

trich feathers, and horns. Instead, the areas north of N||uis were said to have been occupied by other San groups, namely Naro, Hai||om, and Gain+aman. The few Taa speakers who nowadays live at the communal area of Tjaka Ben Hur, which is located only a few farms west of Tsachas, came there during the past four decades either together with their Tswana patrons or after a career as farm laborers in order to live with the relatives of their spouses. Several reasons might account for the fact that Bleek met Taa speakers as far north as Tsachas and Uichenas. First, Tsachas is located on the Chapman's River in the immediate neighborhood of Oas,⁹ an important station on the 19th-century trade routes from the south along the Nossob River and from the west coast through Gobabis to Lake Ngami in Botswana. During the second half of the 19th century, these routes were controlled by the Lambert Oorlam (also Gai|Khauan or Amraals).¹⁰ They had moved the Nossob upstream from the south in the first half of the 19th century. The trade route probably attracted people from all population groups in the wider area. Bleek herself stated that the trade route went through an area, which lay at the intersection of the settlement areas of the Naro, the ‡Kx'au-||en, and the N|u-san or !Xoon (1927: 63).¹¹ A second point in case is the fact that farm allocations to settlers along the Chapman's River date from as early as the first decade of the 20th century (Mendelsohn 2002: 134, see also Map 2). The Taa speakers which Bleek met at Tsachas and Uichenas, thus, might also have been farm laborers attracted by work opportunities or recruited by force who must not necessarily have lived there before. In her publications, Bleek does not provide further details about the background of the Taa speakers she met at these places.¹² A third

point worth consideration is that, also in the first decade of the 20th century, the German colonial government run a model settlement scheme for Bushmen at Oas with the intention to slowly adapt them to a sedentary lifestyle and farm labor (NAN 1911–1913). However, old !Xoon claimed that they had nothing to do with that scheme and that they only heard about Koukou (‡Kx'au-||en) people being settled there while their own parents had kept away from it out of fear (interviews with SM, JT, and JK, 06.02.2006 and 13.02.2006). This seems to be confirmed by Rudolf Pöch, who traveled in Southern Africa between 1907 and 1909 and who reported that two San groups were living at Oas: the Hei//um (Hai||om), who spoke Nama, and the ‡Aunin (‡Kx'au-||en) who spoke their own language (Pöch 1908–1909: 2; quoted in Hirschberg 1936: 1).

Rather than to the north, oral accounts point to areas further south of Aminuis as place of origin of Namibian !Xoon. This calls for turning attention towards areas as far south as the lower reaches of the Auob and Nossob Rivers down to its pass over the border and into what is nowadays the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park of Botswana and South Africa. The reasons for this considerable southward extension are a) !Xoon oral accounts claiming that their ancestors originate from the south, and b) that both, the oral and the written record suggest that territories occupied by Taa speakers and their southern neighbors were partly overlapping, if not synchronically, at least diachronically. The oldest !Xoon man living in Namibia and one of the main informants on oral history reported that his people originated from the south. Although he was not able to provide more detailed information, he mentioned the Auob River and once even the name Karoo, i.e., a stretch of land even further south in South Africa. The lower reaches of the Auob and Nossob Rivers are usually attributed to the linguistically closest relatives of the !Xoon, called !*Auni or S4 (Southern Khoisan 4) by

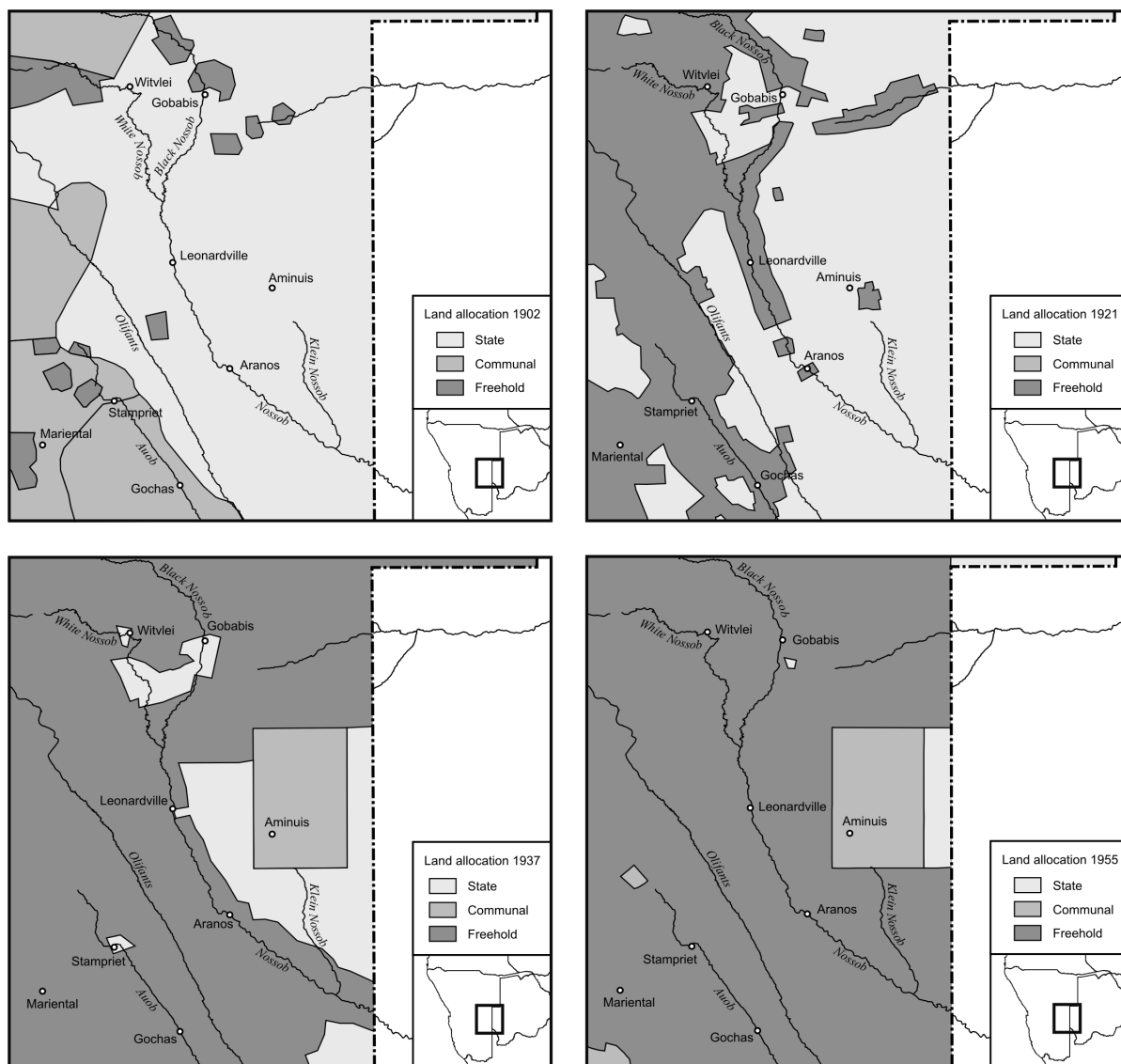
9 Tsachas, Oas, and Uichenas are place names of Khoekhoe origin. For Oas (also Twass, |Oas) see Nienaber and Raper (1980: 396), for Uichenas (also !Uicha-!nas, !Uixa!nas) see Nienaber and Raper (1980: 1080). The name Tsachas (also Zachas) is not to be found in Nienaber and Raper's encyclopedia of Khoekhoe place names. The ending -s, however, is typical for Khoekhoe place names.

10 "Oorlam" are those Khoekhoe-speaking people who migrated from the south to what nowadays are the southern and central parts of Namibian national territory as a consequence of the colonial expansion in South Africa.

11 A map in Schinz (1891) shows one route leaving the Nossob at Wesleyville (Leonardville) and leading through the Kalahari via ||Nuis (N||uis, Otjewe), ‡Aroroams (Aroroams), !Uixa!nas (Uichenas) to |Oas (Oas). It also shows a side route running through !Hū-!gūis (Hugus) and !Gubu-!oms (Gubums), i.e., the area which was claimed to be their traditional territory by present-day !Xoon.

12 According to the information in one of her notebooks recently published as part of "The Digital Bleek and Lloyd Collection" (Bleek and Lloyd Collection n.d.), the area of Uichenas once seems to have been inhabited by Naro only

(n.d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 19) and the speakers of S6 to have originated from Aminuis and come to Uichenas together with their Tswana masters (18). On the other hand, she noted that "some of Balzer's Bushmen" had lived at Uichenas before the Tswana came to Uichenas six years earlier "when the English took Gobabis" (19). Balzer was the owner of Tsachas (NAN 1898–1915). It is unclear what Bleek means by "Balzer's sort of Bushmen" since under the heading Tsachas (Tsachas) she lists the names of several San groups including the "!"xonate," "!"nu ||en," "!"yau||ein," (‡Kx'au-||en ?), "Hei||umate" and "!"xore = Naron" (Bleek and Lloyd Collection n.d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 3). Her notes further state that !kxo (!Xoon) were living further south "around the Nossop" at Naosanabis (N||aosanabis) and Hoakus keis (Hougousgeis), and the N|u-||en eastwards from Uichenas up to beyond Naunas, i.e., in Botswana. The !Xoon and N|u-||en are said to speak one language and understand each other (3).



Map 2: The expansion of the commercial farms (illustration based on Mendelsohn 2002). A version of this map originally appeared in Boden (2007: 14).

Dorothea Bleek (1929: 1). Almost nothing is known about the fate of the !'Auni except that in 1936 some of them lived in the camp of Donald Bain, “the well-known South African explorer and big game hunter” (Maingard 1937a: v), at Tweerivieren on the confluence of the two rivers and the current location of the southern entrance gate of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. From there Bain brought them to the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg. Both at Tweerivieren and Johannesburg they were studied by an interdisciplinary team of researchers (Rheinallt and Doke 1937; see also Gordon 1999).¹³ According to

Bleek (1937: 195), the group was composed of “the #Khomani, the !'Auni, the |Namani who had been living among the Nama and only spoke the Nama language, and a few women of the Khatia or Vaalpens tribe who had married !'Auni and |Namani men.” The !'Auni group joined the camp later (Doke 1937: 98f.). They were reported to have been resident in the Gembok Game Reserve and to have had close contact with the Nama under Simon Kooper further north (Maingard 1937b: 237). According to

language, yet ... a step nearer to the Central Bushman Group, which means that it is nearer to the Hottentot tongues.” The #Khomani speak a language of the !Ui branch of the Tuu family, known under the name N|uu and only spoken by a handful of speakers today (cf. N|uu 2009).

¹³ Bleek (1937: 195) classified the !'Auni language as belonging to the Southern Group and “somewhat like the #Khomani

Steyn (1984: 117) who visited the “descendants” of the attendants of the Empire Exhibition at Johannesburg in Tweerivieren, in 1982 and 1983, one of them, a man called Regopstaan or !Amg!aub was born near Gochas, the former headquarters of Simon Kooper in Namibia and identified himself as †Om-ani (†Khomani). According to oral accounts also !Xoon and 'N|oha were in Simon Kooper's group (e.g., interview with SP, 01.05.2005, Corridor 21; interview with HK, 22.11.2006, Gochas). Many !Xoon fled to Botswana during the war, after their headman, who had been put into office by Simon Kooper, was killed at !Uu!om (Gubuoms) southeast of Aminuis (interview with SM, 11.02.2008, Corridor 15).¹⁴ The surname Kooper occurs frequently among Namibian speakers of Taa, especially among the 'N|oha. Many Nama men who fled from Namibia into Botswana because of the war were said to have married local San women (interview with WK, 28.2.2010, Corridor 17).¹⁵ We thus have evidence, that among the San, who lived temporarily or permanently with Simon Kooper's people, were ancestors of Taa speakers as well as people who in the 1930s were classified as !'Auni and †Khomani. The range of movements of all these groups seems to have been much wider than their present-day settlement areas.¹⁶ Without doubt, this was partly an effect of the German-Nama war of 1904–1909, which like the migrations of the Oorlam had done before, caused upheavals and population movements (see chap. 3) resulting in a realignment of the political geography within an area, usually represented as extremely remote and untouched.

14 This ties up with a piece of information in Bleek's notebook saying that the father of a woman she met at N|uisa (beside N|uhi or Otjewe) was a Bushman who was killed by Germans when she was living at !ū!ums (!Uu !om or Gubuoms), irritatingly, however, Bleek gives the name of her nation as ||kauven (*Bleek and Lloyd Collection* n.d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 9).

15 After the war, farm labor also worked like a kind of population whirligig, since workers from different ethnic groups met on the farms, married, and after leaving farm work went to live with the relatives of one partner, sometimes in areas hundreds of kilometers away from where they came from.

16 Also Steyn (1984: 123) suggests an extremely wide range for the southern Kalahari San, attributing it to the ecological conditions instead of historical events: “Although life could be very secure in those good years when tsama were so plentiful that it was ‘unsafe to gallop a horse’ through the dune valleys (Herbst 1908: 4), life must have been extremely precarious in years of tsama failure. The only long-term solution was to migrate and it seems feasible to postulate that southern Kalahari San must have ranged extremely far and wide during drought years; more so in fact than any other Kalahari San living to the north.”

3 A Rough Historical Sketch

During the early years of the 19th century the country east of the Nossob River was inhabited by San groups who probably belonged to the Central (Khoe) and Southern Khoisan (Tuu) language families as well as by groups of Kgalagadi (Köhler 1959a: 60). Köhler¹⁷ dates the arrival of the Kgalagadi in the Aminuis area back to the 18th century.¹⁸ In the first decades of the 19th century, also Khoekhoe- or Nama-speaking groups started to penetrate the area from the southwest in search of tradable animal products such as ivory, skins, and ostrich feathers. In the early 1840s, the Lambert Oorlam had established themselves in the Nossob Valley at N||aosanabis and Gobabis and at Oas on the Chapman's River.¹⁹ During the 1860s and 1870s, when Ngamiland was considered the prime elephant-hunting ground of Africa (Wilmsen 1989: 93), they controlled the trade routes from the south and west to Lake Ngami in Botswana. Before the Amraals became the rulers of the area, Herero-speaking Mbanderu had used the southwestern Kalahari as seasonal grazing grounds (Gewald 1991: 429).²⁰ Since the !Xoon claim to have come to the Aminuis area from the south, the question arises whether they tried to escape the Lambert Oorlam by moving north or whether they came as their associates or servants. Most probably

17 Köhler was a government ethnologist in South West Africa from 1955 through 1957 (Keuthmann 1986: 83) and prepared reports on the population of the different districts, continuing the work of his predecessor in office Günter Wagner (Wagner 1957; Köhler 1958, 1959a, 1959b, 1959c, 1959d). For the report on the Gobabis district he relied to a great deal on the data collected by Wagner.

18 There is also some oral evidence from Namibian !Xoon confirming that at least some Kgalagadis frequented their areas as long as memories serve them, although, except for individuals, the Kgalagadis were said to not have settled there on a permanent basis (interview with SM, JT, and JK, 06.02.2006 and 13.02.2006, Corridor 15). In the monthly and annual reports for the Aminuis Native Reserve, which include ethnic groups other than Hereros and Tswanas only from the 1940s onwards, the number of Kgalagadis is always given as less than fifty.

19 The Lambert Oorlam had left the Worcester District in South Africa in 1810 (Hahn 1971 [1880]: 19). The dynasty of the Lambert Oorlam was headed by Amraal Lambert from 1814 to 1864, Andreas Lambert from 1864 to 1894, and Eduard Lambert from 1894–1896. In 1896, Eduard Lambert led a revolt against the German occupation and was killed during a battle at Gobabis (Dierks 2003: 93, 542).

20 Evidence for the latter's protrusion to areas far more south and east of their present locations is, for example, a fight between Bangwaketse and Mbanderu near present-day Lehututu in southwest Botswana (Wilmsen 1989: 91). The settlement Omaweneno near Tsabong with Nama-speaking Hereros is another point in case (90) among others.

some of them did the one or the other for different reasons or during different phases of their lives. The diaries of Reverend Joseph Tindall, who set up a Wesleyan mission among the Lambert Oorlam in 1843, reveal different lifestyles of San living in the area. Some lived as dependents among Amraal's people (Tindall 1959: 119; Lau 1987: 67 f.), some lived in the *sandveld* as foragers (Tindall 1959: 31), and still others were passing through or visiting to attend church services (63, 64, 68) and probably engaged in a sort of "freelance clientage" as described by Marks (1972: 59; see also Sylvain 1999: 28).²¹ Unfortunately, we are not told which language (other than Nama) these San spoke or which ethnonym they used for themselves. If they were not Taa speakers themselves, they probably spoke one of the Tuu or Southern Khoisan languages.²²

The genealogies of present-day Namibian !Xoon, although shallow and covering only two ascending generations, reveal close contacts with all neighboring groups, especially with the Nama and Naro.²³ The places which the !Xoon indicated as their ancestral "big places," where they always used to return to from foraging areas further away, have all Khoekhoe names: Aminuis (!Ami-n̄uis), N||uhi (!Nuis), Hugus (!Hū-!gūis), and !Uu-!om (!Gubu-!oms, also Gubuoms, Gubugoms).²⁴ A side remark in Hahn (1971 [1880]: 88) locates the Gei |Khaus (Gai|Khauan), i.e., the Lambert Oorlam at ||Nuis. I was even told by an old !Xoon man that the permanent waterholes were indicated to the !Xoon by the Nama who had discovered them during their hunting expeditions. The waterholes were said to have been unoccupied at the time (interview with SM, 11.02.2008, Corridor 15). This is remarkable for two reasons. First, one wonders why the Nama should tell foreigners about the locations of water sources which used to be kept secret (Nienaber and Raper 1980: 396), if not because of close rela-

tions between the Nama and the !Xoon. Secondly, it leaves us with the question, whether other San had been living at these places. It is actually hardly conceivable that the places were unoccupied, given the obvious advantages of permanent water in the dry southern Kalahari. Contact with the Lambert Oorlam groups might have empowered the !Xoon to take over the permanent water places from other San groups. Examples for claims that places were unoccupied before one's own arrival are legion in historical documents, in oral accounts as well as those of missionaries and government officials (see below), and the assertion of an empty landscape from the side of immigrants has, of course, always to be treated with caution. So far there is no documentation available from other San groups which might shed light on this question.²⁵

The next to occupy Aminuis were a group of Tswanas who originated from Kuruman in South Africa and came to Aminuis in the late 1890s. They settled at Aminuis, first with the permission of Kaptein Andreas Lambert and later with that of the German Governor Major Leutwein.²⁶ According to oral accounts, they had come to know the land around Aminuis during hunting trips, which led them as far north as the Okavango. They followed the Nossob and it took them years to arrive, since they temporarily settled and plowed fields on their way. As a consequence of conflicts with the Lambert Oorlam on the Nossob they fled to Aminuis (interview with DD, 04.03.2010, Mokaleng). In 1894, a treaty was signed between the Tswana chief and Major Leutwein which allocated the places Aminuis and Aais (on the confluence of the Black and White Nossob) to the Tswanas.²⁷ The advent of the Tswa-

21 Also Bleek (1927: 57) wrote about the N|u-|en (speakers of Taa) that some of them were in the service of other tribes, while others were living in the "bush."

22 Tindall reported that thousands of people settled around Amraal at the beginning of the 1840s – Nama, Herero, Bergdama and San (Tindall 1959: 119), facts which may provide an impression of his power (cf. Wilmsen 1989; Gewald 1991).

23 In her introductory article to the photo collection of Duggan-Cronin, Bleek (1942: 13 f.) attributes "traces of Nama blood, showing in ... longer faces and greater height than the pure Bushmen" to the San dwelling along the Molopo, Nossob, and Auob, i.e., |Khomani, |'Auni, and N|u-|en (!Xoon), while the people found in the Kalahari have Bantu blood as "a consequence of contact with Bantu tribes for many generations."

24 Information on the respective Khoekhoe place names is to be found in Nienaber and Raper (1980: 187 [Aminuis], 934 [||Nuis], 470 [!Uu-!om]). The name !Hū-!gūis is not mentioned but the ending -s is typical for Khoekhoe place names.

25 The old man claimed that the !Xoon came to Aminuis during the lifetime of his great grandfather. His year of birth could not be established exactly. Beyond doubt and dispute he was the oldest living person in the !Xoon community and, thus, older than people whose identity documents confirmed that they were in their late eighties. Most probably he was born around 1920. He is the second child of his father who himself was the second child of his own parents. In former times, !Xoon men used to marry only in their thirties, when they had proven to be capable hunters. A male generation length of 30 to 35 years assumed, his father's grandfather was born around 1820 and might, in fact, have come to the Aminuis area at about the same time when the Lambert Oorlams established themselves at N||aosanabis.

26 NAN (1933): The document is a statement of the Tswana Chief, which is handwritten in German and substantiating a Tswana land claim to Aminuis. The file also contains an English translation. "Kaptein" is a term commonly used for Nama and Oorlam leaders in Namibia.

27 NAN (1894–1897). In 1900, the German government requested the Tswana Chief Nunu to lay claim on both places and withdrew the rights of ownership after the deadline had

nas at Aminuis is well remembered by the !Xoon because they equipped the local San with hunting dogs and iron traps and made San hunt for them against little or no remuneration (interview with SM, 08.04.2004, Corridor 15).²⁸ The accusation that the Tswanas exploited the local San is confirmed by diverse archival reports in the National Archives of Namibia.²⁹ The Tswanas seem to have applied for the establishment of a Roman Catholic Mission and thus helped the RC Mission to gain a foothold in the otherwise Lutheran Mission dominated South West Africa.³⁰ The following quote is an excerpt from the mission chronicle. While confirming the presence of some Nama (Oorlam) and a few San, it also claims that Aminuis was unoccupied and, therefore, suitable to be settled by the Tswanas.

Several hundred Bechuanas from Kuruman in South Africa moved to Southwest since 1880. They say Chief Morwe, a grandfather of the current Kgosiemang was dissatisfied with the English government and did not want to pay taxes. Therefore, the chief and many other groups moved away with all their belongings, ox wagons, goats, and cattle. Due to their previous cattle trade with Hereros and Hottentots they already knew the land whereto they wanted to move. At that time the current Aminuis, situated on the edge of the Kalahari, was no man's land. Only some Hottentots and a few Bushmen were staying there when some Bechuanas arrived and others moved onward to Kaukarus and to the Nossob river in the vicinity of Gobabis (Anonymous n. d., see original citation in Appendix).

elapsed (NAN 1898–1914). Nevertheless, the Tswanas continued to stay at Aminuis.

28 As has been documented for many other Bantu groups in Southern Africa, the Tswanas from Kuruman can be supposed to have had San servants who possibly accompanied them on their move to Aminuis. This idea was rejected by my !Xoon informants and has, so far, not been confirmed by Tswana informants.

29 For example: “Almost every Bechuana keeps Bushmen who live in true serfdom. They systematically exploit them for their own goals; everything the Bushmen bring home from the bush they have to give to the Bechuanas” (NAN 1898–1914, see original citation in Appendix); “I find that they have been lending dogs to the Bushmen to assist in killing Big Game on the understanding that the said Bushmen shall bring them meat. I have warned them that this practice must cease” (NAN 1925–1926); “No crime came to my notice – with the exception of one instance where I found that the Bechuana Headman KOSEMAN had two Bushmen working for him which practically amounted to slavery – I released these Bushmen and informed KOSEMAN that this practice has been abolished and severely reprimanded him” (NAN 1926–1927).

30 In 1902, the Roman Catholic Mission station at Aminuis was founded (Dierks 2003: 104). Till today, most church members are Tswanas, Kgalagadis, and San although the majority of the area's population are Hereros.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the larger Auob, Nossob, and Aminuis area became an arena of the war of 1904 to 1909 and earlier skirmishes between the Germans and the Namas, in particular those under Simon Kooper who was based at Gochas (!Gochas) and Haruchas (!Haruxas) and Manasse !Noreseb Gamab from Hoachanas. Both groups had joined Hendrik Witbooi in the liberation war against the Germans. Also Witbooi's people fought in the Aminuis area (*Großer Generalstab* 1907: 38 ff., 151 ff., 209–216; Bühler 2003: 230 ff., 261 ff., 318 ff.).³¹ The headquarter of Simon Kooper was at Gochas but his people operated as far north as Aminuis already before (von François 1899: 115) and also during the war (*Großer Generalstab* 1907), always being ready to cross the border in order to abscond themselves from German prosecution.³² Information on the whereabouts of Hendrik Witbooi and Simon Kooper was received from Bushmen (*Großer Generalstab* 1907: 153, 154). In the end, the Nama were defeated by the Germans. Simon Kooper and his people fled to Botswana and, after some mêlée, finally settled at Lokgwabe near Lehututu (see also Haacke 1993: 42).

After World War I and the end of the German colonial rule over Namibia (South West Africa), the League of Nations authorized the South African Union with the mandate to govern the country. In 1923, the South African Administration proclaimed the Aminuis Native Reserve for the Hereros, who had previously been living in south-central Namibia in areas that were to be given to white farmers. The

31 The partiality of the Tswanas at the time seems to have been opportunistic. The accounts by RC Father Watterott, substantiating their loyalty to the German government, is disputed by local officers who ascribe Watterott's representations to the interests of the RC Church in the eastern part of the then German South West Africa and its dependency on the Tswana followers (NAN 1898–1914).

32 On the 2nd of March 1905, the priest Franz Jäger from the RC Mission at Aminuis was killed by Hottentots while accompanying a Tswana hunting party. Later during the same month, Aminuis was the site of a German encounter with Hendrik Witbooi. Combats between the Germans and Simon Kooper's people took place in October 1905 at Arahoab (Aranos) and Awadaob on the Nossob, and in December 1905 at Guguoms (!Uu-!om), Aminuis, and Toasis. During the battle at Guguoms Manasse was killed (Dierks 2003). It might be a coincidence that the !Xoon headman Oujan Mboman who stages prominently in the oral record of Namibian !Xoon was killed at the same place. The German, who allegedly killed him and his men and abducted women and children to Gobabis, was said to have been a trader at Aminuis. The !Xoon, who learnt of the events later, decided to move to a place called Njin-njin right across the Botswana border, where they stayed for at least two years before they dared to send messengers to the Tswanas at Aminuis to find out about the situation and come back (interview with SM, 15.02.2008, Corridor 15).

area could serve this purpose because it was considered to be a “virgin and unoccupied country” by the administration (NAN 1933–1937). In the beginning, the Hereros, together with their cattle, were confined to the permanent open water sources in the southwestern part of the reserve from where they gradually spread to the north and east with wells being dug and boreholes sunk. They apparently respected the San as first inhabitants and even feared being attacked by them:

The Hereros do not appear to go very far from the wells and most of their information is obtained from Bushmen who come for water. One Herero admitted that they did not go far into the veld as they were afraid the Bushmen might shoot them (NAN 1927).

The !Xoon I spoke to about eighty years later rejected the idea, that the Hereros once were afraid of them. Instead, they movingly stressed their own feelings of fear, humiliation, and powerlessness towards not only Hereros but also Tswanas and Boers.³³ Since both, the oral accounts of the !Xoon and the reports on native affairs by the administration for the 1920s, identify the San in the area between Aminuis and Uichenas as Hai||om (see chap. 4), the San of which the Hereros were afraid, must indeed not have been from the !Xoon group.

The !Xoon claimed to have found the Aminuis area and surrounding water places unoccupied and to have been the first occupants and owners. However, from their own historical accounts Aminuis emerges rather as a centre where people from all population groups met. The !Xoon attributed the area northwest of Aminuis to the Gain|aman and Hai||om Bushmen and the area northeast of Aminuis to the Naro (see chap. 4). An old Tswana man confirmed that, at the time when the Tswanas arrived, different groups of Bushmen were living at Aminuis whom he listed as the Naro, the Koukou (ǀKx'au||en), and the !Xoon (interview with DD, 04.03.2010, Mokaleng). From the middle of the 19th century onwards Aminuis was frequented by Khoekhoe speakers, from the 1880s onwards by the Tswanas from Kuruman, and from the 1920s onwards increasingly also by Hereros and Whites. While the historic developments in the area were much more complex than what can be described on a few pages, the aim of this chapter was to do away with the notion that the area was isolated and remote. In fact,

the two rivers and the international borders saw multiple population movements along and across them. The !Xoon, although often represented as one of the most isolated even among the San populations, were involved in the regional politics. In particular the Oorlam immigration into Namibia and the Nama-German war affected their social relations and the political geography to the effect that they cannot be expected to have lived in their present settlement area in former times. With this in mind I will now turn to a more detailed discussion of the information on the various names for San, which appear in the sources.

4 A Puzzle of Names

Ethnonyms or group names are subject to change, bound in space and time, depending on the context and on who is calling a name. Therefore they are rather unsound for establishing continuities of group identities over longer periods of time as long as linguistic data are missing. Responsible for this state of affairs are decisions of individuals to attach themselves to the group of their choice (which, needless to say, is not a completely free choice but limited by socioeconomic and political conditions), as well as to movements and contacts between populations and the ever changing evaluations and images, benefits, and disadvantages accompanying the named categories. On the following pages I will consecutively go into every group name for San, which is mentioned in the selection of written sources dealing with the area circumscribed in chap. 2, and discuss how the people behind these names might be related to the ancestors of present-day Namibian !Xoon. All names used by the !Xoon are also mentioned in the written record while the opposite is not true. The presentation of material follows a backward chronological order, starting with the names used in current !Xoon discourse and tracing them in the written record while picking up more names to be found in earlier sources on the way back in time.

!Xoon

As stated in the beginning, the name !Xóǃ (!Xoon) was popularized by Anthony Traill. He used it for the speakers of all variants of the whole language cluster, admitting that it was the self-designation of only two subgroups: the people living around Lone Tree and Taketshwane in Botswana and those living in the Aminuis area in Namibia. He met people calling themselves !Xoon at Kongowa in the

33 In comparison with members of the other two groups, the Hereros were represented as less bad, at least in the beginning. In particular, the Herero Chief Hosea Kutako was said to have protected the local !Xoon against illegal recruitment for farm labor by the Boers (cf. oral account in Boden 2007: 62).

Aminuis Reserve who claimed to have been there for as long as memory served them and defined their *!ηole* (district) as bounded by (O)kongowa, Kungas, Kumu, and westward towards Aminuis itself (Traill 1974b: 13). Since Traill did not find Taa speakers at N||aosanabis, he suggested (1974b: 12):

Perhaps Bleek's !xō who survived, or who had been living in the bush trekked the 40 odd miles eastwards to the isolation of the Aminuis area and in doing so ensured their preservation to the present.

Oral history accounts, referring to the time when Bleek travelled the area, suggest something different. Already then, Aminuis was a rural center frequented by several different population groups (see above). The foraging territory of the !Xoon was described as extending from Aminuis rather east- and southwards than westwards. The Taa speakers whom Bleek met at N||aosanabis just like those she met in Uichenas and Tsachas were probably either farmworkers or people who lived in closer association with Namas. In her publications, Bleek used the name !kō or Koon (!Xoon) only for the Taa speakers at N||aosanabis, while she called the Taa speakers at Tsachas, Uichenas, and Aminuis N|u-||en. A characteristic worth mentioning for Bleek was the !Xoon's fame for making the best ostrich eggshell beads.

They [the !Xoon] are famous for making ostrich eggshell beads. I obtained a list of words of their language, which is merely a dialect of the |nu ||en tongue (Bleek 1929: 2).

and

Ostrich eggshell beads are bartered by all tribes, but the Koon, a tribe to the south, are known to make them especially well, and their beads are always in demand (Bleek 1928: 37).

Also Passarge reports about the trade with ostrich eggshells by a group which might have been the ancestors of present-day Namibian !Xoon. He wrote (1907: 118, after Wilmsen 1997: 202):

The best and most beautiful beads were made by Kqung south of Rietfontein [in Botswana], who everywhere got the highest prices for them. From them, Naro used to get beads to trade.

For the territory of Namibia, the name !Xoon and its variations can only be traced back to the work of Dorothea Bleek. No similar name appears in the written documents of earlier times. Two remarks by Passarge refer to San in Botswana. One is the mentioning of the Kqung south of Rietfontein who were bartering with the Naro (quoted above), the other one (Passarge 1907: 28, after Wilmsen 1997: 145, using superscript numerals for clicks, see fn. 50)

speaks about the Qóo or ¹Kung as a “shy tribe of Bushmen who should speak a language unintelligible to the Naro and Cauxai [Ju speakers].” Passarge's Naro companion told him, that these people were carrying a piece of wood in the partition of the nose. This is interesting because a group of people with such a custom, the Hei³Guin (29, Wilmsen 1997: 145), probably composed of Khoekhoe *hei* “wood” and *g^huin* “nose” appear as “Nasenstock-träger” (literally: “nose-peg-wearers”) also in other German sources dealing with our very research area (see below).

A map published in the “German Colonial Atlas” by Langhans (1897) displays the ethnonym “||Ko gein” in the east of Aminuis. Although the click is different, the name “||Ko gein” might be a mutilation of !Xoon. Interestingly, the same name is written across the Auob River about half way downstream between Gochas and the confluence with the Elephant's River. However, other names for San groups including, for example, the name “Hei †Guin Buschmänner” (Hei †Guin Bushmen) includes the label “Buschmänner” (Bushmen) while “||Ko gein” is written without such a specification, suggesting that they were a group of “Hottentots.”

Today the name !Xoon is the self-denomination of the largest group of Taa speakers in Namibia, while the second group, the 'N|oha, deny them this denomination and call them G!aokx'aa instead. The 'N|oha reserve the name !Xoon, most often spelled !Xuun, either for the Ju speakers from Nyae-Nyae or for a group of San in South Africa where some of their ancestors came from. One man, who according to his identity document was born in 1942, stated that his mother's father originated from the “Karoo,” on the other side of Bokspits (on the Botswana shore of the Molopo), and came to marry his 'N|oha grandmother at N|uiyani in Botswana. His grandfather, a man called Na'i or OuKiss spoke a different language which was difficult to understand. OuKiss came with his brother and sister and two Baster brothers from Upington to Bokspits where they separated. The Basters went the Nosob further upstream to Aranós, the Bushmen went through Tsabong and Kang to end up at N|uiyani. The man referred to his grandfather's people as !Xoon (interview with AK, 27.03.2010, Otjiwarongo). His sister explained the group name !Xoon as “Kuruman Bushmen” (interview with AK, 29.03.2010, Corridor 13). Another man whose maternal grandfather was the brother of OuKiss gave the latter's group affiliation as !Xoon on one occasion (interview with GT, 27.04.2004, Corridor 18) and on another occasion as N|ukate (see below) from southern Botswana (interview with GT, 21.02.2005, Cor-

ridor 18).³⁴ According to one of my main !Xoon informants on history, two groups of !Xoon originally moved to the Aminuis area from the south to whom he referred as the “short” and the “long” !Xoon, respectively. While the “short !Xoon” went back to the south, the “long !Xoon” stayed in the Aminuis area for good (interviews with SM, 18.02.2005, 06.02., and 13.02.2006, Corridor 15). The oral accounts, thus, suggest that the name !Xoon was used more widely in the past than it is used today.³⁵ It seems to have been used for speakers of different Tuu languages, including the †Khomani or N|uu speakers in the Upington and Kuruman areas of South Africa, whose language was recognized to be hardly intelligible and significantly different from their own by speakers of Taa.³⁶

G!aokx'aa

Within the written sources, the name G!aokx'aa (plural: G!aokx'aate) is only mentioned by Traill (1974b: 13). Although causing a great deal of irritation when used by the 'N|oha for the !Xoon today,³⁷ Traill's observations suggest that at least some of the ancestors of present-day Namibian !Xoon have used that name for themselves.

At this farm [Bosduin] there were a number of Bushman labourers who claimed to come from Kumu (!um is the !xõ name) in the Reserve. They called themselves !gaokx'ate and gave me the names of relatives living in the Reserve. When I later visited Kongowa (Karikum)^[38]

and Kumu I was able to confirm these connections. The Kumu group prefers to be called !gaokx'ate and not !xõ; the latter name, I was told, was used by the Kongowa group. I was offered the explanation that the name !gaokx'ate had been given them by the ǀǀǀǀǀǀ Bushmen of Botswana who crossed the border to work for the baTswana in the Corridor. These ǀǀǀǀǀǀ erroneously believed that !gaokx'ate was the !xõ name for God and so called them the “!gaokx'ate.” The latter name is actually an inaccurate rendering of the !xõ gauxa (chief)!^[39] ... The name !gaokx'ate crops up again further east in Botswana at Phepahne north of Lehututu, where both †hūā and !gaokx'ate are reported to be found. But I have not confirmed this personally (Traill 1974b: 13).

The people identifying themselves as !Xoon today consider the use of the name G!aokx'aa as denigrating and passionately reject to be called by it. They also offered a very different etymology for the name, stating that it means “sore hip” and refers to the condition of young women who have to keep lying for a long time during the initiation seclusion. All of them, even those whose parents or who themselves lived at Kumu in the 1970s, rejected Traill's representation that the Kumu people called themselves by that name in former times. Only very rarely the name G!aokx'aa was used by members of the !Xoon group for themselves. According to Traill (1974b: 24) the !ama (western) group at Zutshwa also know the name “!gaokx'ate” (G!aokx'aa) and ascribe it to the Kang group. As is the case with the name !Xoon, it was thus used at different ends of a large geographic area for speakers of different dialects of the same language cluster.

N|u-||en, N|u-san, N|u-khoe

Neither the name N|u-||en nor its “Hottentot” version “|Nu-san” or that of the “white man” which according to Bleek reads “Nusan” or “Noosan” (cf. Bleek 1927: 57) did make sense to my !Xoon consultants nor did it make sense to the Taa speakers, whom Anthony Traill met in the 1970s (Traill 1974b: 11). Köhler (1959a: 67), however, mentions that in 1950 a group of “|nusan” was living at Okongowa, and a woman in the location of Stampriet used the name N|u-khoe as a synonym for Taa speakers in 2006 (interview with MJ, 21.11.2006, Stampriet).⁴⁰ How-

34 The grandson of OuKiss also reported that his parents went to stay for some time with the game warden of the Kalahari Gemsbok Park, a man called Joep Le Riche. They left, however, because of rumours that Joep Le Riche was going to kill them later (interview with AK, 27.03.2010, Otjiwarongo). Joep Le Riche was a game warden in the Kalahari Gemsbok Park (South African part declared in 1931, Botswanan part declared in 1938) from 1935 on for 36 years and was followed in office by two of his sons.

35 In 2010, I met Taa speakers from N|uiyani in Tjaka who spoke the 'N|oha variety but nevertheless called themselves !Xoon (interview with KA, 21.03.2010). Also the Taa speakers living at Kulé in Botswana were said to speak the language variety of the 'N|oha while being called by the ethnonym !Xoon (interview with KS, 27.10.2010, Corridor 17).

36 If, like N|u (see below) !Xoon was once used as a generic term, this might also explain why Traill found groups of this name at the two opposite ends of the Taa language cluster.

37 In Boden (2005) I have described the reasons and trajectories for this in more detail and showed how it relates to current constructions of “authentic Bushmen” (see also Boden 2007: 54 f. for individual statements).

38 At least today Kongowa and Karikum are not two names for one place but two different pans, both lying in the southeastern part of the former Aminuis Reserve at a distance of about 25 kilometers from each other.

39 Bleek (1929: 27) gives the term gao-k'au “Captain (chief) ... (applied to Europeans only)” for the |Xam language, another language of the southern branch. The Nama term for chief is “gao-aob” (28). The terms are possibly cognate.

40 *Khoe* is the word for “human being” or “person” in the Khoe languages. That the !Xoon were called N|u-khoe by the “Nama” was also confirmed by the Taa translator who ac-

ever, based on a comparison with Bleek's lexical and grammatical data Traill (1974b: 11) confirmed that the !Xoon, whom he met in the Aminuis Reserve at places like Okongowa and Kumu, were "beyond doubt" speakers of the same dialect as Bleek's "[Nu]en". Bleek (1927: 57) wrote:

On the upper Nossop and Auhoup there are still a number of Bushmen who call themselves *[nu]-[e]:n*. The Hot-tentots call them *[nu]-san*, which the white man has turned into "Nusan" or "Noosan". Some of these are in the service of other tribes, others are living in the "bush". Their speech is very like that of the *Kakia-masarwa*, in fact we may say these tribes speak two dialects of one language, a third dialect of which is spoken by the *!kǝ* of Nausanabitz, called "*Koon*" by white men. The *!kǝ* who are famous for beadmaking, must not be confused with the *!kunj*, who are members of the Northern Group. Nausanabitz, their headquarters, lies between the homes of the other two tribes, whose speech is so similar to theirs.⁴¹

In earlier sources, the N|u-san are mostly located further south. Passarge (1905: 80) placed the "Nusan," "a special people with a special language," i.e., different from the languages of both the "Kaukau" (Ju-) and "Ngami-" (Khoe-) languages, in the Southern Kalahari at Rietfontein and Mier. Rietfontein actually lies on the South Africa-Namibian border south of the Auob River and 26° latitude. In the accompanying map, the name "Nusan" is written in Botswana between the Nossob and Molopo Rivers or between 25° and 26° latitude. Also Hahn and Vedder (Hahn et al. 1966 [1928]: 82) used the name for speakers of the southern language group:

companied us on the trip (interview with HM, 21.11.2006, Stampriet). Note that they used the Khoekhoe term for "human being" (*khoe*) instead of the denigrating term "san." Haacke and Eiseb (2002: 225) give the translation "Kalahari Bushmen" for "n/usaa". Budack (1969: 212) collected several etymological sources for "[nu]-san" among the Nama of the Gobabis District. He doubts the explanation that *n/u* means "strange" or "unknown" because these meanings were neither mentioned in the dictionaries of Krönlein nor Olpp. According to Krönlein (1889: 263) *n/u-!hub* means "thirstveld" and according to Olpp (1888: 91) *n/u* is the smell of the roasted seeds of a wild melon (quoted in Budack 1969: 212).

- 41 This passage is irritating, because, on the one hand, Bleek located the *Kakia-Masarwa* at a place called *Kakia* beyond the Molopo River in Botswana, on the other hand, she says that *Naosanabitz* (N|aosanabis) lies between the homes of the groups speaking the closest related languages. One of them are the N|u-en on the upper Nossob and Auob. If the other group were the *Kakia-Masarwa*, it would be strange to speak of N|aosanabis as lying between *Kakia* and the upper Nossob and Auhoup. Instead she might also speak of the *Kattia* on the lower Nossob, who, she says, speak a dialect of the !Auni language (Bleek 1927: 56).

The Bushmen of the Kalahari region consist of three main divisions, each speaking a language of its own, viz.: the N|u-|ein or N|u-san in the south, the Ngami Bushmen in the centre, and the Kaukau Bushmen in the north. The N|u-|ein inhabit those portions of the Gobabis, Gibeon, and Aroab districts which lie to the east of the Elephant and Auob rivers. The northern limit of their distribution is formed by a line running roughly from Naunas across Oas to the Elephant's River, crossing the Nossob a short distance below the junction of the Black and White Nossob Rivers.⁴²

In 1870, Theophilus Hahn (1870: 142) published a short wordlist from people called "N|usan" in the southern |Karri-|Karri (Kalahari), which was provided by missionary Weber.⁴³ Although some of the words in this list resemble Taa words, other basic words are too different for the list to be as a whole recognizable as present-day Taa.

In 1861, J. G. Krönlein, a Rhenish missionary at Bethany, had sent Wilhelm Bleek "some fragments of the N|ūsā Dorstveld Bushmen (no water there) taken down from the dictation of an Orlam of Bethany, who lived for some time amongst the Bushmen, and who had till very lately a Bushman in his service, with whom he mostly talked N|ūsā language" (quoted in Güldemann 2006: 380). Güldemann found Krönlein's language material to be closer to the |Xam cluster within the !Ui branch than to the Taa branch of the Tuu family. N|u-san, thus, appears to be a term, which Khoekhoe speakers used for all the San in the southern Kalahari or as Güldemann (2006: 380) puts it, "a generic Khoekhoe exonym, and thus notoriously ambiguous in its meaning and reference," which should not be taken to imply homogeneity in linguistic terms.

'N|oha

As far as I know, no one has so far suggested that the phonological similarity of the names N|uu and 'N|oha (plural: 'N|uhmde) might be due to the fact that also the 'N|uhmde were part of the N|uu. According to Traill the 'N|uhmde are "Bushmen of Botswana who crossed the border to work for the baTswana in the Corridor" (Traill 1974b: 13). Biographical data recorded from the 'N|oha, who now-

- 42 In the volume they show the picture of a "[Nu]-|ein Bushman Gobabis."

- 43 Missionary Friedrich Wilhelm Weber from the Rhenish mission was based at Berseba from 1857–1860, at Gobabis from 1860–1865, and at Warmbad from 1867–1880 (<<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/7589/Names/RhenMiss.html>> [23.06.2009]). It is not documented where exactly Weber recorded the wordlist.

adays live in the southern Corridor, rather suggest that they came in order to work for the emergent farms in the south of the Aminuis Native Reserve from the late 1940s onwards. At the time, the area was opened up for commercial farming in order to serve ex-combatants of World War II. The quest for farm laborers might have been met partly by Tswana brokers, but oral accounts stress that the farmers took the recruitment in their own hands during “hunting” trips across the border, also using local !Xoon to persuade ‘N|oha from Botswana to come and work on the farms (interview with SM, 15.02.2008, Corridor 15). Many older ‘N|oha, who nowadays live in the southern Corridor or in Aranos, spent some time on the farms Oorwinning and Boesmanstad, which both lie immediately on the border. Traill (1974b: 15) recorded the name ǝ^{ha} for the Taa speakers he met at Oorwinning in the early seventies and has the following information on them:

... the ǝ^{ha} acknowledged that they originated east of Oorwinning at the place called ǝ^{ha} in Botswana. ... The ǝ^{ha} I interviewed claimed that they had all moved to South West Africa some 25 years ago and that the other ǝ^{ha} lived in the southern part of the corridor north of Oorwinning between the Aminuis Reserve and the border (Traill 1974b: 16).

The geographical coincidence suggests that the ‘N|oha belong to the same group although the name ǝ^{ha} is neither used by the ‘N|oha nor by the !Xoon. The name ‘N|oha is not mentioned by Bleek or in any of the earlier sources. However, the information in Bleek’s notebook (*Bleek and Lloyd Collection* n.d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 3), that the “[nu]len” were living eastwards from Uichenas behind Naunas, while the “!kxo” were living southwards around the Nossob, might mean that her N|u-llen were ancestors of the ‘N|oha (pl. N|uhmde) instead of the !Xoon.

N|ahexa (also ʔ//ǰa^{he}), Lala, Kattea (also Katea, Xatia), Vaalpens

These names are here dealt with in one paragraph obviously not because of their phonetic similarities but because they are the names which in the Southern Kalahari have been documented for mixed San-Bantu populations.⁴⁴ N|ahexa is the name currently used for people of mixed ‘N|oha and Kgalagadi origin who are sometimes also referred to as

“Vaalpens” or “swaart Boesmans” (interview with AK, 01.04.2010, Otjiwarongo). Traill (1974: 17) worked with “ʔ//ǰa^{he}” at Kule in Botswana who originated from Lehututu. According to his appraisal they were in contact with the S.W.A. “corridor Bushmen” while he suggests on the ground of linguistic evidence that the Aminuis !xō (!Xoon) were largely isolated from such movements. Oral accounts by Namibian !Xoon, however, provide lots of evidence for !Xoon moving into Botswana. That their dialect is distinct is certainly not due to isolation during the past century, but must have reasons lying much farther back in history. The next quote from Traill (1974b: 18) reveals that the names !Xoon, ǝ^{ha}, N|ahexa, and Lala were all used for the same people, though probably for entities of different scope or with different intentions:

In their study of the relationships between the Bushmen and Kgalagadi at Kuli [Kule], Silberbauer and Kuper ... say that the Bushmen are !xō and that they call themselves ǝwa, while the Kgalagadi call them Lala. As mentioned above, the Kuli Bushmen I interviewed called themselves ʔ//ǰa^{hmsa} (plural of ʔ//ǰa^{he}). They accepted no other Bushman name. My informants amongst the Lone Tree !xō reserved the name ʔ//ǰa^{he} for the Lala and offered information which suggests that the term refers to a Bushman-Kgalagadi hybrid who is a dependent of a Kgalagadi.

The name Kattea was unknown to both the !Xoon and ‘N|oha I spoke to in the first decade of the 21st century. However, Köhler (1959a: 67f.) reports about a group of Bushmen who called themselves “Katea” at Otjiungukua (Otjongukwa) in the northeastern part of the Aminuis Native Reserve, but he was uncertain whether they should not be called Kgalagadi. Also the Kattea are usually equalized with the Vaalpens, i.e., the mixed San-Bantu population.⁴⁵ From Passarge Pöch got the information that the dunes west of Lehututu were known as “Katteaveld” with the Kattea identified as impoverished Tswanas from the south. Bleek found people of that name on the lower Nossob and identified them as Bushmen.

In the waterless region of the lower Nossob I found a little band of Bushmen living “on the melon” under the overlordship of some Bastaards. Some of these called themselves *launi*, others *xatia*, probably the Kattia, or Kattea mentioned by various authors. They spoke two dialects of one language, a member of the Southern Group, but less closely allied to the *kham* [Xam] speech than the above mentioned languages (Bleek 1927: 56).

44 The names for mixed San-Nama populations will be subject of the next chapter.

45 E.g., Pöch (1910: 361); Bleek (1929: 2); Green (1952: 228); Traill (1974b: 38).

Again, these names were used for different groups and provide no clues as to which language the people referred to by them might have spoken. The names for mixed San-Nama population groups are discussed next.

**Gain \dagger aman (also Gein \dagger ams),
!Gabe (also Gabe, ²Gabe)**

My !Xoon consultants located a group called Gain \dagger aman in the area north and west of Aminuis (see map in Boden 2007: 53)⁴⁶ and to have spoken both languages: !Xoon and Nama. The name was said to be of Nama origin and to mean “big blanket”. In Khoekhoe *kai* means big (Haacke and Eiseb 2002: 59) and *n \dagger ams* means blanket (414). The !Xoon further stated that the Gain \dagger aman were the descendants of a man of mixed Nama-!Xoon origin who was the founder of the group and a headman. This information was confirmed by a Nama woman in Mariental (interview with MK, 21.11.2006). Geinamseb or Geinamses is today a common surname among both !Xoon and Nama in the area southeast of Gobabis. The Gain \dagger aman were further said to have come from the west and to have returned to the Nossob about the time when the reserve was established and to have “become Nama.” However, apparently some Gain \dagger aman also became !Xoon, given the high number of people identifying themselves as !Xoon with that surname. One !Xoon man said that the Gain \dagger aman and !Xoon were actually the same people, since all the !Xoon were mixed with Nama as well as with Naros. Neither Traill nor Bleek have any information on this name, nor do Passarge or Pöch.⁴⁷ It does, however, appear on a map in the German Colonial Atlas (Langhans 1897: sheet no. 17) which, different from my informants, locates the “Gei \dagger ams” south of Aminuis. Theophilus Hahn (1971: 5) placed a Khoekhoe-speaking group called “Gei \dagger nam” in the northwestern Kalahari which he specifies as the area east of Gobabis (15), i.e., even further north than my informants, although, unfortunately, very imprecise as a geographical information.

46 According to my !Xoon informants, the Gain \dagger aman occupied the same places like the Hai \parallel om who, however, spoke a different language (see below).

47 At least, this is true for Bleek’s publications. Under the heading “Amenuis” (Aminuis) she noted the sentence “[Kai]namede Bushmen they are” (*Bleek and Lloyd Collection* n. d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 6). Although the representation of clicks is quite different, this note might indeed refer to people called Gain \dagger aman by present-day !Xoon with *-de* representing a plural suffix in Taa.

Interestingly, the map in the German Colonial Atlas (Langhans 1897: sheet no. 17) shows the writing “!Gabe-Buschmänner” (!Gabe Bushmen) in the area where my informants located the Gain \dagger aman. The name !Gabe is another name used for mixed San-Nama populations in the southern Kalahari. Although it was not in use by nor known to my !Xoon informants, I encountered the name in the very south of Botswana in the village of Struizendam, south of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. A woman whose father has been a San employee in the park service recognized the recording of a !Auni speech sample from the 1930s as “!Gabe language.” She explained that this language was “between the [local] Bushmen language and Nama” (interview with BO, 28.03.2009).⁴⁸ If the !Gabe on the map were identical with the Gain \dagger aman, this would leave us with the question who the “Gei \dagger ams” on the map were. It is also possible, that between the time when the data for the map were collected (probably the early 1890s) and the time to which my informants refer (the 1920s and 1930s), the political geography was realigned and the Gain \dagger aman took over the places from the !Gabe. Or, the !Gabe were a mixed population of Nama and “short !Xoon” from the south, who allegedly came to the Aminuis area together with the “long !Xoon” according to oral accounts, but left again.⁴⁹ It is also possible, that two different names were recorded for the same people.

Neither Traill, Köhler, nor Bleek have any information on the name. Passarge (1907: 8) locates the “²Gabe” on the western edge of the South Kalahari in a chain (obviously from north to south) with the “Hei³Guinn” and the “²Nusan” as far south as Rietfontein (in South Africa).⁵⁰ A similar name is also mentioned by Theophilus Hahn for people he met at N \parallel uis.

The Gabe Bushmen of \parallel Nuis shewed [showed] me beautiful embroideries of their own make from white, pink, blue, black and green beads, which they said they had

48 According to the Khoekhoegowab dictionary of Haacke and Eiseb (2002: 314), *!gabe* in Khoekhoegowab means “speak a Bushman language.”

49 The “short !Xoon” might also have been \dagger Khomani or N \parallel uu speakers according to the information of an old Nama man in the location of Gochas who reported that the \dagger Khomani moved up and down the Nossob several times (interview with IG, 23.11.2006).

50 For clicks Passarge used the superscript numerals: 1 = |, 2 = !, 3 = \dagger , 4 = \parallel , he did, however, not always hear the sounds correctly (Wilmsen 1997: editing notes). In another article Passarge (1905: 80 and accompanying map, resp.) uses the following spellings: ¹Gabe (dental instead of alveolar click), Hei Guin (without click and only one “n”) and ²Nusan (same, i.e., alveolar click like 1907, which is, however, at odds with the dental click in the writings of others).

bartered from the Ghanse or !Ai Bushmen [Naro],^[51] and these had again bartered the beads from the Batoanas of the Lake for ostrich feathers, leopard and jackal skins (Hahn 1895: 614f., and quoted in Wilmsen 1989: 116).

According to my !Xoon informants, N||uis was the place where the !Xoon often met with the Naros in order to barter beads and other goods as late as the 1920s and 1930s. This, together with the information on the fame of !Xoon bead-making reported by Bleek and Passarge (see above), suggests an identity of !Xoon ancestors with the !Gabe. It might be worth mentioning here that although neither the !Xoon nor the 'N|oha used the name !Gabe for the !Xoon, they are sometimes referred to as "Nama-Bushmen" which in other contexts was obviously the meaning of !Gabe. The 'N|oha used to challenge the Sanness of the !Xoon by saying that the !Xoon language variety resembled the Nama language. But also !Xoon identified themselves and their language as "Nama-Bushman." While it is clear that both names, Gain|aman and !Gabe, were used to refer to mixed San-Nama populations and both names seem to be of Khoekhoe origin, it is far from clear, whether the two names were used for the same or different groups of people. Hahn locates the !Gabe in the area which is claimed by present-day !Xoon as their long-time traditional territory, before the advent of the Tswanas. Furthermore, the consistent statements with respect to the barter of beads also speak for this possibility. On the other hand, the two groups seem to have been considered distinct groups in the 1890s, according to the map in Langhans (1897: sheet no. 17).

Hai †Guin (also Hei Guin)

The name Hai †Guin in one variation or another was neither mentioned by my !Xoon consultants nor does it appear in the accounts of Traill or Bleek. Its trajectory ends, so-to-speak, in the first decade of the 20th century with the publications of Pöch and Passarge. This is astonishing because the area where the Hai †Guin have been reported to live is extending over an enormous stretch of land from the Elephant's River in the west to Lehututu in the east. The name is obviously of Khoekhoe origin and referred to the custom of wearing a wooden stick through the partition of the nose. On Passarge's map (1905)

the name "Hei Guin" is written west of the section of the Nossob River which lies between the confluence of the Black Nossob and White Nossob and its passover into Botswana at longitude 20°. Apart from the name on the maps, however, Passarge unfortunately has no further information on the Hei Guin and generally admits to know preciously little ("herzlich wenig") about the large *sandveld* of the southern Kalahari (1905: 80). At least it is clear that Passarge categorized the "Hei Guin" as "Bushmen" since the name is written in the same typeface as the names for other "Bushmen" groups and different from the types he used for names of the different groups of Bantus and "Hottentotten." Pöch (1910: 360) met a San woman with a nose peg ("Nasenpflock") in the "upper Nossob Valley".⁵² She came from Lehututu in Botswana. According to Pöch, the language she spoke was 'Kang' and had six clicks, a fact which for him clearly identified her language as a member of the Southern family.⁵³ A language with more than four clicks doubtlessly belonged to the Tuu or Southern Khoisan language family. The source is not explicit as to whether the woman originated from Lehututu or was displaced there by historic events. All other evidence for the "Nose-peg-wearers" is further to the west: The Langhans map locates the "Hei †Guin Buschmänner" between the Elephant's River and the Nossob in Namibia. Passarge (1907: 29) points to the probable identity of the "Hei Guin" with the "Nasenstockträger" in Great Namaqualand. Hahn (1870) located the "Nasenstockträger" in the Veldschoendragerland. He confirmed that the meaning of Hei †Guin is "wooden noses" and identified them as a section of the "N|unin" (1971). If, in fact, Hei †Guin used to be a name for the ancestors of present-day !Xoon or if the people called by that name at least spoke Taa, the information on their localities would match with the claim of present-day !Xoon that their ancestors came from an area further south. However, a relationship between !Xoon and Hei †Guin could not be established. None of the !Xoon I spoke to knew the name nor the custom of wearing a nose peg.

51 !Ai Bushmen is a name often found in the early German sources for Naro-speaking people and seems to be the name of the westernmost subgroup of the Naro (Alan Barnard, personal communication 12.09.2009).

52 Pöch traveled the Nossob Valley up until close to the German (Namibian) border. Thus, what he refers to as upper Nossob is actually relatively far downstream from the perspective of this article and the current settlement area of present-day Namibian !Xoon.

53 Given the difficulties which the authors at the time had with identifying clicks, one might even speculate, whether the term |Kang might not be a mutilation of the word †aan, which is the word for "language" in all Taa varieties.

Naro, Hai||om, †Kx'au-||en

I end this section with some information on other San groups living in the Aminuis area, who do not speak one of the Taa dialects. According to my !Xoon consultants these were the Naro, the Hai||om, and the Koukou (†Kx'au-||en). Among the three, the !Xoon had closest relations with the Naro for whom they also used the term !Xoqre.⁵⁴ The “big place” of the Naro was said to have been N||uis (Otjewe), a place with permanent water northeast of Aminuis, from where their foraging grounds extended to the northeast. Relationships with the Naro were particularly close and friendly (see Boden 2007: 52 for respective statements), much closer than those to the 'N|oha as the !Xoon's fellow Taa speakers. !Xoon and Naro were said to have frequently visited each other and to have allowed each other to use resources on their territories in times of need. Genealogical data provide evidence of these close relationships and numerous intermarriages between the two groups. Judging from more recent maps showing the distribution of San groups, one would not expect to find the Naro as far southwest as N||uis. Again, the oral accounts which locate the Naro in the Aminuis area should make us consider that the enormous historic changes that went on south and north of the Orange River from the 17th century onwards⁵⁵ also caused a realignment of the foraging territories of the different San groups in the southern Kalahari beside the incorporation into the settler and herder economies.

Relations between the !Xoon and the Hai||om were said to have been comparatively reserved. The area said to have previously been occupied by the latter was that between Aminuis and Uichenas. Not only is this the same area, which the !Xoon attributed to the Gain†aman but the Hai||om, like the Gain†aman, were said to have left the area when the reserve was established and the Hereros moved in. However, the Hai||om were said to have spoken their own language, different from both !Xoon and Nama of which almost all !Xoon have command. Taa speakers who said they had Hai||om ancestors among others lived at Otjikoto, a place that actually lies more or less half way between Uichenas and Aminuis.⁵⁶ Köhler (1959a), referring to the preparatory work of Günter Wagner in the year 1950, i.e., 30 years after the establishment of the reserve,

wrote that the latter had counted 86 Hai||om in the Aminuis Native Reserve, which is a lot given the fact that the overall population census for the reserve never disclosed more than a total of 231 Bushmen before 1956. Unfortunately, he fails to indicate more details on the locations. The occupation of the area north of Aminuis and south of Uichenas by a group called Hai||om is confirmed in a 1928 report on the San by the district magistrate of Gobabis:

The Bushmen in the Gobabis district are divided into four groups, viz; – The Makokos “No'qua'khou” [†Kx'au-||en], the Narons [Naro], Haaikoms [Hai||om] and the Koons [!Xoon]. The first named group occupies the whole region north of the Chapman River to the Eiseb and beyond. The Naron group resides in the area east of the Makoko group (B. B.). They are to be found chiefly in that portion of the Protectorate [Botswana], east of Sandfontein and Naunas. The Haikoms occupy the area between Uichenas and Aminuis. The Koons are a scattered group and reside chiefly in the occupied zone. The Bushmen, as a rule, only take up employment [on farms] in those parts where they grew up in their natural state ...⁵⁷

The Hai||om are usually associated with the Eto-sha area of north-central Namibia. The Hai||om who live there speak a variety of Khoekhoe.⁵⁸ The Eto-sha area is nowadays also deliberately offered as the area whereto the Hai||om of Aminuis left – at least by the younger people who are engaged with San support organizations, such as the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA). Older people usually said that they did not know whereto the Hai||om left. The name Hai||om is also of Khoekhoe origin and composed of “tree, stick” and /om “fall asleep” (Haacke and Eiseb 1999: 14, 76). Werner (1906: 260 and word list) reports the name “Heikum” for a group of people speaking a Ju or Northern Khoisan dialect and living in the area between Grootfontein and the Waterberg. Although this was also “not part of the central ‘Hai||om-area’” (Dieckmann 2007: 57), it is

54 Also Bleek (*Bleek and Lloyd Collection* n. d.: Book BC151_A3_010: 3) noted: “!Xore = Naro.”

55 Cf., e.g., Vedder (1934); Lau (1987); Gewald (1991).

56 According to my translator, however, the speech samples recorded at Otjikoto were heavily influenced by Naro. A detailed linguistic analysis is still pending.

57 In the late 1920s, the South West African Administration had sent a circular inquiry letter concerning the San in the territory to all magistrates. The citation above is an excerpt from the answer of the Magistrate in Gobabis: (NAN 1928). Unfortunately, the reply by the Magistrate of Gibeon District remained silent on the names of “Bushmen” groups in his district. The “occupied zone,” i.e. the farm area for Whites, was very restricted at the time (see Map 2), due to lack of open water, wells, or boreholes in large parts of the country. In the southern part of the Gobabis District it was confined to the areas along the Nossob and Chapman's Rivers and the permanent water place Aminuis itself.

58 Cf. Barnard (1992); Widlok (1999); for a detailed discussion of the problems of localizing the ancestors of the Hai||om see especially Dieckmann (2007: 35 ff.).

still hundreds of kilometers northwest of Aminuis. The name “Hai||om” is not to be found in the section for the area on the Langhans map. In 1908, however, Rudolf Pöch had one of his headquarters among the “Hai||um” and “//Au-nin” at Oas on the western rim of the Kalahari.

The Bushmen at /Oas are members of two different tribes; some call themselves Hei||um, the others //Au-nin (Synonyma: //Au-kwe, //Au-San). The hunting-ground of the //Aun-nin lies to the northeast of /Oas, that of the Hei||um to the southwest. The latter seem to have had considerable contact with the Hottentots; they have completely lost their language and speak Nama. Hottentots are living together with them. The //Aunin still speak their own Bushman language. That dialect seems to be related to the one which H. Werner recorded from the Bushmen at the Omuramba Omatako; it is strange that these Bushmen, as does the other group at /Oas, call themselves Hei||um. (Pöch 1908–1909: 2, cited in Hirschberg 1936: 1, see original citation in Appendix).

This suggests that the name Hai||om was used for San, in this case of Ju stock, who spoke Khoekhoe. Whether the Hai||om in the Aminuis area were of Ju stock or not, they were considered different from the San whom the !Xoon call Koukou (ǀKx ‘au-||en) and who came to the Aminuis area only after the reserve was established, either as farm laborers or as hands of immigrating Herero from the north.

5 Discussion

The information on the puzzling array of names for San groups presented above leaves us with the inevitable insight that the inconsistent, ambiguous, and contradictory information reflects, as we should acknowledge the entangled and ever-changing character of social relationships in history and that the idea of continuous identities is simply mistaken. Most of the written record was produced by contemporary witnesses, all of them people with a migrant background in Europe, i.e., explorers, missionaries, academics, as well as the military and administrative staff of the German colonial power. The oral record, on the other hand, was produced by local people and from retrospective. The context of production of the written record is, at least roughly, the time period it refers to, while the context of production for the oral record is the presence. To contextualize the former, we have to consider the “Zeitgeist” and political economies of the periods in question. For contextualizing the latter we have to take into account the processes and cavities of memories and narratives and the current politico-ideological econ-

omies of the !Xoon in Namibia today which shapes their recounting and interpretation of the past. However, despite these differences, the written and oral records have in common the concern of identifying boundaries between population groups. The oral and written record, thus contribute to a common and entangled logic. In the written record, the concern is twofold and pertains, first, to the differentiation between Bushmen and Hottentots (Khoekhoe, Nama, Oorlam), and, secondly, between different types of Bushmen: pure and hybrid, tame and wild, and eventually linguistically and culturally distinct. How and why differences were recognized or not, whether differences were difficult to see through or even willfully obscured, and, what criteria observers used in constructing social categories and the boundaries between them, are complex questions which have been discussed and analyzed by several authors in terms of academic and political interest, which sometimes amounted to arrogant ignorance.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the same concern for boundaries between groups also speaks from the oral record, albeit from a different perspective. “Becoming Nama” is most often represented as a reaction to fear of persecution or discrimination, both in the past and in the present and uttered with ambivalent attitudes of compassionate justification and indignant repudiation. Being “real or authentic Bushmen” and being able to exhibit an “authentic Bushmen tradition and culture” has become a disputed resource in ethno-tourist and other cultural projects, creating or fueling internal conflicts and dominating the micropolitical discourse in which origin and history play an important role (e.g., White 1995; Boden 2005). In the oral record there were, therefore, at least two different interests in merging Nama and Bushmen identities: hiding a Bushman affiliation out of fear of discrimination and denying a Bushman identity out of an interest in securing resources exclusively for oneself.⁶⁰

59 E.g. Gordon (1992); Barnard (2007); Dieckmann (2007).

60 It is important to note here that also the oral record is nowhere near complete, neither with respect to descendants of all populations involved in the histories of the research area nor even with respect to the communities of Namibian !Xoon. Most of the oral record was produced in the communal areas of the Southern Corridor with only few additional testimonies from people living on commercial farms or in town locations. The few oral accounts recorded there indicate that relations and identifications with Nama were much more prevalent. That Sanness opens access to certain resources, especially in the field of craft and culture marketing, is a particularly modern occurrence and not open to all San (cf. Sylvain 2003).

Although a great deal of time and effort was invested into academic research as well as from people directly involved in the colonial enterprise, the most famous researchers on the Bushmen like Passarge, Pösch, or Seiner did not visit the area between the Nossob River and the Botswana border but passed either north or stopped further south. This raises the question why the Nossob and Auob Rivers, which had served as a lifeline for immigration and trade for many population groups during the 19th century, became so neglected by early-20th-century researchers. The most straightforward reason is the war of 1904 to 1909 together with the reports by combatants about the waterless and inhospitable environment which disqualified the area as first choice for colonial settlers.⁶¹

To be sure: based on the linguistic proficiencies of Anthony Traill and Dorothea Bleek we know that the language spoken by the N|u-|en whom Bleek met at Tsachas, Uichenas, Aminuis, and N|aosanabis is the same like that spoken by the !Xoon of Aminuis in the 1970s (Traill 1974b: 11) as well as that of the present-day !Xoon and 'N|oha. However, the fact that the language is the same, in itself is not yet also evidence for a continuity of group identity. Current intergroup dynamics within the Namibian Taa speech community as well as the historical record call for caution in this respect. Given the absence of any oral history evidence for !Xoon living as far north as Tsachas and Uichenas together with the !Xoon claim that at least the area around Uichenas was occupied by the Gain|aman and Hai|om (see above), we have to consider three possibilities: (a) the San Bleek met at the two places were Taa speakers but not !Xoon, (b) the Taa speakers Bleek met at Tsachas and Uichenas were a mixed Taa-Nama population speaking both languages, (c) the Taa speakers Bleek met at Tsachas and Uichenas were a group of !Xoon or !Xoon farmhands whose relations with the !Xoon of Aminuis have broken off for whatever reasons.

Another unsolved question is why about 25 years after the Langhans map was published, which located the !Gabe Bushmen in the area between Uichenas and Aminuis, and six years before the

report of the South West African Administration, which located the Hai|om in this area, Bleek identified the Bushmen at Uichenas and Aminuis and even further north at Tsachas as the (Taa-speaking) N|u-|en. Traill also met Taa speakers on the farms Bosduin and Oorwinning. From oral accounts of both !Xoon and 'N|oha there is no doubt that the people who lived at Bosduin were from the !Xoon group, while those who lived at Oorwinning were from the 'N|oha group. Traill found Taa speakers at Kongowa in the (Aminuis) Reserve. He writes that the people at Kongowa called themselves !Xō (!Xoon) while the people at Kumu called themselves !gaokx²ate (G'aokx'aa). Today such a distinction is neither made by the !Xoon nor by the 'N|oha. Instead the name !Xoon became the self-denomination of the people originating from both Kongoa and Kumu, while the 'N|oha use the name G'aokx'aa as a challenge. Even more so, slight differences in language are recognized by !Xoon people for those who used to live in the north at places such as |Oan-sxaan (Otjongukwa) or Soqu-si-|qhante (Okomboha) in company with the Naro and those who lived further south, but today this difference was never raised as an argument for different group identities and did not substantiate different ethnonyms. At present, the sole group demarcation within the Namibian Taa speech community is that between !Xoon and 'N|oha.

It is a common problem in ethnohistory that ethnonyms or group names of earlier written sources cannot easily be matched with names for social groupings which people use in the present. Identifications with names constantly change, not only because people, temporarily or permanently, move between places and groups, marry, or otherwise relate themselves between social categories, but even more so because the meanings and values attached to names and categories change with time and context. In Namibia as elsewhere in the world, ethnic groups were confronted with and reacted to constructions of themselves by each other as well as by explorers, settlers, missionaries, academics, and officials of the colonial state (cf. Silvester et al. 1998: 11). The question in the title of this article is therefore merely rhetoric. Far from solving it, the article rather demonstrates how difficult it is to match ethnonyms used by different people at different points in time. It also provides sound evidence for how the ancestors of present-day Namibia !Xoon were entangled in the overall realignments of the political geography in the wider border area between Botswana, South Africa, and Namibia as a consequence of the Oorlam migrations northwards and the German-Nama war as early as the 19th and ear-

61 In general, significant white settlement in South West Africa did not take place before the end of the war in 1907 (Silvester, Wallace, and Hayes 1998: 27). Although the war had popularized the country, which resulted in a rush of settlers adding to many members of the Schutztruppe who stayed in the country (Külz 1909: 325), the maps in the atlas of Namibia (Mendelsohn 2002: 134 ff.) show that the area under question was one of the last to become occupied by farmers and that only little freehold land was allocated there before 1921 (135).

ly 20th century. These complex relationships were shown to partly be responsible for the difficulties in drawing boundaries between the !Xoon and other southern San, on the one hand, and Khoekhoe, on the other. More unsolved questions pertain to the identity of the Hai †Guin, the Gain†aman and the Hai||om, who lived in the Aminuis area as well as to the role of the Naro and Koukou (†Kx'au-||en) within the history of this neglected corner of Namibian historiography. Further research is needed and the aim of the article would be met if it was to initiate such research.

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Appendix

Anonymous n. d.

Einige Hundert Betschuanen aus Kuruman in Südafrika waren von 1880 ab nach Südwest gezogen. Der Häuptling Morwe, ein Großvater des heutigen Kgosiemang, wäre unzufrieden gewesen mit der englischen Regierung, er wollte z. B. keine Steuern bezahlen. Darum zogen der Häuptling und viele andere Gruppen mit ihrem Hab und Gut, Ochsenwagen, Ziegen und Kühen fort. Von ihrem Viehhandel her mit den Hereros und Hottentotten kannten sie schon das Land, wohin sie ziehen wollten. Das heutige Aminuis, am Rande der Kalahari liegend, gehörte damals zum Niemandsland. Es hielten sich aber Hottentotten und wenige Buschmänner hier auf als einige Betschuanen hier ankamen und andere weiter zum Kaukarus und Nossobrevier bei Gobabis zogen.

NAN 1898–1914

Fast jeder Betschuane hält sich Buschleute, welche in einem richtigen leibeigenen Verhältnis zu ihnen stehen. Diese nutzen sie für ihre Zwecke auf das gründlichste aus; alles was die Buschleute im Felde erwerben, müssen sie den Betschuanen abgeben.

Pöch 1908–1909

Die Buschmänner bei /Oas gehören zwei verschiedenen Stämmen an; die einen nennen sich Hei//um, die anderen //Au-nin (Synonyma: //Au-kwe, //Au-San). Die //Au-nin haben ihr Jagdgebiet nach Nordosten von /Oas, die Hei//um nach Südwesten. Die letzteren scheinen viel mit den Hottentotten in Berührung gekommen zu sein; sie haben ihre Sprache vollständig verloren und sprechen Nama. Es wohnen auch Hottentotten unter ihnen. Die //Aunin sprechen jedoch noch ihre eigene Buschmannsprache. Dieser Dialekt scheint große Verwandtschaft zu haben mit dem, welchen H. Werner von Buschleuten am Omuramba Omatako aufzeichnete; merkwürdigerweise nennen sich diese Buschleute, wie die andere Gruppe bei /Oas – Hei//um.

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Blurring the Lines

Ritual and Relationships between Babongo Pygmies and Their Neighbours (Gabon)

Julien Bonhomme, Magali De Ruyter, and Guy-Max Moussavou

Abstract. – This article focuses on the ritual performance of relations between Babongo Pygmies and their neighbours in Gabon. Whereas the Babongo occupy socially subordinate positions vis-à-vis neighbouring populations, the *bwiti* initiation ritual inverts this relational form by placing Pygmies at its mythical point of origin. The Babongo, while performing at rituals, embody the “Pygmy” as he is construed by his neighbours. However, the profound changes of the *bwiti* ritual during the 20th century have facilitated the emancipation of the Babongo. In becoming full-blown ritual actors, they enact *bwiti*’s origin myth for their own sake. Thus subaltern actors emerge as central participants on the ritual scene. [*Gabon, Babongo Pygmies, ritual, myth, interethnic relations, social change*]

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“We take our revenge on our masters using fetishes,
by making them drink our saliva in herbal infusions
and other potions”

(a Congolese Babongo Pygmy,
cited in Gambeg et al. 2006: 137)

On the 30th of June 1865, whilst exploring the mountain range in Gabon that now bears his name, Paul Du Chaillu visited an encampment of “Obongos,” or “dwarfed wild negroes” (1867: 315). He was the first European to come into contact with Pygmies and to give a precise description of their way of life.¹ Although they were the first to have contact with Europeans, Gabonese Pygmies are the least well known of the Central African Pygmy groups, doubtless because they fail to conform to the stereotype of forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers. The scanty literature devoted to them includes a few linguistic texts (Raponda-Walker 1996; Mayer 1987), some rather unreliable work by ethnologically-minded missionaries (Le Roy 1928; Trilles 1932 – for a critique, see Mary 2010) and a few short introductory articles written by specialists on other Pygmy groups (Joiris 1997; Bahuchet 2007). The first work that stands out is by Efraim Anders-

¹ Du Chaillu does not use the term “Pygmy” in his travel writings, published in 1867. It is only in his 1872 opus “The Country of the Dwarfs,” a prettified version for children, that he uses it, following the example of Georg Schweinfurth, who had encountered an Akka “Pygmy” at the court of the Mangbetu king in 1870. There, he also makes the connection to Graeco-Roman legends about Pygmies.

son (1983), a Swedish missionary and anthropologist who spent time with Congolese and Gabonese Pygmies in the 1930s and 1940s. Only recently has more dedicated work on Gabonese Pygmies begun to appear.²

As Du Chaillu remarked, relations with neighbouring populations are an essential aspect of Pygmies' social life. In this article, we focus on relations between Babongo Pygmies (Du Chaillu's "Obongos") and their neighbours, highlighting the ambivalence of such ties. This ambivalence, we argue, is a question of differing perspectives in that it results from the two parties' asymmetric points of view regarding the relationship. The article then examines the ways in which interethnic relations are performed in initiation rites. Relations between the Babongo and their neighbours emerge in ritual contexts as singularly complex phenomena. This is, in part, because mythical representations of Pygmies play an important role in the neighbours' rituals and, in part, because the Babongo also participate in them. The clearest example of this imbrication is an initiation rite known as *bwiti*, whose origins are sometimes attributed to the Babongo and sometimes to their neighbours.

This ethnographic puzzle in turn allows us to address three questions of wider anthropological import: the relationship between ritual and social organisation; that between myth and ritual or, to be precise, between representations and action in ritual contexts; and the dynamics of change in the sphere of initiation. If, as we claim, the relationship between ritual and social organisation can be construed neither as matter of simple reflection nor as one of radical disconnection, then how does ritual re-enact relations formed outside its domain? This question is still made more complex by the Pygmies' dual presence within these initiation rituals, where they are present both as mythical representations and as practical participants. Far from overlapping, these two forms of presence produce a tension between the respect accorded to the Pygmies in local myths and their practical ritual subordination. Dynamics of change in the sphere of initiation reconfigure this tension, as the Babongo enact their neighbours' myth via their active participation in a new branch of the initiation rite. This transformation in the Babongo's ritual status occurs thanks to an alteration in the balance of power between the political, religious, and therapeutical dimensions of the sphere of initiation. In order to situate the Babongo case within wider patterns of ritual logic and

dynamics of ritual change within the region, our analysis extensively draws on comparative materials from other Pygmy groups. This article not only constitutes a significant contribution to the ethnography of Central African Pygmies (Bahuchet 1991), but also engages with anthropological approaches to the complex relational dynamics of ritual action.³

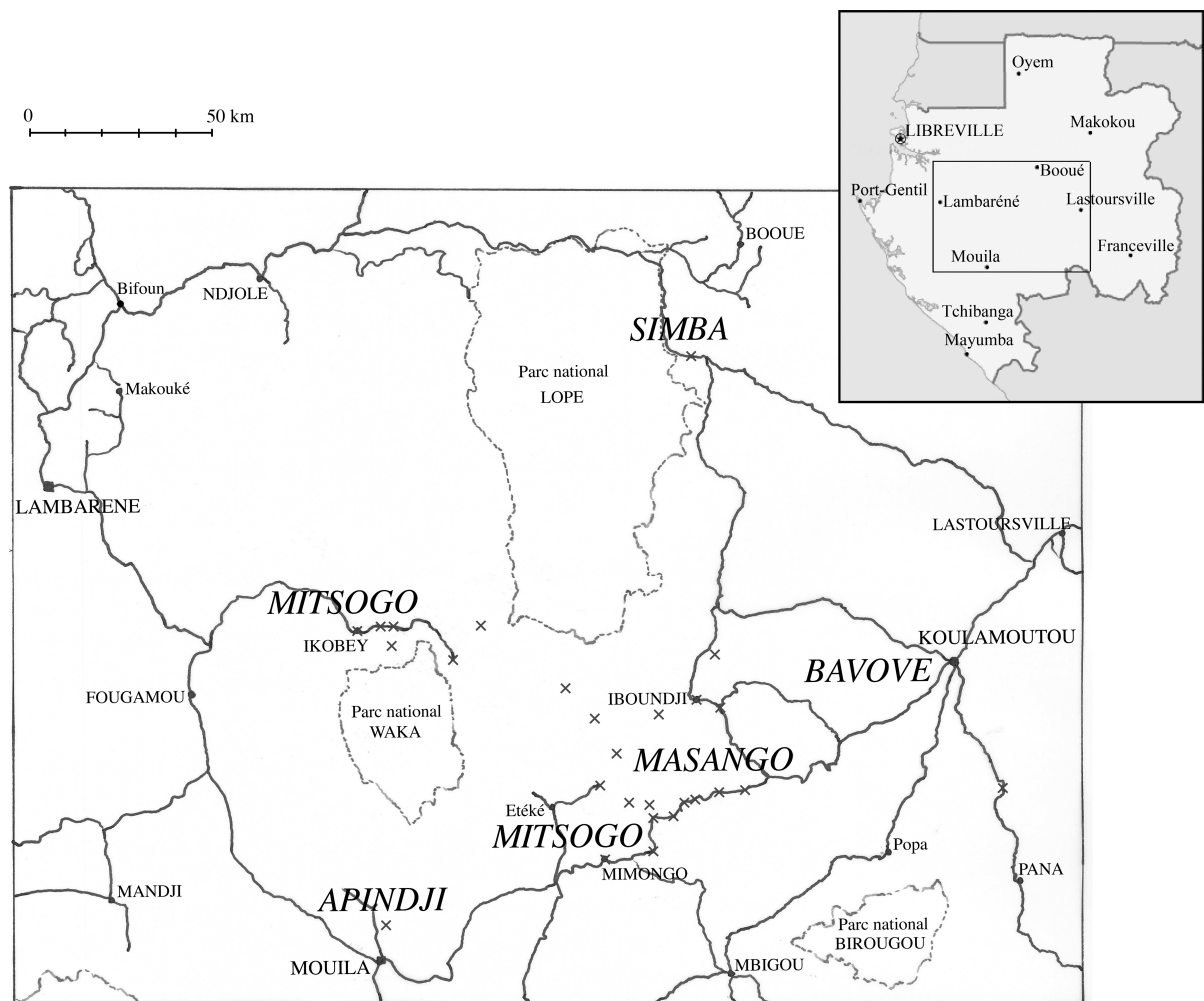
1 A Question of Perspective: Relations between Babongo Pygmies and Their Neighbours

Numbering several thousand people in total, Gabon's Pygmy population is broken up into various small groups scattered throughout the country (Knight 2003). The Baka Pygmies from the Minvoul region (in the northeast of the country) recently arrived from Cameroon and are distinguished by their more mobile lifestyle, their yodelled and contrapuntal polyphonies, and by their use of an Oubangian language in an exclusively Bantu environment. The other Pygmy groups have longer-standing relationships with their neighbours and live in nearby villages or in mixed communities. In the early twentieth century, the now all but vanished Akoa lived among the Myene in the coastal regions, from the Gabon Estuary to the Fernan Vaz Lagoon. The Bakoya, who are also to be found in the Congo, live in the Mekambo region in the east of the country. The Babongo are distributed between the Chaillu mountains, where they live alongside the Mitsogo, in the intermediary zone between Ikobey and Eteke, and alongside the Masango between Mimongo and Koulamoutou (see map).⁴ In the same region, they also have contacts with the Bavove, Simba, and Apindji, who belong to the same ethnolinguistic cluster as the Mitsogo. Further south, they can be found towards Mbigou and Pana, among the Banzebi, and even on the other side of the Congolese border. They are present in smaller numbers as far east as Lastoursville and Franceville. In the very south of the country, the Barimba of the Tchibanga region (who live alongside the Bapunu and the Bavungu) and the Bagama of the Mayumba region (who live with the Balumbu and the Bavili) should perhaps be considered part of the wider Babongo population (Andersson 1983: 2). Indeed, as Pygmy groups live in close association with their neighbours, it is not

2 Knight (2003), Matsuura (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010); Soengas (2009).

3 Kapferer (1979); Handelman (1990); Houseman and Severi (1998); Gell (1998); Houseman (2006); Bonhomme (2006).

4 GPS coordinates of settlements based on personal research, cross-checked with data by Knight (2003) and Matsuura (2006).



Map: Main locations of Babongo villages in the Chaillu mountains.

always clear whether their different names are autonyms or heteronyms.

As well as these various ethnonyms, the term “Pygmée” has been reappropriated by those it describes and is widely employed in the local Gabonese dialect of French.⁵ Though the term is laden with negative stereotypes and has been accordingly criticised in the literature, we have chosen to keep it as a local category, as a means of emphasising the Babongo’s singular position in the local ethnic mosaic. The ties that bind Pygmies and their neighbours are seen by the latter not as something contingent, but as a form of relationality that is both generalised and systemic: as we were repeatedly informed, “Every race has its Pygmies.”⁶ Even “Whites” are seen as having Pygmies of their own,

which two of our interlocutors glossed as Jews and Eskimos. From the viewpoint of the people themselves, the distinction between the Babongo and their neighbours is of a different order to the distinction between other ethnic groups. This is why we cannot limit ourselves to ethnonyms, which might reinforce the idea of identity as something both self-sufficient and substantive (Bazin 1985). The term “Pygmy” has the signal advantage of emphasising the perspective logic at the heart of relations between the Babongo and their neighbours. Indeed, these interethnic relations cannot be considered in isolation from the two parties’ representations of their respective identities and of the fundamental nature of their relations (Bahuchet et Guillaume 1979: 111). Thus, the term “Pygmies” denotes the Babongo *as they are perceived by their neighbours*, just as the French word *Noirs* (Blacks) symmetrically denotes neighbouring populations *as they are perceived by the Babongo*.

⁵ For a discussion of the Western invention of Pygmies, see Bahuchet (1993b).

⁶ In local French, the word “race” signifies ethnic group.

Local perceptions of “Pygmies” are structured by both physical and sociocultural stereotypes: they are short of stature and light-skinned and they live from hunting in the forest. This distinction between Pygmies and their neighbours has its roots far back in history. Recent studies in population genetics situate the point of separation between Pygmies’ ancestors and their neighbours’ at least 60,000 years ago;⁷ which is not to suggest that Pygmies constitute a homogeneous population: Central and West African Pygmies separated off more than 20,000 years ago. And a second separation occurred roughly 3,000 years ago, probably sparked off by the Neolithic Revolution and Bantu expansion into Central Africa. This led to the emergence of contemporary Pygmy groups, as a wave of migration by agricultural populations pushed hunter-gatherers into the forests. The introduction of metallurgy (ca. 500 B.C.E in Gabon) and bananas enshrined the economic and demographic superiority of agriculturalists (Klieman 2003). Pygmy hunter-gatherer communities became isolated from one another, but at the same time began to maintain steady relations with their agricultural neighbours, as attested to by gene flow indicating intermarriage. Thus, western Pygmies are today genetically closer to their agricultural neighbours than to eastern Pygmies. Among western Pygmies, the Babongo stand out as the group most genetically proximate to its neighbours (Verdu et al. 2009). Though such long-term historical reconstructions are problematic, they have the signal virtue of situating Pygmies firmly within history, rather than assigning them the role of ahistorical hunter-gatherers somehow emerging straight out of the Paleolithic era (Headland and Reid 1989; Blench 1999). They allow us to stress the importance and historical depth of relations between Pygmies and their neighbours, who are better thought of as “two different ethnic groups within a single society, rather than as two separate societies” (Grinker 1990: 112). The ethnic boundary that separates them does not exist in spite of their social interactions, but by virtue of them.⁸ The two groups’ interactions are based on a form of complementary specialisation that directs their lifestyles: Pygmies’ specialisation in forest products finds its counterpart in the increasing agricultural specialisation of their neighbours. This interdependence relies on a system of exchanges:

agricultural and craft products are traded for the produce of hunting and gathering. The most prestigious form of exchange sees iron traded for game.

It is impossible to say for sure whether the agriculturalists’ economic and demographic superiority was always accompanied by political ascendancy, or whether relations between Pygmies and their neighbours remained relatively egalitarian. What is clear is that contact with Europeans shifted things in favour of the agriculturalists, as Pygmies are now also dependent on their neighbours’ control of the long-distance trade networks that bring them European consumer items. Pygmies also provide cheap ivory that their neighbours sell on to Europeans at a profit.⁹ The villagers’ economic domination leads to the social marginalisation of the Pygmies, who are relegated to an inferior and dependent class. The villagers’ perspective is then legitimised by ideological representations wherein they portray themselves as the Pygmies’ “masters” or “patrons,” describing them as “slaves” and thus reproducing relational schemas born out of colonialism and the slave trade. The Mitsogo even claim that until recently the Babongo were used as a backup source of sacrificial victims for certain rituals. These are not, however, precise representations of the reality of their relations. Pygmies have never been the agriculturalists’ slaves *stricto sensu*, and in any case, the status of dependents in the region is of a far more varied and porous nature than the Western notion of slavery would lead us to expect (Rey 1971). Moreover, Gabonese Pygmies’ position in the interethnic system at the heart of the slave trade remains unclear. For instance, many Mitsogo were enslaved and sold from group to group until they reached the coast. The same is perhaps true of the Babongo (Raponda-Walker 2002; Knight 2003) and is likely the case that so-called “Akoa” Pygmies are in fact descendants of Pygmy populations from the interior who arrived on the coast by way of slavery. That said, the Babongo’s limited numbers, relative isolation in the forest, and more nomadic lifestyle make it unlikely that they were significantly involved in the slave trade.

This representation of the Pygmy as slave coexists alongside an equally derogatory representation of them as animals: relegated to the margins of humanity, they are depicted as closer to monkeys than men. One Fang syncretic myth attributes their origins to Cain’s miscegenation with a chimpanzee (Świderski 1979: 194). This idea of Pygmies as somehow bestial is remarkably close to the Western myth

7 Quintana-Murci et al. (2008); Verdu et al. (2009); Patin et al. (2009). – Though social anthropologists must, of course, be prudent in their use of such data (as culture cannot be mapped onto genes), this work nonetheless opens up a window on Africa’s distant past.

8 For a discussion of the notion of ethnic boundary, see Barth (1969).

9 As early as 1686, Olfert Dapper remarked that the kingdom of Loango procured ivory from “dwarves” called “Backé-backés.”

of the “missing link,” which played an important part in racial and evolutionist visions of Pygmies within anthropology, although it is unclear whether or not there is a direct link between the two.¹⁰ This stigmatisation is aided by the attribution of a distinctive ethos to Pygmies – one which underlines their proximity to the animal kingdom. According to one Bapunu woman from Libreville, “Pygmies go around naked. They smell bad. And they speak poorly.” This derogatory representation is also used to justify more brutal behaviour, as one man from Ikobey put it, “Pygmies are almost human. You have to be brutal with them or they’ll mess you around. If you don’t scare them, they won’t tell you anything.” The real state of relations between Gabonese Pygmies and their neighbours varies, however, from group to group: the Babongo are, for instance, treated less badly than the Baka, who are violently stigmatised by their Fang neighbours (Cheyssiak 2000).

Asymmetrical relations between Pygmies and their neighbours are reflected in group names. Most of the time, the Babongo are called (and call themselves) “the Mitsogo’s Babongo” (*Abongo a Mitsogo*) or “the Masango’s Babongo” (*Babongu ba Masangu*), which is as much as it was when Du Chaillu remarked that “the Obongos [Babongo] who live within the Ashango [Masango] territory do not go out of that territory – they are called the Obongos of the Ashangos – those who live among the Njavi [Banzebi] are called Obongo-Njavi – and the same with other tribes” (1867: 323). This appellation differentiates between subgroups by residence, but the particle “a” or “ba” is also a possessive one. Indeed, some Mitsogo and Masango consider themselves to be the “owners” of the Babongo families that their ancestors “brought out of the forest” and sedentarised at their sides in roadside villages. Such families must perform certain chores (hunting, agricultural labour) for their owners, who offer, in return, a more or less unspecified form of protection and who take responsibility for lifecycle rituals (marriage, initiation, funerals). Owners may even act as administrative guardians for “their” Babongo. As one Mitsogo man from Mimongo said to us, “When there are elections, I draw up the list of my people.”

This asymmetry results in a culture of dependency: the Babongo’s is a culture based on borrowings. “Bringing the Babongo out of the forest” was a “civilizing act.” Villagers claim that they introduced the Babongo to clan exogamy: “The Babongo adopted the clan affiliation of the Mitsogo who brought them out of the forest. Before, the Babongo just got married to whomever, fathers with daughters.”

The Babongo have the same social organisation as their neighbours and belong to the same clans. Many Mitsogo even claim that the Babongo have no culture of their own and that they learnt everything from their neighbours. Language is a good indicator of this tenuous cultural demarcation, especially as the vernacular terms usually translated as “ethnic group” actually designate the spoken idiom first and foremost (such as *eongo*, in Getsogo, the language of the Mitsogo). All Central African Pygmy languages are related to the languages spoken by their neighbours, past or present, and the *lingua franca* is always the neighbours’. In the Chaillu Mountains, the Babongo speak Getsogo or Yisan-gu (the Masango language), but among themselves they also speak Ebongwe, which the Mitsogo claim they do not really understand. It is, however, linguistically very close to Getsogo, Gevove (the Bavove language) and Gehimbaka (the Simba language), although it differs in its system of classes, in terms of intonation, and also by virtue of a number of unique expressions. Du Chaillu remarked that the Babongo language was “a mixture of what was their own original language and the languages of the various tribes among whom they have resided for many years past” (1867: 323). Although the existence of a Pygmy protolanguage has never been verified, the idea that Babongo is a linguistic hybrid is supported by André Raponda-Walker (1996: 7), who wrote the only Ebongwe grammar to appear to date.

It thus appears that the opposition between Bantu and Pygmies defended by numerous authors falls down in the Babongo case, as they speak a Bantu language. Nor is the classical distinction between nomadic hunter-gatherers and sedentary agriculturalists of much relevance to the present-day situation. The policy of resettlement in roadside villages, carried out in Gabon since the 1940s, has brought the Babongo out of their forests and sedentarised them (Knight 2003). The most we can say is that they maintain a more mobile way of life than their neighbours and spend more time in the forest encampments, where they sometimes preserve their traditional huts. Their sedentarisation has been accompanied by a shift towards agriculture. Du Chaillu commented on the absence of Babongo plantations in the mid-nineteenth century, but slash-and-burn agriculture emerged by the 1940s (which is to say, quite early in comparison to other Pygmy groups), as attested to by Andersson (1983: 22–24). The production of basic foodstuffs for which they had previously been dependent on their neighbours afforded the Pygmies a greater degree of autonomy vis-à-vis these latter (Althabe 1965; Guille-Escuret 1998). They are, however, rarely self-sufficient in

10 See Bahuchet (1993b) for a discussion of this trend.

food crops. As one Masango from Mukandi complained to us, “The Babongo’s plantations are too small. When they’ve eaten everything, they come and steal from ours. We make them clear our new plantations as punishment, but it never stops them.” This accusation of theft from plantations constantly recurs in neighbours’ discourses on Pygmies and implicitly reveals the Babongo’s decision not to give themselves over entirely to agriculture, but to cling on to a forest way of life – in short “to remain specialised hunter-gatherers in the world of agriculturalists to which they now belong” (Bahuchet 1993a: 153).

Depending on one’s point of view, the Babongo’s shift towards sedentary agriculture can be construed as a form of cultural alienation signalling increased dependence upon their neighbours or, on the contrary, as a step towards equality with them. This uncertainty speaks to the ambivalence of relations between Pygmies and their neighbours, which encompass “interdependence, latent hostility, and mutual attraction” (Arom et Thomas 1974: 90). This ambivalence is evident in intermarriages, which invariably see Black men marrying Pygmy women. This hypergamy reproduces ethnic subordination – as one Bakoya from Ogooué-Ivindo man put it, “You will never see Pygmy [men] marrying [women from] other races, because they don’t like us. They just want to make children in Pygmy [women’s] bellies. They say we have tails [like monkeys], but they marry our women. Have you ever seen a man marry a monkey?” In such intermarriages, the wife’s family is habitually cut off in favour of her husband. The Babongo are notable among Pygmy groups for the number and probably the historical depth of intermarriages with their neighbours, and sometimes Pygmy men even marry Mitsogo or Masango women, which would be unthinkable for Baka Pygmies living alongside the Fang and most other Pygmy groups. Although the Babongo’s neighbours tend to hush up such unions, the fact remains that mixed marriages do create a sort of interethnic solidarity.

The existence of such forms of solidarity between Pygmies and their neighbours has led some authors to challenge the prevailing paradigm of interethnic domination. So Jean-Michel Delobea (1989) speaks of an “association” between Aka Pygmies and the Monzombo in the Central African Republic, whilst Hideaki Terashima (1998) goes so far as to describe relations between Efe Pygmies and the Lese (DR Congo) as “symbiotic.” Pygmies and their neighbours often formalise their relations in symmetrical partnerships that go far beyond mere economic exchanges: ritual friendship, blood pact, fictive kinship, and participation in initiation rites (Rupp 2003). The first three forms of partnership

do not really exist among the Babongo, but participation in initiation rites plays, as we shall see, a key role in interethnic relations. Naoki Matsuura (2006) suggests that relations between the Babongo and their neighbours better fits a solidarity model than a domination one and might even be conceptualised as assimilation. He further claims that the Babongo and the Masango have developed more or less equal relations which tend to erase their differences. They live together in villages, cooperate in agricultural tasks, marry one another, and participate in the same rituals. And yet, despite all this, the Babongo and the Masango maintain the ethnic boundary that divides them.

Pygmy ethnography thus oscillates both between an “ideology of domination” and an “ideology of solidarity” (Joiris 2003), and between an ideology of dependence and an ideology of autonomy. The differing perspectives of various anthropologists play, of course, their part in this, but such ambivalence is also part and parcel of the local context, as Colin Turnbull and Paul Schebesta’s seminal debates about the Mbuti make clear. Schebesta described the Efe-Mbuti as “vassals” tied into “a more or less tyrannical relation of submission” to their village “patrons” (1940: 59 f.). Turnbull (1965), on the other hand, insisted on the Mbuti’s autonomy. The Mbuti switch back and forth between two opposing worlds, the “village world” and the “forest world.” Though villagers may try to control the Mbuti, when they are present in the village, this control is always contingent; the Mbuti retain the initiative and can always go back to the forest if they are unhappy with the situation. Once away from the “noise” of the village, the Mbuti regain their autonomy. In truth, the controversy between Turnbull and Schebesta is a matter of perspective. The latter came into contact with the Pygmies via the villagers and so “saw Pygmy society from the point of view of village society” (Museum 1969: 157). Turnbull’s perspective, on the other hand, is conditioned by having lived in the forest with the Mbuti and “reflects the Pygmies’ view of themselves” (157). Schebesta describes Pygmy-villager relations from the latter’s point of view, whereas Turnbull approaches them from the former’s. This is not to suggest that Schebesta was wrong and that Turnbull described the Mbuti “as they really are.” Turnbull’s vision of the Pygmies’ harmonious life in the forest is the product of a romantic fascination that has marked the literature to a considerable extent (Frankland 1999). What is more, one cannot argue that only the Pygmies’ point of view is acceptable, as their relations with their neighbours is part and parcel of their identity. Pygmy ethnography has to take into account not

only Pygmy-villager relations but also their different perspectives on these relations.

As the Babongo case clearly shows, this perspectivist logic is not symmetrical. The Babongo's point of view introduces a further layer of complexity that of their neighbours' lack. The Babongo are past masters in the art of seeing themselves as others see them and playing on this. This reflexive capacity to adopt the other's perspective is particular to them (the Mitsogo would never try to see themselves from the Pygmies' point of view) and it is a product of the asymmetry of their relations: Pygmies perceive themselves in terms of the dominant group's categories. One often hears the Babongo mockingly refer to one another as "Pygmies." This propensity to see themselves as "Pygmies" is less a symptom of their alienation than an ironic subversion of existing stereotypes that affords them a degree of liberty.¹¹ In front of their neighbours, the Babongo frequently adopt the latter's point of view, living up as much as possible to the stereotype of "the Pygmy." This strategy of dissimulation is a true weapon of the weak and makes the ethnographer's work significantly more complicated. Everything becomes a question of interlocutory situations: Who is speaking? In what context? In front of whom? This subversive play with others' perspectives means that one can never tell where the Babongo "really" stand, if indeed one can assign them a fixed place at all. The Pygmies' reputation as slippery customers is exactly paralleled by their performance of evasion. As one Mitsogo man from Mimongo said to us, "the Pygmies are very cunning, they love to blur the lines."¹²

2 The Mythical Figure of the Pygmy in Their Neighbours' Rites

Relations between Pygmies and their neighbours become still more complicated in the ritual sphere. The foremost reason for this is the important role that Pygmies play in their neighbours' rituals. Among the Ngbaka of the Central African Republic, hunters use songs to propitiate trapper spirits known as *mimbó*. These spirits, who are meant to guide

game towards the traps, are in fact representations of neighbouring Aka Pygmy spirits (Arom and Thomas 1974). The Bahemba of Lake Tanganyika also have a cynegetic rite called *muhungú*, where they employ small sculptures representing the spirits of Bacwa Pygmy hunters (Kazadi 1981). The Bahemba are also susceptible to possession by the spirits of dead Pygmies who return to take revenge on the descendants of their former masters. Initiation into the *bútèmbó* possession cult allows them to stabilise their relationship to these spirits whilst putting them to work for the benefit of the community. As the discrepancy between actual Pygmies and ritual representations of them makes clear, rites are a means of playing out interethnic relations on another level.

Ritual relations between Pygmies and their neighbours are further complicated by their shared participation in numerous rituals. This mutual participation in the other group's rituals sometimes leads to such an overlap that it is no longer clear whose they originally were. So Schebesta aptly remarks that it is "difficult to distinguish between the Bambuti and Blacks in the religio-spiritual sphere" (1940: 89). Turnbull, on the other hand, tries to demonstrate that the Mbuti have their own rituals quite distinct from those of their neighbours, although some of his own observations appear to undermine this claim. In an article published in 1957, he looks at the male initiation among the Mbuti. This initiation rite, which he calls *lusumba* and which is carried out when a young man makes his first big kill, signals the culmination of his integration into the community of hunters. Ceremonies are also organised in situations of famine, illness, or death in order to "awaken" the forest spirit and bring down his benevolence. In "Wayward Servants" (1965), however, Turnbull disavows his use of the term *lusumba*, stating that this is the villagers' word for one of their own rituals and that the true Mbuti name is *molimo* (1965: 25). He also suggests that some *molimo* ritual chants are in fact derived from the neighbours' *nkumbi* male initiation rites, in which the Mbuti also take part (77–80). From the villagers' point of view, the *molimo* is nothing more than a clumsy imitation of their own songs. Although, that said, in the presence of outsiders, the Mbuti will only perform a fake *molimo* in which they parody the villagers' *lusumba* rite by imitating their inelegant and elephantine demeanour (Turnbull 1960: 39). The situation is further confused by the fact that villagers have their own funerary rite called *molimo*.¹³

11 Much as with the use of the word "nigger" in North America, the term "Pygmy" has been reappropriated by the stigmatised group. It is often used in an ironic fashion, but is sometimes invoked as part of an assertion of ethnic identity which sees its derogatory qualities inverted.

12 The French expression used by our informant was *brouiller les pistes*. It could be translated as "blurring the lines" or "covering one's tracks." The word *piste* also alludes to the footpaths used by Pygmies in the forest.

13 The situation is no less complicated when it comes to the *elima*, a female Mbuti initiation rite, that bears the same name as that of neighbouring villagers.

Table: Initiation Rituals in the Chaillu Mountains.

Rituals	Type of Ritual	Sex	Source Population	Origin Myth	Membership	Pygmies' Status	Comments
<i>mudimu</i>	Rite of passage linked to first big game kill	♂	Babongo Pygmies	∅	Babongo Pygmies	Sole actors	Principally, but not exclusively male (rare cases of female initiates)
↳ <i>buluma</i>	Propitiatory hunting prayer						Linked to <i>mudimu</i> . Incorporated into <i>bwiti misoko</i> as a ritual sequence
<i>mwiri</i>	Initiatory rite of passage to adulthood	♂	Non-Pygmy	♀	Anybody	Initiates	
<i>nyembe</i>	Initiatory rite of passage to adulthood	♀	Non-Pygmy	♂	Anybody	Initiates	
<i>bwiti</i>	Vision-Centred Initiation		Non-Pygmy	♀, Pygmies	Anybody	Initiates	Ritual Overlap of Mythical Representations of Pygmies and Their Actual Participation
↳ <i>disumba</i>	↳ Religious initiation (ancestor cult)	♂	↳ Mitsogo, Apindji			↳ subordinate actors	
↳ <i>misoko</i>	↳ Therapeutic initiation (healing cult)					↳ also initiators	Emerged out of a process of regional ritual synthesis incorporating Pygmy elements
↳ <i>nyobe</i>	↳ healing-centred	♂	↳ Mitsogo				Losing ground to <i>ngonde</i>
↳ <i>ngonde</i>	↳ divination-centred	♂	↳ Bavove, Masango				Has experienced nationwide growth since the 1980s. Strong Babongo Pygmy involvement
↳ <i>mabundi</i>		♀					Initiates subordinate to <i>ngonde</i> or independent branch of <i>misoko</i> ? Closely linked to <i>nyembe</i>
<i>bwiti akoo</i>	Dance of rejoicing	♂	Akoo Pygmies	Pygmies	Akoo Pygmies	Sole actors	Non-sacred dance derived from <i>bwiti disumba</i> : no real initiation; no visions
<i>ombudi</i>	Possession-centred therapeutic initiation	♀	Non-Pygmy	∅	Anybody	Initiates	Principally, but not exclusively, female. Many similar possession cults in the region

This complex tangle of different rituals is equally present in the Chaillu mountains, which boast a dozen distinct initiation societies (see Table). These initiations encompass both coming-of-age rites (which are obligatory, collective, and sexually segregated) and rites of affliction (which are contextually dependent, individual, and sometimes mixed). Some rituals (*bwiti*, *mwiri*, *nyembe*) are widespread throughout the region, whilst others are restricted to particular populations. Thus, the Babongo jealously guard their *mudimu*, which they consider their principal ritual (even though it seems that some subgroups do not perform it anymore). Although it has no particular distinguishing characteristics in terms of its musical structure, nobody contests the ritual's specifically Pygmy origin – which is somewhat reminiscent of the relationship between the Pygmy's Ebongwe language and the neighbouring Getsogo (De Ruyter 2003). The Babongo are quite open-minded about participating in their neighbours' rites, but out of concern for their identity are notably more taciturn when it comes to the *mudimu*: as one Babongo man from Mimongo put it, "We can't show everything. That's just not possible. We can give away the leaves, but the yam stays with us." When faced with outsiders (including anthropologists), they sometimes even try to pass off one of their neighbours' rituals as the *mudimu*, thus screening their own ritual with another (just like the Mbuti do with the *molimo*). This obfuscation is typical of the Babongo's tendency to blur the lines and cover their tracks. *Mudimu* initiation requires a wild yam, game, and honey, all of which invoke the Babongo's distinctive activities: hunting and gathering. The ritual is a rite of passage organised when a young man kills his first bushpig with a spear. The animal's heart is then mixed with particular leaves and the young man has to eat it raw with this "medicine" being presented to him on the tip of a spear by an initiated man. The ritual also sees the transmission of a symbolic knowledge linked to hunting and, more generally, to the Pygmies' origins. The initiation is normally described as "catching the *mudimu*" or "catching the *nyama* [game]." The word *mudimu* signifies the game's spirit master. *Mudimu* ceremonies may also be organised in the event of a bad hunt in order to propitiate the master of the game. The Babongo's *mudimu* is a classic example of what we know of Pygmy rituals.¹⁴ These rituals are close-

ly linked to hunting, and most notably to hunting with spears – a specifically Pygmy activity. They are frequently concerned with propitiating masters of game. Most of them can also be held in the event of crisis, illness, or death and are often combined with rites of passage connected with a hunter's first big game kill. These are closer to being simple rites of passage (which consecrate an event external to the ritual) than full-blown initiations (which create a new identity *sui generis*). This marks Pygmy rituals out from those of their neighbours (Boyer 1989/90).

Rituals are not symmetrically shared by the Babongo and their neighbours. Though the *mudimu* is normally restricted to the Babongo, these latter are initiated into most of their neighbours' rituals. The two groups often organise collective initiation rites (*mwiri* for men and *nyembe* for women) and these are obligatory for the Babongo, just as they are for their neighbours. Whichever ethnic group they belong to, all young men are equally subject to initiatory hazing during the *mwiri*. These shared rituals, according to Matsuura (2007), are proof of the equality of relations between the Babongo and their neighbours. However, such equality as there may be does not run very deep. It is mainly the Mitsogo and the Masango who control the initiation societies and act as cult leaders. For their neighbours, the Babongo's participation in initiation ceremonies is a sign of their dependence. Whereas for the Babongo, it is a means of attaining initiated adult status in the eyes of their neighbours.¹⁵ This ambivalence surrounding the Babongo's participation in their neighbours' rites is a question of perspective: what looks like equality from one point of view can look like domination from another. The diverging points of view between Matsuura and us regarding the Babongo's place in their neighbours' initiations partly derive from our respective field sites: the somewhat egalitarian relations between the Babongo and the Masango stand in contrast with the more unequal relations between the Babongo and the Mitsogo. Yet we argue that, behind the public façade, the ritual relations between the Babongo and the Masango are asymmetrical as well.

boursing Gabonese languages. That said, the two rituals are different in form.

- 15 According to Turnbull (1957), the Mbuti's decision to be initiated into their neighbours' rite of passage is only indicative of a superficial adherence to the rite. For them, *nkumbi* is apparently a rather grotesque theatre in which they participate without really believing in it. And indeed, the initiation does not alter the social status of young Mbuti men back home. Whatever the case may be, this radical interpretation, which exalts the Pygmies' pragmatism whilst ridiculing their neighbours' credulity, does not apply to the Babongo's initiation into *mwiri*.

14 See Turnbull (1965); Bahuchet (1992); Joiris (1993); Tsuru (1998). – The similarities between *mudimu* and the Mbuti's *molimo* are striking. In both cases, it is both a rite of passage and a rite of propitiation. What is more, the two words are cognate, which is even more remarkable when we consider that the term, which means "spirit," is absent from neigh-

Among the rites shared by the Babongo and their neighbours, it is in the *bwiti* (or *bwete*) ritual that the relational situation is most entangled. Its principal branch, the *bwiti disumba*, is an obligatory male initiation ritual. It is less an initiatory rite of passage to adulthood (like the *mwiri*) than a religious initiation that accords particular importance to visions and to the transmission of secret knowledge. The initiation centres around the ingestion of a plant-based hallucinogen called *eboga* (*Tabernanthe iboga*). The initiate's visionary journey takes him to the ancestors' mythical village. The *bwiti* is based around an ancestor cult and the central cult objects, also called *bwiti*, are reliquaries containing the skulls of the forefathers. Although the Babongo are normally initiated into the *bwiti disumba* in the same manner as their neighbours, the ritual's origins are a subject of controversy. In 1910, André Raponda-Walker remarked that "the Bouiti [sic] apparently comes from the Akoa, the Pygmies. It is also sometimes attributed to the Apindji and the Ashango" (1998 [1910]: 14). This question surrounding its origins is also of key importance to the initiates themselves, as the knowledge transmitted during the *bwiti* is done so in genealogical terms: to know is to reach back to "the origin" (*go ebando*), all the way to the very first links in the initiatory chain of transmission (Bonhomme 2007). It is, however, difficult to distinguish between those parts that deal with *bwiti*'s actual transmission from one local population to another and those that concern its mythical origins. Both the Mitsogo and the Apindji (who are closely related) claim that they created the *bwiti* and their neighbours often attribute it to them. This is also the most anthropologically convincing hypothesis. However, many initiates claim that the *bwiti*'s origins lie with the Pygmies. According to one Bapunu initiator from Libreville, "*bwiti* is a religion created by our Pygmy ancestors in the virgin forest." And according to another Bapunu initiate, "it was the Pygmies who first practised the *bwiti*. The *bwiti* was performed in the bush, in the forest. Then the Mitsogo brought it back to the village." Yet another version attributes the *bwiti* to Pygmy "half-bloods" or to those attached to their neighbours. As one Bavove initiator from Koulamoutou put it, "All the different branches of *bwiti* come from the Pygmies. When people say it comes from the Mitsogo, that means it comes from the Mitsogo's Pygmies." Even those Mitsogo most hostile to the Babongo recognise that they played some part in its mythical creation: according to a Mitsogo initiate in Ikobey, Kombi, the Mitsogo man who created the *bwiti*, supposedly had a Pygmy "brother," called Motsoyi, who created the "Pygmy version" of the ritual. Here again,

the *bwiti*'s origins are all a matter of perspective. City dwellers are more likely to attribute the *bwiti* to the Babongo than are those who live alongside them,¹⁶ and the Mitsogo are less likely than others to do so. As for the Babongo themselves, their discourse varies. When asked, some claim that they created the *bwiti*, but others say they took it from their neighbours. This is a clear example of the Babongo's dual perspective, whereby they may represent themselves as either Pygmies or as Babongo. Their response depends on the context of utterance. Thus, during one interview with a Babongo man in Mukandi, a nearby Masango man commandeered the conversation and replied in the former's stead:

Guy-Max: Did the Babongo take the *nyembe* (female initiation ritual) from the Masango?

Babongo man: Our grandparents learned the *nyembe* with the Masango.

Masango man (interrupting): All those sorts of things, the *ba-misoko* (a branch of the *bwiti*), it's the Pygmies who are the autochthones there. Even with the *mwiri*, the *nyembe*, all of that, it's them the autochthones. They began it all. Us Masango, we developed it differently.

It is then the Masango man who attributes all the initiation rites to the Pygmies, and the Babongo man does not contradict him. The interview continues in the same vein and the Babongo man frequently models his response on his neighbour's point of view. The attribution of the *bwiti* to the Pygmies is, then, more their neighbours' doing than their own. In any event, the idea that the *bwiti* originates with the Pygmies sits unhappily with what we know of Pygmy societies – i.e., the absence of ancestor cults (with the dead becoming anonymous spirits roaming the forests) and a fortiori of cults based around relics (limited importance is given to the conservation and transmission of cult objects). The *bwiti*'s initiatory logic, just like its restriction to men, also fit poorly with what we know of Pygmy rituals, which are normally more flexible and characterised by less rigorous gender segregation.

The attribution of the *bwiti* to Pygmies partakes then of the mythical order. The figure of "the Pygmy" features heavily in *bwiti* myths. This is the case in the origin myth of the musical bow (*mongongo*), one of the two main instruments used during the *bwiti* (the other being the *ngombi* harp).

In the forest, a Pygmy falls from a tree and dies. His widow finds his body and informs the men back at the en-

16 For some city dwellers, the term "Pygmy" indiscriminately describes all "bush people," encompassing Pygmies proper as well as their village neighbours.

campment. They use the dead man's innards to make the musical bow's vibrating string, his spine to form the body of the bow, and his tibia and radius to make sticks with which to strike the string and change the pitch.

The *eboga's* origin myth relies on a similar narrative schema:

In the forest, a Pygmy falls from a tree and dies. An *eboga* plant grows on the spot where he died. Later, the dead man appears to his widow in a dream and asks her to venture into the forest and eat the *eboga's* root. She does so and her husband appears before her. This is the origin of the *bwiti*.

The initiates also say that their forefathers learnt about *eboga* from the Pygmies. They sometimes add that the Pygmies only used the *eboga* so as to be able to beat their drums without tiring. They made use of the plant's stimulating properties (when ingested in small doses), rather than its hallucinogenic properties (at higher dosages). The Pygmies' neighbours supposedly took the *eboga* and put its visionary properties to use in their own rituals. In the words of one Vili initiate in Mimongo, "The *bwiti* comes from the Pygmies. Or rather, Pygmies discovered *eboga* by watching animals eat it. Then they gave it to the Mitsogo who built the *bwiti* around it." This version situates the origins of *bwiti* with the Pygmies, but stops short of giving them all the credit for it.

Pygmies, as they appear in *bwiti* myths, have little in common with the actual Babongo as their neighbours know them. These mythical Pygmies correspond to an idealised figure, who appears not just in *bwiti*, but in the oral traditions of populations throughout Gabon as well as elsewhere in Central Africa.¹⁷ This mythical figure takes shape according to the image of the "primordial Pygmy" (Klieman 2003). The Pygmy is first and foremost seen as autochthonous and thus as the land's original owner (Vansina 1990: 56f.). Most migration narratives in Gabon describe meetings with Pygmies, the first inhabitants of the area, who guide the newcomers through the forest: they "were the compass," as one Bapunu man put it (Deschamps 1962: 25). Or in the words of a Mitsogo man, "We followed the Pygmies and they showed us the rivers, the peaks,

and the fruit trees. Back then, we were one family" (Sallée 1985: 236). Fang oral tradition tells that the Pygmies saved them by piercing a hole in a gigantic *adzap* tree (*Mimusops djave*) that blocked their path at the edge of the forest (Fernandez 1982: 57). The Pygmy qua forest-specialist acts as a necessary intermediary between the newcomers and this environment, which the villagers deem hostile and dangerous. He is seen as a mediator with the forest spirits, and is sometimes even identified with them. The Pygmies' power is seen as proportional to how deep in the forest they live: the more invisible they are, the more powerful they are supposed to be. People also say that beyond the Babongo (now mainly sedentarised in roadside settlements), hidden in the forest, there are still "true" Pygmies to be found. This legend is based around the opposition between real Pygmies, visible to all, and the mythical Pygmy, who is by definition invisible. Indeed, Pygmies have a reputation for being slippery or ungraspable. This is linked to several characteristic aspects of their behaviour as forest dwellers: they live apart, move quickly and discretely, cover their tracks, and decamp when strangers arrive. But their neighbours also attribute to them magical powers of invisibility and even of animal metamorphosis.

The mythical Pygmy also represents the ancestor of humanity, a sort of Ur-ancestor who preexists lineage, clan, and even ethnic notions of kinship. For one Bapunu woman, "Pygmies are the first men." Mitsogo oral tradition has it that the original ancestor, the "trailblazer" who came down from the village above to explore this world, was a Pygmy named Motsoyi (Gollnhofer et Sillans 1997: 122). He brought with him the entirety of the human race or, in some versions, he engendered them with his wife Madombe, thus giving rise to all the different "races." This Pygmy ancestor is also the bringer of civilization. The Pygmies' neighbours often attribute to them the first use of fire and of cooked foods, of hunting dogs and trapping techniques, of weaving and pottery, and even of sedentary lifestyles, metallurgy, and agriculture. As one Bavove initiate from Koulamoutou put it, "the Pygmies invented everything." And so Blacks credit Pygmies with creating even those things they do not possess and which serve precisely to distinguish the former from the latter (sedentarity, metallurgy, and agriculture). This is the mythical context in which we have to place the local claims that *bwiti* originates with Pygmies: the Pygmies' neighbours credit them with inventing their own rites. This image of the civilizing Pygmy is widespread in Central Africa (Bahuchet et Guillaume 1979; Klieman 2003) and rests on an inversion of people's lived reality. Another myth

17 Despite the current (and perhaps historical) absence of Pygmy groups in West Africa, similar representations are found throughout the region, mentioning small, pale-skinned men who specialise in hunting (Klaus Hamberger, personal communication). This contrast between Central Africa, where symbolic representations refer back to real populations, and West Africa, where these same representations exist in a referential vacuum, only serves to highlight the question of the true distance between the mythical Pygmy figure and actual Babongo.

helps us to measure the true distance between the original Pygmy and the contemporary Babongo. It tells of the separation of the three “races” that make up humanity: Pygmies, Blacks, and Whites (Gollnhofer et Sillans 1997: 145–147).¹⁸ Their father presents them with three chests and says that each of them must choose one. The Black man chooses the largest chest, full of axes and machetes – he is condemned to manual labour. The White man chooses the smallest chest, containing paper and pencils – he will master writing and so is destined to take command. The Pygmy meanwhile ignores the chest and heads back into the forest to look for honey. The Pygmy here is no longer presented as a heroic civilizing figure but via his traditional, civilization-re-nouncing lifestyle: from the point of view of their neighbours, who consider themselves to be more “evolved,” the Pygmies have chosen to remain “savages.” This myth explains how Pygmies can be considered the Blacks’ original ancestors, whilst simultaneously differing by virtue of their preference for forest life. As one urban Bapunu woman elegantly put it, the Pygmies are “our brothers who remained in the bush.” In short, the Pygmies’ neighbours represent them in strikingly ambivalent ways: on the one hand, the image of the Pygmy as despicable savage (used to justify his subjection), and on the other, the exaltation of the primordial Pygmy in ritual and in myth. As one *bwiti* initiator from Libreville succinctly put it, “the Pygmies are both our Gods and our slaves.”

Following Igor Kopytoff (1987), Kairn Klieman (2003) suggests that the relational dynamic between allochthones and autochthones that produces the figure of the primordial Pygmy in Central Africa is to be found throughout the whole Niger-Congo region. The incoming Bantu populations needed the (at least symbolic) support of the Pygmies, whom they considered to be the land’s autochthonous inhabitants, in order to establish their domination. And so they incorporated representations of them into their rites so as to arrogate their power to themselves. This perhaps explains why Pygmies today occupy eminent roles in the Mitsogo’s *bwiti*. This ritual incorporation is based on a relational logic that does not apply only to Pygmies. Indeed, their place in their neighbours’ initiation rites is equivalent to that of women vis-à-vis male initiates. Outside the ritual context, both women and the Babongo are placed in a subordinate position within a relationship of com-

plementary hierarchy (sexual hierarchy for women and economic hierarchy for Pygmies). The relationship is inverted in initiation rites’ origin myths, with initiates attributing the origins of their rituals to Pygmies and women (Bonhomme 2006: 177–190). *Mwiri* was supposedly discovered by women during a fishing party, before being expropriated by men (a similar narrative schema also appears in *bwiti*). This act of expropriation enacts men’s appropriation of female fertility: through the ritual, initiates claim to re-engender novices and make men of them without the need for women. In the same way, the myth of *bwiti*’s Pygmy origins can be seen as a ritual appropriation of powers associated with the forest world.¹⁹ Male initiation rites enact the capturing of women’s and Pygmies’ powers following the same logic of relationality.²⁰

This ritual appropriation operates via a process of identification with the primordial Pygmy. In the words of one Eshira initiate from Libreville, “During *bwiti*, we become like our parents were, when they were like Pygmies in the forest.” Initiates sometimes claim imaginary Pygmy ancestors, especially in urban contexts (the further away the Pygmies are, the easier it is to identify with them). This identification is enacted during ceremonies and signals both a return to one’s origins and an appropriation of the savage world of the forest. Initiates dress in leaves and animal hides and transform into forest spirits, which correspond to their fantasised version of Pygmies. One ritual sequence evokes this primordial Pygmy figure. Two initiates grasp each other by the waist and begin to spin frenetically. This is followed by a strange song limited to glottal grunts. Initiates claim that these represent the *bwiti*’s “original” songs and dances, when the ancestral Pygmies had not yet mastered singing and rhythmic dance.

The Pygmy figure occupies a central place in *bwiti* epistemology. The transmission of initiatory knowledge is surrounded by secrecy. Initiates gain access to different information according to their status and their *bwiti* “age.” A junior member will have access to a secret, but there will always be a further level of explanation available only to his elders. Initiatory knowledge has a layered structure organised around a pair of genealogical and spatial metaphors – deepening one’s initiation knowledge is a matter of simultaneously reaching back towards

18 This is a ternary variant of an origin myth of differences between Blacks and Whites that is widespread throughout Africa (Görög 1968) and which draws on Biblical narratives such as the curse of Canaan and the rivalry between Isaac’s children.

19 The Babongo’s reluctance to initiate their neighbours into *mudimu* is nonetheless seen by the latter as evidence of their failure to entirely appropriate the Pygmies’ power.

20 *Bwiti* also performs the capturing of the White man’s power, although outside the ritual context White men occupy the opposite end of the social spectrum to women and Pygmies (Bonhomme 2010).

the ancestors and heading further into the forest. The mythical Pygmy figure exists where these two metaphors meet and is, therefore, associated with the most secret level of knowledge. Initiation teaching takes place in the forest, in a set-aside place called *nzimbe* or *bwenze*. When they speak of the “deepest” secrets, initiates do not hesitate to remove their clothing, thus enacting the return to their savage origins. The Pygmy figure is also present in representations of the initiation language. Initiates use a secret language “to speak *bwiti*,” transforming ordinary language by dint of metaphorical transpositions and loanwords from neighbouring languages.²¹ Among the Bavove (also known as Puvi), this secret language is known as *mitimbo* and is symbolically associated with Pygmies.

Mitimbo – that’s *bwiti* language. *Puvi mitimbo*. Puvi, you’ll get to see him. But you can’t see *mitimbo*. The old Puvi man, the one who knows, the doyen, you can’t see him. He’s a Pygmy. If he wants to explain real *bwiti* to you, he will. If he doesn’t, he’ll explain you lies. Each race has its Pygmies. The true Puvi are the ones in the forest, the Pygmies. The Puvi, that’s us villagers. But you cannot understand *bwiti* until you go to the Pygmies. The true ones are hidden (Melen 2001).

For this Bavove initiator, the figure of the Pygmy hidden in the forest evokes the dissimulation that is at the root of the transmission of initiatory knowledge. Initiates, just like Pygmies, like to cover their tracks: they lie, twist, and stall so as to keep some secrets back from their juniors, in order to maintain their authority over them. *Bwiti*’s final secret is as ungraspable as the Pygmies themselves.

3 The Myth Made Reality: Babongo Participation in Their Neighbours’ Rites

Mythical representations of Pygmies play an essential role in *bwiti*, but the Babongo also often participate in the ceremonies. In villages where Babongo live nearby, *bwiti* organisers requisition “their” Pygmies to take part in the all-night-long ceremonies. The presence of Pygmies is not strictly necessary, but it is highly welcome, as it provides a ritual instantiation of the mythical Pygmy. As one Masango from Ogooué-Lolo put it, “When a Pygmy takes part in *bwiti*, his role is like a White man. He’s the boss, because he’s got all the power that we took.

He can be really useful. *Bwiti* isn’t for Pygmies, but they are present.” Thus for one night, real and mythical Pygmies coincide. In a similar way, in one *bwiti* sequence, two women known as *yombo* are called to embody a mythical maternal figure, called Disumba, by grating red padouk wood (which is a fertility symbol). However, the Babongo remain subordinate ritual auxiliaries and their neighbours keep control of the initiation society (just as the *yombo* remain subordinate). They are not treated with any particular reverence and are sent home once the ceremony is complete, sometimes without having been offered either food or lodging. One Babongo informant from Makoko complained that “When there is a *bwiti*, they always say ‘Come along!’, but it’s not so easy to find somebody who’ll offer you a place to sleep, or even food and wine.”

The Babongo are also in charge of the entertainment at their neighbours’ ceremonies. Pygmies are renowned for their skill as dancers, singers, and musicians and are highly regarded as masters of ceremonies throughout Central Africa. The Babongo live up to this reputation. Thus, the musical bow player is normally a Babongo – such a situation recalls the instrument’s origin myth (Sallée 1985: 267). There was even a branch of *bwiti* based on their role as masters of ceremonies. This branch, called *bwiti akoka* (literally “Pygmy *bwiti*”), was popular until the mid-twentieth century on the Gabonese coast. It was a dance of rejoicing during which dancers competed in performing acrobatic tumblers (Mboumba 1988). *Bwiti akoka* was a profane version of *bwiti disumba*, which retained the ritual’s spectacular elements whilst losing its initiatory role. No use was made of *eboga* and there were no religious visions or transmission of initiatory knowledge. The only initiatory aspect of the ritual was the administration of a “vaccine” that helped participants acquire their acrobatic prowess. Most dancers were Akoka Pygmies who performed the ritual for the entertainment of their Myene neighbours. “Alongside the Mitso-go and Apindji, Pygmy slaves were also renowned *bwiti* dancers. One of them, a man called Kouba from the Pointe Denis, was famous for a long time throughout the Estuary region for his pirouettes, somersaults, flips, sleight of hand ... and for his chaotic movements when the excitement reached a pitch. He died around the time of the First World War” (Raponda-Walker et Sillans 1962: 210).

Though they are normally confined to a subordinate position, the Babongo play a key role in regional dynamics of ritual circulation and innovation. Famed for their song-writing skill, they also help spread these songs and do not hesitate to adapt musical pieces from one ritual to another. Their ge-

21 Because of the importance of lexical loanwords, the initiation language is often thought of a pidgin, which mixes up elements from the languages of all the different populations that the *bwiti* ritual has passed through. This recalls that other linguistic admixture – Ebongwe, the Babongo’s language.

ographic situation also helps them in their role as transmitters of ritual. The Chaillu Mountains form a vast ensemble of dense, hilly, and quite isolated forest, with few inhabitants. There are, for instance, no direct roads between the small towns of Ikobey, Eteke, and Iboundji. This triangle of forest, known as Diboa, constitutes the historical heartland of *bwiti* as well as the Babongo's principal zone of settlement. The latter serve as linchpins connecting the different local populations, who all practise *bwiti*. The Pygmies' role as ritual innovators can also be attributed to their lifestyle and social organisation, which are respectively more mobile and more fluid than those of their neighbours (Tsuru 2001). They are less dependent on cult leaders, who ensure a certain ritual orthodoxy in neighbouring populations. The Babongo, in contrast, are characterised by a creative indiscipline that their neighbours condemn as disorderly.

The Babongo play an especially important role in *bwiti misoko*. If local metaphor describes *disumba* as the trunk of *bwiti*, then *misoko* is a side branch (Bonhomme 2006). In Gabon, the sphere of initiation is traditionally structured by an opposition between male religious visions and female therapeutic possession (Mary 1983). In the southern half of the country, *bwiti disumba* marks a contrast with the different local variants of female possession cults (*ombudi*, *mabanzi*, *elombo*, etc.). *Bwiti misoko*, on the other hand, is a hybrid ritual as, though it remains centred around visions, these are less religious than divinatory. It is a rite of affliction: it is misfortune that leads people to join the cult and their initiatory visions are principally concerned with identifying the witch at the root of the problem. Initiators, called *nganga-a-misoko*, also act as healers and diviners. *Misoko* can be further broken up into subbranches. The earliest of these comes from the Mitsogo and is called *myobe*. *Ngonde* is a more recent and more spectacular branch, which specialises in divination and comes from the Bavove. *Bwiti misoko ngonde* probably emerged in the first half of the 20th century and has, since the 1980s, spread throughout the country, displacing *myobe* and *disumba* ceremonies. It is firmly established in the southern half of the country as well as in most urban centres. Its success is down to a few great initiates, who have undertaken full-scale initiation tours of the country, proselytising as they go and creating new "temples" (*mbandja*), which they then entrust to their "*bwiti* children." In the Chaillu Mountains, the rise of *misoko* has shifted the centre of initiatory activity eastwards. The range's western reaches are populated by the Mitsogo and Apindji, who specialise in *disumba*, whereas *misoko* is associated with the Masango, Bavove, and Simba further to the east.

The Babongo, who live on the border between these two zones, play a key role in the ritual dynamics that have led to *misoko*'s emergence out of *disumba*.

Indeed, *bwiti misoko* is the product of a process of regional ritual synthesis that incorporates Pygmy elements. For instance, *buluma* is a propitiatory invocation employed by the Babongo for hunting and is doubtless linked to *mudimu*, though it has now fallen into disuse. This invocation has been transplanted into the *misoko* ritual. Thus, a Pygmy rite has been embedded in one of their neighbours' rituals as a subsidiary sequence. This link between *mudimu*, *buluma*, and *misoko* was confirmed by a Babongo *nganga* from Mimongo: "Old man Dumu and old man Manumba [famed *misoko* initiators] went to the Babongo to be initiated into *buluma*. Afterwards, when they invoked their *bwiti*, people were shaken by spirits. You can't be a real *nganga* until you're initiated into *mudimu*." The idea that *buluma* has been transposed into *bwiti* is further confirmed by the presence of two separate invocations (*mwago* and *buluma*) in *misoko*, whereas originally *disumba* only had *mwago* (a long prayer addressed to the ancestors). *Buluma*, in contrast, is much briefer and is linked to hunting and divination. It speaks of spear hunting, hounds, tracking, and game. According to initiates' interpretations, it is a "consultation done before the hunt so that the *bwiti* will indicate the path leading to good bush." There is a strong symbolic association between hunting and divination. Diviners are compared to a hunter and his dog: they sniff out witchcraft like a hunting dog sniffs out game (one of their techniques consists of smelling the patient's hand). On its way from the Babongo to their neighbours, *buluma* went from being an act of cynegetic propitiation to one of therapeutic divination, with its hunting symbolism being adapted to the new register. This kind of transposition is common in Central Africa: rituals used by Pygmies for hunting are used by their neighbours for healing (Andersson 1983: 107). Pygmies, unlike their neighbours, are more interested in hunting than in witchcraft.

Bwiti misoko ngonde incorporates Babongo elements, but does this mean that it originates with the Pygmies? The Masango and Babongo who cohabit in villages between Mimongo and Koulamoutou both often say that, though *disumba* went from the Mitsogo to the Masango and from there to the Babongo, *misoko* went from the Babongo to the Bavove and thence to the Masango. This, however, is contradicted by individual initiatory genealogies. Most Babongo *misoko* practitioners were initiated by their neighbours, rather than by other Babongo. In the eastern part of the Chaillu Mountains, the Ba-

bongo were often initiated by Bavove and Simba. To the west, the chains of initiation are yet more convoluted. Babongo from villages around Ikobey were not initiated by their immediate neighbours (the Mitsogo, who generally practise *disumba*), but by a Bapunu man called Desayo, renowned throughout the country. This latter, one of the ritual entrepreneurs who helped popularise *misoko*, has initiated hundreds of people since the 1970s. Though the mythical Pygmy is held to be the first *bwiti* initiate, the Babongo are in fact quite often the very last links in the chain of transmission.

Nowadays, however, there are many Babongo *bwiti misoko* initiators. The Babongo mainly specialise in *misoko* rather than *disumba*, into which they may be initiated but are rarely initiators. It is notable that in a mixed village like Mukandi, the *disumba mbandja* (temple or men's house) is Masango, whilst the *misoko* temple is Babongo. For everyone except the Babongo, the *bwiti disumba* is one of the cornerstones of ethnic identity in the Chaillu Mountains. Being a "real" Mitsogo or Apindji means being an initiate. An uninitiated man cannot enter the men's house and take part in collective decision-making. The institution of initiation plays an essential role in the reproduction of local social organisation. Propped up by the local ancestor cult, *disumba* serves to reinforce and legitimise male elders' domination of women, juniors, and dependents. It is, in Ioan Lewis's (1971) terms, a central cult, whose religious and political functions are intrinsically intertwined. As they are dominated by their neighbours, the Babongo are confined to a subordinate role in *bwiti disumba*. *Bwiti misoko*, on the other hand, is not associated with any particular ethnic identity and has a more individual dimension. This branch of the cult is engaged in a process of peripheralisation, whereby *bwiti* becomes detached from the traditional ancestor cult, loses its political centrality and takes on a therapeutic and divinatory role.²² The assertion and legitimation of male elders' authority is no longer really central to the cult. *Bwiti misoko* is more detached from local social organisation and, therefore, presents the Babongo with an opportunity to emancipate themselves from their neighbours' ritual supervision – it is easier for them to hold important positions.²³ *Misoko*,

then, started to appeal to the Babongo just as it was coming to wider national attention. It is no coincidence that around this time some *misoko* communities began to admit female initiates, known as *ma-bundi*. *Bwiti misoko* allowed for the simultaneous emancipation of the Babongo and of women, both of whom had up until then been caught up in a relationship of initiatory domination.

The Pygmies are famed throughout Central Africa for their knowledge of the healing properties of plants and often specialise in *nganga* healer-diviner activities. The Baka, for instance, treat their neighbours – the same neighbours from whom they learnt all their *nganga* rituals (Tsuru 1998). In Gabon, where initiation rites are still very common, a *nganga* career is doubly attractive because it connotes membership of a prestigious and widely implanted ritual corporation. Nowadays, the Babongo are famous in the whole of Gabon as excellent *nganga-misoko* and people come from afar to be treated or initiated by them (Matsuura 2010). Some Babongo villages have even developed a proper trade in religious healing. Urban initiates perform pilgrimages to Pygmy villages to acquire ritual prestige. Babongo *nganga* are in demand as far afield as Libreville. The Babongo who live near Butumbi even benefit from a brand new mobile phone tower in the surrounding area that enables them to directly get in touch with potential clients in town, hence bypassing their Masango neighbours (Matsuura, pers. comm.). It is not unknown for political elites to ask Pygmies to "bulletproof" them against their rivals. Thanks to the *misoko*, *bwiti* may have lost its local political centrality, but it has become a ritual resource that can be deployed in political competition at the national level. Specialised as it is in the management of fortune and misfortune, *misoko* is well adapted to political modernity, to its risks, and to its unpredictability.

Pygmies' new ritual prestige even extends to "White men." The last ten years have seen the emergence of initiation tourism in Gabon (Chabloz 2009). Most tourists go no further than Libreville, but some brave souls visit the Babongo to be initiated. These Westerners often share a primitivist conception of Pygmies which partially overlaps with local representations of them. Considered to be "first people," they are thought to practise a more authentic form of *bwiti* than their neighbours. This trade in religious healing generates more revenue than the sale of forest produce. *Bwiti misoko*, then, allows Pygmies to attain desirable social status and sometimes even to take a wife from among their neighbours' women. For the neighbours, and especially for the Mitsogo, this is highly unwelcome. They

22 For a discussion of processes of centralisation and peripheralisation of cults, see also Berger (2010).

23 S. Fürniss (2008) describes a similar situation among the Baka Pygmies of Cameroon. Whereas Eastern Baka remain subordinate actors in the circumcision ritual of their Kwele and Bangando neighbours, Western Baka have borrowed this ritual from the Bangando and have now become specialists in charge of their own neighbours' circumcision.

have trouble coming to terms with “their” Pygmies being emancipated and are unhappy about the foreigners who come to be initiated by the Babongo rather than by themselves, whom they consider the original practitioners of *bwiti*. In short, *bwiti misoko* is the Pygmies’ revenge on their neighbours. By becoming specialists in their neighbours’ rites, they have ironically transformed the *bwiti* myth of the primordial Pygmy into reality (just as *mabundi* can be seen as somehow enacting the myth of the ritual’s female origin). Thus the Babongo have finally assimilated the figure of “the Pygmy” created for them by their neighbours, and in so doing they have further blurred the lines between myth and reality.

4 Conclusion

In this article we have focussed on the ritual performance of relations between Babongo Pygmies and their neighbours, looking at the ways in which initiation rites allow for the renegotiation of social ties contracted outside the ritual context. To this end, we have endeavoured not to constrict the case study with restrictive ethnography, trying instead to situate it within wider patterns of ritual logic and dynamics of ritual change within the region. The Babongo are to their neighbours as women are to men. Outside the context of initiation, both women and the Babongo occupy subordinate positions in the relationships of complementary hierarchy that respectively link them to men and to neighbouring populations. *Bwiti* inverts this relational form by placing women and Pygmies at the starting point of the ritual and of its power. This dual mythical origin is enacted via their actual participation in ceremonies, however, their presence remains subordinate to the mythical representations controlled by cult leaders. The Babongo who perform at *bwiti disumba* ceremonies are supposed to embody the “Pygmy” as he is construed by their neighbours. In similar fashion, the two women who grate padouk during one ritual sequence are supposed to embody “woman” as she is construed by men (indeed, they can also be replaced by initiates dressed as women). Both the Babongo and women are present not because of what they are, but because of what they represent in a ritual organised entirely from the perspective of male elders. The relationship between myth and ritual or, more precisely, between representations and action in the ritual context, remains strictly controlled by cult leaders. Confined to subaltern roles, neither women nor the Babongo have any scope for innovation. *Bwiti disumba* plays a central role in the repro-

duction of male elders’ domination of their juniors, women, and dependents in the village community.

The Babongo’s status has also been affected by the profound changes undergone by *bwiti* over the course of the 20th century and the national expansion of *bwiti misoko* since the 1980s constitutes a significant turning point. The shift from *disumba* to *misoko* has seen the cult taking a therapeutic turn and becoming increasingly peripheralised: as the links to the ancestor cult and the dominance of elder men have been gradually weakened, *bwiti* has lost its political centrality. This decoupling of ritual from local social organisation has allowed for the emancipation of subordinate social actors. Junior men flood the initiatory sphere (particularly in urban areas), bypassing their elders and forging a career as “father-initiator.” Women, too, are more and more present and no longer hesitate to challenge men’s initiatory authority, asserting the independence of *mabundi*, their own branch of *bwiti*. As for Babongo Pygmies, they are no longer mere ritual entertainers serving their neighbours and have become renowned *nganga* in competition with their former initiators. This initiatory emancipation renegotiates the relationship between ritual and myth, which had until recently been controlled by the cult leaders. In becoming full-blown ritual actors, both the Babongo and the women enact the *bwiti*’s origin myth *on their own account*. The shift in Pygmies’ initiatory status is part of a wider process of recomposition of the field of religious healing, which has seen subaltern actors emerge as central participants on the ritual scene.

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