

TOPNAAR OR HOTTENTOT ? THE PEOPLE ON THE TOP REVISITED

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SUMMARY

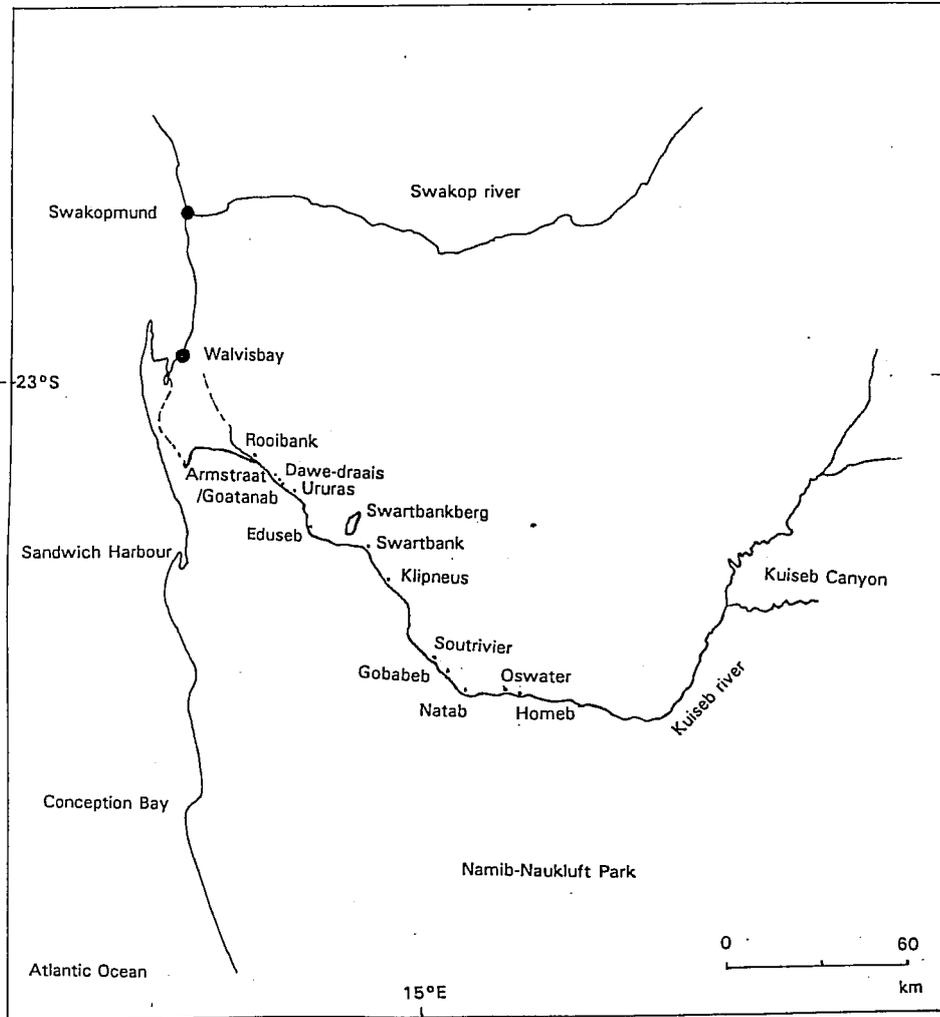
The Topnaar which live in the Namib Desert have only been studied superficially. This article gives some sociological, historical and general interest information about these wonderful people.

1. The Topnaar People

1.1 The Topnaar Society

The Topnaar people belong to the Nama, who for their part, belong to the Khoi-Khoi ethnical group. The Khoi-Khoi were called Hottentots by the first European colonizers, probably because of their language Nama, a "click" language. The four clicks used in Nama are ǀ a "dental click", ǁ a "lateral click", ǃ a "palatal click" and ǂ a "alveolar click". The Khoi-Khoi, translated as 'men of men', were previously more widely dispersed in southern Africa. At present Khoi-Khoi tribes are only found in Namibia where they consist of 3 groups: the Nama, the Oorlam and a number of Sān groups (see table 1).

The Nama are divided into 9 tribes, two of which are the Topnaar of the lower Kuiseb valley and the Topnaar of Sesfontein. The two areas they live in are shown on map 1. The name Topnaar is of Dutch origin, meaning 'people of the upperland' or 'those who are on top'. This is probably a translation of the traditional Nama name ǂAonin.



Map 2 : The Topnaar villages of the Kuisieb Valley

Etymologically \neq *Aonin* is derived from \neq *áob*, meaning top. There are different explanations of the name \neq *Aonin*: 'people on the top', living in the mountains (KÖHLER, 1969); 'people standing on top of the Nama people', superior to the other tribes (KÖHLER, 1969); 'people living in a marginal area', on the edge of the Nama territory (BUDACK, 1977) or 'people inhabiting the sea coast' (KÖHLER, 1969).

The Topnaar tribe is divided into sibs (clans) and the tribal government consists of a chief and his council. In the past the leadership was inheritable, but now also the people have a say in the elections of a new chief.

1.2 History

The Topnaar are among the oldest inhabitants of Namibia. Their history is not completely known. The earliest recorded presence of Topnaar in the Walvisbay area goes back to 1670 when the Dutch East India Company's ship, *Grundel*, first entered Sandwich Harbour, just south of Walvisbay (see map 2). The natives on the shore were recognized as Hottentots by the crew, but their language was noted to be slightly different to that of the Cape Hottentots (who were known from the first voyages of the Dutch East India Company to South Africa). At that time the Kuiseb still reached the sea at Sandwich Harbour. Seven years later, in 1677, the Dutch East India Company vessel *Boode* visited Sandwich Harbour and met Hottentots, which were herding cattle and collecting *!nara* seeds. In 1973, Dr. Beatrice Sandelowsky discovered near Conception Bay (see map 2) some fragments of a Khoi clay pot, which were dated approximately 650 years back. This probably means that Khoi-Khoin were already living along the Namibian coast in the 14th century. It is not sure, however, whether these people were Topnaar people or belonged to another tribe.

According to oral tradition, the Topnaar came from the north prior to occupying the Walvisbay territory. The exact area where they came from was however not further specified.

The Topnaar were among the first traders in Namibia. As early as 1677 they bartered with European sailors beef, goats, milk, *!nara* and fresh water in exchange for general supplies, clothes, weapons and alcohol.

A long time ago, the Topnaars' territory was more extensive and reached from the coast, eastwards along the lower Kuiseb as far as *!Hu-daob*, and from Conception Bay in the south northwards to the Swakop river (BUDACK, 1977; KÖHLER, 1969; see map 2). They were driven from part of this area by the Herero migrating from the north and other Nama people migrating from

the south.

There exist different opinions about how some Topnaar people migrated to Sesfontein, about 500 km north of the Kuiseb in the Kaokoveld. HOERNLÉ (1925) says the Topnaar told her that some of them returned to the north after having settled in the Walvisbay area. Other sources (KÖHLER 1969; Kooitjie, personal comment) say that in the 1880's, during the wars between the Nama and Herero, a group of Topnaar joined Jan Jonker Afrikaner, headman of the Afrikaners, to fight the Herero, and thereafter remained in the north, in a place called *!Am-eib*. Forced by drought they moved afterwards to Sesfontein, where at that moment already lived some other African tribes, Bushmen and Bergdama. Another group of Nama people, the Swartboois, followed them later.

1.3 Way of Life in the Lower Kuiseb Valley

The Topnaar of the lower Kuiseb valley traditionally live by herding cattle, gardening, and gathering the *!nara* (*Acanthosicyos horridus*). The latter is a cucurbit which grows in the wild. It is endemic to the coast of Namibia and provides food and water to the Topnaar. The Topnaar are therefore also called *!Naranin*, people living off the *!nara*. This however is a derogatory name to them as it stresses their dependency on "veldkos" (literally food from the field, referring to the use of indigenous edible plants for food). The *!nara* grows abundantly in the sand dunes near Walvisbay. Each family possesses a number of *!nara* bushes. In this the Topnaar differ from the other Khoi-Khoi: the *!nara* bushes, not the land on which they grow, are private property, whereas normally possessions are common. This perpetual right to the *!naras* was approved by Queen Victoria herself. Each family can only harvest from its own *!nara* bushes. The property rights are hereditary. If the parents die, the *!nara* field is divided over the children that are interested in the *!nara*. The chief and his council may rule in disputes if necessary. During the harvesting season of the *!nara*, whole families move down to the coastal *!nara* fields and remain there until the end of the harvest. Only a few people stay behind in the villages to attend livestock.

In the past, the Topnaar of the Kuiseb area were split up into *Hurinin*, the hunter-gatherers and fishermen living along the coast, and *!Naranin*, those living more inland along the Kuiseb river. The latter were the dominant group. Now they have fused. Furthermore these Topnaar have also fused with some Herero, Ovambo, Damara and Euraficans living in the same area.

A. NAMA			
no.	Nama name	European name	Tribal centre
1.	<i>Gai- khaun</i>	Red Nation	Hoachanas
2.	<i>!Gami-≠nūn</i>	Bondelswarts	Warmbaths
3.	<i>≠Aonin</i>	Southern Topnaar	Rooibank
4.	<i>!Gomen</i>	Northern Topnaar	Sesfontein
5.	<i>!Khara-khoen</i>	Simon Kopers	Gochas
6.	<i> Haboben</i>	Velskoendraers	Koës
7.	<i> O-gain*</i>	Groot Doden	Schlip
8.	<i> Khau-!gōan</i>	Swartboois	Franzfontein
9.	<i>Kharo-!oan</i>	Keetmanshoppers	Keetmanshoop

B. "OORLAM" TRIBES			
no.	Nama name	European name	Tribal centre
10.	<i>!Aman</i>	Bethaniers	Bethanien
11.	<i>Gai-!khauan*</i>	Amraal Lamberts	Naosanabes
12.	<i>Hai-!khauan</i>	Berseba people	Berseba
13.	<i>!Hōa-!aran*</i>	Afrikaners	Windhoek
14.	<i>!Khobesen</i>	Witboois	Gibeon

C. SĀN GROUPS			
no.	Nama or proper name	European name	Area
15.	<i>Nami-sān*</i>	Namib Bushmen	Southern Namib desert
16.	<i>Kai- omn</i>	Keikum Bushmen	Outjo & Tsumeb districts, Etosha Pan area, Owambo
17.	<i>Naron (!Ai-khoen)</i>	Naron Bushmen	Ghanzi & Gobabis districts
18.	<i>Koe (Kwengo)</i>	Black Bushmen	Kavango, western Caprivi

* : Tribes marked with an asterisk have nearly died out.

Table 1: The structure and localisation of the Khoi-khoen (Hottentots) in Namibia

The Khoi-Khoi are traditionally nomadic. The Kuiseb Topnaars' mobility, however, is restricted by the environmental conditions of the area: the people depend on the waterholes in the riverbed and the *!nara* fields. Another drastic influence on their mobility and general way of living is the fact that in 1907 a large area of the Namib desert was declared a National Park. This ruling prevents hunting and prohibits the herding of livestock or any other activity outside the riverbed. Following implementation of the South African Odendaalplan (the aim of this plan was to return all black people in South Africa and South West Africa (now Namibia) to their respective homelands), some farms were purchased further south, in Namaland, with the intention to move and resettle the Topnaar outside the Namib-Naukluft park. They refused, however, to leave their territory, which they claim as their traditional tribal area as they have already occupied it for several centuries. Their culture is linked to the *!nara* and they depend on the sea and its food resources. There also exist legal treaties respecting their traditional rights to the use of the *!nara* plants.

For years the presence of the Topnaar in the Namib-Naukluft park was a topic of dispute between the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism and the Topnaar people. A result of this was that under South African rule, few investments in the development of the area were made. Only in 1979 did the Department of Water Affairs improve the water supply in the villages by building windpumps, dams, pipelines and watertaps.

The first known chief of the Kuiseb Topnaar was Frederik *Khaxab* (mid 19th century). After his death Piet || *Eibib* became chief of the Topnaar. When he died in 1910, leaving no son, two fractions struggled for the leadership, but without result. For 66 years the Topnaar had no leader. This resulted in the loss of some of their traditions, culture and tribal unity. Only in 1976, when Namibian independence became a possibility, did the need for a Topnaar spokesman at national level emerge. A new leader, chief Esau *Kooitjie* was nominated. On his retirement in 1981, his 18 year old son Seth *Kooitjie* was elected his successor. Since then the Topnaar have again had someone to represent them and promote their interests on a national level.

At the time of this research about 400 Topnaar lived along the Kuiseb river, divided over 12 semi-permanent settlements, all located on the northern bank of the river, far enough from the river so that the occasional floods will not destroy the houses. The villages, from east to west, are Homeb, Os-water, Natab, Gobabeb, Soutrivier, Klipneus, Swartbank, Eduseb, Ururas, *Goatanab*, Dawe-draais and Armstraat (see map 2). The 4 last villages belong to the Walvisbay-enclave (still belonging to the Republic of South

Africa). One to ten families reside in each village. Another 400 Topnaar live in Walvisbay.

1.4 Way of Life in Sesfontein

The Topnaar of Sesfontein are also called *!Gomen*, “stupid people”, speaking a strange, unintelligible dialect (KÖHLER, 1969). In 1906, the farm Sesfontein, so called because of the six perennial springs issuing in the area, was granted to the Topnaar and Swartboois by the German Government. Due to these springs, which provide water to this area, irrigated agriculture is possible in Sesfontein. Every male inhabitant owns a part of the irrigated fields. The major crops are wheat, corn and tobacco. Gathering of wild food plants is still important to these people as well as some goat farming.

About 100 Topnaar presently live in Sesfontein. The earliest chief the Sesfontein Topnaar can remember was *!Uichah*. Under him they still lived in the south. Only during the leadership of his son, Anibab Hendrik *!Uichamab*, did the Topnaar actually come to Sesfontein.