, clothing, jewellery, household goods, etc. Photos of these objects are also accessible online, although so far, without appropriate metadata;
  - 28 folders with dossiers that can offer clues on how the material was collected and processed by Köhler and his Khwe field assistants, such as research applications, reports, correspondence, and the like.

Since 2000, when the Oswin Köhler Archive was established as an independent documentation and research platform at the Institute of African Studies at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, several research applications have been submitted to different organizations for funding academic examination and digitization. Except for the initial, two-year funding of a research fellow, who was mainly occupied with the relocation and first inspection of the material – remember that the academic legacy of Oswin Köhler contains materials not only from the Khwe, but also from many other languages and cultures, as well as Köhler's private library and equipment – none of the applications have been approved. However, the Institute of African Studies has spent a part of its own funds for the sustainable storage of the paperwork and for starting the digitization of the photos. Finally, in December 2014, the German Research Society ('DFG') approved a three-year project for one full-time and one half-time research fellow, whose main task is the presentation of a manuscript for the fourth volume of the Khwe encyclopaedia. Both researchers, myself and Anne-Maria Fehn, have been working on Khwe culture or language for several years, although not a quarter as long or as intensively as Köhler who, as should be kept in mind, also worked in a very different historical context. Given the preliminary stage of processing of most of the texts, it is possible neither to edit the texts in the same way as Köhler would have done nor to determine the final wording of translations and annotations that he would have chosen. It would also not necessarily be desirable to stick to Köhler's style of editing, at least from the perspective of the Khwe and academic communities. In order to ensure the usefulness of the oeuvre to these audiences, it has been decided to provide the texts with interlinear English translations and with annotations revealing the changes made to the texts from one version to the next. Digital copies of all text versions will be made available to

enable others to retrace these changes themselves. The publication of volume 4.1 of Köhler's Khwe encyclopaedia, with about 300 texts, is planned for 2018.

This project was approved by the DFG only after a second attempt. The first attempt was rejected because, among other things, the time budgeted for consultation with the Khwe on the content of texts and images was considered to be too long. The requirement is clear: Köhler's material should finally be published. Worries that new insights generated during fieldwork might delay the publication further are understandable, as Köhler repeatedly justified his delay in publication with the need to do more fieldwork and the insights that might be gained from it. Some reasons for this delay were certainly due to Köhler's personality, above all the meticulousness of his work and his affection for the Khwe language, for his Khwe field assistants, and for fieldwork itself. However, most prominent in his research reports are his increasingly articulate representations of Khwe culture as being on the verge of extinction – a process Köhler ascribed to the detrimental influence of their militarization. He also presaged that research among the Khwe was becoming ever more precarious and potentially impossible due to impending Namibian independence, and he increasingly emphasised the necessity of documenting the traditional Khwe culture, as long as this was still possible.

## HOW DID THE COLLECTION COME INTO BEING?

### Oswin Köhler

Oswin Köhler was one of the most important German Africanists of the second generation. He headed the Institute of African Studies at the University of Cologne from 1957 until his retirement in 1977. During the 1940s, he had studied African languages under Diedrich Westermann and ethnology under Richard Thurnwald at the Humboldt University in Berlin and was subsequently employed there as an assistant professor. In 1953, he decided to flee with his family from the German Democratic Republic because the government did not want him to link up with foreign colleagues or do fieldwork overseas (Brahm 2010). Soon after arriving in Hamburg in West Germany, he was offered the job of ethnologist in the Ethnological Section of the South African Government under chief ethnologist Van Warmelo, who had studied in Hamburg. From 1954 to 1957, Köhler worked as a government ethnologist in Windhoek and was responsible for collecting data through regional surveys (Köhler 1957; 1958; 1959a-e). At this time, he took an interest in the languages and traditional cultures of the San. During his surveys, he met San individuals who were working as labourers on commercial and communal farms. After his return to Germany, he became head of department for the Institute of African Studies at the University of Cologne and negotiated a research sabbatical every third year for his 'Bushmen' research program.<sup>1)</sup> The period after his retirement in 1977 marked an intensification of, rather than an end to, his work on Khwe language and culture. Köhler himself said about this period that it

was his most productive time. He also considered himself to be the only capable person to permeate Khwe language and culture (OKW 333-a) and control the way his informants were speaking in their own language (OKW 333-b). That he, indeed, remained the sole academic working on Khwe language and culture for decades is, however, also due to the political circumstances of Köhler's research.

### Political Context

The formation of Köhler's Khwe collection cannot be understood without also understanding the political circumstances which, in the 1960s through the 1980s, were mainly shaped by the Namibian struggle for independence and reactions to it.

At the time of Köhler's first exploratory trip in 1959, aimed at finding a suitable 'Bushman' community still living according to their tradition, Namibia was under South African rule. West Caprivi, as the main settlement area of the Khwe in Namibia, had been made a 'native and stock free zone' by the South West Africa Administration in 1937. The Khwe were labelled 'Bushmen', a different category from 'natives', and were considered non-cattle-owners; therefore, they were allowed to stay on their ancestral land. A Khwe *hoofman*, the late Khwe Chief Martin Mutende Ndumba, had been installed by the government as paramount political representative of the Khwe. Hunting and gathering was the main source of subsistence. In addition, an increasing number of Khwe men were working as contract migrant labourers, staying away from their families for 12 to 16 months at a time.<sup>2)</sup> The Khwe language, in academic circles then known as 'Hukwe', was considered to be probably extinct (OKW 321-a).

In 1992, when Köhler made his last trip to the Okavango, Namibia had finally reached independence from South African rule. The neighbouring countries had regained independence earlier: Zambia in 1964, Botswana in 1966, and Angola in 1975. The long-lasting civil war in Angola had started with the opponents of the government, UNITA, being supported by the South African Defence Force ('SADF').

In the meantime, important changes had occurred for the Khwe. In the mid-1960s, the Caprivi Strip had enormous strategic importance. SWAPO's armed struggle began in 1966, and during the first years of the liberation war, the Caprivi Strip served as the main route of infiltration for PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) fighters. During the late 1960s, police and army forces in the Caprivi Strip were considerably reinforced. In 1974, the SADF officially took over policing duties in the area, already having been secretly engaged in combating insurgents before this time. In the 1970s and 1980s, West Caprivi was home to clandestine SADF training camps and was effectively a no-access zone for civilians. Many Khwe, both from Angola and from Namibia, served as soldiers in the SADF. When the SADF withdrew, about 1,600 Khwe, mainly originally from Angola, resettled in South Africa.<sup>3)</sup>

One of the most intriguing questions regarding Köhler's repeated field stays



among the Khwe during these years is how he, as a researcher from a European country, was able to do research in the immediate neighbourhood of a border warzone and of a military no-access zone at a time when South Africa faced increasing international criticism for its unjust annexation of the Namibian territory, its Apartheid policy, and its involvement in the Angolan civil war. It seems natural that Köhler had what Gordon (1992: 158) has called ‘impeccable conservative credentials’, obtained between 1954 and 1957 as a government ethnologist. In his research applications and reports, Köhler himself stresses his good relationships with the highest government officials, on whose goodwill and concessions he could always count (OKW 325-a). He also stresses his apolitical conduct as a precondition for being allowed to do this kind of research (OKW 325-a), as well as his subtle distribution of gifts and work assignments for San and Mbukushu locals, both to counterbalance micro-political conflicts arising from jealousy, and for reasons of personal safety in the middle of the bush in a border warzone (OKW 322-a; OKW 328-a). He did not want his whereabouts to be known (OKW 331-b), and he seems to suggest that he was hiding himself from all war parties involved, whether the SADF, PLAN, or combatants in the Angolan civil war. While it is highly unlikely that his whereabouts remained unknown to any of these, his efforts to remain inconspicuous and to keep up good relations, not only with government officials, but also with all local groups, were certainly wise.

In the ensuing years, Köhler’s lament about the decline of Khwe culture was growing, as were his concerns regarding the political atmosphere. As early as 1965, he justified choosing a driver from Kavango instead of Windhoek, by arguing that a person from Windhoek might incite the Mbukushu and even the ‘Bushmen’ for political reasons (OKW 323-b). During his trips in the late 1970s and 1980s, he took a number of precautions to insure both his personal safety and the security of his work: he arranged an escape exit from his research camp, made additional copies of his materials and sent them to Germany, refrained from working in his research camp in the bush for certain periods of time, and occasionally escaped together with his informants to the Roman Catholic mission in Andara, and in 1978, even to Swakopmund. The political conditions, thus, not only had an impact on Khwe cultural practices, but also on Köhler’s fieldwork practices.

### **Research Program**

During his exploratory trip in 1959, Köhler had first checked out a !Xun settlement further west, but found that the place presented too many logistical obstacles for a long-term stay. When he was introduced to the Khwe man Mbongi at the Catholic mission in Andara, Köhler was immediately fascinated by the idea of studying an allegedly extinct San language, not least because he saw that Khwe was more closely related to Khoekhoegowab or Nama-Damara than to the language of the !Xun. To him, the mission in Andara provided a good base for the



challenges that a long-term field stay presented at the time. The mission continued to be his base for storage, postage, and supply as well as a place of refuge from political upheaval or other troubles during all of his subsequent field stays. Before heading out to survey Khoisan languages spoken in Botswana, Köhler recorded 45 texts with Khwe in Bagani and Mutc'iku and decided to make the Khwe people the focus of his subsequent research trips.

In both 1962 and 1965, he spent a few months at the homestead of Martin Ndumba in Mutc'iku. There he worked with a couple of old men and introduced the position of a 'speaker', who had to summarize the discussions on a certain topic and dictate them to Köhler, because the informants could often be inarticulate or digressing. Mbongi held the office of the speaker until he died in 1974. From 1976, the position was taken over by Ndo, whose diction Köhler considered much more elaborate than that of Mbongi and whom Köhler therefore asked to rephrase most of the texts previously recorded with Mbongi (Köhler 1989: 18). The extent to which the texts mirror natural speech is, thus, significantly restricted, as they replicate the diction of mainly one or two individuals.

From 1968, Köhler shifted his research camp to a place called Dikundu in the southwest of Andara. The most probable reason for this relocation was the militarization of West Caprivi, but Köhler does not mention this fact explicitly, either in his publications or in his research reports. He does mention the war in Angola, but emphasizes that Dikundu was the ideal place to work on both the !Xun and the Khwe languages, as it was situated at the border of their respective hunting areas. However, in 1968, no !Xun were living in Dikundu so that Köhler had to fetch informants from Tamzo, further west (OKW 324-a).<sup>4)</sup>

During his 1968, 1971, and 1974 trips, Köhler worked on parallel research programs with the !Xun and Khwe languages and planned to produce a dictionary, a grammar, and a text collection for each of them.<sup>5)</sup> The Native Commissioner had, in fact, explicitly asked Köhler also to document the !Xun language (OKW 322-a). To what extent Köhler's turn to the !Xun language was a concession to political circumstances or academic demands is not clear from the sources consulted so far. After his retirement, Köhler concentrated again on his Khwe work, supplementing, revising, and correcting the recorded texts for the remainder of his numerous field stays.

### Language Work

In Mutc'iku, Köhler worked with a number of old men, including the then Khwe Chief Martin Ndumba and several others. When Köhler shifted his research camp to Dikundu, only two Khwe men from Mutc'iku were willing to work with him there: the speaker Mbongi and old Kafuro who also used to entertain Köhler and occasional visitors, including members of the security forces, by playing the *laá-!hàvà* or 'musical bow'. While Köhler stresses the continuity in his work with Kafuro and Mbongi, my Khwe respondents in Mutc'iku felt that his shifting to

Dikundu caused a disruption in their relationship with Köhler, who allegedly did not explain to them why he left them, only coming to fetch Kafuro, and no longer visiting them after Kafuro died in 1980. According to Köhler himself, he gave up visiting the Khwe in Mute'iku in 1981 because he felt that they had been spoiled by army pay, and he wanted to avoid their ever-increasing demands (OKW 331-b).

One difference between Köhler's fieldwork practices in Mute'iku and Dikundu, which is not revealed in his publications and research reports, but was only testified by Khwe in Mute'iku, is that both Oswin and Ruth Köhler actively took part in Khwe cultural activities while staying in Mute'iku. Oswin Köhler went with the Khwe to the bush in order to learn about plants, tracking, trapping, and orientation in the bush, while Ruth Köhler learned how to open mangetti nuts, sew mats, play women's musical instruments, and find bushfood. In Mute'iku, Oswin Köhler asked Khwe to perform dances and music and let them listen to his recordings. He also asked them to make ethnographic objects, which he would purchase.<sup>6)</sup>

By comparison, Köhler's research in Dikundu was much less participatory. According to Gombo, they were 'sitting all the time', and a handwritten report by the speaker Ndo, the sole Khwe whom Köhler taught how to read and write Khwe, calls the language work *n#ú-djàó*, 'sitting work' as opposed to *‡há-djàó*, 'outside work' like building, fetching firewood, and the like. Gombo described the language work as consisting of informants answering Köhler's questions and occasionally bringing plants from the bush, into which Köhler never accompanied them. To what extent this reflects Köhler's worries of encountering gunmen of whatever party, a wilful decision for a certain kind of work procedure, or at least during the later trips, simply a concession to old age, remains unclear so far.

In Dikundu, the number of informants was also much more limited and, after Kafuro's death in 1980, was made up of only four men: the speaker Ndo and the informants Gombo, ‡Amku, and Dimbare, all originally from Angola. Their life stories are detailed in Köhler (1989). Köhler himself emphasized the advantages of his cooperation with Khwe informants who had been trained by him for many years (OKW 332-a). Ironically, the more limited the fieldwork practices and the number of informants became, the more Köhler emphasized his increasing permeation of Khwe ways of thinking. It immediately suggests itself that what he was actually grasping more and more was the way of thinking of his four long-term informants.<sup>7)</sup>

The problems with Köhler's implicit assumption of cultural consensus and the biases of the encyclopaedia itself have been pointed out elsewhere (Boden 2014; Widlok 1998). Köhler only worked with men and saw old men as the guarantors of genuine Khwe culture. Only 'in case of need ["notfalls"]' (Köhler 1989: 17) did he request his informants to ask their own wives about women's subjects. He worked with a couple of men in Mute'iku and later mainly with four men from Angola and the Okavango area, but not with women, young people, or people from villages further east. Therefore, it is unlikely that the interests, knowledge,

opinions, and worldviews of women, young people, and Khwe from the east are sufficiently covered in the encyclopaedia.

Vocabulary like *decline*, *extinction*, and *loss* with respect to Khwe culture is omnipresent in Köhler's research reports. Among the reasons why he stressed the decline was certainly to justify his continued data-collection against demands from the donors to publish what he had already recorded. Köhler's focus on the past was presumably also a concession to the political situation. Texts about Khwe experiences in the military camps or in the army would certainly not have pleased the SADF and government and might have deprived Köhler of a research permit and exposed the Khwe (OKW 328-b). Together with Köhler's disapproval of the impacts of the army on the Khwe, these reasons led him not to document contemporary changes, but to focus only on what had been valid before. For this purpose, he worked, or had to work, with an increasingly limited number of informants and field methods.

### Logistics

Köhler had chosen Mutc'iku as the first site for his fieldwork because he considered it to be free from disturbances by 'natives', i.e. non-San, and white hunters (OKW 322-b). At that time, the ferry at Bagani was the only possibility for crossing the river. Weekly supply trips to Andara or Mukwe for restocking drinking water and food were necessary and sometimes difficult because of low water levels. Dikundu, where Köhler built his research camp from 1968 onwards, was also consciously chosen as a far-away place in the bush. In order to reach there, 10 kilometres of access lane had to be cut, and a 15-meter well had to be opened up for the San residents of the camp.

While the camp in Mutc'iku had been relatively basic, consisting of a big tent, a camp shower, a shadow roof for the language work, and an enclosure, the buildings in Dikundu also included a house, a storeroom, and an open space for welcoming visitors. The equipment filled four small trucks. Building materials like logs and grass were soon stripped from the immediate neighbourhoods and then had to be brought by car from distances of several kilometres. It is remarkable that Köhler pushed for the repair or reconstruction of the camp in Dikundu during every field trip, even when he was not able to work there. In his reports, he justified the expenses by arguing that the bush was the sole place to provide self-assurance and identity to the Khwe as 'Bushmen' (OKW 334-a), where they were still able to live or exemplify an authentic life free from the bad influences of civilization. However, his decision might also have had to do with the subtle, micro-politically required distribution of work.

Ruth Köhler was occupied with typing Khwe texts and German translations as well as with organizing food, firewood, and water supplies, supervising the driver on supply trips, distributing food to the families of the informants who were living in the research camp, caring for the sick, and dealing with all kinds of requests from the local population. Such requests used to annoy her husband to

such a degree that, when she was away in Germany, he once shifted his camp to Andara (OKW 332-b) and in another instance resorted to employing an entrance guardian (OKW 341-a). Only mentioned by my Khwe respondents, but not in Köhler's reports and obviously considered as a matter of course by him, Ruth Köhler in addition managed the household and the social life. Photos show her cooking, washing, ironing, serving food, decorating the walls, planting flowers, and arranging fun games like sack races.

In Mute'iku, Köhler had paid the workers and had supplied food and water only to workers. Besides the language work, he also paid for other services, such as fetching water for the informants, building the shadow roof and enclosure, or collecting waste. He brought gifts and helped with transport, in particular to the shops in Mukwe, where the families of the workers could spend the money earned by their husbands. In Dikundu, however, supplies for the informants and their relatives were constantly increased. Here, Köhler provided food, firewood, and water for the families of the informants as well. Later, he also had houses built for them, fetched informants and their families – with their household equipment, dogs, and chickens – by car and brought them back to their living places after the field stay. He gave work and supplies to all locals, and at least from 1985 onwards, paid and supplied his informants even during the periods between the field stays. The reasons mentioned in his reports were the poor lives of his informants, the sociality of the 'Bushman' which did not allow individual men to be separated from their families for significant periods of time, and his personal safety which he felt depended on good relations with all neighbours. But between the lines, one can read that he faced more and more difficulties in convincing his informants, whom he repeatedly represented as the 'last free Khwe hunters', not to join the army, which would have put an end to his fieldwork. He did so by constantly increasing wages and supplies (OKW 334-b). Therefore, in contrast to what one might have expected in light of the gradual improvement of the infrastructure in the research area, Köhler's logistical investments became ever more extensive, costly, and time-consuming over the years.

## HOW TO WORK WITH THE COLLECTION?

Köhler's collection makes up a uniquely comprehensive documentation, both of Khwe cultural heritage and of the way the collection itself was created over time (cf. Vojkonny 1999). At the same time, it is obvious that a simple handover to the Khwe as legitimate heirs of their cultural heritage is not in their own best interest, nor in the interest of the academic community, nor of the funding organizations which, over the years, have spent enormous sums on Köhler's research. Reasons are manifold. First of all, it cannot yet be satisfactorily decided in each case which material belongs to the Khwe and which material belongs to other groups. Secondly, the Khwe do not at present have the financial means and required skills to handle or process the analogue formats of the texts, photos, and tapes, to

understand the German annotations and explanations, or even to read the Khwe texts. Other problems arise from Khwe ideas about the significance of the material as well as questions of intellectual property and use rights.

Khwe from Namibia and from South Africa have repeatedly asked me how to get access to Köhler's Khwe collection, to which I had only occasional access myself before the current project started. I was always, and still am, of the opinion that the Khwe should get access to the material, but I see more problems now that I know the material better. Some are just practical and financial problems of sorting or raising funds for digitization, which are solvable in principle, although not necessarily within the time period envisaged by the Khwe. More problematic are Khwe ideas about Köhler's work and issues related to intellectual property rights.

Khwe ideas about Köhler's documentation of their cultural heritage, as far as I came to know them, are that it will show them what their ancestors did and how they spoke. From an academic perspective, this is a problematic expectation. As I have shown, the text collection reflects as much Köhler's ideas of what should be documented and how, as it reflects actual Khwe language use and cultural practices. In many other ethnographies, the contributions or the authorship of informants and field assistants remains almost entirely invisible. In the vernacular Khwe encyclopaedia, Köhler indicates below each text who contributed to it and when. However, this still conceals who contributed exactly what and when.

Furthermore, the way Köhler has shaped both the topics and the way of speaking is widely invisible. Even though he explains his work procedures in some detail in the first volume (Köhler 1989), as I have highlighted myself before (Boden 2014; see also Schlee 1992), now that I have actually had a chance to look at the different versions of a text and the changes made to it over the course of time, I find it much more difficult to trace how the described procedure translates into the extant text versions.

Köhler's Khwe collection cannot be understood without looking at what Köhler and his field assistants actually did. It is obvious that the increasingly limited number of informants and field methods and the focus on past instead of current cultural practices, together with Köhler's increasing dependency on the informants, limited the linguistic and cultural content. One critical problem, therefore, is finding a responsible way of making the Khwe aware of Köhler's explicit and implicit ways of shaping Khwe cultural heritage, without actually telling the Khwe how they should understand Köhler's documentation.

What Geertz said about science is likewise true for cultural heritage: if you want to understand what cultural heritage is, you should look in the first instance not at its representations or what its apologists say about it, but at how it is produced, by whom and for which purpose. With respect to language, one could argue that Köhler's documentation mainly represents Ndo's way of speaking, supervised and eventually corrected by Köhler, and with respect to culture, that it represents Köhler's ideas together with the knowledge, interests, opinions, and

worldview of a few Khwe men from Angola and the Okavango River, consciously excluding women's and young people's voices, statements from Khwe in the eastern parts of Bwabwata National Park, and developments of recent history. Nevertheless, it is probably the best approximation of past cultural practices available to the Khwe. In the end, it is their own responsibility and decision to take from Köhler's material what they want to be their cultural heritage, and this might not occur without conflicts between Khwe whose interests and opinions are supported by the texts and those whose interests and voices have been silenced in the texts. I see it as my responsibility to make the Khwe aware of the way the collection was shaped, and by whom, and to warn them against taking the result as a mirror of 'authentic' tradition.

Another key problem relates to intellectual property rights or the question of who owns what (cf. Tomaselli 2014). There is no doubt that the Khwe are the bearers of their cultural heritage, and the fact that the collection has for years been enclosed in a private German household and, since 2000, in a university archive is unsatisfactory, not least for the people who paid for the compilation of the documentation, viz., the German tax-payers and private organizations whose aims were access and academic analysis. The question is how these different interests can be negotiated and who should be involved in negotiations, particularly with respect to material such as previously personally owned hunting songs, personal images of living and dead people, or secret knowledge of plants, which, according to Köhler, the Khwe would not have shared with their Mbukushu neighbours (OKW 323-a). Should these now become accessible in a publication?

'Prior informed consent' is a buzzword for bolstering the ethical legitimacy of collecting and publishing ethnographic data. As far as Köhler's immediate informants are concerned, there is no doubt that they understood what Köhler was doing and gave their consent. People in Mutc'iku, as well as Gombo himself, unanimously told me that Köhler had been sent by the Germans to document their language and culture and write it down in books as a proof of his work performance to the 'German government'. But were these people entitled to decide on the dissemination of this knowledge to Köhler as an outsider and eventually to the academic public as a whole? That they became Köhler's guarantors of Khwe traditional culture was not the result of a decision made by the Khwe community, but was partly due to chance and partly an outcome of Köhler's and their own interests.

Further questions arise from new technologies, such as whether prior informed consent also encompasses online publication, which was neither on Köhler's nor on the Khwe's minds at the time. Today, the obvious advantage of an online publication would be easier access for the Khwe, but it would also make access and potentially problematic or unauthorized use easier for others.

At present, I cannot provide solutions to any of these questions. I am convinced, however, that they can only be answered in an ongoing dialogue with representatives of the Khwe community. Who these representatives should be is,



of course, another question, which only the Khwe can decide. Ironically, if taken seriously, this process might ultimately delay publication and access even more. The dialogue should include the following:

- a discussion about ways the Khwe can participate in the academic examination of the texts and images;
- a reflection on how the collection came into being, from the perspective of the Khwe as well as from the perspective of researchers;
- a discussion on which parts of the collection should be published and accessible and to whom;
- a discussion of ways the archive can support Khwe uses of their cultural heritage for their own benefit, e.g., through publications or exhibitions on site;
- a discussion of how Köhler's Khwe material can be used in school education or within the activities of the recently established Khwe community trust, TEKOA (The Traditional Knowledge Outreach Academy), where elder Khwe teach younger Khwe their traditional cultural knowledge.

A first step in this direction was made during my field stay in February/March 2016, when I discussed these issues with respect to the films recorded by Köhler in 1962 and 1965, a small and easily manageable part of the collection. While all participants of the public film screenings enjoyed the films and embraced the idea of having access, the proper disposition of the films was not (yet) agreed upon, a challenge that will probably persist as long as a representative body for the Khwe is not officially recognized.<sup>8)</sup>

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

From today's perspective, Köhler's prophecies concerning the demise of Khwe culture and research among them seem odd or antiquated. Indeed, the number of researchers who have worked with the Khwe has considerably increased after Namibian independence. What Köhler was about to lose was, rather, his illusion of how Khwe culture was supposed to look. One might even argue that, to a certain degree, he himself reduced the richness of Khwe cultural and linguistic expressions in his documentation by increasingly limiting field methods and reducing or even excluding representatives of certain social groups.

No one can doubt that the living conditions of the Khwe underwent significant changes when West Caprivi became a military no-access zone and many Khwe men served as soldiers, or that this period, just as any previous period in history, influenced their cultural practices, some of which they abandoned, or had to abandon, over the course of time. Köhler called this process a loss, a decline, demise, and a negative development, and he contended that the Khwe



could be self-assured and live according to their identity only in the bush. However, the fact that so many Khwe men joined the army, and that Köhler had to spend so much money keeping his own informants from doing so, suggests that, at the time, the Khwe also saw a positive development, an economic opportunity, and possibly also an increase in their social prestige through SADF service. Instead of diminishing, this might have actually strengthened the ethnic self-assurance and cultural identity of the Khwe at the time. After independence, the Khwe faced disadvantages and suspicions from the new rulers, based on their involvement with the wrong side. These negative experiences might have cemented their ethnic self-awareness even more.

The interest of the Khwe in their traditional culture is growing, as the TEKOA initiative and Khwe reactions to the Köhler material demonstrate. Khwe cultural knowledge is valued, in part because it can be applied in ethno-touristic enterprises or nature conservation. Also, the Khwe language is still spoken in Namibia, and Khwe children still learn to speak Khwe as their first language, even though, one might add, Köhler did not endeavor to make Khwe a language taught in schools. This is astonishing, given his expertise in the language as well as his good relations with the South West Africa Administration, which did not inhibit San language-development, as the example of Ju indicates (cf. Haacke 2005; see also Heckler, Chapter 1 and Biesele, Chapter 2). The task of Khwe language-development is now, unfortunately, left to individuals who are less versed than Köhler was.

The comprehensive nature of the Khwe material in Köhler's academic legacy, together with the possibilities it allows for reconstructing how ethnographers arrive at their texts, provides a unique chance for understanding past *cultural practices* of the Khwe, as well as past *academic practices* and ideas. In my view, this will require a reflexive and meticulous, if time-consuming, examination and interpretation of the material from a historic perspective, as well as an ongoing dialogue with representatives of the Khwe communities.

## NOTES

- 1) I will use the term 'Bushmen' with quotation marks when referring to Köhler's diction and will otherwise use the term 'San'.
- 2) During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, migrant work was mainly to farms further south in Namibia or to coffee plantations in Angola. Then, from the 1940s onward, this migrant work was mainly to the gold mines of the Witwatersrand in South Africa (cf. Brenzinger 1998; Boden 2009).
- 3) For more detailed historical accounts of this period see Uys 1993, Boden 2009, Taylor 2009, Taylor and Battistoni 2009, and Kangumu 2011.
- 4) In 2012, my Khwe respondents said that Dikundu had always been !Xun land and that the Khwe had no land rights there. When Köhler made his camp at Dikundu, a group of Mbukushu started to settle in the vicinity, and they are nowadays the sole inhabitants of the place.

- 5) In fact, Köhler planned a triple monograph, the third language being !Xoon [Taa]. He had chosen these three languages to allow him to compare one language from each of the three Khoisan linguistic lineages (Khoe, Kx'a, and Tuu, then still called Central, Northern, and Southern Khoisan). The Khwe and !Xun grammars have been published (1981a; 1981b), but the dictionaries, !Xun texts, and !Xoon material have not yet been published.
- 6) Köhler gave part of the music recordings to the department of music ethnology at the University of Cologne and part of the ethnographic objects to the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum for anthropology in Cologne.
- 7) In the first volume of Köhler's Khwe encyclopaedia, Köhler (1989: 22–3) lists all informants who have contributed to the oeuvre. There are six 'main Khwe informants' in addition to Mbongi and Kafuro during his field stays from 1959 to 1965 at Mutc'iku and 16 'secondary Khwe informants' from 1968 to 1988 in Dikundu. However, a look at the actual 'authors' of texts shows that only a tiny portion, indeed less than 8 percent, are indicated as having received input from other than the main four informants with whom Köhler worked in Dikundu after 1965.
- 8) A detailed description of these procedures and challenges will be published elsewhere.

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