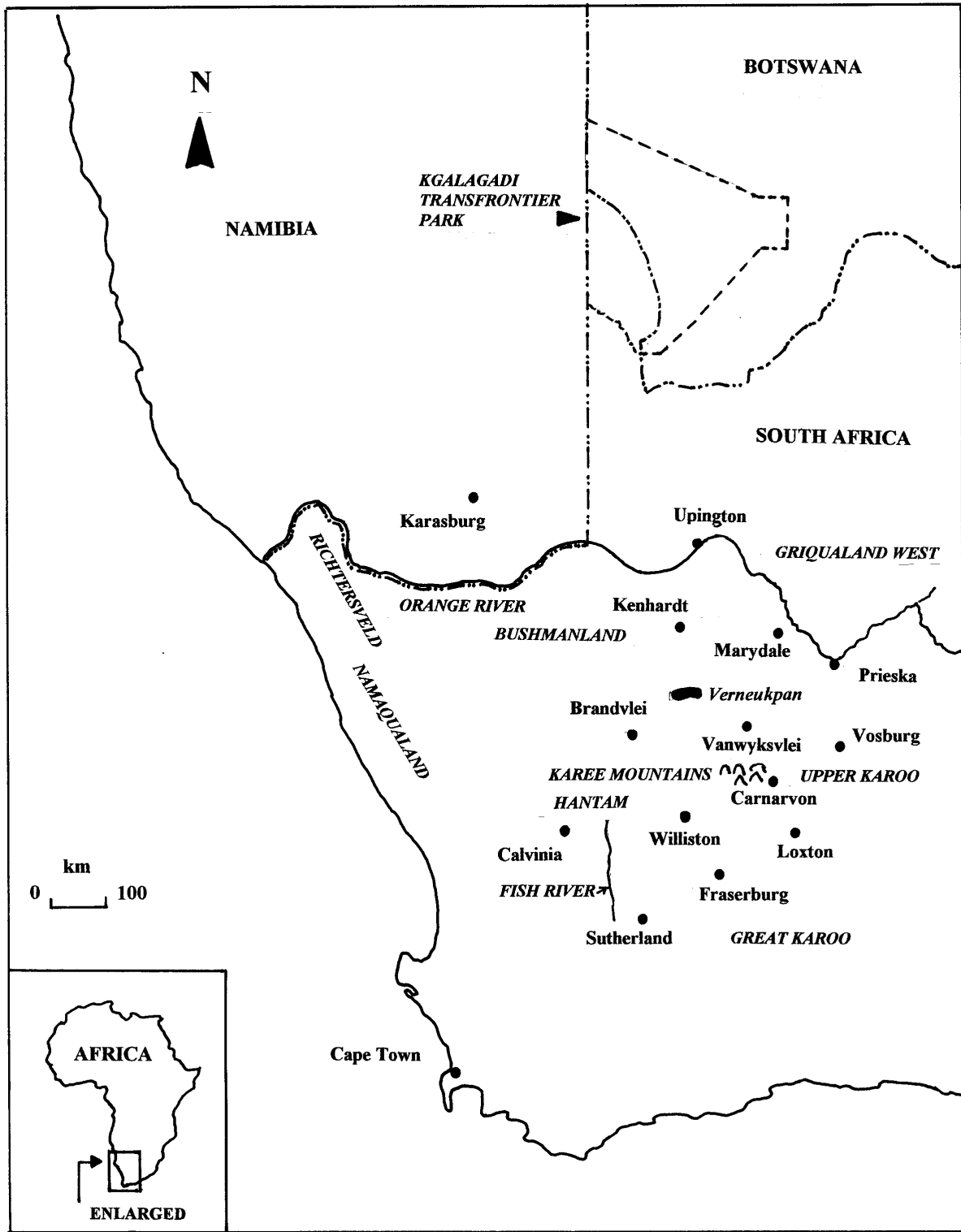


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Map: The Northern Cape, South Africa and surrounding areas, showing the location of some of the places mentioned in the text.

1 Introduction

From time to time, sightings of an enormous animal connected to a whirlwind or rain and water turn up in Southern Africa (e.g., *Cape Times*, 7 November 1998; *Beeld*, 4 March 2000; *South African Broadcasting Corporation (Radio Sonder Grense)*, 5 October 2011). Also, some writers on the San¹ wrote about a peculiar animal connected to water and referred to as a Water Bull or Water Snake. The writers included J.M. ORPEN, the then chief magistrate of St. John's territory, Natal; G.R. VON WIELLIGH, a surveyor; E.F. POTGIETER, an anthropologist; and the linguists Wilhelm H.I. BLEEK, Dorothea BLEEK and Lucy LLOYD.² This being also was depicted in rock art. To add to the understanding of the phenomenon, I did research among the !Xam San descendants of the Northern Cape and published the results in 1997 and 1998. I found that the !Xam and some other San (such as other Southern San [see later] and the Kua), as well as the Khoekhoen (I did research mostly among the Nama, Oorlamse and Korana) viewed rain/water as beneficial but potentially dangerous and that they symbolized it in the attitudes and behaviour of an extremely potent female or male mammal (such as the Water Eland and Water Cow or Bull) or snake (the Water Snake). Although male and female Water Animals were indicated in answer to specific inquiries, male Water Animals mostly featured spontaneously in !Xam narratives. Much information was still available on the concept of water/rain as a Water Snake, but considerably less on the Water Bull/Cow and very little on the Water Eland. Even today, the Water Snake features prominently among many of the !Xam descendants (cf. PRINS 2009: 201). In addition, in 2007 I published a monograph on the specialists who "worked with" the weather and water.

The place that a phenomenon takes in the views of a group is indicative of its value (e.g., BEATTIE 1966: 65-77). Rain/water is more than only an element to quench thirst. Like many other groups, the !Xam experienced the universe as a life-force order of which the components influence one another. My objective with this thematic study was to add to

¹ Although aware of the controversy regarding terms such as San, Bushmen, Khoekhoe, Korana, Griqua and Oorlamse (cf. BARNARD 1992: 156-198, BURCH & ELLANNA 1994: 3, SILBERBAUER 1996: 29, SADR & FAUVELLE-AYMAR 2008) I shall not address the issues here as they are lengthy and unresolved.

² Where more than one of these family members are mentioned simultaneously in the text, I shall refer to them merely as "the BLEEKs".

the previously published information on !Xam views of rain and water, in the first place by adding the views of ordinary persons and, secondly, by adding the pivotal influence that !Xam views of creation and the underworld had on it.

The !Xam formed part of the Southern San language category, as formulated by Dorothea BLEEK (BARNARD 1992: 23, 78). The Southern San included groups such as the San of the Drakensberg and Maloti (including the !Xegwi of Lesotho and later Mpumalanga; cf. PRINS 2009: 200) and the !'Auni-#Khomani³ of the southern Kalahari. For the purpose of this study, I shall refer to other San as the "Northern San". The latter includes groups such as the G!wi of the central Kalahari of Botswana, the San of the Namib and the !Kung of northwestern Botswana and northeastern Namibia.

Descendants of the !Xam still live in the Northern Cape (see Map). Although the composition of the inhabitants in the research area prior to the eighteenth century is not clear, it was probably inhabited predominantly by San. Possibly, from about 1740, Europeans, Korana, Griqua and Xhosa-speaking persons moved into the area (VAN DER WALT n.d.: 94, ENGELBRECHT, 1936: 13-28, ANDERSON 1987: 20-25; DEACON 1996: 24, 247-251). Much biological and cultural contact occurred between these groups, particularly between the Korana and the !Xam. Subsequently, the !Xam lifestyle has undergone substantial changes. The band organization disintegrated long ago and, apart from a few words, the !Xam language has disappeared. Today, the !Xam descendants live in towns or temporarily on farms, earn salaries and, where it is still possible, the gathering of produce from the veld is limited to occasional gathering of a little veld food and medicine.

Owing to the comprehensive culture change the !Xam had undergone, research by means of participant observation would have been limited. Therefore, I decided on a culture-historical reconstruction of the information (cf. FOX 1991: 93-113). It comprised the study of historical documents, such as the documents by the BLEEKs, ORPEN, VON WIELLIGH and POTGIETER, as well as oral information mostly in the form of memories of my !Xam informants, and my own observations. Owing to the effect of change on the !Xam lifestyle, the information in this manuscript is writ-

³ To a large extent, the !'Auni-#Khomani have mixed physically and culturally with the !Kharakaikhoë-Nama.

ten in the past tense, although concepts such as the Water Snake are still considered by many !Xam descendants. I focused on their cosmological ideas, as those tend to be the last to change. Although the !Xam worldview is not a reasoned philosophy, it can be studied by means of behavioural patterns (or memories thereof) (cf. ELIADE 1954: 3f., DOUGLAS 1975: 9, HAMMOND-TOOKE 1980a: 318f.). The approach applied in this study to !Xam views of rain/water is obviously only one of several possible ways of understanding a multilateral subject (cf. KENT 1996: 17, WOLCOTT 2001: 60, EMERSON 2001: 41, BREWER 2001: 102, HAMMERSLEY 2001: 334, DENZIN 2001: 356). The Southern San distinguished water, fire and wind as basic elements of the universe. This paper focuses on one of these, namely rain/water, which was sometimes represented by means of an animal. Of course, the other elements would also have been important to the !Xam.

No group can be studied as an isolated entity. Where applicable, information about the !Xam was compared with other Southern San (among them a few persons from the southern Kalahari such as Regopstaan Kruiper and his wife, !Kui#amas, who were of #Khomani and !Kharakaikhoë-Nama descent) and with neighbouring groups such as the Nama-speaking San of the Namib (the !Gainin),⁴ the G!wi of Botswana, and the Khoekhoen (particularly Nama, Oorlamse and Korana) of southern Africa, as well as with groups outside Africa. Informants of the BLEEKS mentioned in this study are Diä!kwain, !Han#kass'o, !Kabbo, #Kasin, !Kweiten ta !ken and !Xaken-an. ORPEN had an informant named Qing (or ![K]Ing), while VON WIELLIGH referred to his teacher as "Bles". Although VON WIELLIGH did not write down his information verbatim, and ORPEN at one stage re-organized his information, I did not find serious discrepancies in the data that I collected for this study. I interviewed 35 main informants, all elderly persons who regarded themselves as !Xam descendants and who showed a good knowledge of the !Xam culture. I frequently found that a person of mixed descent displayed excellent knowledge, often transferred to him or her by a mother or grandmother. Where it was difficult to distinguish between Khoekhoë and San customs, my knowledge of both lifestyles (cf. HOFF 1990, 1997) came in handy. My informants identified themselves as !Xam, *inter alia* on grounds of a common origin, a common group name (they re-

⁴ BARNARD (1992: 219) suggests that the !Gainin may have been Nama who lost their cattle.

membered the term “!Xam” but used “*Boesman*” in everyday conversation), a common language (spoken only in the past), and a shared 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. Most of my informants preferred to be anonymous.

Unfortunately, I did not find any *!gi:ten* (singular: *!gi:xa*, lit. “person full of potency”, that is a ritual specialist) in the research area; therefore, their perspectives are lacking. Accordingly, my information on subjects such as the underworld and the initiation of *!gi:ten* came from ordinary persons. In a few cases, an informant claimed descent from a *!gi:xa*.

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, and that some of the information could date back to that time. With the death of the present-day elderly, a large amount of information will be lost, and much has already disappeared. Members of the younger generation do not necessarily share the views of the older generation. However, there is growing interest among younger persons in their culture.

On certain subjects, such as the Water Snake, the informants showed ample knowledge. On others, such as the *!khwa-ka !gi:ten* (specialists who worked with the rain and water; singular: *!khwa-ka !gi:xa*), they showed much less knowledge. On certain subjects, such as “*watermeisies*” (lit. “water girls or water maidens”), the thoughts of my informants were entwined and difficult to decipher. The term “*watermeisie*” was used for Water Maidens, female victims of the Water Animal, female Underwater People and female Water People. This may be attributed to influences from other groups.

Conducting the interviews in Afrikaans, the *lingua franca* of the region and my first language, ensured good understanding. For the !Xam language, I followed the spelling by the BLEEKs, while I used the Nama orthography in connection with the Khoekhoen. In this document, all words foreign to English are written in italics. The !Xam and their descendants used the terms Water Snake, Water Bull/Cow, Water Eland, Water People, Water Person, Water Man, Water Woman, Water Maiden, water things, water animals, water plants, rain things and rain animals,

but the terms Water Animal and Underwater People are my own. For comprehensive studies of the !Xam symbols for rain/water and more details on the informants, see HOFF 1997 and 1998.

2 Climate and water sources

Water, veld food and a particular attitude to life were of the factors that ensured the survival of the !Xam, much more than the sporadic availability of meat from big game. The !Xam regarded rain and water with benevolence and fear. In Africa, the importance of rain and water is well understood. Africa is a continent with many climatic zones, from mediterranean and tropical to deserts, where, even in temperate areas, one's life can be saved by being conscious of water. Should the rain fail, one could die. When the rain comes, it could fall softly and friendly, but it could also sweep away humans, animals and homes in anger. The average annual rainfall of the !Xam area, usually in the form of summer rain, is less than 300 mm (personal enquiry South African Weather Services, 9 March 2009; LOVEGROVE 1993: 18). It is a climate inclined towards extremes. A dry riverbed can be transformed into a whirling death trap within a few seconds.

The hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the San necessitated good knowledge of the climate and veld, and the weather was watched carefully (cf. BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 317, 339ff., 387ff.; BLEEK 1932b: 337-342, 1933a: 301f.). The !Xam deduced that the direction of a shooting star predicted rain, that rain was brought by a northerly or north-easterly wind, but that the westerly wind would drive away rain clouds, while the easterly wind would bring severe cold. Should white clouds from the south turn to the northeast and darken, it meant that rain would come. These were called jackal clouds. Should the underside of the jackal cloud be black, it would extend a "leg" (of rain) and it would seem that the rain was dropping its "apron". This would indicate that the time has come to repair the huts to keep out the rain and the cold. !Han#kass'o described the !Xam reaction to cold, "The wind which lies in the east blows very hard, it lies in the east, it is cold. Therefore the Bushmen make shelters, shelters of bushes. They make shelters, they light a fire, they sit warming themselves. That is how they sit sheltered, the shelters are close to the bushes, they make a fire and warm themselves."

In contrast to this was the danger of heat and thirst. Should the westerly wind drive away the rain clouds, “we stand half killed by the sun, so the children dip water for us at the pond (a long way off), because we are half killed by the sun ...”. In times of drought, with the sun scorching down on man and earth and the hunters unable to approach the game on their knees, the bushes whitening, the springbok, and veld food such as plants and locusts, disappearing and the people dying of hunger and thirst, the !Xam yearned for rain and the relief it would bring: “We will drink new rain water lying on the ground which has recently fallen. We will travel away from the old hut and travel to the new water which is sweet, for we have been drinking bitterness.” Then they praised the beauty of the rain and requested the specialist working with rain and water, “O beast-of-prey, you must please really listen to us, for the place here is not pleasant, for it is dry, for the bushes are dry; the place is not pleasant, because it is white, for the bushes are withered. Please let it be wet, that the bushes may grow beautiful. For a place is beautiful when it is sprouting, when the mountain tops are green” (LLOYD 1889: 16; BLEEK 1933a: 301, 307; 1933b: 383, 385, 388).

South of the Orange River, fountains surrounded by reeds and rushes, as well as non-perennial rivers and pans were the most important sources of water. Of these, fountains were the most dependable. Although a fountain was not usually regarded as a source of food, dwellings were made of its rushes and musical instruments in the form of flutes were made of its reeds, while the mud, “water plants”, water tortoises and shells were regarded as potent medicines. Should it rain, the shell of a large female tortoise was put in the open to catch the rainwater, while in the veld the cavities in the sandstone and dolerite filled with water and served as natural reservoirs. To keep the water pure, the !Xam covered each cavity with a large stone. People knew these localities well and shepherds gratefully drank of the cool water. If no water was to be found, a *gora* (shallow hole) was dug for seepage water to collect or to be sucked from by means of a reed. A reed was placed in the hole and the latter was filled with small stones and covered with a layer of soil so that the reed barely stuck out above the ground, making it virtually invisible. Through the reed, water was drawn by mouth, either to be drunk or stored in containers. Water was kept in ostrich eggshells or in springbok or gemsbok stomachs that also served as drinking vessels. The eggshells

were carried in nets made of thongs (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 163, 313; VON WIELLIGH 1921-III: 63, BLEEK 1923: no page number, 1936: 140). Although it was the task of women to fetch water, children were often sent (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 313, 357ff.). Filled ostrich eggshells were buried for future use when scarcity of water was encountered. During his journeys through Bushmanland and the Upper Karoo in the 1870s, DUNN (1931: 35) noticed that a San person buried an eggshell with water to drink on a return journey at 32 km intervals. In the absence of water, the !Xam ate veld plants such as sorrel (*Oxalis pescaprae*), *ghaap* (*Hoodia officinalis*), *!khoba* (*Hoodia gordonii*), *kambro* (*Fockea comaru*) and veld cucumbers (*Cucumis africanus*) for their water content, or drank the stomach moisture of game that had been killed.

Huts were never erected close to a water source, as the presence of humans would bother the game when they came to drink (cf. BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 307, BLEEK 1933a: 302), and because water sources were regarded as dangerous places inhabited by the Water Animal and frequented by beasts of prey. The movement of persons and animals were determined by seasons and the availability of water (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 383). The game followed the rain, while people followed the game (BLEEK 1875: 17, LLOYD 1889: 16, 21; BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 315, BLEEK 1932b: 341). !Han+kass'o (BLEEK 1932b: 341) described the joy experienced when the rain and, consequently, springboks appeared,

I always want it [the rain] to do so, that the children may look up the valley, for the springbok will come trotting. Therefore the children shall look up the valley; for it is a being that loves rain, it will come trotting up in order to drink as it goes along.

Then the children stuck ostrich feather "brushes" into the ground, halting the springboks, making sure that they could be shot more easily.

The mobility of the San often led to misunderstandings. The BLEEKs (BLEEK & LLOYD 1911: 307, BLEEK 1923: no page number, HEWITT 1986: 26f.) mention that fountains had owners, that a kin group sometimes owned more than one water source and that the surrounding area served as summer or winter encampments,

The huts were a good way off, perhaps an hour's walk, and hidden by bushes. Their position was frequently changed. These circumstances have given rise to many misconceptions. Travellers passing through the coun-

try, and seeing the Bushmen appear from nowhere and disappear again, have often written that they had no fixed homes or property, and were mere wanderers, erecting rude bush screens wherever they happened to be. The writers would have been surprised to learn that they were themselves trespassers and poachers in the Bushman landowner's eyes, camping at his water and shooting his buck, for each family had its own game reserve. If the white man were a passing hunter and friendly, if he shared his bag with the Bushmen, he was welcomed and could travel through the territory in peace; but when the settlers came in, permanently occupying the land at the springs, and doing great execution among the game, then the Bushmen retaliated by shooting the intruders or killing their stock. Whereupon the white man, unaware of any unfriendly behaviour on his part, unhesitatingly dubbed the Bushmen an untamable [stet] savage and a thief, and did his best to imprison or shoot him. Hence the war of extermination, which has reduced the race of Colonial Bushmen to its present vanishing figure.

The Namib San, too (TRENK 1910: 166, 168), regularly made use of permanent water sources. During the rainy season, they moved around in the sand dunes, but when the water and valuable *!nara* plants disappeared, they returned to the mountains where each group used its own source of water.

Although generosity is a prominent characteristic of the Khoekhoen and San, they had to protect their water sources. Cavities in the rocks and *goras* were covered with stones, and care was taken not to tread footpaths to water sources. VON WIELLIGH (1919: 191, 1921-III: 36f.) mentions that the person with the smallest feet walked in front while the others, with bigger feet, followed in the tracks. A water source was not approached directly, but by a detour. When Europeans entered their area and started digging for water, the !Xam filled up the wells to make them invisible and asked the Water Snake to dry up the water sources. Kaatjie related the story of an Englishman who continuously chased the !Xam from the water hole where he lived. One day this man had to go on a journey. In preparation, he buried ostrich eggshells filled with water along his intended route. However, the !Xam became aware of his plans and removed the eggshells one by one. When the man, exhausted by thirst, approached the place where the last eggshell was to be found, there too was nothing. In its place lay a tortoise on its back with legs wriggling in the air "so that the man will likewise fight for water".

!Xam dwellings were modest and harmonized with the environment. The semi-circular framework of the hut was covered with grass, bushes or reed mats (cf. BARROW 1801-04-II: 275, HEWITT 1986: 25ff.). Around this, a screen of bushes was stacked as protection against the wind. A *!mein* (little hut), today referred to as a *!mein-tjie* (a combination of !Xam and Afrikaans meaning 'small house'), made of bushes is still known to the !Xam descendants in the area and were in the 1990s used at remote sheep posts. Descriptions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show a semi-nomadic lifestyle of !Xam groups of up to thirty or more persons around an extended family core (HEWITT 1986: 25f., BARNARD 1992: 79). The size was in proportion to the available food and water resources. It is not clear whether, like the G!wi of the dry central Kalahari of Botswana (BARNARD 1992: 102), the !Xam assembled at pans during the rainy season, and during the dry season spread out and quenched their thirst with tubers and the stomach content of hunted game. If so, the proximity to water during the rainy season may have ensured more time and energy for ritual activities (cf. KATZ 1982: 37, GUENTHER 1999: 24f.).

Ecological adaptability required that the San individual had to be resourceful and opportunistic without placing the emphasis on him- or herself and thereby causing friction. Adaptability and a capability to make use of new possibilities (GUENTHER 1999: 4, 41) were some of the traits that promoted the survival of the San. A peculiar example of this was provided by a woman of Griekwastad who, in 1992, repeatedly emphasized the continued importance of elephant dung as a medicine. As elephants are found only in nature reserves today, I asked her how they manage to obtain the dung, to which she replied, "But at the circus, of course."

3 How rain and water were presented

Man tends to depict things of value by means of symbols (BEATTIE 1966: 65-77, LEWIS 1976: 110). For the !Xam living in the semi-desert, rain and water were of immense value as means of survival. It not only quenched the thirst of humans and animals, but the green veld also provided a supply of plant medicines and edible plants and attracted game, ensuring a supply of meat. However, groups in other climatic zones, such as the !Xegwi of Mpumalanga, the San of the Maloti mountains, the !'Auni-