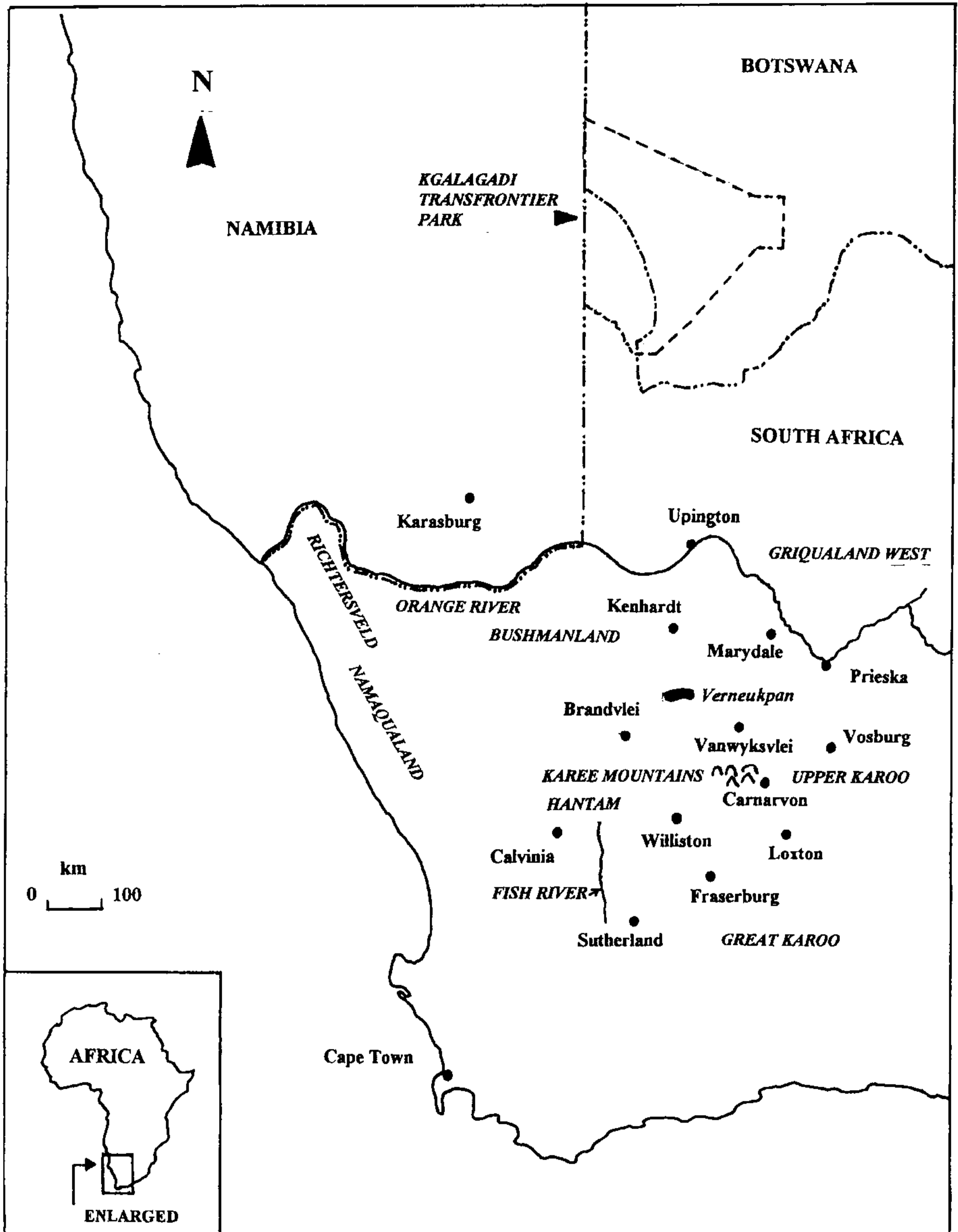


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Map of the Northern Cape, South Africa and surrounding areas, showing the location of some of the places mentioned in the text

## Introduction

In the nineteenth century the linguists W.H.I. BLEEK and his sister-in-law, L.C. LLOYD, conducted interviews with /Xam<sup>1</sup> individuals from the Upper Karoo and Bushmanland in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. BLEEK's daughter, Dorothea, later continued the research (cf. BLEEK & LLOYD 1911; BLEEK 1933a, 1933b, 1935, 1936).<sup>2</sup> The /Xam, together with groups such as the /Auni-#Khomani of the Kgalagadi National Park area in the Northern Cape, the //Xegwi of Mpumalanga, and the "Mountain Bushmen" of Lesotho, Natal, Transkei, etc. formed part of the Southern San.<sup>3</sup> Two subjects repeatedly included in the data collected by the BLEEKs were, firstly, the importance and characteristics attributed to water/rain which was often portrayed as a being (e.g. BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 192-204, BLEEK 1933a: 297-312, BLEEK 1933b: 375-392), and, secondly, supernatural power which could be harnessed by, *inter alia*, /Xam ritual practitioners who had a connection with rain. The supernatural potency was variously referred to as *!gi* (e.g. BLEEK 1935: 12, 29, 32, 35, 36), *//ken* (e.g. BLEEK 1935: 13, 26, 28, 31, 33), and */ko:de* (e.g. BLEEK 1935: 11, 28, 35). A person who harnessed this power was called a *!gi:xa* (pl. *!gi:ten*). The suffix *-xa* means '-full' (BLEEK 1956: 255). A *!gi:xa* was thus a person who was "full" of supernatural power. The /Xam persons interviewed by the BLEEKs referred to *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* who caused the rain to fall; *!gi:ten* (without further appellation) who drew sickness out of people; *ôpwaiten-ka !gi:ten* who controlled the movements of game so that the animals would run into the hunter's ambush; and to *//xi:ka !gi:ten* who used their power to harm people (BLEEK 1933b: 376, BLEEK 1935: 2-5, 29, 35). They named the following *!khwa-ka !gi:ten*: *!Nuin !kuiten* (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 236; BLEEK 1933b: 382-384), *//Kunn* (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 323-325; BLEEK 1933b: 385-387), *Xa:a-tin* (BLEEK 1936: 135), */Kannu* (BLEEK 1933b: 388) and */Kaunu* (BLEEK 1933b: 390). The latter two names may designate the same person.

In 1991 I began research among descendants of the /Xam. My research area (see Map) included the places from where the BLEEKs' informants came. The purpose of the research was threefold: to add to the data of /Xam views on water/rain and thereby increase our understanding of /Xam views in this regard, to explain the role of the specialists in connection with it, and to place, in broad outline, the data in the /Xam cosmological framework of a stratified universe. The intention is, in the words

of GEERTZ (1973: 27), to achieve a balance “between setting down the meaning particular social customs have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such” (cf. WOLCOTT 2001: 54, 56). I hope to address the latter more fully in a follow-up document.

I commenced my research among the /Xam descendants with enquiries about their symbols for water/rain and published the results in 1997 and 1998. Taking into account the social context in which the BLEEKs’ informants provided their information (cf. GUENTHER 1996a: 87-99), my first objective was to determine whether rain/water was and still is a subject frequently discussed by the /Xam descendants, and whether factors other than the obvious need of water for survival could account for the suggested importance of rain/water. An emphasis on water/rain would not be surprising as the /Xam inhabited a dry and drought-ridden environment where the availability of water meant the difference between life and death, and where water/rain was considered a substance of great value (cf. HOFF 1997: 33) which was, as might be expected, one of the themes addressed in San rock art (HOFF 1998: 11; cf. WOODHOUSE 1992: 54), but its symbolisation and the context in which it was mentioned, suggested further meanings. I found that rain/water was, and indeed still is, a prominent subject, which the /Xam descendants viewed as beneficial but potentially dangerous and which they symbolised in the attitudes and behaviour of, *inter alia*, a Water Snake (HOFF 1997: 21-35), Water Bull and Cow (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 192, BLEEK 1933b: 375-377, HOFF 1998: 109-124) and a Water Eland (male as well as female) (L.VIII.16.7461-17.7472 in LEWIS-WILLIAMS 1981: 106). Much information was still available on the concept of water/rain as a Water Snake, considerably less on the Water Bull/Cow and very little on the Water Eland. These Water Animals formed part of a category of “water things” which included Water People, Water Sheep, water plants, mud and pebbles (HOFF 1998: 121). An aggravated Water Animal could injure people by, for example, causing blisters or stiffness in the legs, killing people by lightning, or catching people. It sometimes caught a woman when it desired her. The Water Animal caught people by, for example, “pulling” them into a water source with its eyes or with threads, or by sweeping them in by means of water or a strong wind, particularly a whirlwind

(HOFF 1997: 28-30, 1998: 117-118; BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 192-199, 201-205; BLEEK 1933a: 299). A belief was revealed in an underworld, referred to as “under the water where it is dry”, where a Water Animal took victims, particularly women, to live with it (HOFF 1998: 116). The /Xam therefore connected rain/water with, *inter alia*, the underworld. Much of this information is transmitted in the form of stories. This, and the expressive nature of symbols (cf. BEATTIE 1964: 69-71), anchors the Water Animals deeply in /Xam, and indeed Khoesan, thought.

The second topic of enquiry, and subject of this document, was about the persons referred to by the BLEEKs’ informants as *!khwa-ka !gi:ten*. Very little data exist about them, although the BLEEKs’ informants did refer to matters such as the gender and age of persons who caused rain to fall, their influence after death, the techniques used to cause the rain to fall, and reasons for unwillingness of *!gi:ten* to cause rain (HEWITT 1986: 287-290). Additional data on the *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* would have a wider application, as specialists who influenced the weather were also reported among other Southern San groups (the //Xegwi [POTGIETER 1955: 4] and the “Mountain Bushmen” [JOLLY 1986: 6, 1999: 61]). This data should also contribute to the interpretation of rock art, in line with a tendency in recent years to interpret rock art by means of the ethnographic record (cf. LEWIS-WILLIAMS & Dowson 1989: 24).

The /Xam lifestyle has in the preceding centuries undergone substantial changes (cf. KENT 1996: 16) and the band organisation has long ago disintegrated. Some researchers therefore believed that the /Xam have died out and that their culture has disappeared (e.g. LEWIS-WILLIAMS 1981: 3, 14). In reality, the descendants of the /Xam still live in areas of Bushmanland and the Karoo. Although the composition of the inhabitants in the research area prior to the eighteenth century is not clear, the area appears to have been inhabited predominantly by San. From around 1740 Europeans, Korana<sup>4</sup> (a branch of the Cape Khoekhoen) and Xhosa moved into the area (VAN DER WALT n.d.: 94, ENGELBRECHT 1936: 13-28, ANDERSON 1987: 20-25). Much biological and cultural contact occurred between these groups, particularly between the Korana and the /Xam.

The fast-disappearing lifestyles of foragers is a general phenomenon which researchers have to accommodate (KENT 1996: 16). BURCH (1994: 442-446), in a discussion of postmodernist problems encountered in for-

ager studies, suggested two possible ways of dealing with the changed nature of forager societies: a focus on historical research (cf. FOX 1991: 93-113) and/or a focus on culture change. As research by means of participant observation would have been limited, this study is a culture historical reconstruction (FOX 1991: 106-108) of a particular facet in /Xam culture. It, accordingly, comprised the study of historical documents, such as the documents by the BLEEKs, ORPEN (1874), VON WIELLIGH (1921) and POTGIETER (1955), oral information in the form mostly of memories of my /Xam informants obtained through interviews, as well as my own observations (cf. CARMACK 1972: 238). Although not a portrayal “from life” (FOX 1991: 95), a historical approach may deal with “lived culture” (FOX 1991: 110). The historical approach therefore does not endeavour to emphasise the extent in which the culture was integrated, it tends to be diachronic and it acknowledges the role of individuals in culture change (CARMACK 1972: 230). It could, in the words of FOX (1991: 108), “trace how human actors originate ideas about their society out of cultural meanings already constituted, and then how they experiment with these ideas”.

Most of my informants lived in small towns, while a number resided temporarily on farms. Their residential areas in towns are occupied not only by /Xam descendants but by others such as /Xhosa. As up to three generations plus various lodgers, sometimes share a house, interviews were usually conducted at my lodgings.

Informants of the Bleeks mentioned in this study are Diä!kwain, /Han-#kass’o, //Kabbo and #Kasin. I interviewed twenty-eight main informants, all elderly /Xam descendants. In the choice of my own teachers, only persons who regarded themselves as of /Xam descent and who displayed considerable knowledge of /Xam culture were considered. I frequently found that a person of mixed descent displayed excellent knowledge, often transferred to him or her by a /Xam mother or grandmother. /Xam descendants still identified themselves as /Xam<sup>5</sup> on grounds of, *inter alia*, a common origin, a common group name (they remembered the term “/Xam”, but used “Bushman” in every day conversation), common language (spoken only in the past), and I would suggest, a common cosmology. Half of the principal informants identified one or both parents as Bushman, while the rest indicated one or more grandparents or even great-grandparents. To distinguish the San outside South Africa

from the Southern San, I referred to them, for the purpose of this study, as “Northern San”. I have named those informants who showed particular insight, but kept to first names only, as most of my informants preferred to remain anonymous. While ensuring their anonymity, this should facilitate the reading of the text. A number of informants were born before 1910. This means that their grandparents, from whom they claim to have derived most of their cultural knowledge, could have been born around 1870, the time when BLEEK & LLOYD interviewed their informants (cf. DEACON 1986: 135) and that some of the data provided by the /Xam descendants could date back to that time. The informants tended to retain accounts given by previous generations or acts witnessed during the informants’ youth. Therefore, much information will be lost with the death of the current elderly and much has already disappeared. Even today it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to replicate this historical reconstruction of the *!giten*. Most of my informants are now dead or too old to be of help. In most cases, young people display little or no knowledge of *!khwa-ka !gi:ten*. Fortunately, though, young people are now becoming aware of their cultural heritage.

Conducting the interviews in Afrikaans, the *lingua franca* of the region and my own first language, promoted good understanding. Except for a few words, the /Xam language has unfortunately disappeared. Information was as far as possible recorded verbatim. This method has the advantage that it provides a data basis which can later, if necessary, be reinterpreted by other researchers. It furthermore gives an exceptional insight into the informant’s thought processes and world-view (cf. REYNEKE 1986: 41).

When I initiated my research among the /Xam descendants in 1991, information on the *!khwa ka-!gi:ten* (now referred to as *water-!gi:ten*) was already difficult to obtain, even from the older people. Although all informants have had personal contact with a *!khwa-ka !gi:xa*, they lacked comprehensive knowledge and tended to retain pockets of information on particular facets of the *!khwa-ka !gi:xa*’s life. Firstly, the role of the *!khwa-ka !gi:xa* seems to have disappeared. In the area where I conducted my research only one person, now deceased, could be traced who was, according to the community, still practising as a *!khwa-ka !gi:xa*. He, however, described himself as an herbalist who occasionally used the droppings of the Water Snake for ailments caused by the water. It was there-

fore not possible to obtain firsthand information about *!khwa-ka !gi:ten*. Secondly, information on *!gi:ten* was never readily available to the non-initiated: *!gi:ten* were secretive about their medicines and procedures and lived apart from the group. Therefore, very few informants had knowledge of the requirements for becoming a *!khwa-ka !gi:xa* or the preparation and instruction of a *!gi:xa* initiate, and they were often unsure of the sequence of the proceedings. Yet, occasionally similar details were obtained from informants living as far apart as Kenhardt and Sutherland, a distance of about 340 km. Much of the information came from informants whose parent or grandparent had been a *!gi:xa*.

Much emphasis has in recent decades been placed on the ability of ethnographers to provide truthful representations of other groups (CLIFFORD 1988: 23, BREWER 2001: 101, NUGENT 1988: 84-85) and of the pitfalls of “portraying abstract, ahistorical ‘others’” (CLIFFORD 1988: 23). In the words of LEENHARDT (CLIFFORD 1988: 37):

“In reality, our contact with another is not accomplished through analysis. Rather, we apprehend him in his entirety. From the outset, we can sketch our view of him using an outline or symbolic detail which contains a whole in itself and evokes the true form of his being. This latter is what escapes us if we approach our fellow creature using only the categories of our intellect.”

Faced with (if I may borrow from Fox 1991: 104), a “shreds and patches” situation of cultural remnants when I initiated my research among the /Xam descendants, a socio-functional analysis of the *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* in /Xam culture would not have been possible, and reconstruction of the role of the *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* was attempted with difficulty. However, as a group’s basic cognitive orientations are usually the last to change (MÖLLER 1976: 7, FORDE 1954: vii, VAN ROOY 1978: 1), a focus on /Xam cosmology allowed me still to obtain valuable information. It was, therefore, still feasible to follow this particular anthropological theme (cf. HONIGMANN 1976: 259). As beliefs find expression in actions, data could still be obtained by asking questions about ritual actions taken by /Xam (cf. HAMMOND-TOOKE 1980: 344). By deriving basic /Xam ideas about the universe from the data collected, I endeavoured to place, in broad outline, the role of the *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* within the stratified universe of the /Xam. Although all younger San descendants may not share the cosmological views of their ancestors, many ideas are still maintained. Acts of



association, based on one of the main lines of thought in the Khoesan cosmology, namely the idea that association promotes harmony, are still carried out: for example, by washing one's hands in a fountain, one's perspiration and potency comes into contact with the water and associates with it. The focus applied to this study of /Xam views regarding rain/water and /Xam categorisation is obviously only one of several possible ways of understanding a multi-faceted subject (cf. KENT 1996: 17, WOLCOTT 2001: 60, EMERSON 2001: 41, BREWER 2001: 102, HAMMERSLEY 2001: 334, DENZIN 2001: 356).

As the data on *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* is based mostly on memories, it is presented in the past tense. I kept to the spelling used by the BLEEKs and LLOYD in connection with the /Xam language. Some terms, such as the term *water-!gi:xa*, are expressed in Afrikaans and the /Xam language. Due to this feature all words foreign to English are in this document written in italics. The word for 'water' is in both Afrikaans and English 'water', although pronounced differently. The /Xam descendants pronounce the term *!gi:xa* (pl. *!gi:ten*) as *!geixa* (cf. BLEEK 1956: 382) and use it in the singular as well as the plural forms. ENGELBRECHT (1936: 180) found the same word and pronunciation among the Korana. Due to a *!gi:xa's* knowledge of powerful medicines and methods as well as his/her ability of clairvoyance, the Afrikaans expression *slim mens*, literally 'clever person', is often used instead of *!gi:xa*. Although the BLEEKs' informants used the same term, *!khwa*, for both rain and water, the /Xam descendants translated *!khwa ka-!gi:ten* only as *water-!gi:ten*, never as *reën-(rain)-!gi:ten*. Where informants mentioned certain data in connection with only one Water Animal, for example the Water Snake, only that Animal is indicated, otherwise the term "Water Animals" is used. The /Xam descendants used the word 'water' as a prefix to denote that it belongs to the category of "water things", but the terms "Water Phenomenon", "Water Being" and "Water Animal" are my own.

### Categories of *!gi:ten*

As mentioned above, the /Xam regarded rain/water, symbolised as a Water Animal, as a beneficial but potentially dangerous phenomenon which required caution and a specific approach (HOFF 1997: 27, 28; 1998: 115-117). Some acts in connection with rain/water could be carried out by anyone either male or female, or by older persons, such as women past