



Who Were the Ancestors of the Namibian !Xoon?

A Preliminary Approach Based on Oral and Selected Written Sources

Gertrud E. Boden

Abstract. – Namibian !Xoon have remained unheeded to the greatest possible extent, both within the otherwise large amount of anthropological publications on the San and within Namibian historiography. They speak a dialect of the Taa language within the Tuu language family (formerly Southern Khoisan) and currently live in the wider Aminuis area southeast of Gobabis. The article approaches the history of the Namibian !Xoon before 1920 by looking at selected written sources and discussing the information on an array of ethnonyms for San groupings therein in the light of recently documented oral accounts according to which the !Xoon originate from further south. [*Namibia, San/ Bushmen, ethnohistory, oral history, ethnic boundaries*]

Gertrud E. Boden, PhD, Research Fellow Social Anthropology, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, ESRC-EuroBABEL project “Kinship Systems in Southern African Non-Bantu Languages. Documentation, Comparison, and Historical Analysis.” – Publications include: “Becoming invisible – Changing Land Use Practices and Identity Strategies of the !Xoon in Namibia between the 1920s and 1970s” (*Journal of Namibian Studies*, in press); “From Utility to Perceptual Salience. Cultural, Lexical, and Conceptual Change in the Southern Kalahari Landscape” (*Anthropological Linguistics* 51.2009/3–4: 303–327). – See also References Cited.

1 Introduction

The Namibian !Xoon who currently live in the wider Aminuis area of Omaheke South speak a variety of the Taa language, which is the last vital language of the whole Tuu (formerly “Southern Khoisan,” cf. Güldemann 2005) language family.¹ Taa corresponds to S6 (Southern Khoisan 6) in the classification of linguist Dorothea Bleek (Bleek 1927), better known under the ethnonym !Xóǝ (!Xoon, also: !Xuun, !Xǝ, !ko, !ku, Koon), the name popularized

by Anthony Traill. The name “!Xoon,” however, is not accepted as a group name by all people speaking one of the varieties of the Taa language cluster while all of them call their common language Taa-*ǃaan*, *taa* being the term for “person” or “human being” and *ǃaan* the term for “language.” In his survey report on the “Koon” (!Xoon), Traill (1974b: 8) himself admitted the arbitrariness of his decision to use this ethnonym:

The title of this report facetiously acknowledges that the rule of “anything goes” applies when one gives a Bushman group a name. Nobody calls the !xǝ the Koon these days, but then hardly anybody calls them the !xǝ either. The name Koon is a rather bizarre example of one aspect of the problem for it represents the Germanic mutilation of the Bushman name !xǝ or !kǝ; the Bantuised form of Magong is hardly an improvement on this. In addition to these foreign renderings of Bushman syllables, one finds that the Bushmen themselves lack a clear idea of what one is really after when one asks “Who are you?” “We are people” or, if one persists, “We are veld-people” is the usual reply. The stock names one finds in the literature do not spring easily to their minds when identifying themselves, and some have a relative value depending on the geographical location of a band ... Since there is no prestige dialect in the area, the name one chooses to give the cluster of dialects must be based on arbitrary criteria, such as the first name used in print, or the most widely

¹ Throughout the article I will use the terms “San” and “Khoekhoe” or “Nama” when speaking from my own perspective and the terms “Bushmen” and “Hottentots” when referring to accounts by others who use these names for the respective populations.

published name, or the name of the majority dialect, etc. There is nothing in Bushman politics or linguistic self awareness that will provide a motivated name.

With these remarks in mind, I shall now stick to my own prejudice and refer to the linguistic group as the !xō. There are two groups who, to my certain knowledge, use this name; they are the Bushmen of Aminuis, S.W.A. and those at Lone Tree and Taketshwane, Botswana. This name therefore covers the following names: #hūā, masarwa (when referring to speakers of a Southern language) !ko, !ku, !kō, !kū, koon, lala, /nu//en, ?//ŋa^hmsa, tuu ?ŋa^hnsa, !xong, //nq, Tshasi, n²/ŋūmde, !gaokx²ate, !o^hju, ōwa, ōkha, Tshasi, Magong, /ŋamani, /²ūkate, #āā, #gē, o^ha.

... All members of the group have #ā: [ʔaan] for “language” (Traill 1974b: 8 f.).

Compared to Traill’s extensive list of denominations, the number of names which present-day Namibian speakers of Taa use for themselves and each other is low and restricted to the following four (in the singular): !Xoon, G!aokx’aa, ‘N|oha, and N|ahexa, to which add, of course, more generalizing terms such as San, Bushmen, or Rooi mense (red people) which also encompass people speaking other Khoisan languages. !Xoon and ‘N|oha are self-denominations of the two Namibian groups of Taa speakers, N|ahexa is the name used for the mixed ‘N|oha-Kgalagadi population and G!aokx’aa is the name which the ‘N|oha use for the !Xoon. Especially younger people among the ‘N|oha reserved the name !Xoon for the !Kung of Nyae Nyae, while some elder ‘N|oha, who claimed “!Xoon” ancestry for themselves, used it for San in South Africa, more particularly, San living in the Kuruman and Upington areas. The four names do not correspond to the names most often found in written sources referring to the present settlement area of Namibian speakers of Taa before the 1970s.

It is evident from oral and biographical data that the ‘N|oha arrived in Namibia in great numbers only after the 1950s, when they were hired for farm labor in the southern Omaheke and Hardap regions. Thus, although Taa is to be preferred as a name for the language cluster, I will, nevertheless, most often have to speak about the !Xoon since this is the group name used by those Namibian speakers of Taa whose ancestors are the focus of this article.²

2 The language and culture of the !Xoon of Lone Tree and Taketshwane in Botswana – though not their history – have been described in some detail by the linguist Anthony Traill (1974a, 1974b, 1985, 1994), the ethnographer Hans-Joachim Heinz (1975, 1978, 1979, 1994), and the ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1972, 1974, 1986), to name just the most productive ones. The language and culture of the !Xoon in the Aminuis area of Namibia, however, only recently became

However, neither the !Xoon as a group of people nor their historic settlement area is a straightforward subject for ethnohistorical research. First, San who might have been ancestors of present-day Namibian !Xoon came to be referred to by different names in the course of history. To this adds the ignorance of differences between particular San communities on the side of some early travelers, white settlers, or administration officers who were satisfied with categorizing people as “Bushmen.” Secondly, the !Xoon are not the only San who nowadays live within the boundaries of their current settlement area and Bushmen referred to in the written sources may also have been speaking Naro, †Kx’au-||en, Khoe-khoe, or one of the now extinct Tuu languages.³ Furthermore, the borderland of southeastern Namibia with Botswana and South Africa was the scene of migration by various population groups and wars as will be shown below.

In chapter 2 I am going to discuss the geographical boundaries of the research area in more detail. Besides providing information on the current and previous settlement areas of Namibian speakers of Taa as documented by linguists, it will deliver the reasons for extending the focus beyond that area for the purpose of historical research, in particular to the south. Chapter 3 gives a short overview over the macro-historical developments in the area defined in chap. 2 with the aim of providing the reader with at least a rough idea of the multiplex trade, raid, and labor networks in which the ancestors of the !Xoon must have been involved. Chapter 4 compiles the information on the different names for groups of people who might have been the ancestors of present-day Namibian !Xoon. However, I want to warn the

a subject of academic research within the initiative “Documentation of Endangered Languages” (<<http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/projects/taa>> [06.03.2012]). The sole publication on their histories so far is a collection of oral history accounts compiled and edited by the author in 2007, which, in the first place, was meant to serve the members of the !Xoon and ‘N|oha communities as a tangible record of their memories, experiences, and of their collaboration in the documentation project. Some of them also got a word in edgeways in the richly illustrated coffee-table book titled “Voices of the San” (Le Roux and White 2004), a product of the joint oral history project of several San NGOs, namely the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), the South African San Institute (SASI), and the Kuru Family of Organizations.

3 The different San groups belong to three different subfamilies of the so-called “Khoisan” languages: the !Xoon speak a language of the Tuu (formerly “Southern Khoisan”) family, the †Kx’au-||en speak a language of the Ju (formerly “Northern Khoisan”) family and the Naro speak a language of the Khoe (formerly “Central Khoisan”) family to which also the language of the pastoralist Khoe-khoe (in the local context most often “Nama”) belongs.

reader from the beginning of not expecting to have a clear and orderly picture afterwards. The sources deliver an inconsistent, ambiguous, and contradictory array of information, which reflects, as we should acknowledge, the entangled and ever-changing character of social relationships and boundaries. In chapter 5 the findings will be recapitulated and discussed. Given the enormous extension of the research area, together with the large number of populations involved in its histories, it is neither possible to master all possibly relevant sources within the scope of this article nor to contextualize in full detail the sources which I was actually able to use. Some general reflections on the context of the sources will be included in the final discussion.

2 Defining the Research Area

Let me start with the current settlement area of Namibian speakers of Taa: Map 1 shows the results of a survey conducted in 2004 with information added during the following years up to 2009. It also contains information on the locations where Taa speakers were met during previous linguistic surveys, namely those undertaken by Dorothea Bleek in 1921 (Bleek 1929), Anthony Traill in 1973 (Traill 1974b), and Tom Güldemann in 1998 (Güldemann 1998). The locations where Traill met Taa speakers in the 1970s all fall into the core area where Namibian speakers of Taa are also living today while this is not true for all locations where Bleek met Taa speakers after the rain season in 1921.⁴ Traill visited the Aminuis Reserve and N||aosanabis (present-day Leonardville) about 50 years after Bleek in January and July 1973. He does not give any information about Tsachas and Uichenas which he most probably would have done if he had visited these places. Traill did not find “!xō ... nor any Bushmen or Hot-tentots” at N||aosanabis (1974b: 11). N||aosanabis is usually equated with present-day Leonardville (Dierks 2003: 22). Next door to the municipality district there is also a farm called N||aosanabis (*Republic of Namibia* 1994). Traill does not provide a clue as to whether he is referring to the town or to the farm. I suppose, he went to the farm since it is

most unlikely that there was actually no single San or Nama living in the location of Leonardville in the 1970s.⁵ Traill identified Bleek's language material as from the same language as that of the !Xoon in the Aminuis reserve. Traill's visit is well remembered by some of the !Xoon to whom I spoke in the first decade of the 21st century (Boden 2007: 73 f.).

The eastern boundary of the area in question is the most unambiguous one since it is defined by the national border with Botswana. This is, of course, an arbitrary boundary in terms of population movements and simply owed to the organization of the research which up to now, except for a short survey trip to Botswana in March 2009, could only be conducted in Namibia.⁶

The western boundary is the longitude of Leonardville, which is the westernmost place where Taa speakers live today⁷ and where also Dorothea Bleek met Taa speakers in 1920. According to oral accounts, the !Xoon still used to cross the Nossob during foraging expeditions in the early decades of the 20th century, at least further south in the Aranos area (interview with SM, 15.02.2008, Corridor 15). In addition, one possible candidate for the ancestors of Taa speakers in Namibia, the Hai Gǀuin, mentioned in some of the early written sources (see chap. 4), was located in the west of the middle and lower reaches of the Nossob River.⁸

The northernmost places where Taa speakers were reported to have lived are Zachas (Tsachas) and Uichenas, about 40 and 60 kilometers southeast of Gobabis, respectively. In the oral accounts of present-day Namibian !Xoon neither these two places nor any stretches of land north of N||uis (Otjewe) were claimed to have been occupied by their ancestors. Most of them stated to not have frequented these northern areas on a regular basis themselves nor had they heard that their parents had done. They only remembered to have travelled to the trading store at Onderombapa which was opened during the late 1920s or early 1930s for selling skins, os-

4 It has to be considered here that my own survey was conducted in a “snowball” manner, starting from the known Taa-speaking communities in the Corridor asking people living there for relatives and other Taa speakers living elsewhere. Both, the survey and the oral history record, are therefore biased in favor of the perspectives of the !Xoon in the Corridor, relationships with whom were much more intense and long-lasting than with people living on farms, in town locations, or in the reserve.

5 Today the town of Leonardville has a large location of mostly Nama dwellers but also an alleged total of 300 Bushmen, a number provided by the president of the local Bushmen committee, a man of !Xoon ancestry. He further stated that about two thirds of the Bushmen at Leonardville were of Koukou (ǀKx'au-||en) and only one third of !Xoon origin (interview with FN, 27. 11. 2006, Leonardville).

6 The author is well aware that both, oral and archival research, in Botswana and South Africa are necessary for a more complete understanding.

7 Individuals also live in urban centres further west and north, such as Rehoboth, Windhoek, and Gobabis, most of them are young people looking for jobs or hired as domestic workers and nannies by Hereros or Tswanas from the Aminuis area who work in Windhoek.

8 Hahn (1870); Langhans (1897); Passarge (1905: map).

