Onseepkans: Irrigation, Removals and Resistance in the Borderlands of Namibia and South Africa

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Introduction

Onseepkans, a village with an estimated population of 2,500 people, lies at the border between the Northern Cape province of South Africa and southern Namibia. Stretching over several kilometres along the southern bank of the !Garib / Orange River, it consists of three small settlements, called Melkbosrand, Viljoensdraai, and Mission. Today a central feature of Onseepkans is its function as a bridge and border station for crossing between South Africa and Namibia. In the close vicinity of the border post, the typical facilities of a South African rural small town can be found – such as RDP housing, a bottle store, a police station, a snack bar, a camping site and a small guest house. Slightly further away from the main road, there are a few small stores selling canned food and drinks.

Yet, a closer look at the village's built environment reveals particularities that point to the singularity of Onseepkans' past. The material markers, that open a way into understanding the uniqueness of this village are, for instance, the ruins of several dozen farmhouses dotted across many kilometres along the only road, a brand-new pumping station for irrigation fields, the old bright white mission station or the remains of a military station.

Observing them, several questions surface. How did these material markers emerge in this particular landscape? How might their histories shed light on key historical moments in the region, including land dispossession, colonial infrastructure and mid-20th century development initiatives? To understand these questions, I will retrace the history of the small-scale irrigation scheme in Onseepkans in the 20th century and set this in its broader historical and geographical context, while linking it to the regional history of people living along the river.

Farms, missions and the dispossession of land 19th century

The settlement of Onseepkans was founded in the 1910s as an outpost of the Catholic Mission at Pella, which lies about 100km further down the !Garib.[1] The mission station in Onseepkans was owned by the Catholic Church, while most of the land around it – the so-called remainder of the 'Onseepkans and Nias' farm – was still Crown land, owned by the Union Government. To understand the context in which Onseepkans was established, I will first outline some of the developments in the region in the 19th century.

Martin Legassick described the history of areas around Onseepkans in the late 18th and throughout the 19th century as frontier history: defined by colonialism and mutual acculturation, and shaped by migration, war and revolt.[2] However, as Andrea Rosengarten argues in her contribution to this volume, it is particularly important to understand the 18th century societies in the area as dynamic and entangled, with changing alliances. Central actors in these times were Christian missionaries, whose establishment of mission stations led to more settled agriculture, capitalist trade and of course the spread of Christianity.[3] Before this, the region was predominantly populated by communities who sustained their nomadic and semi-nomadic economy of pastoralism, trade, and – at times – hunting and gathering, without clearly marked borders or even fenced landownership. Instead, they had an extensive and migratory form of land use.[4] Even before the Cape Colony's official annexation of the area between the Olifants River and the !Garib in 1847, the colonial administration began to firstly allocate land to so-called Baster and Orlaam groups and later white farmers. Initially, these allocations do not appear to have put much pressure on the people living there, at the time, since these so-called loan farms were a rather loosely specified form of usufruct rights.[5] This meant the people living in the area could largely sustain their economies which relied on migratory land use.[6]

This changed when the British annexed the region in 1847 and intensified the colonial grip on the region south of the !Garib, resulting in increasingly enforced racial divisions. Most newly annexed land became Crown land, meaning that it could now be surveyed and sold in freehold to farmers. While, in the second half of the 19th century, large parts of the area became commercial land for white farmers, the farms close to the river were mostly only surveyed and sold in the early 20th century.[7] Before that, the land was often used

1 The 'founding moment' of the settlement can likely be referred to as when the administrator of the Province of the Cape of Good Hope declared and proclaimed the establishment of a 'pound' (a kraal to keep straying livestock) on the farm Onseepkans and Nias in 1917.

2 Legassick 2010: p. 3; Legassick 2016.

3 Legassick 2010: p. 5

4 Penn 2005; Legassick 2016.

5 Meaning a temporary right to the use the property of another or the state, without changing the character of the property. Dye and La Croix 2017: p. 2.

6 At times, such arrangement could still be found in the mid-20th century – see Gordon in this volume.

7 For the farms downriver from Onseepkans, see Moore in this volume.

as emergency grazing. North of the !Garib, European land seizure started even later.[8] In the mid-19th century, people north of the river mostly relied on a pastoral system with very high mobility and no fixed boundaries between different entities – other than some loosely defined areas, with the influences of local authorities determining this.[9] During this time, European missionaries and traders, and settlers from the Cape became more influential in southern Namibia, increasingly leading to conflicts over the use of land and resources.[10]

Linked to the annexation of land and new racial ordering of landownership, are two changes in the late 19th century that became crucial for later social and economic developments of the area around Onseepkans. These are the establishment of Christian missions, and the extension of canal-building for agriculture from the middle of the !Garib downwards. Missionary activities in the area began with the establishment of the London Missionary Society (LMS) station in Warmbad (1806), north of the !Garib, and in Pella (1809), on the South side.[11] Following the first settlement of Christian missionaries was a long and complex history of changing mission societies, attacks on mission stations, resistance, movement and collaboration between diverse groups in the area.[12] Many mission stations tried – often unsuccessfully – to get land titles or at least so-called 'Tickets of Occupation', that defined the land around the missions as reserved for the exclusive use of the African residents.[13] In 1909, the South African state took administrative control of all mission areas along the !Garib through the Cape Mission Stations and Communal Reserves Act 29 of 1909, and the row of acts and amendments following it.

When, in the 20th century, most of the land along the Lower !Garib became freehold, privately-owned land, it was these mission lands that remained a place where African people were allowed to live and have their own livestock. Subsequently, throughout most of the 20th century, many (former) mission lands became reserves of 'cheap labour' for the surrounding commercial farms and mining industry, as well as a place for the resettlement of forcibly removed people from other parts of South Africa and Namibia.[14] In other words, the mission lands of the Northern Cape and – to a certain degree – Southern Namibia, laid the spatial foundation for the 'coloured reserves' under apartheid.[15] In the case of Onseepkans, as I show below, the state land around the Catholic mission station was not turned into a reserve, but used to establish small-scale irrigation schemes for white farmers, and housing for the workers. It was only through the land and administration reforms of the late 1990s and early 2000s that former mission lands were

8 Except for some irrigation farms, like Aussenkehr, most of the farms directly north of the river were only surveyed during the South African period. And even then, there was an embargo on selling them for some years, because it was still unclear where the exact course of the border will be.

9 Werner 1993: p. 137

10 Wallace 2011: pp. 46–47

11 Dederling 1997

12 For an overview, see Dederling 1997.

13 Surplus People Project 1995: p. 70; McLachlan 2019.

14 Wisborg and Rhode 2005: p. 411

15 Rhode and Hoffman 2008

integrated into larger municipalities and landownership was often handed over to communal trusts.[16]

'Developing the frontier' 1900 -1950

Alongside the establishment of the particular land regime described above, a second crucial development impacted the landscape and life along the Lower !Garib. This was the construction of irrigation fields. From the early 20th century onwards, the South African government and private investors had plans to extend the irrigated farmlands around Upington, Kaimos and Kakamas – all along the !Garib. During this time, Onseepkans consisted of not much more than a small mission station, run by the Catholic mission in Pella, and a few small settlements along the river, mostly inhabited by Khoekhoegowab-speaking herders. The owners of the commercial farmland around Onseepkans were mostly white Afrikaner farmers and, in some cases, private companies.[17]

Irrigated farming has a long history along the Orange and Vaal Rivers, starting in the early 19th century. The British missionary John Mackenzie, for example, mentioned irrigated gardens and channels built by the local inhabitants in the area around the confluence of the Orange and the Vaal Rivers in 1859.[18] Similarly, many people living further downriver remember that their families had long been planting on irrigated fields.[19] Close to Onseepkans, in an area near today's village of Witbank, the earliest indication of irrigated gardens can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century.[20] European settlers developed larger irrigation schemes further upriver, around Upington and later Kakamas, after the colonial government won its wars against the resistance of so-called !Kora groups in 1880.[21] This dismantling of the long lasting resistance of the !Kora groups, living on and around the islands of the !Garib, marked the beginning of a more intense form of colonisation of the areas around Upington and Kakamas. After the wars, the government allocated land along the river to loyal coloured farmers to secure the area, and many of them began to build channels and dams for irrigated agriculture.[22] White officials and missionaries noticed the lush and highly productive areas and began to copy the system of channelled irrigation and applied it on even larger scales. In the colonial historiography, these extensions of the channel system in the late 19th century, often ascribed to the missionary Christiaan Schroeder, became the starting point of 'development and civilisation' in the area.[23] Gradually, the colonial government took the irrigated lands away from coloured farmers and gave them to white farmers.

16 Wisborg and Rhode 2005

17 See Bernard Moore's contribution to this volume.

18 Mackenzie 1871; Legassick 1996.

19 JJ, Pofadder, 24 November 2018 and CC, Witbank, 28 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

20 JJ, Pofadder, 24 November 2018, interview done by the author.

21 Legassick 1996

22 Hopkins 1978; Legassick 1996; Visser and Du Pisani 2012.

23 Hopkins 1978; Visser and Du Pisani 2012.

Concurrently, the Dutch Reformed Church was strongly supporting so-called poor white Afrikaners, and built new irrigation schemes for white farmers further down the river, most prominently in Kakamas. To do this, the church created a labour colony in Kakamas for the resettlement of impoverished whites.[24] The scheme worked for over 50 years, with a break during the South African War, and promised white workers a piece of their own land after completing a particular period of work in the labour colony. While the colony in Kakamas remained in the administration of the church, the state gradually became more influential in (what was presented as) 'solving the poor white's problem'.[25] This meant that there was, generally, a growing need for places to accommodate poor white farmers. And in the case of the Kakamas labour colony, this meant that more irrigated land had to be found to accommodate white labourers.

Looking for such land, the government found that the small mission station of Onseepkans was suitable for establishing a new irrigation project. In 1908, the first government plans emerged, setting out to build an earth channel that cut short the bow of the river close to Onseepkans, to irrigate the flood lands between it and the river. The farm had been surveyed as 'Farm 88 Onseepkans', however it was not yet bought by nor allocated to farmers, and potential additional labour to carry out the plans could be found in the nearby mission lands of Pella.

Around the Onseepkans mission, a few white people settled at roughly the same time, and in 1921 they built the mission church. The archives do not indicate when exactly the irrigation system was finally constructed, however, in 1921 the Onseepkans Irrigation Board was established.[26] This board was officially in charge of keeping the irrigation infrastructure working and allocating water to the irrigated plots along the river. The scheme initially consisted of an earth channel running along approximately seven kilometres of the river and capable of irrigating an area of 267 hectares subdivided into 66 single plots of four hectares. Each plot was intended to sustain one white farmer and his family, for whom the layout of the scheme foresaw the construction of a farmhouse at the highest point of every plot. In addition, the scheme allocated grazing rights on municipal land to all irrigation farms, allowing potential occupiers to keeping some livestock as an additional source of income.[27] All farmers had to do work on the channel, in a rotating system, to keep it open.[28] The organisation of this crucial task gave the irrigation board the status of a general administrative body in the remote village of Onseepkans. Although it was administratively under the village council of Pofadder and the district administration of Kenhardt, most inhabitants remember the irrigation board as being

24 Roos 2011

25 Roos 2011: pp. 54–76

26 Government Proclamation 114 'Irrigation District' of 1921. The entire Archive of the Onseepkans Irrigation Board (OIB) is kept in unorganised boxes in a private basement in Onseepkans (here referred to as the Archive of the Onseepkans Irrigation Board (AOIB). The author had access to some of the material in 2018.

27 AOIB, Kaap Prov. Departement van Waterwese, Kenhardt, Vorgesetelde Kanaal Verbetering, Map from 07.05.1958.

28 For an example of the tasks of the board see: AOIB, Onseepkans Irrigation Board. Notule van die vergadering van die Raad, 03, June 1934.

in charge of all aspects of life – at least for the white population. These includes schooling, infrastructure, grazing rights and health.[29]

The building of the irrigation channel in Onseepkans in the second decade of the 20th century was part of a general effort by the South African government, the church and private white farmers to develop and modernise the area along the Lower !Garib, probably also in connection to the newly gained territories north of the river. Shortly after building the irrigation scheme in Onseepkans, the provincial authorities in Cape Town upgraded the track that linked Onseepkans to Kakamas and Pofadder to a district road for the future development of the Orange River.[30] In this regard, because of the fast-developing irrigation along the river, the Chief Inspector of the District Roads Engineer in Cape Town suggested the building of a new road along the river. He argued that such a road would ease the shipment of agricultural products to the next railhead in Kakamas.[31] He also suggested the road pass by the Ritchie Falls, west of Onseepkans, and the Augabries Falls east of it, because it would be "drawing tourers" to the area.[32] In Onseepkans, the implementation of the irrigation scheme triggered additional developments in infrastructure and administration. The Catholic Church, for instance, extended its church building in 1923 and added a small school next to it a few years later.

Private business soon joined the government officials and the church in their conviction about the prosperous future of the area. Among those who emphatically believed in the business opportunities along the river was, most famously, Carl Weidner, a farmer of German decent who had established the irrigation fields at Goodhouse – one of the farms he was managing for international investors – in 1919.[33] A few kilometres upriver, on the !Garib's north bank, a German farmer began to irrigate parts of his farm around the same time.[34] The growing agricultural production on both sides of the river led to more cross-river transport, particularly once South Africa started to rule the former German colony under a mandate granted by the League of Nations in 1920. In 1921, Gideon Huijsamen – a farmer near Onseepkans – inquired about the licencing process of a ferry between Onseepkans and South West Africa. He argued that there was a growing interest in people

29 JS, Onseepkans, 23 November 2018; CC, Onseepkans 22 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

30 National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Cape Town Archive Repository (KAB), PAR 71, 39/14 Kenhardt Division. Proposed Proclamation of Public Roads as Divisional Roads, Road Construction and proclamation of Divisional Road from Pofadder / Kakamas to Onseepkans. 25 January 1930.

31 National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Cape Town Archive Repository (KAB), PAR 71, 39/14 Kenhardt Division. Proposed Proclamation of Public Roads as Divisional Roads, Letter: Chief Inspector of the District Roads Engineer, Cape Town to District Roads Engineer, Calvinia, 10 September 1929.

32 National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Cape Town Archive Repository (KAB), PAR 71, 39/14 Kenhardt Division. Proposed Proclamation of Public Roads as Divisional Roads. 25 January 1930.

33 KAB ACLT 25 File 3588 (vol. 1): Secretary for Lands, Notice re: Sale of Orange River Farms and Islands – 26 April 1912; Green 1948. See also Moore in this volume.

34 WB, Garies, 17 January 2020 – interview by the author.

and goods being able to cross the river at Onseepkans.[35] The archive remains silent about whether Huijsamen finally got the permission to run his ferry services, but the crossing at Onseepkans clearly became possible during this time. This served as a direct link from the railhead in Kakamas in South Africa, to the one in Karasburg in today's Namibia. In 1926, a delegation from Onseepkans asked for new facilities to export and import cattle over the border, which was finally granted one year later.[36] The growing production, trade and mobility is also reflected in the first hotel, shop and fuel station being opened in nearby Pofadder in 1921.[37]

It was during this first wave of investment and 'development' that the irrigation at Onseepkans seems to have been economically successful. Until the Second World War, the small gardens at Onseepkans provided fruits and vegetables for the farmers' families and allowed for some trading with the cattle farmers more inland. For some years in the 1930s, the export of oranges from Onseepkans was documented.[38] During this time the Union Government also began to establish small-scale farming irrigation schemes for poor whites on the north bank of the river – for example on the farm Beenbreek just opposite Onseepkans, or further downriver at Noordoewer. South African journalist Lawrence Green, who visited Onseepkans in the early 1940s, remembered that 'All the tropical fruits grow well there, especially paw-paws and bananas. Wheat and melons are important crops; peas and table-grapes flourish'.[39] From 1938 to 1964, a period of relative economic stability for the white farmers at Onseepkans, a village management board existed.[40] This independent local authority oversaw and administered aspects of life in Onspeekans that were not directly linked to the irrigation plots, such as schooling, health and transport. However, as I will show below, from its inception there were complaints that the farmers were too poor to pay taxes to the local authority. After many discussions, Onseepkans lost its self-governing status. The village management ceased to exist in 1964 and the settlement became directly governed by the Kenhardt council.[41]

Decline, removals and life on the river: 1940–1990s

Despite constant investment in transport facilities, the imagined boom of irrigation agriculture and tourism never materialised. The high hopes of the South African govern-

35 NASA, KAB, PAS 4/168 Ref: 46/A.59 Kenhardt Divisional Council Ferry Boat Licence over Orange River at Onseepkans, Gideon Huijsamen to the Resident Magistrate, Kenhardt, 15 December 1921.

36 NASA, KAB, AS 4/168 Ref: 46/A.59 Administrateur se Toer No 4/1926. Uit- en invoerport: Onseepkans. 1. May 1926.

37 The same family that opened these facilities later bought the farm Klein Pella at the Orange River, turning it first in a large sheep farm and later into a date plantation.

38 AOIB, Verslag van Handel in Vrugte, 09 December 1936.

39 Green 1948: p. 134

40 NASA, SGD 248, 4/207 Onseepkans Village Management Board 1938–1964, General Series of Regulations as Approved in the Ordinance No 157 of 1936.

41 Government Gazette No 3287, 15 April 1965.

ment 'to transform Bushmanland into a garden'[42] only happened in some small places, for instance at Goodhouse, by Weidner, and later at Klein Pella, where profit made from irrigation schemes allowed owners to invest in extensions and new cash crops, such as dates and grapes. Yet the remote and small irrigation plots in Onseepkans hardly became economically successful. From the very start of the Onseepkans village board in 1938, archival records document that disease and poverty affected the small community of white irrigation farmers and their workers.[43]

Despite the economic decline after the Second World War, the village of Onseepkans was not forgotten by the newly established apartheid government. From as early as the 1950s, discussion began on how to introduce apartheid's segregation laws in the area. The first plans to remove the entire Coloured population from the river banks of the Lower !Garib were made in 1953, by the Committee of the Survey of Coloured Settlements on the Orange River.[44] The committee was in charge of assessing whether there was a 'need' for a Coloured population at the river, and if so, whether they should live where they resided at that moment, or if removals or extensions of the settlements were needed.[45] The first meeting of the commission concluded that more research on the matter was necessary, but that generally all irrigable land along the river should be reserved for future white settlement. The only exception concerned the long-established mission lands around Pella and Steinkopf, as well the Homs mission, north of the river.[46] Shortly later, in early 1955, the committee decided to remove all Coloured people from the area of Witbank, because firstly it would offer fertile irrigation ground for white farmers, and secondly there were already coloured areas close by, such as Pella and Richtersveld.[47] A former inhabitant of Witbank remembered that they were removed in 1955 and their land was given to South African war veterans.[48] However, archival documents show that the plans to turn Witbank and the river islands close by into irrigation land for whites never materialised. The land was, in effect, just cleared of coloured people and never allocated to whites.[49] Livestock herders were moved to Pella or further away to the Richtersveld.[50] Some Coloureds who used to have irrigated gardens at the river before this period, seemed to manage to move to the !Garib islands around Keimoes, like Eksteeinskuil or Bella Vista, where

42 Green 1948: p. 130

43 TBK, SGD 248, 4/207 Onseepkans Village Management Board 1938–1964. There are constant reports about typhus and other diseases in the coloured locations and amongst white farmers. The Village Board was abolished in 1964 because the white settlement was rapidly losing inhabitants and there was hardly any tax income anymore.

44 NASA, KUS 154/100, F2, Minutes of the Meeting Committee of the Survey of Coloured Settlements on the Orange River, 3 March 1953.

45 NASA, KUS 154/100, F2, Minutes of the Meeting Committee of the Survey of Coloured Settlements on the Orange River, 3 March 1953.

46 NASA, KUS 154/100, F2, Minutes of the Meeting Committee of the Survey of Coloured Settlements on the Orange River, 3 March 1953.

47 NASA, KUS 154/100, F2, Deel II van die verlag van die intedepatementele Komitee: Eksteenskuil-Kleurlingsnedersetting en Witbank Kleurlingnedersettingsgebied. 5 December 1954.

48 JJ, Pofadder, 24 November 2018, interview done by the author.

49 See Moore in this edited volume.

50 CC, Witbank, 28 November 2018, interview done by the author.

some restarted small irrigation fields while the land on the islands was still designated a coloured area.[51]

The decisions of the Committee of the Survey of Coloured Settlements on the Orange River in the 1950s did not lead to immediate, large-scale relocations in the area of Onseepkans. Rather, people living around Onseepkans were removed several times, on a small-scale. Many people remember a place called 'Tintin', close to where the bridge is located today, as the place where they or their parents were living before the relocations happened. Others seemed to have lived in the immediate proximity of the Catholic mission station, while some lived directly on the land of the white farmers they worked for. However, as usual, there have been many reports of the bad hygiene and health situation in the settlements of the Coloured inhabitants – which the government used as reason for plans to relocate the population.[52] It was only in 1976 that the government decided to concentrate the population within three clearly defined locations, removing people to places closer to the irrigation fields: Melkbosrand, Viljoensdraai and around the Mission station. 'Tintin', where most people were living, was destroyed, and a new school was built on the premises, and the people who were removed had to rebuild their reed houses in new locations. These were mostly women and children, who worked on the irrigated farms, while many men had to work in the mines or on livestock farms further away. While the irrigated plots along the river were privately owned by the white farmers, the area on which the locations were built had been declared municipal land. All of the irrigation farmers had grazing rights on this land, and most families kept goats on it, too. The administration of the grazing rights was in the hands of the Irrigation Board and if accepted by the board, people living in the locations could also get grazing rights on municipal land.

From the 1960s onwards, small-scale irrigation farming production in Onseepkans declined. With the building of better roads from Cape Town in the 1960s, it became cheaper to ship fresh fruits from the Cape to the farmers in the North than to produce them locally at the !Garib.[53] Many of the white irrigation farmers along the river in Onseepkans sold their plots to their neighbours and moved out of the area. Others bought up several of the 4ha plots and began to produce cash crops – mainly grapes – instead of producing for the local market.[54] Although the irrigation scheme in Onseepkans had not been profitable for many decades, the South African government was still strongly supporting the irrigation and livestock farmers in the area. Many farmers explain this support by pointing to the strategic importance of the area, probably as a further line

51 NASA, KUS 154/100, F2, Deel II van die verlag van die interdepatementele Komitee: Eksteenskuil-Kleurlingsnedersetting en Witbank Kleurlingnedersettingsgebied. 5 December 1954.

52 NASA, KUS 2/272, Ref: 5/2/1/F262, VOL 2/3 and JJ, Pofadder, 24 November 2018, interview done by the author.

53 LN, Pofadder, 24 November 2018; HV, Onseepkans, 22 November 2018, interviews done by the author.

54 CC, Onseepkans 22 November 2018, interview done by the author. This development can also be seen in other places along the river, where the household-based subsistence farming on irrigation schemes turned into more commercialised production. See Moore in this volume.

of defence – in case occupied Namibia could not be held.[55] This fear might also explain the building of two bases for the South African Defence Force's border patrol and an Operating Signals Regiment of the Air Force in 1969.

While in the second half of the 20th century the South African apartheid government removed most of the coloured population from both banks along the river and relocated them to the so-called reserves in Pella, Steinkopf, Richterveld or to Namaland, on the Namibian side, there have always been people who defied the resettlements. Particularly in the remote and hardly accessible riverbed of the !Garib, around Onseepkans and Witbank, some small-scale livestock farmers managed to stay and run their farms until today – be it on the margins of private farmlands, remains of communal lands or in the administratively unclear border areas.[56]

Particularly north of the !Garib, some space of manoeuvre and resistance for the farmers along the river remained open during apartheid times – and in some cases – up to now. To understand how this came to be, it is worth looking at how the areas on the other side of the river opposite Onseepkans changed over the second half of the 20th century.

The first removals of people classified as Nama living along the river, by Homsdrift, started in the 1950s. In the late 1980s, the mission was closed and sold as private land. In 1946, the South African administration appointed the so-called Lardner-Burke commission to assess the conditions of white settlers within the police zone (everything south of the veterinarian line that divided the northern communal land from the mostly commercial areas in South and Central Namibia) and develop a policy to address the growing need for farmland.[57] The commission suggested an extension of the police zone and the surveying of new farms on the edges of the zone. Poor whites living on farms, so-called *bywoners*, were to live and find employment elsewhere. Additionally, farmers who did not own farms, but only had grazing rights were pushed into either leasing or buying farms or leaving. With these extensions of the farmlands, the remaining Africans were pushed even further out of the productive lands.[58] This expansion continued until the early-1960s, when most of the land in the police zone was privately owned farmland designated for whites. The policy reached its summit in 1962, with the establishment of the Commission of Enquiry into South West Africa Affairs, better known as the Odendaal Commission, leading to the final phase of forced removals and also a shift in colonial settlement policies.[59]

The intensification of racialised land laws during South Africa's occupation of Namibia gradually upended semi-formal communal land agreements from earlier mission times in the far south of the territory. One of southern Africa's last great seizures of land for white settlement was from the so-called Bondelswarts. In order to consolidate the disparate reserves into one centralised homeland, the Bondels Reserve and the much

55 HV, Onseepkans, 22 November 2018; CC, Onseepkans 22 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

56 Lenggenhager and Rosengarten 2020.

57 Miescher 2012: pp. 138–141

58 Miescher 2012: pp. 138–141

59 Kössler 2000. See also ongoing PhD research of Bernard C. Moore.

smaller reserves around the Homsdrift mission station at the !Garib were to be taken over by white farmers, and the population removed to the newly created Nama homeland. While many residents had no choice but to accept resettlement and eventually employment as cheap labour on white farms, some families resisted removal and went upriver to more remote, rocky territory, where they settled in the secluded sections of the river. These riverine areas have been used by livestock farmers for grazing and living for centuries, however the people never possessed official rights to the land they live on. Nevertheless, some families made use of their thorough knowledge of the local geography and landscape, as well as the sometimes-unclear administrational situation and loose control of these remote border regions, to establish a livelihood outside of the direct control of the two apartheid governments.

Conclusion: The situation since the 1990s

Floods were a constant feature of life along the river in Onseepkans, and repeatedly destroyed parts of the irrigation channel and other infrastructure. In 1988, one of the largest floods of the 20th century destroyed parts of the settlements in Onseepkans and most of the fields and gardens along the river.[60] Many of the white farmers remember this flood as the end of the irrigation scheme.[61] Most of the remaining white farmers left after the flood, leaving the ruins of their homes, which are still a prominent feature of Onseepkans today.

The flood can be seen as the local cumulating point of a longer period of deregulating and restructuring agriculture and farming in (white) Southern Africa in the last years of Apartheid, leading to an accumulation of land into larger, more profitable farms. At the same time, this can be understood as the beginning of what Henry Bernstein analysed as 'measures to safeguard capitalist farming and agriculture in the "new South Africa" following the abolition of the institutional apparatus of apartheid [that] were anticipated and initiated in the final years of apartheid.'[62] With the political changes in the early 1990s, and in many cases even before, the state withdrew most of the subsidies for farmers in the region. However, as Bernstein described it, white farmers already developed strategies to keep up their share in an increasingly neo-liberal agricultural system in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the case of the white-owned, small-scale irrigation farms along the river, these developments led to changes in landownership and land use. On the one hand, the government bought up some of the plots to redistribute to the former workers. The redistribution process implied that each of these 4ha plots, once designed to sustain one white family, were allocated to a group of six people, and jointly organised through a trust. Some of the new owners leased their plots to other people. Talmar, a large Spanish energy

60 TK, Onseepkans, 22 November 2018; DD, Onseepkans, 23 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

61 HV, Onseepkans, 22 November 2018; CC, Onseepkans 22 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

62 Bernstein 2013: p. 25

company running a solar farm close by, invested in developing grape production on some redistributed plots, promising to pay dividends to the new owners once the grapes were profitable. On the other hand, irrigated plots – that were not redistributed by the government – were bought up by white farm owners from the region and merged, becoming part of larger commercial grape production. Other plots still belong to the Catholic Church and are used by an NGO to produce fresh fruits and vegetables, and to run a community garden. Very few plots are still owned by the original families, and those that remain so are mostly no longer in use.

The area around the small-hold irrigation farms along the river changed, as well, with some livestock farms being redistributed in the 1990s. This includes, for example, the Cabobb farm that is now owned by some families from Onseepkans and Pofadder. Other farms are still owned by white families, some used for tourism, mining or solar production, and others still used for small-stock production. At least on the Namibian side, farms are increasingly bought up by international companies and rich private individuals for their own use and amusement or to turn into private conservation areas. On the municipal land around Onseepkans, the people still have grazing rights, although some owners of the irrigation plots claim that these rights were given to them exclusively.

Life in the three locations in Onseepkans changed remarkably after 1994, when the new government built concrete houses for the people, and again in 2002, when the village finally got electricity. However, the economic situation of most of the inhabitants of Onseepkans remains difficult. Many of the white grape producers in the area still prefer to bring in cheap labour from further away, the governmental jobs at the border and the police station are not recruiting locally, and other jobs are rare, or far away.[63] In 2019, the government – supported by private companies – built a new pumping station for a spray irrigation, replacing the old concrete channel. While it is doubtful that the cash crop systems introduced by the Talmar company, the large grape farmers and partly by the government, will change the inequality in the area, for some people they give new perspectives and possibilities. Others see their future, rather, in the more diverse production of fresh vegetable, fruits and lucerne, on a small scale.

The international border between Namibia and South Africa established in 1990 made trans-border mobility much more difficult. While, for most of the 20th century, people from Onseepkans and other settlements along this stretch of the river had more easily criss-crossed the !Garib in search of work or grazing, or forced by resettlements and dispossession, today crossing the border involves administrative and financial efforts. While most of the people living in Onseepkans still have family living in Southern Namibia, and some Namibians living close to the river still have South African citizenship, there are few exchanges across the border.[64] However, in the case of the families who managed to resist the evictions during colonialism and apartheid, who still live in the immediate borderlands in the river the border, there has been an unexpected outcome. In a court case to remove of one of these families, the Namibian court declared that in the view of the Namibian government, the international border at this stretch

63 HV, Onseepkans, 22 November 2018; CC, Witbank, 28 November 2018 –interviews done by the author.

64 KA, Onseepkans, 23 November 2018 – interviews done by the author.

of the river was the high-water mark on the northern bank, based on historical floods. Therefore, the area between the river and its flood marks could not be treated as the private land of an individual landowner in Namibian court.[65] This decision protected some families from being removed from the land that they used over many generations – however, it also points to entangled and unanswered questions about post-apartheid restorative justice, international boundaries, land ownership, and the environment in the binational area around Onseepkans.

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