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## Drinking, Fighting, and Healing : San Struggles for Survival and Solidarity in the Omaheke Region, Namibia

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## **Drinking, Fighting, and Healing: San Struggles for Survival and Solidarity in the Omaheke Region, Namibia**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Since independence from South African rule in 1990, Namibia has been hailed as ‘Africa’s cornerstone of optimism’, and praised for drafting one of the most democratic constitutions in the world. Despite some recent and disturbingly undemocratic trends, the end of apartheid brought unprecedented freedom, and the promise of a future of equality and opportunity. However, for those subaltern people on the periphery, such as the farm San in the Omaheke Region of eastern Namibia, the future seems to promise only more poverty, and freedom sometimes assumes perverse forms.

During my fieldwork in the Omaheke (between 1996 and 2001), I often asked San what had changed the most dramatically in their lives since independence. The most common reply was that the farmers are now less violent. “Sam Nujoma took the beatings and the money away,” many San told me<sup>1</sup>). While the San are no longer as vulnerable to the physical coercion of white farmers, they are increasingly vulnerable to economic coercion as farmers adapt to a liberalizing economy by retrenching large numbers of San workers. Although violent labor management tactics are no longer backed by state sanction, there is almost no state presence in the farming areas, and so white farmers continue to govern their farms according to apartheid notions of racially inferior and ‘childlike’ Bushmen. The farm San often resent being subject to such paternalistic rule. One young San woman, Beh, highlighted the disparity between the promise of freedom and equality suggested by national liberation, and the realities of race, class and gender inequalities on the farm where she lived: she said, “The country’s independent, but not this farm” (see also Sylvain 2001). However, in counterpoint, |Xabe, a middle-aged San woman living in a squatters’ village, claimed, “This country’s now too free for everybody.” Beh lived on a farm where the activities of the San were regulated by a paternalistic farmer. |Xabe lived in a squatters’ village plagued by violence and general lawlessness.

There are many contradictions inherent to Namibia’s postcolonial condition implied by Beh and |Xabe’s comments. But the ones that I will address here are

those that create the conditions for violence. It is ironic that just as new labor legislation has effectively decreased the level of violence the San suffer at the hands of their white employers, the level of violence they suffer at the hands of non-whites, including other San, has increased dramatically.

Violence among the San is almost always associated with drinking. Drinking not only contributes to physical assaults among the San, it is also often a form of self-violence. As I watched the San drink, fight and reconcile, I felt I was watching a cycle of self-destruction and self-repair, and that this cycle reflected the tensions and contradictions inherent to their postcolonial world: the love-hate relationships they often develop with a *baas* who denies them adult status, but who provides and protects; the tensions that arise in an ostensibly non-racial democracy where everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others; the contradictions of an emerging civil society where everyone is Namibian, except the ethnically unacceptable; and the ironic condition of a neo-liberal democracy where markets are free, but people are not free from the devastating effects of free markets. The San live in a world where a democratic constitution gave people the right to live where they want, but no opportunities to make a living where they settle; they are free to conduct themselves as autonomous citizens and consumers, but too often the only freedom the San can afford to enjoy is indulging in a bucket of homebrew. Here, hope for a better future competes with helplessness in the face of present poverty.

I will refrain as far as possible from attempting to ‘explain’ drinking and fighting among the San by, for example, focusing on the causes of drinking, or why the San exhibit violent behavior when they are drunk. Such an effort would too easily turn into speculative psychologizing. Instead, I will take the reader on a journey through the Omaheke in order to illustrate the different dynamics involved in drinking, fighting, and healing in the various places the San do these things. We will start on the commercial farms, and then follow San who are ‘on the road’ looking for work. We will finish in the squatters’ village along the edges of the black township of Epako. My purpose is to convey a sense of the tensions, fears, and hopes that the San express as they drink, fight, struggle and endure.

## FEAR AND LOATHING ON THE FARMS

The San are the third largest ethnic group in the Omaheke Region (CSO 1994: 19). They belong to three main language groups: Ju|’hoansi are concentrated in the northern and central areas of the Omaheke; Nharo-speakers are found in the east, along the border of Botswana; and, !Xûn-speakers live primarily in the south. The largest linguistic group in the Omaheke is the Bantu-speaking Herero, who raise cattle in the former ethnic ‘homelands’, now known as the ‘communal areas’. Nama-Damaras are the second largest group, and they, along with the San, constitute the largest proportion of farm workers in the Region. A small minority of Bantu-speaking Tswanas raise cattle in the communal areas in the south of the Region. The German and Afrikaner descendants of white settlers comprise only eight percent of

the population, but own sixty-five percent of the land in the 'commercial farming block'. Approximately two-thirds of the 6,500 San in the Omaheke work on white-owned commercial cattle ranches. San also work as casual laborers on Herero and Tswana cattle posts in the communal areas. Small pockets of San are also found living in government resettlement camps, and there is a growing community of urban San living on the outskirts of the black township of Epako.

Although Herero and Tswana agropastoralists were allocated land under the colonial reserve system, and later under the apartheid 'homeland' system, the land area designated was not adequate to sustain a self-sufficient subsistence economy. Thus, Herero and Tswana men were compelled to leave the reserves/homelands in order to earn wages in the white colonial economy. Even today, Hereros and Tswanas must supplement subsistence agriculture by working on white-owned farms, or in construction or domestic service in Gobabis, which is the main urban and administrative center of the Region. No land in the Omaheke was designated to the San, and so, to make a living, they are required to live and work on land owned by others.

In the commercial farming block, each farm is run according to the individual farmer's own style of farm and labor management. The number of workers and residents, wages, rations, pay schedules, and housing conditions vary according to the farmer's productive strategy and economic circumstances. Farms tend to fall along a continuum from an 'old fashioned', very casual mode of farm management, to a more 'rationalized' farming system (see also Guenther 1986; and Russell and Russell 1979). 'Old fashioned' farms are usually run by older Afrikaners, who see the San more as 'Bushmen' and less as workers. 'Rationalized' farms tend to be run by younger, more business-like farmers (often they are German). However, both 'old fashioned' and 'business-like' farmers are quite paternalistic in their relationships with their San workers.

One justification frequently offered by farmers for their paternalistic treatment of the San is that Bushmen are inclined to drink to excess, and then get violent. On 'rationalized' farms, farmers limit the labor complement to less than five men and their immediate kin, and so drinking and fighting tend to be less common, or at least less extreme. On these farms, the farmers monitor the activities of their workers more closely, and police visitors more diligently: farmers check to see if visitors are bringing alcohol onto the farm, and some even require that visitors pass sobriety tests — such as closing their eyes and touching their noses, or balancing on one foot. The San often resent this supervision, however they acquiesce because they enjoy higher wages and greater security on these farms. 'Old fashioned' farmers justify lower wages and fewer rations on the grounds that San will use the money to buy alcohol, and use the mealie meal and sugar to brew beer. Such farmers interfere less frequently in the daily lives of the San; instead, they simply deprive the San the means of getting drunk and leave them to their own devices — confident that, as former foragers, Bushmen are accustomed to getting by on very little. Both the farmers and the San cite alcohol as the most urgent 'social problem' faced by the

San today. But the San, unlike the farmers, see direct links between drinking and poverty. A pail of homebrew in the mornings fills the stomach and, in a phrase I heard repeated all over the Omaheke, it ‘kills the hunger’.

### A FAMILY FIGHTING ON A FARM

During my most recent trip to the Omaheke, from May to July 2001, my husband and I visited the farm ‘Ruveld’ where many of our Ju|’hoan fictive ‘family’ lives<sup>2)</sup>. As etiquette demands, our first stop was at the farmer’s house, to drink some *Rooibos* tea, chat a bit, and ask permission to visit his workers. Since it had been three years since our last visit, we had quite a bit of catching up to do. The farmer described how much more dangerous life in Namibia had become for everyone, including white farmers. We were told about an Afrikaner family who had been murdered just 60 kms north of Gobabis. This farmer, his wife and two children had been ambushed at the gate to their farm by one of their former workers and were shot and killed. Newspapers reported that the farmer and his worker had been in cahoots in a diamond-smuggling operation, and that the worker shot the farmer and his family after the farmer double-crossed him. However, rumours around the region held that the worker had been laid off, and was seeking revenge. Omaheke farmers are now bracing themselves for a Zimbabwe-style insurrection.

While I listened with ambivalent sympathy to the farmer’s fears, I recalled the story my Ju|’hoan ‘family’ told me about what had happened to Gashe on this farm. Gashe is chronically unemployed, and often squats on the farm to visit with his family when he tires of life in the Epako squatters’ village. When he visits the farm, he must be especially careful to keep out of sight of the farmer. Most farmers discourage visitors, but this farmer has a particular hatred of Gashe, who had been his worker fifteen years ago. Their relationship soured after Gashe was injured while drilling a borehole. The farmer refused to take Gashe to the hospital, and so Gashe spent two days lying in bed, until some fellow workers helped him get to the state hospital in Gobabis. When the doctor saw Gashe’s injury, he convinced Gashe to lay charges against the farmer. Unfortunately, this merely resulted in Gashe losing his job. After Gashe recovered from his injury, he found a job on another farm, but lost it very quickly when he punched the abusive farmer in the face. Now Gashe has a reputation among white farmers throughout the Omaheke as a ‘*bokram*’ and a ‘*skelm*’ (a ‘ram-buck’ and a ‘trouble-maker’) — and, of course, he has not found work since.

Gashe is in very poor health, since he must often scrounge through garbage cans in town to find the occasional meal. He lives mostly on homemade beer, which is the cheapest form of sustenance in the township where he spends most of his time. One evening about three months before my visit, Gashe became disoriented, blacked out, and wandered into the farmer’s backyard. The farmer, awakened by his barking dog, grabbed Gashe, hung him on a meat-hook, and beat him senseless with a *knobkerrie*. After we finished our visit with the farmer and his family, we headed down to

the workers' compound, where we hoped to see Gashe and find out how he was doing.

I had come to Ruveld with the nominal patriarch of my Ju|'hoan 'family', ||Au|twi. When we got to the workers' compound, all the Ju|'hoansi were completely in the bag. Some were stumbling to Nama 'long-arm' music; others were pushing each other to the ground; others were falling down on their own. ||Au|twi sat glumly in front of his shack, watching his children and grandchildren beat each other over the head, shout insults at each other, and roll in the dirt. I sat down beside my 'tun', N≠isa, an elderly woman whose name I had been given, and gave her some tobacco. A young woman named Nu!xga stumbled over and immediately demanded the tobacco, menacing old N≠isa and I with her clenched fist. Just as I was handing Nu!xga some extra tobacco, I heard shouts and scuffling from the shack behind us. I stood up and turned to face the shack in time to see a large knife pound through the thin metal door. A few seconds later, a sloppy-drunk young man burst out of the shack, brandishing the larger butcher knife at everyone in his path. I recognized him as the man who, in the three years I had known him, had stabbed his sister, his mother, his brother-in-law and his niece.

This family had survived many episodes of drinking and physical assault. The worst episode occurred on a Saturday evening in 1997. After some festivities and fairly heavy drinking, a young man named |Kunta stumbled into the shack where his grandmother, |Xaia, was sleeping and stabbed her several times in the back. |Xaia's husband, ≠Oma, ran into the shack to rescue his wife and began fighting with his grandson. |Kunta's father, Oba, tried to get between his own father and his son. The fight ended when ≠Oma put a spear in Oba's stomach. |Xaia was hospitalized for one night. Oba was sent to Windhoek for surgery and ≠Oma and |Kunta were sent to jail for a week, until the farmer brought the injured parties to town so they could drop the charges. There were no fatalities, but the fight caused great sorrow among the Ju|'hoansi on this farm. I did not witness the fight myself, but those who discussed it with me were especially dismayed by the fact that a father, son and grandson had done such harm to each other. Sons are supposed to respect their fathers, and one should never harm one's grandparents. Tensions ran high among the Ju|'hoansi on the farm for about a month. However, after the incident everyone took great care not to insult or offend one another and not to discuss the fight. Within a relatively short period of time, the incident was behind them.

Violence against the San at the hands of a farmer typically reflects a pervasive and latent sense of general paranoia. Beatings from farmers are usually associated with efforts to maintain or re-establish control; it is a way of enforcing subordination — not just physically, but psychologically as well, since beatings are usually administered as punishment for some 'transgression'. Thus, the violence of farmers tends to be calculated and purposive. However, not all forms of such violence are so goal-oriented. It is too easy to see excessive drinking simply as a 'Bushman problem', as many in the Omaheke do. Drinking is also a way of life among other

African groups, including white farmers. Although many farmers I spoke to expressed deep concerns about the San's 'drinking problem', they usually did so after more than a few shots of *Jägermeister*. Furthermore, drunken violence is not unique to the San. One young San woman described her experience with a farmer known to cause trouble when he 'lifted his hand': "Every time he drinks a lot on weekends — then, when he's drinking, he'll come to our houses and fight with the people [the San]".

Patterns of violence on the farms are shaped by power relations largely revolving around the farmer's status as *baas* and father-figure. However, this central power relationship has the greatest impact on the forms of violence that occur between San husbands and wives. Since San women have no independent access to employment or residence rights on a farm, and earn only supplementary wages in return for domestic service, they are highly dependent on their menfolk, whom farmers treat as the primary breadwinners. San men are, by most accounts, increasingly willing to resort to violence, and batter their wives, to assert their authority. Nonetheless, violence in the workers' compound, among the San themselves, usually only occurs after heavy drinking has taken place. Even when a San husband hits his wife, it is usually when he is drunk. Furthermore, a San husband will hit his wife in a fit of temper — an outburst that is spontaneous and not as calculated as violence at the hands of a farmer. General fighting in the workers' compound also tend to be brawls, rather than calculated attacks. This certainly does not make wife-battering or brawling among the San less serious than beatings at the hands of farmers. In fact, it is often more damaging, since the San react to beatings from a farmer with solidarity and mutual support; but since most San on the farms are kin, drunken brawling among the San themselves is a form of domestic violence. Alcohol-related violence between children and parents is particularly deplored and poses perhaps the deepest threat to their social cohesion, since showing respect for one's parents (and elders in general) is a very important principle of behaviour for the Ju|'hoansi.

On 'old fashioned' farms, such as Ruveld, larger groups of extended kin live together. When social tensions emerge, it is often difficult for the disputing parties to simply leave — which was the primary dispute-resolution strategy among foraging San. This is especially true for the employed residents, who are expected to perform their duties everyday. Nonetheless, after an episode of drunken violence, some of the Ju|'hoansi on Ruveld do leave to spend the weekend on 'Klaaplaas', a neighbouring farm where some of their other extended kinfolk live.

## **VIOLENT VISITORS**

Farms run by absentee farmers are a favourite visiting site for unemployed men who are 'on the road' looking for work. Where there is no farmer to regulate visitors and monitor drinking, alcohol consumption increases dramatically and so does the severity of the fights that break out once everyone is sufficiently inebriated.

Furthermore, on such farms, injuries may result in fatalities, since the San have no way to get to the hospital in Gobabis. Drinking is also more dangerous because entrepreneurial Hereros and Tswanas bring bottle store liquor onto these farms in the backs of their pickup trucks to sell to the San. Since San don't usually have much cash handy, they often exchange their rations for alcohol (see also Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997).

Klapplaas is run by an absentee farmer, and was residence to seven Ju|'hoan adults — all close kin — and two foster children. Only two of the men earned wages (totalling N\$70 per month), and the farmer visited weekly to deliver rations that were never adequate to feed the entire family. The men used their wages to buy sugar and dried vegetables from a nearby farm store, and combined these with a portion of their mealie meal rations to brew beer. The homebrew invariably 'feeds' them longer than any food they could afford to buy. One morning I arrived for a visit to find the foreman's skull cracked open, from a blow with an axe, and others with purple bruises, split lips and eyes swollen shut. A fight, which no one could remember clearly, had broken out the night before when they shared their beer with two young Damara men who were making their way to Gobabis to look for work.

The predations of 'drifters' often make the San feel vulnerable and fearful. Many San I spoke to expressed a preference for living and working on a farm run by a more paternalistic white farmer, because such farmers offer protection from the violence of strangers. One such protectively paternalistic farmer, Mnr. van Vuuren, was known by the San in the Omaheke as a relatively generous and compassionate employer. During a typical weekend of drinking and partying, a group of five Damara men, who were on the road looking for work, came to the farm seeking a place to stay the night and to help the workers' drink their homebrew. The Damara men had visited a number of farms beforehand, and so were already amply soused. After the Damara visitors had spent most of the afternoon sampling the San's homebrew, they became belligerent. Insults were exchanged and the visitors drew their knives. One of the San domestic servants fled to the farmer's house to request assistance. The farmer rushed down to the workers' compound, where he was immediately accosted by the five Damaras wielding knives and throwing rocks. Mnr. van Vuuren managed to dodge the assaults, land a few knock-out punches and disarm the Damaras. This episode was recounted by the San throughout the Omaheke with awe and admiration — and thereafter the farmer was affectionately nicknamed "Jean Claude van Vuuren"<sup>3</sup>).

Unfortunately, jobs on the 'better' farms are increasingly scarce, and many San are perpetually 'on the road' job-hunting or simply seeking food and temporary shelter from kin and friends.

## **HARD TRAVELIN'**

Those San who are 'on the road' wander between the white commercial farms and the Herero and Tswana cattle posts in the communal areas. They stay with kin



and friends on the farms, in the resettlement camps, or in the Epako township while they look for work on the nearby farms. When they have exhausted the employment possibilities in the surrounding areas, they move to another site where they have kin and friends, and repeat the job-hunting pattern in a new area. Since jobs on commercial farms are very hard to get these days, many San move deeper into the communal areas to find work on Herero or Tswana cattle posts. While working for Hereros, many get caught in the trap of perpetual un- or underemployment, poverty, hunger, alcohol addiction and despair, as ǁUmte's story illustrates.

ǁUmte worked on five commercial farms and on one Herero cattle post, before he became chronically unemployed. In the mid-1980s, after being fired by a white farmer (because a cow miscarried), ǁUmte journeyed to Pos 3, a small village in the northern communal block (formerly Hereroland). He described the working conditions on the cattle post this way:

I was fetching firewood for them. They just gave me five dollars to drink beer. That Herero was not nice. He didn't want to pay me. That's why I left.

The money given to San workers by their Herero employers is expected to be spent on the beer that Herero women brew. A number of San told me that after they were paid, the only item they could afford to buy on the cattle post was homebrew. Similarly, in the villages, such as Pos 3 and Tallismanus, there are few stores where San can buy food on a regular basis. Homebrew is often the only food the San can find and afford in the communal areas.

By the time he returned to the commercial block to find a job that paid an actual wage — after about a year of being, in effect, paid in beer — ǁUmte had developed a serious drinking problem. In the commercial block, he found a job on a farm where some distant kin were living. However, in less than a year the farmer beat him with a *sjambok* and chased him off the farm because, according to ǁUmte, “I was staying home drinking beer and not looking after the goats.” Bad luck kept his next stint as a farm worker short. ǁUmte managed to keep his drinking from adversely affecting his job performance; however, the farmer was quite brutal. ǁUmte told me:

I was digging a hole for the garbage and he was beating me. That's why I quit. He said I must work nicely and I was working nicely, digging a hole, but he beat me. I took my money and left.

Eventually, after a few years of job-hunting, ǁUmte gave up looking for work altogether: “I didn't want to keep looking for work,” ǁUmte explained, “If I look for a job, then they [the farmers] will not offer me a job. The farmers just beat - they don't want workers.” Since ǁUmte took up a full-time life on the road, he has ceased to worry about making a living or taking care of himself. He told me: “I'm just looking for beer.” ǁUmte now travels between Ruveld, Klaapplass, and Epako, where he has kin who provide food and shelter. He must follow a relatively nomadic

lifestyle, because, if he stays too long at any one place, his hosts start to complain that their visitor is ‘lying on their necks’. Although ǀUmte is highly mobile, he lingers in Epako longer than anywhere else, since that is where the beer is most abundant.

## **VIOLENCE AND VIOLATION IN SUPERNATURAL SPACES**

The township of Epako is located four kilometers east of Gobabis. The residents are primarily ‘black’ Africans — Damara, Herero, Tswana, and Ovambo — but there is also a fairly large population of Namas and a smaller community of San. Many Ovambo residents were brought to the Omaheke as contract laborers prior to independence, and declined to leave. Newer Ovambo residents came to the Omaheke to work in ‘development brigades’ created by SWAPO after independence. Although the different sections of Epako now have names like ‘Freedom Square’ and ‘Independence Island’, most residents continue to refer to these sections using their ethnic designations: ‘Hereroblok’ is located in the northern area of Epako, ‘Tswanablok’ in the east, and ‘Damarablok’ in the west. Ovambos live primarily in the migrant workers compound in the center of the township. Each ethnic block contains brick houses in varying states of disrepair, but at least most are equipped with sporadically running water. The San residents live on the edges of the various ethnic blocks, in improvised shacks made out of corrugated iron, plastic feed sacks and scraps of cloth.

When I conducted a household survey among San residents in 1997, most of the relatively small population of San lived along the edges of Tswanablok and Hereroblok because they considered Damarablok too large, too noisy and too violent. Just before I completed my survey, the municipality pushed the San out of their Tswanablok squatters’ village to make way for new houses that were being constructed by the Build Together Programme, which was designed to provide housing for the poorest sectors of Namibian society. The Build Together Programme was meant to be a “people’s process housing” project, where people who needed housing “initiate action, take decisions at the local level, and implement the Programme” (GRN 2000: 469). Some of the uprooted San participated in the construction of the small brick buildings that housed flushing toilets and a tap with running water, in the hope that they would be able to resettle on the small plots of land adjacent to the latrines. A few San were able to secure these plots, but most of them were unable to afford the fees for the water and plot rental. They eventually abandoned their plots and resettled in the squatters’ village outside of Hereroblok, or in the new squatters’ village that emerged along the edges of the newly-named ‘Toiletblok’.

My 1997 survey found that the two most important sources of income for the San in Epako were domestic service and pensions. Those San women who can ‘pass’ as Nama are sometimes able to secure higher-paying jobs in the white households of Gobabis. However, most San women comprise a ‘second-tier’ domestic labor force,

doing laundry or raking yards for Herero and Tswana neighbors in return for a small wage, some food or homebrew. Since San men have difficulty competing with Herero, Tswana, Damara and Ovambo men for higher-paying jobs in construction or road-work, most do odd-jobs as handymen or work in the gardens of their non-San neighbors — also in return for a small wage, some food or homebrew. Most San end up returning their wages to their employers to pay for water, which is only available at their employer's house. Occasionally, San are recruited to work in the maize or bean fields of white farmers, who come to Epako to load their pickup trucks with cheap, seasonal laborers. The farmers must arrive early in the morning, since by lunch-time, most unemployed Epako residents are heavily intoxicated.

In 1997, the small community of San residents was just barely hanging on. Their ability to survive depended on elaborate mutual support networks, which enabled the San to pool resources and redistribute people among households to compensate for critical cash shortages. However, since independence, an increasing number of retrenched San workers are settling in Epako. Also, an increasing number of elderly San are brought to Epako by white farmers, who load them in the backs of their pickup trucks and dump them in the squatters' village. Epako is now home to a much larger population of unemployed San who are unable to depend on the assistance of kin and friends. As inflation and a devaluing currency raises the cost of food, and since user-fees were introduced in the clinics and hospitals, the San no longer have any cash to spare for needy friends and family. Besa, a young resident of Epako, explained the deterioration of San life in the township this way: "we used to help each other — now we just struggle for ourselves."

### **TARANOAS AND OTHER TROUBLE IN THE TOWNSHIP**

By the time I returned to Epako in 2001, most San households relied heavily on the pensions that elderly San receive from the government. Unfortunately, elderly San risk physical injury every month when they attempt to collect their pensions at the post office. Di||xao described the plight of older San this way:

It's we, the old people, who are always having trouble. On pension day, there are lots of young people at the post office. The young people will knock you down and take your money ... Two times last pension day they took my whole wallet - two times! You do not see where they are coming from. You only see that they took your money and are running away.

The young people Di||xao referred to belong to gangs of young men called 'Taranoas', which is otjiHerero, meaning roughly "watch me carefully". Anyone not belonging to one of these gangs faces intimidation and assault whenever they venture near the shops beside the Ovambo compound, where most of the gangs congregate.

Just after independence one of the only ways to make money in the township

was to establish ‘cuca shops’ — the local term for shebeens — where homebrew, called ‘*tombo*’, is made and sold. Tswana and Herero women and Ovambo men quickly cornered the market in illicit beer brewing, since they had access to the cash needed to purchase the supplies. The San have few similar opportunities to earn money through informal sector work. Instead, non-San generate income for themselves by selling homebrew to San, who purchase the beer to ‘kill the hunger’.

As population growth combines with unemployment, more non-San arrivals set up cuca shops to make a living. Thus alcohol now dominates the informal economy of Epako — and life in the township becomes increasingly dangerous, especially for San. One young man, who had a steady job and was struggling to support his family, summed up the plight of the San in the township: “The Ovambo people catch you and beat you up — and the Damaras are not far behind to rob you.” During my fieldwork in 1996 to 1997, I occasionally encountered young San men who had been roughed up when they strayed too close to the Ovambo compound, or when they were caught by cuca shop owners who were collecting drinking debts. Today violence is increasingly directed toward older San and young San women. More young San men are spending their time at the cuca shops, especially those run by men in the Ovambo compound. These young San men often work as go-fers for Ovambo men, or engage in petty theft for Taranoa leaders. Young San men attached to Taranoa gangs are now often involved in attacks on their own family members. One middle-aged San woman, Bau, told me:

Our children are mixing with the Damaras and the Ovambo boys. They send a small child to his grandmother to ask for money. If you say you have no money, they will watch you inside the store. They are not buying anything — they are just watching you. When you walk out of the store, they trip you and when you fall down, they take your money.

Bau’s neighbor added:

Your own child that you took care of is going to be with the other boys, and then he is going to make a mess of you. If my grandfather goes to get his pension, on the way, even my own son will rob him. We did not grow up like that. There is no respect. Small children are smoking today, doing what adults are doing. I don’t know what to say ... The adults are afraid of their children. If they say anything, they will be beaten.

While young San men work as go-fers or ‘foot soldiers’ for gang leaders, young San women perform domestic tasks and occasionally provide sexual services in return for *tombo* or a little bit of money. Patterns of drinking and violence in Epako are intimately connected to — and reflect — the ethnic class system in the township. The San continue to live in servitude, usually in a state of debt-bondage to non-San cuca shop owners, who encourage the San to drink on credit.

San women are vulnerable to sexual assault and rape, not only while drinking at

the *cuca* shops, but anywhere in the township at night, when the heaviest drinking takes place. Although San men do sexually assault San women, very often San men will administer a straight-forward beating while they are drunk — usually to a female relative. San claim that San women in the township are most commonly attacked and sexually assaulted by Damara men. One young woman said: “We are asking each other, ‘why are these boys doing these things?’ But the Damara say, ‘A San is a San’ — maybe they think we are not human.”

Taranoas dominate life in the township, but there are still alternative social worlds and ways to make a living. Because township life is bleak and dangerous, those San men who are able to do so settle their families on government resettlement camps, or informal settlement areas in the farming block, while they work in town. Sons and husbands live in Epako part-time to work, and return with their wages to their families on the weekend, sustaining a micro-migrant labor system throughout the Omaheke. I met one middle-aged Nharo man, Gllau, who had lived in Epako for six years. His family and his livestock were located on ‘Slaafplek’, a small settlement on the border of Botswana. He explained why he kept a residence in both places this way:

I grew up on Slaafplek, I found my wife there. I had my children there — that is my birthplace. But there is no work for me. That’s why I came here to look for work. If I get anything here, then I bring it there — to home.

Gllau suggested that my husband and I visit his family at Slaafplek. So, we headed to the border of Botswana, to follow the social networks that tied Epako to a remote village settlement on the edge of the farming block.

## **HYENA PEOPLE AND OTHER FORMS OF MYSTICAL MALFEASANCE**

Our visit to Slaafplek was the first time we had stayed with a community comprised primarily of Nharo-speaking San. The first night of our visit, my husband had a vivid dream, in which he woke up to find a strange creature sleeping beside him. It had the head, forearms and paws of a hyena, but the torso and legs of a man. The creature was stretched out, with its huge, toothy head resting on its paws, sound asleep. First thing in the morning my husband described his dream to the Nharo people huddled by our fire. When he finished relating his dream, my husband declared that he must be thinking too much about San folklore. The Nharo around our fire were adamant: that was not a dream. The ‘hyena person’ who visited our tent was familiar to them.

‘Hyena People’ our Nharo hosts explained, visit people in the night and steal their luck. It is by turning into hyenas that Tswanas and Hereros get the higher-paying jobs. “Even if a Tswana cannot speak English as well as a San,” one informant explained, “he will still get the job in the government office — because he has more luck.” My husband was sceptical. “A hyena person came to me, but I still

have luck.” An elderly healer replied, “Of course you do - you’re white! You have so much luck that if you lose some, you don’t notice.”

As we travelled throughout the Omaheke, we related my husband’s dream to !Xun, Ju|’hoan and Nharo people we met. They all gave the same explanation: we had been visited by a Tswana person who had transformed her or himself into a hyena. One young Nharo woman explained what happens when a San is visited by a Hyena Person: “if you are a San, once you have been visited by a Hyena Person, your life quickly falls apart: your money disappears very quickly, even when you don’t buy very many things; your relationship with your employer gets bad — even when you work hard, your *baas* and *miessis* still yell at you; your lover meets someone else and abandons you.”

According to San informants, Hereros and Tswanas have secret knowledge of the veld roots that can be used to concoct a special medicine they need to transform into hyenas. As the San explained this form of mystical mischief, it became obvious that, while they are fearful of Hyena People, they are also contemptuous of them. The figure of the hyena is ambivalent in San folklore. According to Mathias Guenther, the hyena is the favourite dupe or patsy for Jackal — the Nharo trickster figure (Guenther 1999)<sup>4</sup>). On the farms in Ghanzi Botswana, Nharo tell stories of Jackal stealing livestock and crops from the *baas*, and pinning the blame on the duncical hyena, who endures vigorous beatings from the farmers for Jackal’s chicanery (1989: 132–134; 1999: 99). So, in one sense the hyena is a chump-figure. But, Megan Biesele describes the connections the Ju|’hoansi make between of a particular kind of bad luck (*!kui g!oq*) and predatory animals, such as lions, leopards and hyenas. *!Kui g!oq*, Biesele explains, is also extended to “include Black people and ‘angry whites’” (Biesele 1993: 111). Although hyenas are associated with dangerous predators, they do not have the same high status as leopards or lions. Rather, in the Ju|’hoan myths described by Biesele, they are regarded as beyond the pale of humanity. While, mythically speaking, every other animal is regarded as on a par with humans — and often not fully distinguishable from Ju|’hoansi — hyena cannot achieve anything like a human level of ‘manhood’ because he scavenges rather than hunts (ibid: 122).

San people told me most emphatically that, unlike Hereros and Tswanas, Bushmen don’t need ‘medicine’ to help them transform into animals — San are born with such supernatural powers. Furthermore, Bushmen would never degrade themselves by transforming into such a lowly scavenger. San transform into powerful and dangerous animals — especially lions and leopards. Hyena People feature in San accounts as fiendish filchers. They are not as clever or as talented as San — they are dangerous dullards reduced to thievery and sorcery to get ahead in life.

The San throughout the Omaheke feel besieged, not surprisingly, since they are the prime target of every kind of physical and phantastical assault. But in the Epako township they are especially vulnerable. Here they are surrounded by Tswanas, Hereros and Damaras; thus, Hyena People abound. The San are also subject to many

other forms of mystical malfeasance from non-San ‘prophets’ who have the power to practice sorcery and put curses on the San.

The San are particularly singled out for mystical attack when they spend a lot of time at the *cuca* shops, which, as I mentioned, are often run by Herero or Tswana women, and are the places where Herero and Tswana people spend a great deal of time socializing. The San consider the Tswanas to be generally decent people on the whole, but they are also ambivalently respectful of the Tswana’s well-known powers of sorcery. Bringing oneself to the attention of Tswana *cuca* shop patrons invites mystical exploitation. Tswanas have been known to send their spirits into the shacks of sleeping San late at night, steal the San’s spirit, and “ride the Bushman like a donkey to Botswana, where they visit their relatives”.

### **HEALING AND HUMOUR**

The San typically do not see drinking itself as a problem (see Douglas 1987); it becomes a problem when it leads to fighting, unemployment, and involvement in criminal activities. Drinking is an ambiguous activity: it is at once a coping strategy and, when done to excess, a form of self-harm; it is a mode of festive sociality, and a source of conflict and division. Similarly, the reasons San drink and fight are not straightforward: motives are rarely unitary and moods are rarely stationary. What often starts off as a celebratory and festive form of social bonding can turn, in a matter of minutes, into a combative exchange.

Even when San see a connection between drinking and fighting, unemployment and criminal behavior, they rarely single alcohol out for special causal attention. They associate heavy drinking with disease. However, their conception of disease is highly contextual. According to Richard Katz (1982), Ju|’hoansi see sickness as an innate, latent condition; environmental factors or external agents must trigger latent sickness into manifest illness. Thus, San efforts to deal with individual and community harm associated with drinking involve healing ceremonies and conciliatory behavior that address the social, political, economic, and spiritual dimensions of San life.

### **TRANCE DANCING THE TROUBLE AWAY**

Komtsa, a young man who lived in Epako, had a drinking problem that, by everybody’s estimation, had gotten way out of hand. He would stay drunk for weeks at a time, and while drunk, would pick fights with Ovambo and Damara men twice his size. He went days without eating, and would often have to be taken to the hospital by family and friends after collapsing from hunger and dehydration. He was often beaten and robbed by the husbands of *cuca* shop owners to whom he owed money. Toward the end of his drinking binges, he would be tormented by hallucinations — usually by an image of a woman shrouded in a white cloth who came to haunt him at night. One evening, after a week-long drinking binge, Komtsa

attacked his wife, mother-in-law and brother-in-law. Komtsa's family was alarmed enough to request the assistance of a trance dancer. Fortunately, three well-known and powerful trance dancers lived on a nearby farm. Komtsa went to the farm for treatment, and over the course of a weekend, the trance dancers conducted a number of healing ceremonies. Afterward, the healers informed Komtsa that a *g||aua* (spirit) was responsible for his illness. The effects of Komtsa's drinking — getting into fights, being attacked and beaten, blackouts and collapses — were due to the efforts of his deceased mother's *g||aua* to kill him. These efforts were not malicious — the *g||aua* was convinced that her son was not being loved and properly cared for, and decided that Komtsa would be better off with her. While in the trance state, the healers ventured extra-bodily into the spirit world to beg the *g||aua* not to carry Komtsa away. After the trance dances, Komtsa's drinking diminished significantly, and his self-destructive behavior ceased. It was clear that Komtsa benefited emotionally from such extraordinary efforts to save his life.

Not all ill-effects of heavy drinking are owed to the activities of *g||auasi*. When San suffer from delirium tremens or blackouts, most often a trance dancer determines the cause to be non-San sorcery. Usually, it is discovered that a *cuca* shop owner is poisoning the beer, in which case the solution is to patronize a different *cuca* shop. However, sometimes the healer finds out that it is not the beer that is being poisoned; rather, a Tswana, Herero, or Damara *cuca* shop patron has placed poison in the tracks of the San customer, in which case the poison will follow the San person wherever he or she walks. When sorcery is the culprit, healers will provide their patients with powder made from veld roots to ward off the effects of the traveling poison (see also Katz 1982)<sup>5</sup>.

Healers are not only consulted to deal with the effects of excessive drinking. Their services are also requested when hardship and mysterious illness become particularly severe. |Uiya, a young woman living in the 'ToiletBlok' of Epako was having a particularly difficult time with a mystical antagonist. She was chronically exhausted, and suffered from mysterious aches and pains. Her poor health was interfering with her ability to work, and she was constantly worried that she would lose her relatively high-paying job in Gobabis. On top of this, she was engaged in an on-going dispute with a neighboring Damara woman who kept stealing her clothes and shouting insults at her. |Uiya eventually consulted a trance dancer. After a short diagnostic ceremony, he informed |Uiya that her Damara neighbor had taken a handful of sand from her footprints and brought it to a Herero prophet who, for a few dollars, had put a curse on it. When I asked |Uiya why her neighbor would do this, she told me that her neighbor was jealous of her because she had a good job; her neighbor was angry because |Uiya was 'too high' — she was living too well for a San. |Uiya counteracted the curse by rubbing the medicinal powder the healer had given her on her body every night before she went to sleep.

Mathias Guenther notes that in Ghanzi, "mounting incidence of disease and the general state of economic and psychological depression of the farm Bushmen have led to a rise in the demand for the trance curer's services" (Guenther 1999: 195).



This had two important consequences: first, the trance dancers' "esoteric knowledge" increased as they become more familiar with the course of organic diseases and about the machinations of sorcery by non-San; second, the role of the trance dancer became increasingly professionalized (ibid; see also Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997). I noticed similar trends in the Omaheke. The services of the three healers who treated Komtsa were sought by non-San, particularly Basters (as 'Coloureds' are known in Namibia), some from as far away as Rehoboth. Although these healers treated San, their regular customers were non-San who could afford their fees (see also Guenther 1999: 193). Healers in the Omaheke now also deal with tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases as well as mystical malevolence. For the San, physical and spiritual ailments are not usually separable.

Since it is most often curses and sorcery by Tswanas and Hereros that cause illness among the San — and the predations of Hyena People that cause general hardship — many trance dances are usually of the short, specialized and diagnostic variety (see also Katz 1982: 50–51). Longer trance dances are performed when *gllauasi* are involved, or when the patient is particularly ill. However, San still value these shorter ceremonies and, despite the fact that San trance dancers are paid professionals, their activities still contribute to general community well-being among the San. Katz notes that

For the Kung [Ju|'hoansi], healing is more than curing. Healing seeks to establish health and growth on physical, psychological, social, and spiritual levels; it involves work on the individual, the group, and the surrounding environment and cosmos (Katz 1982: 34).

Healing, according to Katz, is a "fundamental integrating and enhancing force" (ibid). I believe this is true for the Omaheke San as well. Trance dances in the Omaheke appear to be truncated versions of the ceremonies conducted by San elsewhere. The ceremonies I saw and heard about were conducted to deal with specific problems; I did not hear about a trance dance being conducted explicitly for the purposes of managing social tensions, restoring peace, or just for the joy of healing (see Katz 1982; Guenther 1999; Biesele 1993). Nonetheless, even the shorter, more specialized ceremonies seemed to produce the same effect. After participating in a trance dance, San appeared calmer, more light-hearted, and renewed. They expressed pride in their powerful, and distinctly San ceremony. Biesele notes that the trance dance "embod[ies] the values of egalitarianism and tolerance, and reforc[es] the idea of mutual effort against misfortune" (1993: 76; also cited in Guenther 1999: 196). Guenther adds that "in the modern social context of multi-ethnic conflict, the trance dance acts as a mechanism for instilling a sense of collective ethnic identity" (1999: 196). Trance dances communicate support and solidarity; they reaffirm the values and principles of cooperation and community cohesion. However, healing ceremonies are episodic, concentrated and ritualized expressions of community and solidarity — the San also reinforce these values in

their responses to drinking and fighting in more mundane contexts of daily life.

### TOUCHING, TALKING AND TOLERANCE

The San's standard reaction to drinking and fighting initially puzzled me. They rarely harbored long-lasting feelings of ill-will against each other when drinking turned violent. If the fighting did not result in serious injuries, they would often relate past brawling among themselves as a comical event. San women in particular usually laughed as they described how their husbands got drunk and hit them. As long as the violent episode being described was not too extreme or too recent, they usually found something humorous to say about it. The San described fairly severe beatings by farmers, police officers, and other non-San with even more laughter and jocularity. At first it appeared as though the San were not taking these issues seriously enough. But a deeper appreciation of their circumstances reveals how humor is one of the few available and healthy responses to hardship; it is a form of feistiness. Laughter cements solidarity; it implies the message that, although they were beaten, they are not broken. The San also seem to have a fairly refined darker sense of humor. Lorna Marshall described how Ju|'hoansi in Nyae Nyae would laugh at a lame elderly man whenever he fell down (1976: 351). The San in the Omaheke seem to be laughing at their own misfortunes in much the same way — perhaps they see much that is absurd about adversity and victimization.

Although many San are able to laugh at drinking and fighting, they are certainly not indifferent to it. Lamponing and laughing were features of retrospective reconstructions of what were certainly upsetting occasions. The San's more immediate reactions to drunken fighting among themselves were typically more subdued, somber and gentle. After a brawl, and once everyone was sober, victims of an assault often joined others in displaying a great deal of affection toward the aggressors. To smooth things over, they redoubled their efforts to reestablish bonds of affection. Lorna Marshall noted that for the Ju|'hoansi in Nyae Nyae

their wanting to belong and be near is actually visible in the way families cluster together in an encampment and in the way they sit huddled together, often touching someone, shoulder to shoulder, ankle across ankle. Security and comfort for them lie in their belonging to the group, free from the threat of rejection and hostility (1976: 350).

The Omaheke San similarly demonstrate affection and solidarity physically — they often sit piled on top of each other — arms flopped over the shoulders of other, legs slung over legs — removing as much space between each other as possible while they are relaxing and socializing. However, this behavior is exaggerated after an alcohol-related altercation; touching is not as absent-minded, and it is reinforced with caresses and expressions of concern. When a drunken altercation occurs, everyone involved is seen as a victim of harm — including the intoxicated combatants. San tend to absolve each other of responsibility for drunken behavior.

One often hears, 'it wasn't his fault, he was drunk' or 'the beer made him do it'. Drunkenness is seen as an altered state of consciousness (see also Katz, Biesele and St. Denis 1997); it is a state separable from normal life, and a space where otherwise unacceptable behavior is more easily forgivable.

The San have few opportunities to address and resolve social tensions, since many of the sources of these tensions are owed to conditions beyond their control. Among the San themselves, there are strong expectations of cooperation and 'mannerliness' (see Marshall 1976). They face enormous pressure to support kin and friends, even when they are coping with hardship and deprivation themselves. Reinforcing these expectations of mild-mannered accommodation and good humor are broader socioeconomic inequalities that often preclude opportunities for the San to assert themselves; they face physical reprisals by non-San if they get too 'cheeky'. They are also abundantly aware of the injustices to which they are subjected, and of the fact that they have few ways of directly challenging them. Thus, the San tend to give each other 'a break' when they get drunk and act up.

The San's egalitarian values also create space for aggressive drunkenness. Omaha San, much like San in Dobe and Nyae Nyae, avoid interfering in each others' activities, and avoid imposing decisions or resolutions on each other (see also Marshall 1976; and Lee 1979) (An important exception, as I mentioned above, is the authority San husbands claim over their wives.) When a dispute arises, San sort it out by 'talking' (i.e., they engage in "purposeful discussions") (see also Marshall 1976). When energetic "talking" threatens to escalate into a loud argument or violence, an on-looker may crack a joke, and when everybody laughs, the tension is broken (Marshall 1976: 352-355; Lee 1979: 372). Unfortunately, this strategy fails when people are drunk — a joke is too easily taken the wrong way and people 'don't listen to reason'. When talking doesn't work — as is usually the case when people are intoxicated — they must exaggerate conventional expressions of acceptance and mannerliness in order to repair the damage they were unable to prevent.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many psychological and sociological approaches to drinking (particularly alcohol abuse and alcoholism) tend to focus on whether alcoholism is a primary social problem or a symptom of poor mental health caused by deprivation and socio-cultural disintegration (Whitehead and Hayes 1998). Other theories identify the causes of alcoholism in strategies to reduce tension, environments of social learning, or the disruption of cognitive processes (see Leonard and Blane 1999). Although the insights offered by these theories are useful for intervention strategies in western contexts, their level of abstraction may encourage us to overlook the more glaringly apparent features of San life that contribute to drinking and drinking-related violence. One young San man explained how San develop a dependency on alcohol this way: "[the San] stay close to the beer and drink it all the time because some of them are accustomed to drinking now". San I spoke to consistently offered very

pragmatic explanations for drinking: hunger and habit.

Drinking, and the fighting that results, are largely assigned by the San to that part of the world over which they have little or no direct control. In the face of poverty, despair, and hunger, the fabric of kinship and reciprocity are often their only assurance of survival, and tears in that fabric must be quickly repaired. Grudges cannot be held, blame must be deflected, and solidarity preserved. When their already difficult material conditions are compounded by sorcery and hyena people, the San's famous healing powers restore to them some measure of control over adversities, while simultaneously reweaving their social fabric.

Ironically, San tolerance, patience, and egalitarian attitudes both create a permissive environment for drinking and fighting, and constitute the values that are vital to maintaining their social relationships. As their material conditions deteriorate — as homebrew becomes the primary source of sustenance — hunger feeds habit, and fear and frustration lead to more drinking and fighting. In the face of these processes, the San have little choice — if they are to survive as a community — but to respond with increasing tolerance toward the very actions that pose the most serious threat to their cohesion.

## NOTES

- 1) Sam Nujoma is the president of Namibia, and leader of the ruling party, the South West Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO).
- 2) The names of farms and informants have been changed.
- 3) On special occasions, farmers allow their San workers into an outbuilding equipped with a television and VCR to watch movies. The San particularly enjoy action films, since there is little dialogue — and many are big fans of Jean Claude van Dam and Jackie Chan.
- 4) James Suzman (2001) also describes Jackal as a trickster figure among the Ju|'hoansi in the Omaheke.
- 5) The San recognize that homebrew on the farms is a different substance altogether from township *tombo*. They claim the main difference is that township *tombo* is 'stronger'. However, according to reports from Tswana and Herero informants who live in Epako, and a few doctors I spoke to in the hospital and clinics, *cuca* shop owners make their beer with all manner of toxic substances, including battery acid, to give their beer an extra kick. Although the San are being literally poisoned by *tombo*, their own understanding of poisoning, and the effects of alcohol generally, is strongly informed by their own relationship to the spirit world.

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