

Fritz Isak (Zak) Gomaxnab Dirkse IGabaxab: Teacher and Promoter of Nama Language

Zak Dirkse (photo by Bernard Moore, 2021)



Zak Dirkse was born not far from Keetmanshoop on the farm #Upus on 12 August 1973. For most of his life, he has lived between Windhoek, Southern Namibia and – sometimes – the Northern Cape. Dirkse first became an Afrikaans teacher and was later asked to also teach Nama. However, when he started to teach the Nama language, there was not much useful teaching material available, hence he participated in the writing and edit-

ing of learning material. Ever since, he has been engaged, in many ways, in the teaching, promoting and researching of Nama language.

Dirkse argues that, for him, three aspects of the Nama language are of particular importance. Firstly, Nama is a transfrontier or cross-border language; secondly, Nama is not the same as Khoekhoegowab; and thirdly, Nama place names should be reintroduced. Dirkse explains that the Nama language is spoken on both sides of the !Garib, even though it remains much more widely spoken on the Namibian side of the river. For him, the distinct relevance of the Nama language in South Africa and Namibia has historically rooted reasons. He explains that the difference is owed partly to the northwards movement of Afrikaners, the different ways apartheid politics and policies were implemented north and south of the river, and to the distinction in percentage of Nama speakers versus other languages in South Africa and Namibia.

In his work for the !Karas Region Northern Cape Joint Coordinating Committee, Dirkse promotes the training of South African Nama language teachers. 'And I also helped the South Africans to come up with South African teaching material in pure Nama', he explains, 'because the language taught in Namibia is not Nama, but Khoekhoegowab'. For Dirkse, Khoekhoegowab is an artificial language that is not spoken in anyone's daily life. He also emphasises that Nama and Damara are different languages, although they are very similar. While in a linguistic definition the two languages would perhaps be referred to as dialects, 'it is the culture that comes with it, that makes Nama its own language,' says Dirkse. A fascination with Nama culture also drives his active involvement in organising and promoting cultural festivals, often in collaboration with people from the Northern Cape.

As mentioned above, an aspect that is very close to Dirkse's heart is the naming of places in Nama language, as during colonialism many places were given completely new names by the colonial authorities. For example the Orange River, first named !Garib by Nama speakers, was renamed by Dutch 'explorers' in honor to the Dutch royal house of Oranje. In other cases, the original Nama place names were either translated, e.g., Grootfontein from the Nama word for large water hole, or they were Afrikanerised, according to how they sounded to Dutch ears. As an example of this, Dirkse refers to the South African village Goodhouse, which was founded at a place that Nama speakers used to call Gádaos meaning the place where sheep cross, literally 'sheep drift'. Dirkse is very pleased at the recent dynamics around renaming. However, for example, in South Africa the Orange River was not renamed back to its original Nama name, but to the Afrikanerised version of it: 'Gariep'.

Today, Dirkse is a Nama-language teacher at St. Therese RC Secondary School at Tses and works for the Nama traditional leaders organisation. What he wishes for is more Nama literature – books, poems and novels published in Nama languages – and not just the publishing of educational books. He shares that many of his learners and students are highly talented and 'will make this happen soon'!

Based on an interview conducted by Luregn Lenggenhager, Bernard Moore and Wanda Rutishauser in Keetmanshoop 7 November 2021.