Monika and Willem Basson: Farming and Living along the River

Monika Basson (Bernard C. Moore, 2021)

Willem Basson (Bernard C. Moore, 2021)

Willem Basson, 'the third', as he jokingly calls himself, is a well-known person in and around Karasburg and Warmbad, because for many years he has been fighting for his right to stay and farm along the !Garib. He was born in 1963, close to the northern banks of the river on the farm KumKum (known as ǀKorǁgams in Khoekhoegowab), seven years after his sister Monika and into a family of ten children. By the time Willem was born, the farm was owned by a white farmer, though the portion they were living on was not used by him.

Basson recalls that for many generations, his extended family lived close to the river, on land that today includes the farms Girtis, Homsrivier, KumKum and Hartebeesmund. With ease, he traces his ancestors back to the mid-19th century. His great-grandfather, Willem Basson, lost his parents in a fight with Jager Afrikaner and was taken in by the Bondelswarts community as a child. He later moved to Velloor farm, where he took the surname of its then owner, Jasper Basson. While working on the farm, Willem met Lena van Rhyn, a Damara woman, and they married in Pella, on the southern side of the river. For his grand-grandson Willem Basson 'the third', this marriage in Pella is considered

to be the founding moment of the Basson family. The couple had five sons and many of them lived along the !Garib, close to where Willem's family still lives and has livestock. The graves of Christian and Petrus Basson, who both died in the 1950s, are still there.

Around the time of Willem and his sister Monika's childhood, the relationship between his family and the farm owners changed. Basson's father could still remember that they lived and worked on the farms, often only paid for their labour in kind and in grazing rights, but (as he recalls) in a symbiotic co-existence with the white farmers. In this regard, Willem Basson himself only remembers that they were seen as '*plakkers*' (squatters) on the farms. Nevertheless, he also recalls that the farm owner wanted to take Basson's entire family to his new farm close to Omaruru, but the family refused and instead stayed at different places along the river. They had their own livestock, which they normally grazed along the river, except for the summer months, when they trekked to Warmbad for grazing. For a few years, Monika attended school at the Roman Catholic Mission at Homsrivier, just next to where they lived, and later started working for a priest in Karasburg. Willem, as the youngest son, often stayed with the animals, and ran the family's farm for many decades.

Willem was a small kid when the police constable Chris Coetzee came to visit his parents' plot in 1971. The apartheid government planned to turn some of the river farms into an irrigation scheme for Coloureds, and it was Coetzee's task to find out how to label the people living at the river, according to apartheid's racial categories – i.e., Nama, Coloured, or another designation. While Coetzee was unsure, and later sent the state ethnographer Kuno Budack to further investigate, Willem's father was ready to be classified as Coloured in order to get land under the planned scheme.

However, this was not needed, as the Coloured settlement was never realised. With the political changes in Namibia in the late 1970s, and the unclear effects which the new dams along the !Garib would have on water levels in the area, the plans came to nothing and were eventually dropped. The Basson family stayed on the land along the river, sometimes moving slightly up or down according to the legal situation of the different farms and the river's water levels. Around the same time as Namibia became independent, the Homsrivier Mission land was sold to private investors. This was followed by a gradual buying up of many other farms along and close to the river. Today, many of the farms in the area belong to the owners of a nearby lodge. The farms are now used for offering luxury tourism on the one hand, and on the other hand, to serve friends and relatives of the owners as a place for pleasure and 'conservation'.

In 2015, the owners of the lodge wanted to secure 'unspoiled' access to the river and approached the Namibian courts to order Basson's eviction. This was more complicated than the farm owner had probably anticipated. The court decided that in the view of the Namibian government, the international border at this stretch of the river was the high-water mark on the northern bank. 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. Willem Basson is therefore living and farming on land that falls in-between the two countries, and he was – at least for the moment – saved from being evicted.

However, the farm owner did not give up and tried to take Basson to court again, this time for trespassing. They argue that the Basson family members have no right to trek to the river, because they have to go through private land to do so. Furthermore, they accuse

Basson of illegal farming, spreading alien plants in the river, smuggling, and lastly (but importantly) argue that his family only moved to this land a few years ago. Despite all the accusations against him, Basson remains positive about his future. He knows that many farm owners in the region want him to disappear, but – having been under the threat of removal for decades – has gained his fair share of experience in resisting. 'One day', he says, 'the land we farm on will be official communal land, that we can share and use for the benefit of all.' Until then, Basson has to make the best out of the fact that he and his family live in a 'political limbo', somewhere between Namibia and South Africa.

Based on interviews conducted by Luregn Lenggenhager and Bernard C. Moore in Warmbad and Karasburg