

ON THE COMPLEXITY OF THE URBANIZATION PROCESS OF THE BUSHMEN: CASE STUDY ON THE !XUN IN THE GROOTFONTEIN AREA IN NAMIBIA

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Abstract: Although overlooked by both administrators as well as anthropologists, and numerically rather marginal, the Bushmen have been always part of the Namibian urban spaces on their erstwhile territories. Based on several field research trips to the area of Grootfontein between 2007 and 2013 and archival research, this article outlines the complex historical processes and factors influencing the mobility of the !Xun Bushmen into, and out of, the urban space of Grootfontein in the commercial farming area of Namibia. Even though the mobility to its urban space was largely legally controlled during both the German and South African rule, the Bushmen continuously managed to penetrate it. With the development of the Blikkiesdorp settlement in the township of Grootfontein in the early 2000s, when many Bushmen were allocated a plot by the municipality, the number of !Xun in the town considerably increased and they became an integral part of the afore-mentioned settlement. This article argues that the reasons for Bushman urbanization are far more complex than being solely economically motivated.

Keywords: *Bushmen; !Xun; urbanization; Namibia*

Introduction

The ratio between people living in rural and urban areas is globally shifting towards the latter. This process is also progressing fast in sub-Saharan Africa and encompasses peoples whose ways of living have been regarded in the Western imagination as the very antithesis of urban life: the

Bushmen.¹ According to the last national census in Namibia in 2011, at least one in five Bushmen households was living in an urban area.² This marks a significant increase in the number of urban-dwelling Bushmen and this has occurred in only the last quarter of a century. In 1991, one year after Namibia's independence, only 3.4% of Bushmen were "urbanized" (Pendleton and Frayne 1998: 3). Therefore, the phenomenon of the urbanization of the Bushmen, which has been largely neglected so far by anthropologists (some data in this regard can be found in Dieckmann (2007) and Sylvain (1999)), should deserve more attention of social scientists as a whole. It is also an issue that may present challenges for Namibian state authorities.

The author of this article has been studying the urbanization process of the !Xun (in older anthropological studies known mostly as the !Kung) Bushmen in the area of the town Grootfontein since 2007.³ These !Xun were gradually drawn to the immediate area of Grootfontein and its township from the areas to its northeast, east and southeast. In pre-colonial times Grootfontein apparently lay not far west of the then Hai//om – !Xun "frontier" (Seiner 1912, 1913; von Zastrow 1914). Grootfontein was established at the

¹ Being aware of the preference of the term San by some authors, I still find the use of the term Bushmen to be more appropriate as a description in this study. The reason for this is that it was perceived by my informants as less derogatory than the former. If the term San is used in this study, it is mostly for stylistic reasons to avoid frequent repetitions of the term Bushmen.

² Out of the 228,955 households counted in Namibian urban areas, 0.3 percent of them were San (and out of the 235,884 households in the rural areas 1.3 percent were San (Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census, p. 172; in the census, the term San was expressly used). At the same time it is critical to be aware of the ambiguity of the term "urban," especially within a Namibian context. This concept seems to be problematic also in the way it is used by census institutions (see criticism expressed by Melber 1996: 4). In Namibia, in official population surveys, the criterion for counting people as "urban" is when they reside at that time in an area proclaimed as urban by the government, i.e., either in municipalities or towns (Land Authority Act 1992). But this begs the question of variety within the context of "semi-urban" spaces, as is the case of the "locations" on private plots, run as small farms, next to the "urban" space of Grootfontein.

³ I conducted six short-term research trips to Namibia between 2007 and 2013: September – October 2007; July – August 2008; July 2009; November – December 2010; December 2011; and April – May 2013. The aim was to spread the field research over several years to be able to observe the mobility patterns of the !Xun over an extended period. During the last visit I also conducted archival research in the National Archives of Namibia. I communicated with the !Xun in Afrikaans, which most of them learnt on the farms, and which largely serves as lingua franca of the Grootfontein urban environment. During the field research I gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. The most important method for the collection of the data was interviewing: ranging from informal and unstructured, to semi-structured and structured interviewing. Most of the time of the research I spent with the !Xun in the township of Grootfontein, with occasional short visits to their kin in the communal area in the western part of the Tsumkwe District, close to the Red Line.

end of the 19th century in an area only scarcely inhabited by Bushmen at that time, and hence was regarded by the German colonial authorities as *herrenlos* (Deutsche Kolonialzeitung 1892: 11). It soon developed as an administrative, commercial and service center for the surrounding farm area within the former Police Zone designated by colonial authorities for the white settlement. It had 16,632 dwellers in 2011 (Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census: 39). In 2001, the last year for which I was provided with statistical data by the Namibian National Planning Commission, the most numerous peoples living in the town were Oshivambo and Nama-Damara (Khoekhoegowab) speakers, both comprising about 30 % of the town dwellers, followed by the far less numerous Afrikaans-speaking people (Coloreds and Afrikaners – 13.3 %) and Otjiherero speakers (12.1 %).

An informal census conducted in 2006–7 by some “foremen” of the !Xun dwelling in Grootfontein, which provides only an estimate, found approximately 200 !Xun San living in the township. Their number might in fact be even higher at some periods. The number of Hai//om Bushmen in Grootfontein, who evidently traditionally inhabited this area (see, e.g., Vedder 1928), is very likely to be even higher, but they “disappear” in official censuses among Damaras, who are Khoekhoegowab speakers as well.

Most of the !Xun I met in the Grootfontein township of Omulunga during my five short-term field research trips there between 2007–2011 started to live for extended periods in Grootfontein only after they were allocated plots by the municipality in the first shanty settlement, Blikkiesdorp, which was developed in the early 2000s. Most of these !Xun as well as their parents were born on the farms. It was only their younger children who were born in Grootfontein. The last generation of “traditionally” living !Xun in genealogical kin relationships to my oldest informants must have been born around the 1910s.

Below I will present the data on the urbanization of the !Xun in the Grootfontein area, which is, I believe, to a considerable degree, also applicable to other Bushmen groups in the commercial farming region(s) in Namibia, because of the similarities of the socio-economic features of the whole area. The main questions to be answered here are:

- How and why have the !Xun been moving into the Grootfontein urban area?
- What place does the town have in their present mobility patterns?

German and South African rule: urban space controlled

When studying the phenomenon of Bushmen urbanization, it is necessary to avoid approaching it in a simplistic way, to which even academics may not be entirely immune. The most apparent tendency to over-simplify might be to view the urbanization of the Bushmen in the studied area, and evidently elsewhere as well, as a move of “pure” hunter-gatherers out of their “traditional” natural environment, “untainted” by civilization, into an alienating and antagonistic modern “city” space.



“Buschmannswerft in Grootfontein” from a photo album of the South West Africa Company in the National Archives of Namibia (Accession A.791, Album 1). The picture is from the German period and gives us a notion about the beginnings of Bushman “urbanization” in South West Africa.

The Bushmen groups within the Grootfontein commercial farming area were not living in a static state of splendid isolation even in the precolonial time before the establishment of the first urban spaces. There are records of a number being in contact with non-Bushmen (Galton 1853, Vedder 1928, Gordon and

Douglas 2000). The urban spaces in Namibia often developed gradually from settlements of a small number of white settlers, and were, therefore, called *Orte* or *Plätze* during the German period, and could host, if they were not booming mines demanding a large labor force, only a relatively small native population, for whom they could offer employment opportunities. Places such as Grootfontein resembled small rural settlements. Grootfontein's first native camps (*Werften*) developed, "hidden in the bush," in the north of the settlement (Jaeger and Weibel 1921: 77). In the 1930s all the natives were resettled in the location (in Afrikaans *lokasie*, a term used for the township for natives) on the other side of the town, known nowadays as the "Old Location."

Groups	Male adults	Female adults	Male minors	Female minors	Total
Ovambo	1600	262	139	105	2106
Herero	510	327	193	155	1185
Klip Kaffir (Damara)	415	252	246	129	1042
Bushmen	171	161	93	103	528
Zambezi	201				201
Bastard	32	21	7	6	66
Hottentot (Nama)	18	11	14	20	63
Colored	17	5	7	16	45

Reflecting political developments in South Africa, in the 1950s the whole territory underwent a toughening of urban apartheid legislation. In the early 1960s, in line with the Natives (Urban Areas) Proclamation No. 56/1951, urban native dwellers were moved into the "New Location," which has been since then expanding. The aim of this policy was to "create a very small African urban elite with rights to remain in the towns, while the majority of the black population were conceived as a transient proletariat" (Wallace 2011: 251–2). The separate development policy was applied towards particular ethnic groups regarded as having their own traditions, habits and languages. Thus, the locations had to

⁴ LGR 3/1/16 17/15/2, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1926, Magistrate Grootfontein. The terms used in the table are those of the original source.

be divided into separated ethnic sections, whose dwellers should be in contact with their respective ethnic homeland. Grootfontein location was divided into three sections: the Ovambo, Damara and Herero location, representing the most numerous ethnic groups. For single contract workers, a dormitory-like Single Quarters was built. According to Köhler (1959b: 64) in the 1950s the Bushmen in the “Old Location” lived “scattered among the Bergdama and Ovambo.” According to my older !Xun informants, in the “New Location” the situation was similar, but some of them were living with the Hereros too.

While the influx of the natives during the first phase of German colonization was to some degree spontaneous, it became gradually legally regulated and remained like this throughout the South African rule period until the second half of the 1970s, when the influx control measures were relaxed. During this period it was legally bound on the breadwinners to have work and a place to stay in the town (the system of residence, site and lodger permits), for which rent had to be paid; only then could this person be joined by the spouse and children. To fulfill these conditions on a long-term basis might be difficult and, in the case of Grootfontein, a significant part of the urban population stayed in the town only for a limited time. The aim of the German and South African administrations was to keep the urban population at the minimum to satisfy the town’s economic needs. This enabled the distribution of the labor force to other areas that were short of workers and, in theory, made the towns socially controllable spaces.

The first statistical data regarding urban Bushmen dwellers in the Grootfontein district I know of are from the Native Affairs Annual Report of the Grootfontein Magistrate for 1926 (see Table 1). Contrary to the generally held notions that during the colonial period only a negligible number of Bushmen lived in the towns, they state that in that year there were 528 Bushmen living in the urban areas of the district without specifying a division between the Grootfontein, Tsumeb and Otavi settlements. Thus, in the 1920s, in the Grootfontein district, there may well have been a significant population of several hundred Bushmen town dwellers. This number, however, soon decreased and was only exceeded again after independence. In the period from the 1920s until the 1950s, for which we have statistical data from the archival records of the town and district authorities, in Grootfontein itself there were always several dozen Bushmen (see Table 2). The highest number was 92 in the year 1954, which means the Bushmen comprised 8.3 % of the town’s native population. In 1944 the level was 10.5 %.

Table 2: Bushmen dwellers in Grootfontein 1935–1958

Year	Men	Women	Children	Total	Natives total
1935 ⁵	11	7	10	28	
1936 ⁶	11	6	8	25	
1937 ⁷	5/15	12/21	11/12	28 (or 48)	496
1938 ⁸	8	17	6	31	448
1941 ⁹				70	
1944 ¹⁰	23	15	27	65	618
1945 ¹¹	22	15	30	67	678
1946 ¹²	21	16	33	70	780
1947	22	15	30	67	700
1948	22	15	32	69	731
1949	18	26	41	85	825
1950	18	19	12	49	956
1951	16	16	19	51	984
1952	13	15	9	37	879
1953	13	31	36	80	940
1954	24	34	34	92	1114
1955	17	22	22	61	1073
1956 ¹³	16	30	16	62	1092
1958 ¹⁴	27	23	22	72	1313 ¹⁵

⁵ LGR 3/1/7 2/20/2, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1935, Tsumeb, Office of the Station Commander, 3. 1. 1936.

⁶ LGR 3/1/7 2/20/2, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1936, Magistrate Grootfontein.

⁷ LGR 3/1/7 2/20/2, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1937, Magistrate Grootfontein, 11. 1. 1938; Annual Report on Native Affairs 1937, Office of the Station Commander, Grootfontein, 3. 12. 1937.

⁸ MGR 1/3/16, 1/1/1, Report on Management, Sanitation and Health of the Grootfontein Native Location for 1938.

⁹ LGR 3/1/7 2/20/2, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1941, Magistrate Grootfontein, 14. 1. 1942.

¹⁰ LGR 3/1/7 2/20/8, Report of the Village Management Board Secretary on the Magistrate Grootfontein, Annual Report on Native Affairs, i.e. non-Europeans 1945, Grootfontein Native Location, 11. 12. 1945.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² LGR 3/1/7 2/20/9, Annual Report on Native Affairs 1946, Grootfontein Native Location, Secretary of the Village Management Board.

¹³ Data for the years 1947–1956 are from Köhler (1959b: 58–59).

¹⁴ LGR 3/3/3, Jaarverslag oor Naturellesake: Distrikt Grootfontein: 1958, Naturellekommissaris.

¹⁵ The statistics on the Bushmen living in urban areas in the Grootfontein district include the location in Grootfontein, Otavi and up to 1952, when the Tsumeb district separated from Grootfontein

Unfortunately since the second half of the 1960s the Bushmen disappear from the records. In the records of the Grootfontein municipality kept at the National Archives of Namibia data are mentioned only for the years 1967 and 1968. In 1967 they mention only 13 Bushmen out of the total native population of 2603,¹⁶ and the following year it was 15 Bushmen out of the native population of 2639.¹⁷ The data for the ethnicity of Grootfontein's native dwellers for the subsequent years stated only the Ovambos, Hereros and Damaras, since ethnicity was apparently ascribed according to which one of the three ethnic sections of the location or Single Quarters (meant primarily for single Ovambo contract workers) an individual occupied. Thus, these statistics also conceal under one of the three ethnic labels peoples from other ethnic groups, including the Bushmen. Furthermore, when the town's authorities began in the second half of the 1970s to lose control of who was living in the location, it must have become yet more difficult to obtain reliably accurate statistics about its dwellers.

If the statistical data are correct, I suggest we may explain the initially higher numbers of Bushmen in the urban areas in the following ways: the urban spaces drew into them in their beginnings the local Bushmen populations, but the latter gradually lost the space to non-Bushmen, who better fulfilled the administration's criteria for employment in the town. Ovambos and Kavangos were provided to the urban areas also by the South West Africa Native Labor Organization (SWANLA), which was headquartered in Grootfontein. The wages in the formal sector in the town were generally higher than at the surrounding farms, and it was more advantageous to work there. However, the Bushmen lost out to other natives in the competition for the employment in the urban areas.

The way they were classified and stereotyped by the whites must have played an equally weighty role in the Bushmen not being employed in the urban environment as well. If the whites regarded the natives as people with fewer needs than themselves, they recognized only minimal needs in the Bushmen.

district also Tsumeb urban area. It is worth mentioning that there was also a not negligible number of Bushmen (apparently mostly Hai//om) in Otjiwarongo, e.g., in 1955 there were 86 of them and in 1956 already 97. "There are many Bushmen, who have infiltrated from the north. They are Nama-speaking and largely integrated" (Köhler 1959c: 70–71, 78). In smaller numbers the Bushmen (//Kxau-//en) were dwelling also in the Gobabis location, e.g. in 1949 it was 49 of them (Köhler 1959a: 48, 90).

¹⁶ MGR 1/3/16, 1/2/10, Grootfontein munisipalitaet, maadverslag: February 1967, bestuurder/lokasiesuperintendent.

¹⁷ MGR 1/3/16, 1/2/11, Grootfontein munisipalitaet, maandverslag: April 1968, bestuurder/lokasiesuperintendent.

“The needs of a Bushman are few, and provided he can get food and tobacco he is satisfied. He has no desire for money, clothing or civilized luxuries,” was Doke’s perception of the !Xun at the farm Neitsas, northeast of Grootfontein. He observed that they were paid a “small monthly wage, usually in clothes” (Doke 1925: 41–43). The Bushmen were regarded as the most backward natives and the worst workers, preferably to be employed only where there was no other option, in other words on the farms in scarcely populated territories. The minimal expenses associated with the Bushmen made their employment on the farms advantageous. However, the negative stereotypes about the Bushmen became deeply internalized by the whites and co-shaped Bushmen self-identity as a marginalized people, while also hindering their development and limiting their ability to assert themselves economically, except for doing the worst paid manual work.

The less time the Bushmen spent in the urban environment, the more difficult it was for them to penetrate its regulated space and the more it became a social domain of the non-Bushmen. In the urban areas there were also (in the beginning mission) schools, which gave the children of the town dwellers the opportunity to obtain some elementary education, which gave them a comparative advantage over the Bushmen living in the farm areas where there were no schools, perpetuating their status as farm proletariat. The non-Bushmen town dwellers got to know the urban social environment and how to exploit its employment opportunities. The longer someone stayed in the town, the greater the chance to stay there in the future and vice versa. This general pattern has also been observed by modern-day Bantu migrants to Windhoek (Frayne 2004: 494).

Importantly, those Bushmen who stayed in the town could be followed by their kinsfolk, for whom they constituted social capital that could be called on to aid their mobility. However, once the urban environment became too non-Bushmen, it must have dissuaded some Bushmen from entering it since it was a socially alien environment. Thus, before independence, according to my information, there were no !Xun “townspeople” families who stayed in the location permanently.

The marginality of the !Xun in the area of concern has had the effect of galvanizing their intra-group kin ties and dependency. Georg Simmel’s rule that the intensity of a group’s cohesion increases with the level of strained relationships towards the *Others* applies in some ways to the !Xun in the Grootfontein area. There was a strained relationship between the Bushmen and the Republic

of Upingtonia settlers¹⁸ (Burger 1978, Prinsloo and Gauche 1933, Gordon and Douglas 2000) and this was followed by the harsh approach of the Germans, which reached genocide-like dimensions during the last years of the German colonial period (Gordon 2009). The Bushmen were then being “pacified” during the South African rule, especially in the farm border areas, most intensively in the Nurugas area east of Grootfontein, which the administration reports described as “law-abiding” only since the second half of the 1930s. Even though there were individual differences among the farmers, the Bushmen were harshly treated by their employers on the farms up to independence. Physical assaults on the Bushmen by the farmers were common. After independence, violence decreased, but did not disappear. The conflict-laden relationship between the farmer and !Xun developed new forms: it became a constant quarrelling about wages and rations.

The intra-group bonds have been further constantly activated due to the economic vulnerability of the !Xun in all the socio-economic environments in which they appeared, be it urban, farm or communal areas. These intra-group bonds have been strengthened since independence in the process of economic competition with non-Bushmen, in which the San have largely lost out. Strong dependency on the kin has also co-hindered the movement of the !Xun out of their “traditional” areas, where their kin networks are at their densest and provide them with social security. This also helped keep them on the farms.

The !Xun often used to and still move from one farm to another in kin-related groups. Even today the !Xun in Grootfontein’s urban environment live in kin clusters and even the township non-!Xun dwellers observed that the !Xun are those who “always” move in groups in the town, be it when going shopping, scavenging at the main dump site, or withdrawing the elders’ pensions at the NamPost. Similarly, Sylvain (1999: 374) observed that young Ju/’hoan men move around the Epako township in similarly-styled “gangs.”

The circular migration patterns of Bantu or Damara people from the communal areas, their “home base,” to towns in the commercial farming area, mostly in the capital Windhoek, has been extensively reported on. They often go to the towns, following their kin, in search of work or a generally better life and can always return “home” to the communal farms, when unemployed or ill. The latter is an area to which they often relate their hopes and aspirations and

¹⁸ The short-lived republic of Boer trekkers coming from Transvaal and then Angolan Humpata to the area of Grootfontein existed between 1885–1887.

they plan to come back there when they grow old (Greiner 2008: 160). These migrants can nowadays build on historically-created kin networks, in urban spaces, on geographically large areas often far away from the home areas of their ethnic group.

In the case of the !Xun and, apparently, other Bushmen groups as well, these networks stretching out of the traditionally inhabited areas are virtually non-existent. The !Xun were used at most as (unreliable) farm laborers in the areas where they were living. The !Xun could move further out of their original territories following the white farmers and farmers' kin. However, the farmers did not take the !Xun along to other areas in large numbers if they could use the local inhabitants there as workers. Thus, the !Xun did not "jump" from one region to another as was the case of Bantu contract workers, some of whom then permanently settled in the spaces into which they moved and built "bases" in originally alien ethnic environments on which could capitalize the kin. There is nothing like a !Xun "migrant" or even "Bushman migrant." Pendleton and Frayne (1998) documented that migrating Namibians mostly stay with their kin, but quite a significant number of urban dwellers move among urban spaces on their own without having to rely on kin. In contrast, the !Xun and other Bushmen's moves depended solely on the presence or movements of relatives or employers.

The !Xun could only gradually penetrate into neighboring areas. However, when they came across areas inhabited by other peoples, their movement seems to have significantly halted. Thus, they did not move farther west of Grootfontein, where the Hai//om traditionally lived.

Sylvain states that the concept of urban and rural sites, where the latter represent the periphery, does not reflect the Ju/'hoan Bushmen perception: "... from the Ju/'hoansi point of view, the 'periphery' would be any site – rural or urban – where jobs are scarce or insecure and where making a living is most difficult" (Sylvain 1999: 376–7). In fact, for the !Xun I observed that periphery is comprehended strongly in the sense of *social periphery* in a threefold sense: (1) the presence, or lack of presence, of the kin, mirroring a situation in which the !Xun often struggle to acquire work and have to rely on mutual support; (2) contacts to potential employers, for instance whites, for whom the !Xun used to work in the past and (3) contacts with !Xun and non-!Xun friends. Many !Xun who decided to settle in Grootfontein did so after working throughout their lives on the farms close to the town or for some periods even in the town itself. Without contacts in the urban space, which were more developed the longer an individual

stayed in this area, it would be more difficult to find employment opportunities there. The !Xun, who had lived on the farms or in the communal area, lacked this social capital to move to the town.

Given what was said above about the regulated colonial urban space and the factors hindering the movement of the Bushmen into it, we may change the way the researchers have approached Bushmen urbanization so far: the right organizing question may not be why were so few Bushmen, given their total numbers, in the urban areas in the past, but how is it possible that, given the mentioned factors, so many of them, relatively, still penetrated it? There were several factors:

- Following the white owners of the farms (and their kin), who had houses in the location, these !Xun could stay in the white employers' *buitekamer* (staff room as part of the house or separated from it).
- The !Xun women came to Grootfontein with their non-!Xun, mostly Ovambo and Kavango, partners, who came to Grootfontein area as contract workers. Their stay in the location depended on the man's employment.
- The !Xun could follow their !Xun kin, or, to a much smaller degree, their non-!Xun affines' (of the !Xun women staying with non-!Xun men) network in the location.
- Generally, the longer a !Xun stayed in the urban environment or at farms and plots in its vicinity, the better this person knew the employment opportunities in the town and could look for and find work there.

Many !Xun who lived in Grootfontein during the time of my research (and who tended to stay there) had non-Bushman fathers.¹⁹ This suggests the question of to what extent the affiliation with the non-Bushmen from the father's side, with the latter's higher social status, influenced their children's psychological mind-set regarding their confidence to enter and assert themselves in a multi-ethnic urban environment. As we know some of the contract workers settled in the town and built their families with local women. This was also the case with extraterritorial workers, who tended to keep to their families in the

¹⁹ The relationships between the !Xun women and non-!Xun (mostly Bantu or Damara) men were, in the past, and even now, often short-lived with the men usually leaving the women after some time and not looking after the child/children who came out of these unions. Though the situation is more complex than this, generally the women are looking for partners with a higher socio-economic status than the !Xun men have, while the non-!Xun partners tend mostly to enter these relationships with the prospect of them being short-term relationships.

Police Zone since they were cutoff there from their ethnic kin networks. The physical appearance of the !Xun from inter-ethnic unions, who did not look “typically” Bushmen, may have contributed to their easier negotiation of the urban environment as well. The non-Bushmen fathers generally also have better jobs and higher wages than the !Xun, which enabled their families to enjoy, to a relative degree, a higher social status.

Generally, even though there were always some Bushmen in Grootfontein under German and South African rule, they did not appear in the records of the town’s authorities outside the statistics for native dwellers. It is apparent that the latter focused only on the larger ethnic groups that were relevant numerically and economically and, after the beginning of the native liberation effort, could pose a security threat for the colonial administration. The location’s Bushmen minority was not an element considered to be worthy of much attention. Therefore, in terms of primary written sources, these Bushmen urban dwellers are virtually invisible. The study of archival records also indicates that the smaller an ethnic minority was in the Grootfontein urban environment, the more its members resorted to conformity with the *Others* and the less they were, as such, “visible.”

Independence: from squatters to “permanent” dwellers

The relaxation of mobility control in the second half of the 1970s and even the independence did not have immediate significant influence on the movement of the !Xun to Grootfontein. A crucial prerequisite for staying in the town remained having a place to dwell. Since the !Xun, mostly former farmworkers, had limited marketable skills for securing jobs in the urban environment, it was difficult for them to generate income that would enable them to rent a house. The town’s authorities also prohibited the establishment of any illegal settlements. The turning point for the !Xun to settle in large numbers in the township was the establishment of the Blikkiesdorp (*blik* – in Afrikaans tin sheet/plate; *dorp* – town or village: thus the name can be interpreted as a settlement of houses made out of metal sheets) settlement.

The fact that in Blikkiesdorp, and later on, in the extension next to it, some !Xun were allocated their “own” plot by the local municipality, created a historically new situation. The plots were formally rented to them. Although the cash-strapped !Xun, like many other poor township dwellers, pay their rent only rarely, I have never heard of a case of a Blikkiesdorp dweller being evicted

for not paying rent. The municipality also allocated some plots in Blikkiesdorp to !Xun families who had started in 2001–2002 to squat under trees next to the main street passing through Grootfontein's commercial center and at the Total station. The then regional and town authorities first tried to resettle some of them in former Bushmanland, but they soon returned to Grootfontein, since these former farmworkers were not used to life in the communal area. Importantly, all Blikkiesdorp dwellers were also allowed to build shacks and huts on their plots, whereas before independence the natives had to live in brick houses. Some of the !Xun who had not received a plot up to that stage stayed in the township by subletting a site and erecting a shack on the plots of other landlords, who are often non-!Xun.

The Grootfontein !Xun dwellers who stay in the township for long periods, (1) are mostly employed in the town in the houses of the white European descendants, as domestic workers; (2) engage in occasional work or live on *zula* (a word of apparently Nguni origin), which means they look for, and sell, empty bottles and scrap metal; and (3) some also live on occasional scavenging of food on the dump sites. Many !Xun combine these strategies as a means of survival. An important role for sustaining the !Xun families in the township is played by the Namibian state pension scheme to which all citizens older than 60 are entitled.

Regarding the Hai//om Bushmen in Outjo, Dieckmann (2007) suggests that the decreasing demand for labor at the commercial farms is one of the main factors behind their urbanization. The commercial farms struggle economically, can no longer rely on the pre-independence state subsidies, and as a result are often turned into safari lodges and guest farms. The farmers also have to comply with new labor legislation (Labor Act No. 6 of 1992), which sets forth minimum conditions of employment concerning remuneration. A role is also played by demographic factors such as population growth, resulting in increased competition among the workers for employment opportunities on the farms (Dieckmann 2007: 240–1; Devereaux, Vemunavi, and van Rooy 1996: 9–13).

Below I list the reasons why the !Xun I have encountered in Grootfontein during the period of my research choose to live in the township:

Losing work at the farm: statements vs. reality

Some !Xun breadwinners told me that they came to Grootfontein after losing work as farmworkers. However, I noticed the !Xun gave this reason most often at the onset of my research when they wanted to highlight their generally

difficult economic situation and may have expected some kind of assistance from me. During the course of my research I gathered a lot of evidence indicating that finding work on a farm or plot tended not to be particularly difficult. The problem lay in having work with satisfactory employment conditions (such as decent wages and food rations and a good relationship with the farmer) and the willingness to engage in farmwork. I came across some farmers who claimed that the Bushmen had lost work at farms after the white farms were acquired by black natives of Namibia. However, I never came across any !Xun who intimated that they had lost work in this way, or even had worked at a commercial farm for a non-white person. This is not to say that it has never occurred in the past, or will never happen in the future, but it is apparent that the blaming of the black farmers in this regard reflects aspects of current racial and political tensions in the country to some extent.

All of the !Xun living in Grootfontein regarded life in the town as difficult, but I observed that none of them had settled down there because there were no other options. Most of the !Xun could try to find employment on a farm and some of them could move to former Bushmanland. In the case of the elders they could also join their relatives in other areas, but when contemplating their possibilities, they regarded Grootfontein as a better option.

Thus, statements about the !Xun living in the town as being the most *desperate* ones, who were virtually *forced* to live there as a last resort – to live in a hostile urban environment – seem to be too simplistic and hinder us from grasping the issue in all its fullest complexity. At the same time, such statements implicitly support the notion that the Bushmen, by their nature, do not “belong” to the urban environment and that their lives there must be less satisfactory than on the farms or communal areas. Such perceptions tend to view the Bushmen one-sidedly as passive victims of the socio-economic system and deny their autonomy to act.

Joining the kin in the township

Sylvain (1999: 384) highlighted the connection between kin network and mobility: “It would be too simplistic to see Ju/’hoan mobility exclusively in terms of job seeking and job dissatisfaction; but, worse, doing so obscures how Ju/’hoan families both facilitate and motivate mobility.”

The !Xun may “settle” in the township after first joining their kin who are already living there. This may be easier when it concerns a single person who can stay at the shack of a relative with whom s/he has a good relationship.

However, it is quite complicated when it comes to the movement of the whole family. This requires the permission of the “owner” of the plot, with whom the asking side should have a good relationship. There must also be space on the plot where the newcomer can erect a new shack. Furthermore, if the whole family settles in the township, the breadwinner must be employed (unless living on *zula*) to provide for the family.

The !Xun, like members of other Bushmen groups, often visit each other. The visitors often come to the town to accomplish a specific task which can only be done there. Examples of these tasks can be getting new registry documents such as birth certificates, undergoing medical examinations, taking children to the hospital to have their vaccinations, or when being summoned to the court (for whatever reason). In these instances, it often happens that some of their relatives come to Grootfontein with them. The “boundary” between a visitor and a person living on the plot may sometimes be unclear, as some of them might find work in the town and stay there for an extended period.

Looking for work in the town

The wages the !Xun received on the farms are, on average, very similar to those they receive in Grootfontein. Thus, if a !Xun decides to go to the town from a farm, factors other than the improvement of their financial situation are mostly involved too. The situation changes, to some extent, when the !Xun move from former Bushmanland or Hereroland where it is almost impossible to generate any income. Relocating to the town means the prospect of having at least some kind of income, although almost always a negligible one. However, because the !Xun from former Bushmanland or Hereroland can often receive better wages in the farm area(s), Grootfontein does not hold a strong economic attraction for them in general.

Reclaiming autonomy: fleeing the “baas”/worker (patron/client) relationship

Some of the !Xun dwelling in Grootfontein, even though physically capable of hard farm labor, are strongly hesitant to work for the white commercial farmers or the black cattle owners in the communal area(s) based on their previous experiences with them. They feel they would have to quarrel about, inter-alia, the actual work, wages, rations, etc. They do not want to again enter into a *baas* (master in Afrikaans) versus worker relationship (or a patron/client relationship when working for the Herero pastoralists). The !Xun perceive such relationships as being exploitative and, in the cases of the white farmers, sometimes

prone to violence. In expressive academic language, one can say that if farms are “total institutions” (Suzman 1995: 12), urban spaces within the commercial farm zone can be viewed as islands of individual autonomy surrounded by this “total” sphere.

Elders: life in the town is less difficult than on the farms or communal area

During the time of my field research, the elderly !Xun gave as their main reason for relocating to the town area their advanced age, which did not allow them to continue working on a farm or to live in the communal area. Life in the town, although not easy, is for them a better option. In Grootfontein, in contrast to the communal area, they could deposit part of their pension into their bank accounts and withdraw it at any time and in any amounts they want. They could also buy foodstuffs at much lower prices in the town than in the communal areas. In Grootfontein they were also able to engage in domestic work of various kinds. This kind of employment takes up mostly only half a day and is less strenuous than farm work.

Schooling of the children

Some parents in the farm areas send their offspring to relatives living in Grootfontein for schooling. The parents of the children often pay the attached school fees. However, the burden of providing food for the children frequently lies with the hosts.

Access to better health service

I have never heard any !Xun person saying that he or she decided to settle in Grootfontein because of the medical care provided by its hospital or clinic. However, if any !Xun in the farm area of Grootfontein or in former Bushmanland was seriously ill, this person went, or was driven by an ambulance, to the hospital in Grootfontein. After hospitalization, that person often stays in the town with relatives so that he or she can regularly attend medical follow-up procedures at the medical facilities at Grootfontein. Such a person becomes more familiar with the urban environment, broadens his/her social networks there and might stay in the township even after recovering.

The role of alcohol

Another factor that could influence the !Xun’s decision to stay in the town, and whose influence should not be underestimated, is the easy and permanent access

to alcohol in the town. In Single Quarters or other places in the township it is possible to buy a large cup of home-brewed beer at any time for 1 Namibian dollar. Most of the !Xun who started to squat in the town around 2001/2002 were alcohol-addicted. By living on *zula* they could always generate some kind of meagre income with which to buy alcohol, which was then shared among all of them. Alcohol consumption, *zula* life and occasional work have perpetuated the squatting. Had these !Xun not been drinkers, it is highly probable that they would not have stayed on the streets of Grootfontein and would have dispersed to the farms and plots utilizing their kin-networks as they had always done in the past. Once they obtained a plot in the township, alcohol and *zula* life kept some of them in the town on a long-term basis.

Moving into the township and staying there for a longer period is, then, mostly a complex process that may encompass several, if not all, of the factors mentioned above. One can draw several conclusions based on these observations.

The !Xun in Grootfontein are characterized by high mobility. In my sample of 109 !Xun living on 12 plots in Grootfontein in 2008, I could trace only 60% of them in 2009, and in 2010 this number decreased slightly to 58%. At the same time a significant number of !Xun relatives came from other areas to these plots in Grootfontein. In 2009 it was 39 persons and in 2010 another 28.

However, overstating the mobility of the urban !Xun dwellers would also be a distortion of the picture. Despite the high mobility, more than half of the !Xun in the sample stayed in the town or returned there and regarded it as their home. Thus, based on my observations and interviews, it becomes apparent that Grootfontein is a place many of them prefer to other areas. The !Xun who erected their shacks as sublets are in a very vulnerable position since they could easily be evicted by the owners of the plots. The !Xun who rent *erven* directly from the municipality, mostly men of third or fourth generations, tend to stay predominantly in the town. The fact that some of them have their “own places” to live represents an important event in their lives. Before settling in the township, they were mostly moving landlessly between farms and, to a lesser extent, also to communal and other urban areas. Veronika, a !Xun woman from Blikkiesdorp, expressed this tellingly when she said that each job on a farm was in fact “temporary” (in Afrikaans *tydelik*) and, after leaving or losing a job, the !Xun can never go to their “own places” (*ons eie plek*).

The movement space of the !Xun dwelling in Grootfontein in 2008 stretched mainly out to the surrounding farms in the area. Of those who were no longer



The !Xun living in the Ovambo „location“ of the Omulunga township.

present in Grootfontein in 2009, more than half (53.5 %) moved to the farms, and in 2010 this rose to more than four fifths (83.5 %). Most of the newcomers to Grootfontein came to the town from farms. In 2009 this figure was 62 % and the following year, 57 %. The movements to other socio-economic domains are much less important. The sites the Grootfontein !Xun dwellers move to are in the following determinable descending order: farms, former Bushmanland (mostly its western part), other urban areas and former Hereroland.

The “owners” of plots in Grootfontein tend to stay on them, but their adult children or in-laws, even if they have their own shack on a plot in the township, stay in the township for a longer period only if they find employment there. It often happens that it is first the man, the breadwinner, who moves to the farm, and his wife and children, especially if they do not attend school, follow him if the farmer does not object. They could leave the plot in the township for months or even a few years and visit their shack in Grootfontein, which is padlocked, only when they are on leave, often sometimes only for a few weeks a year.

It is also usual that the man employed on the farm, be it in long-term employment or a temporary job, leaves his wife and children in the town and

visits them occasionally. If the farm is nearby, he can do so on the weekends. If it is farther away, once a month or so is more common.

Therefore, for the adult children (and their spouses and children) of the “owners” of a plot in Grootfontein, their shacks in the township may serve as a base from which they can go for some periods to other places, mostly to the farms. Sylvain (1999: 370) made a similar observation about the Ju/'hoansi in Omahake.

Many adult daughters of the “owners” of a township plot live with their families on the farms. If they are abandoned by their partners, they could move back to their parents to the town. The !Xun in the township could also become foster parents of minors whose parents have passed away or who were sent there by their own parents outside of Grootfontein in order to distribute the burden of having to provide for their offspring among close kin.

Another important factor influencing the !Xun who have a shack in Grootfontein to come and stay there is connected to the ownership of property they may have accumulated in the past and keep at the shack. The mobility of the !Xun population in the farms, their landlessness and the fact that they do not have their “own” homes was a barrier to property accumulation. The prerequisite for acquiring, by !Xun standards, more valuable property on the farms was to stay there for a longer period and also to have a close relationship to its owner from whom they might purchase used prestigious goods such as bicycles, old TVs, radios or, in exceptional cases, even cars. Having a shack in the township means they have a place to store the property permanently. When they check if it is there or if they want to use some of the items, they have to come to the township. Ownership of things has made the !Xun “follow” them.

Prospects

A look at the terms used by the !Xun reveals that urbanization, as a process of creating permanent, or at least long-term, urban dwellers with a different social status and different cultural styles from the farm and communal Bushmen dwellers, is still a recent process in contrast to other Namibian peoples. The Damara/Nama-speakers call their townspeople *gai !a-//in* and they enjoy higher social status than the *farm //in*, the “farm dwellers.” The differentiation between these two terms reflects the longer exposure of these peoples to an urban environment within the former Police Zone. Similarly, the Hereros have a term for town dwellers, *tate ngo owozondwa* (this term implies far more than simply an urban

dweller, but rather implies the individual has come to be “civilized” as such), and in opposition to them are *ovozofarama* (farm people). Among Oshivambo-speaking people we find the expression *Ombwiti*, whose meaning is close to the term *Siconi* of the Lozi people and is used for migrants from the rural area to the town who forget their cultural roots (Pendleton and Frayne 1998: 5–6).

The !Xun do not appear to have any similar terms and they do not have a term for their own “townspeople.” They do not use the Afrikaans term *dorpenaar* either. Neither do the !Xun have a term for the town. Instead, they use two concepts: *n!ore n//áa* and *n!ore ma*, “big place” and “small place,” but they cannot always agree on their application to places of various sizes. When talking about Grootfontein, the !Xun use predominantly three terms: its !Xun (*/Xau n//áa*), the Damara name (*Káí /áú.b*), or the Afrikaans word *dorp*, which is used for both town and village by the !Xun (as it is in Afrikaans). Most of the !Xun I found dwelling in the township of Grootfontein during my research regarded themselves as former farmworkers. “The people of the town are not the people of the farm” (*Die mense van die dorp hulle is nie mense van die plaase*), claimed my main informant Kashe. “I am a farm man, [but] I stay here (in Grootfontein) only because of *zula*.” Gertrud and Andries, an older couple who had lived in Blikkiesdorp since 2003, claimed: “We are not town people” (*dorp se mense*). The economic vulnerability of the !Xun in the urban, farm and communal environments alike is so high and their income differences are relatively so small that as a group they comprise the lowest social stratum in all these environments (studied during the course of my research). The socio-economic differences among the !Xun are smaller than in other ethnic groups.

As pointed out elsewhere (Nedvěd 2014: forth.), among the !Xun in the Grootfontein area, there did not seem to be any significant “urbanization discourse.” Town is for the !Xun, even for those who prefer to live there than in other areas, not a space of many chances for individual development and socio-economic upliftment as we know it in a Western context. There is not such an uplifting prospect for an illiterate former farm worker or a communal area dweller. The lack of “urbanization discourse” might also be caused by the nature of the social geography. Grootfontein is the only major urban settlement in the commercial farm area reached by the !Xun networks. Thus, the !Xun do not seem to perceive Grootfontein as a representative of urban spaces, but one concrete area with its own specific characteristics. The !Xun then viewed their mobility “rather as a process of moving among concrete places (Grootfontein, particular small settlements in the commercial or communal area and particular

farms) and areas (farms generally, former Bushmanland and Hereroland) in a space whose borders were, to a significant extent, demarcated by the existence of their kin network” (Ibid).

What are the prospects regarding the urbanization of the !Xun in Grootfontein? The fact that they are gradually acquiring their own plots in the township where they can erect their shack dwellings and where they can live, in practice, may lead to a situation where, for the first time in history, a numerous !Xun population staying in Grootfontein over longer periods develops. Here they will tend to stay more permanently and they will be exposed to an urban environment on a long-term basis. As described above, the “owners” of the plots already tend to stay there and so will some of their kin. Given the landlessness of the !Xun farm workers, their desire to have their own place to stay, and the fact that most of them refuse to live in what is for them the socially alien environment of the communal area of former Bushmanland, Grootfontein may for many of them become the only place to live and sustain a meager living outside the farms.

Those who settle in the ethnically heterogeneous urban area might be under certain assimilation pressures by the non-!Xun. However, “every long-term encounter with different cultures does not result in assimilation. In fact, boundary maintenance may be amplified by encounters with the ‘others’” (Kent 2002: 14). Kent reminded us that a common means of maintaining cultural boundaries is perpetuating “negative and stereotypical perspectives of ‘others’” (Ibid.: 15). The !Xun feel they are exploited, marginalized and looked down upon by the non-Bushmen in their daily interactions with the latter. Their negative perspectives of the *Others* and stereotypes provide them with convenient explanations of their situation. In each urban locality, the assimilation pressures will depend on the particular socio-economic and ethnic environment. In Grootfontein, they seem to come from the lower stratum of the Khoekhoegowab-speaking population, consisting, apparently to a large degree, of the Hai//om. This stratum is socio-economically just above the !Xun. These Khoekhoegowab- speakers occupy (geographically) the same spaces (shack areas) in the township as the !Xun, and the latter maintain with them the most intensive social contacts of all the non-!Xun groups.

Another factor which may be counterbalancing the assimilation pressure is the mobility of the !Xun. It is very evident that the kind of culture of mobility which the !Xun had in precolonial times was significantly nourished by the colonial system as well: despite the complexity of the mobility patterns,

the mobility of the !Xun in the Grootfontein area was also a reaction to their economic vulnerability, exploitation and landlessness. In the urban environment the economic vulnerability as a consequence of the influx of people in to the town has resulted in more competition for scarce work opportunities, and might even increase in the future. The mobility out of the urban area will most likely remain an important coping mechanism for them. If economically vulnerable, the !Xun will continue to follow their kin networks and keep to their own ethnic environment.

At the same time, the !Xun and other Bushmen staying in the town may appear to be in a complex and tricky situation: how can it be explained to some of the non-!Xun (both white and black), who have minimal knowledge and are deeply stuck in the stereotypes about them, who the !Xun are and why some of them (want to) live in an urban environment and not on the farms or in the “bush”? Will these non-!Xun be ready to move beyond stereotypes and understand the situation of the !Xun? The situation is all the more complex as the !Xun, from inter-ethnic marriages, might no longer look like “typical” Bushmen. For example, they might be tallish and dark-skinned, qualities not traditionally associated with this ethnic group. This is a phenomenon occurring in any multi-ethnic setting where the Bushmen live. However, in an urban environment it might become even more common or apparent.

The old images and the primordial and essentialist notions of Bushmen persist in both the popular press and development discourse and do not seem to be totally absent from scientific circles (Gordon 1997: 117–119). “While the basic image (of the Bushmen in the Western imagination) has changed, essentially from negative to positive, the centuries-old stereotypes of Bushmen as ‘primitive’ and ‘natural’ have remained.” (Barnard 2007: 2). It is apparent that these images are going to be applied by the *Others*, in one way or another, also to the urban Bushmen even though most of them are the offspring of farm workers and are alienated from the traditionally Bushmen-associated hunting and gathering economic mode. Their lives are going to be read through these long-associated images.

Ninkova (2009: 40) observed that at the Gqaina school in the Omaheke, attended predominantly by Ju/’hoan children, the non-San learners associated the Bushmen with (1) physical markers such as the shape of their hair and the color of their skin; and (2) life in the bush and the wearing of animal skins, although they knew the latter was no longer true. “This description reveals that the image of the San person today is still to a large extent influenced by static

old taxonomies and despite the fact that the San people no longer exhibit certain features, the attitude towards them is largely influenced by that.

This is also why the !Xun who squatted in the streets of Grootfontein in 2001 and 2002 were probably, in good faith, in the first instance not settled in the township, but sent to former Bushmanland, where they were expected to live in a bush environment that is assumed to be closer to their “nature.” The situation in Grootfontein is, of course, more complex: some of its non-San dwellers, including many whites, do not know that there are any Bushmen living in the town at all. Some, for example, the Hereros or Bantu peoples from the north, have certain experience with the Bushmen living in the communal areas and, in some aspects, more realistic notions about them. However, the old images of the Bushmen as primitive people with minimal needs, with whom it is not necessary to negotiate the conditions of their service, also often determine the interaction with them. If the Bushmen in the urban space continue to be treated in such a manner, they might remain prisoners of this imagery even in the urban space(s) they now occupy.

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