



## In memory of Elsie Vaalbooi

**Hugh Brody**

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*A century-old woman died two months ago near the South Africa–Namibia border. Her knowledge of N|u, a rare language of the southern Kalahari, was a key element in the campaign by the Bushmen/San people to recover their ancestral lands. In paying her warm tribute in his first From the edge column, Hugh Brody sees her life as a window on to key contemporary questions of identity, history, and belonging.*

Many who live at the margins of the colonial world have witnessed a process called 'land claims'. Indigenous peoples, their lands taken from them and their heritage eroded by many kinds of change, have launched campaigns on the ground, actions in the courts and negotiations with governments, hoping to win back some of what they have lost.

These claims have transformed indigenous life, if not the consciousness of colonising nation states, in parts of Latin America, across Canada, in the United States, as well as in the South Pacific, New Zealand and Australia. In many countries, including those of southern Africa and the former Soviet Union, land claims are treated with such suspicion as to block or obscure any effective campaign for indigenous rights and lands. But in the new South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) government set up its own land claims legislation and courts; those who had been dispossessed by racist law since 1913 could seek restitution of their property or compensation for the loss.

With a cut-off date in the 20th century, this did not speak to aboriginal rights or indigenous peoples' claims that in principle stretched back over centuries. But indigenous groups in South Africa could, and did, use the new courts to file their collective and distinctive kinds of claim. Among the first to do so were the surviving Bushmen (or San, as they are known in both anthropology and modern politics) of the southern Kalahari.

Some observers have scorned this process as an attempt to remake a shattered past or, worse still, to invent one. Everything about it seemed so uncertain, tentative, imprecise – the ancient, whatever that might be, obscured and effaced by the modern. A group of men and women who looked like Bushmen, said they were Bushmen but whose everyday reality appeared to lie somewhere between migrant farm worker and rural *lumpenproletarian*. But there were at least pieces of heritage, and the researchers could identify cultural heartlands and distinctive kinds of knowledge. And the San of the region were emphatic that their roots lay in

a hunter–gatherer life in the desert. Their knowledge and some of their geography could be, and were, assembled as maps and reports and, in due course, a land claim – which succeeded.

### Land and language

So I begin this first regular column for [openDemocracy](#) in the town of Rietfontein, in South Africa’s Northern Cape, less than a mile from the border with Namibia. This is the edge of the southern Kalahari, a region where the red sand dunes have faded into a landscape of rock outcrops, great vistas of barren gravels and immense, ancient pans. A land that extends over hundreds of square kilometres yet constitutes an edge, a terrain with almost no identity of its own, defined in terms of where you may reach if you travel through and beyond it.

‘Rietfontein’ is Afrikaans for a spring where there are reeds. Despite the dusty dry land all around, settlers found a source of water here, and could plant a few crops and even a stand of palm trees. The town, a sprawl of low breezeblock houses and rough shacks, thus became the centre for a desert hinterland: school, police station and church, as well as a shop and garage. Just down the road is a border post. About a two-hour drive in the other direction is South Africa’s second most prestigious park, formerly known as the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, but renamed in 2000 as Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

25,000 hectares of the park and about 40,000 hectares of farm land to the south of the park have become the new economic resource for the people referred to in a 1930s ethnographic survey as *ǀKhomani San*, though it appears that they called themselves *N||nǀe* (Home People). (The clicks make San words look alarmingly difficult to pronounce – and they are. ǀ indicates a sound made with the tongue off the roof of the mouth, a flat clicking sound. || is a lateral click, created by pulling the sides of the tongue away from the teeth rather like the noise the English use to urge on a horse. There are five clicks in this particular language.)

A debate between politicians, the National Parks board, Native Affairs officials and scientists as to whether those people were ‘pure’ Bushmen or not led to a 1935 survey by academics from the University of

the Witwatersrand. Scholarly research, in the field, was meant to strengthen an argument for ‘protecting’ the Bushmen within the newly established Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. In practice, it was the basis of a decision to take 77 people to be put on display at the British Empire Exhibition more than a thousand kilometres away, in Johannesburg.

The academics measured people’s fingers, noses and genitals; and concluded that most of the group were pure enough to qualify for conservation. Sixty-two years later, this story was to become part of the oral history that backed up the *ǀKhomani* – the claim that yielded the land in and near the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

The first political activist to work on this claim was Petrus Vaalbooi. In partnership with Dawid Kruiper, the man given the role of *ǀKhomani* ‘traditional leader’, Petrus worked with two key forces: the South Africa San Institute (SASI), a small non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Cape Town, and a remarkable sociolinguist, Nigel Crawhall, a multi-lingual activist and intellectual. With Dawid’s blessings, Petrus and Nigel travelled

back and forth across the region, looking for people of San descent, identifying places of cultural importance, building maps to show San names for places and details of San cultural heritage.

Early in the claims process, Dawid Kruiper had told Nigel Crawhall about their ancient language that had gone extinct several decades earlier. This was the language that had been studied in 1936. Dawid believed that there were still elders who could speak this language. Though the land was central to the claim, Dawid felt that they would be the poorer if they could not find anyone who spoke their ancestral language.

### Two peoples: ǀKhomani San and Nama

The *ǀKhomani San* who were at the forefront of the work spoke Afrikaans and Nama. Nama is the language of the sheep-herding Khoikhoi people who moved into South Africa, and down the west side of the Kalahari, about two thousand years ago. They were primarily herders not hunter–gatherers, and with a particular relationship to land, animals and language that in

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many ways was quite different from the San. Dawid Kruiper once spoke to me about the kind of line that he said had always separated his family from Nama families: 'They were the bosses and talked tough, we looked after sheep for them.'

Dawid described a kind of subordination, or perhaps, more accurately, a division of labour within a rather strong hierarchy. The Nama owned the sheep; the San were part-time shepherds. In return, the San gained security; they could look to Nama herders, their employers, for meat. The Nama needed to be able to find water and also to hunt. The San helped them; so they gained security also.

As Dawid described this, the San may have been subordinate, but they were crucial to the system. They were free to go into the desert and hunt and gather when they wanted; but they chose to be close to Nama herders. Somehow, this economic overlap had resulted in San adopting *Khoekhoegowab*, the Nama language, and losing their indigenous tongue – though no one seemed to know what that was.

#### Elsie Vaalbooi: living history

In January 1997, SASI's lawyer Roger Chennells was busy registering those prepared to admit they were San. He was speaking to residents of the dusty shacks in Rietfontein. Petrus Vaalbooi stepped forward to tell Roger that his mother could still speak the old Bushman language. In Afrikaans the language is referred to as *die ou taal* (the old language), or more frequently just *Boesmantaal*, Bushman language.

SASI contacted the world expert on Southern San languages, Anthony Traill of the University of the Witwatersrand. Professor Traill flew to Upington, then drove three hours to Rietfontein to see if this ancient matriarch could indeed understand the language that was last recorded in 1936 and which he had last heard spoken in 1974.

Traill located the Vaalbooi house, where Elsie spent much of her time lying on a camp bed under the shade of an awning attached to one side of a small, breezeblock building. Elsie was very old and frail, not able to do much more than doze for much of each day, and losing her eyesight. She was cared for by a bevy of grandchildren, doted on by Petrus, but seemed to be almost without life – as thin as a few reeds, her cheeks sunk between the bones of her face.

But when Traill played the 1936 recordings a light came back into the old woman's eyes. This white man

from the city had brought back memories deeply buried in her past. The track on the CD was a woman relaying her experiences of going through her first menstrual celebration, a ceremony of central importance in *!Khomani* heritage.

Two months later, Nigel Crawhall made it to Rietfontein to interview Elsie and Petrus. Professor Traill had confirmed the authenticity of the claim, now Nigel needed to help the community harness the tremendous heritage significance of this event. He talked at length to Petrus and Elsie about what this meant for them, for the land claim, and what they were hoping he could do.

In the end, they decided to record a message to the Pan South African Language Board, which is responsible for protecting and promoting South African languages. Elsie asked to listen to her voice on the cassette. She giggled quietly to herself to hear her old voice conjuring up these images that no one else could understand.

It did indeed seem that Elsie was the last speaker of this language. There was poignancy to this: an old woman who held memories and knowledge that were trapped in a final privacy, and doomed. Poignant and also disheartening. According to Petrus, his mother was already 96 years old. But Petrus was determined to find at least one of Elsie's surviving relatives. A few months later, in August 1997, Petrus called Nigel to say he had found another woman in Upington – Anna Kassie. Petrus had managed to get Elsie and Anna to speak to one another on the telephone.

Nigel Crawhall flew to Upington to interview Mrs Kassie, who lives in the township of Rosedale. At the end of the interview, Mrs Kassie's cousin walked in and started speaking the dead language. Nigel realised that if this was the smoke, there was surely still heat in the fire: if there were three speakers, there might well be more. The diaspora had scattered the San of the southern Kalahari far and wide. Somewhere in the clusters of zinc huts and farm labourers' dilapidated shacks there would be more people carrying the language around with them.

At this point – November 1997 – I joined forces with Nigel. He had already found six elders, including three sisters, |Una, |Abaka and Keis, who had been on display, as children, at the 1936 Empire Exhibition. They were living at a grim place called Swartkop, a community of squatters some fifteen kilometres further into the Orange River farm country.

The sisters led us to Andries Olyn, a man living in another of the so-called coloured townships not far from Uppington; who led us to Willem Springbok, a part-time labourer living in a tied shack behind a wealthy farm fifty kilometres farther along the Orange River valley...and so on. Within a year, there was a little community of fifteen speakers; within two years, this had grown to twenty-six.

We learned that the language – the one Elsie and Anna had used on the telephone – was called *N/u*. Nigel also worked out that *N/u* is the last surviving member of the *!Ui* language family, once spoken across South Africa by hunter-gatherer peoples. The most famous example of the *!Ui* language was */Xam*, the language of the Karoo San people. The */Xam* language became extinct in the early 20th century. The recent choice for a South African national motto is in the */Xam* language: *!Ke e: /xarra //ke* (Diverse Peoples Unite).

#### The land claim and its campaign

When we found the *N/u* speaking families in Rosedale and Swartkop, we played them Elsie's tape. They recorded a message in reply. And Elsie a reply to their reply. We shuttled back and forth on the three-hour journey between Rietfontein and Swartkop. Thus far the *N/u* speakers were elderly, mostly women, and nearly all of them frail and suffering poor health: malnutrition over years had taken its toll, as had chronic, low-level tuberculosis. But we could help them, with vitamins, food supplements and some cash. Their energy returned – not so much because of the little we could give them, but from the politics: this land claim was their cause. They seized on it, made it their own, lived for it. The language became their special contribution to the land claim.

Elsie more or less rose from her bed and became a vocal, insistent activist. As news spread of her status – and due romanticisation, as the living embodiment of a 'dead' language – journalists came to her from all over the world. Ulwazi Educational Radio in South Africa and BBC Radio 4 both made documentaries about her; so did the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Articles about her appeared in newspapers all over

South Africa, but also in Italy, Japan, France, Canada and Germany.

The journalists for the most part needed their story to be clear, dramatic and sentimental. Again and again Elsie was celebrated as the only speaker of her language. The existence of the others was of little interest – though the ABC was a striking counter-example in this regard. And the impact of Elsie's story was real enough; the †Khomani land claim was news, and somehow it was good news. Survival seemed to speak of hope. Elsie herself encouraged this optimism. She called on her people to return home and promised her son she would not die until the land claim was a success.

#### Prophecy, politics, and a claim fulfilled

The first time I visited Elsie in Rietfontein, Petrus showed me the photograph of a Bushman that hung in their house. It showed a man in a suit with a look of strong purpose. This was Jan, a nephew of Elsie's, and a prophet. Many years ago he had foretold that, one day, people would come from far away and help the Bushmen to get their land back – no one should give up hope. Some time in the years that followed his making this prophecy, Jan was murdered. I think Elsie and Petrus had now identified Nigel and the

international NGO world, or the land claim in general, as the fulfilment of the prophecy.

Jan's prophecy was accurate enough. The funds for the claim, and those who did the technical work, came from Canada and England. Supporters came from many other lands. Petrus and Dawid lobbied at the United Nations' indigenous people's forum in Geneva. But it was the ANC in exile that had promised that there would be land claims in a new South Africa; and it was Nelson Mandela's government, in the last months of its administration, that urged and then accepted the claim.

The process began in 1996 and was concluded in 1999. In its last years, Elsie seemed to go from strength to strength. She was not at the political or cultural centre; Dawid and his family on the one hand, the Swartkop

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sisters on the other were the two wings on which the claim was able to fly. They were the ones who had been born in the park, and told the stories that established that their eviction had been a result of racist legislation since 1913 – one of the criteria by which the new South African government judged all land claims. But whenever she had a chance, and whenever it seemed to be needed, Elsie Vaalbooi was both a voice and a symbol of the claim. She spoke again about her life, going over her particular story, explaining how her people had lost their land, how they had suffered, and how her Bushman identity was at the centre of it all.

After the claim succeeded, Elsie moved with Petrus and others in their family to one of the farmhouses on the new land – a magnificent, high-roofed building surrounded by trees to give shade and even with a small swimming pool. It had been the home of a rich, white family. The last time I saw Elsie, she was still there, resting in the old, large drawing room, surrounded by grandchildren and at least as articulate as she had ever been.

Elsie died on 7 October 2002. She had asked to be buried on the land she had fought for. A government official encouraged Petrus to bury her in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. She had never lived there, and had only visited its red dunes and dry river beds on the occasion of the joining of the South African and Botswana Parks in 2000. But the park had come to represent the San claim, San heritage, San lands. For all that Elsie had spent her life ironing and cleaning for white farmers, she saw herself, and her family, as *Boesman* (Bushman).

After an acrimonious argument inside the community, her wish was denied. The Kruiper family asked the Vaalbooi to respect the graves of their own ancestors and to withdraw the request. As a result, she was buried where she had lived for many of her last years, in Rietfontein.

Elsie Vaalbooi's story raises many of the issues and arguments that surround indigenous land claims and identity around the world. Is this all a jumble of myth, sentimentality and obfuscation of tough, post-colonial realities? Or is there some real opportunity in the land claims business for men and women such as Elsie Vaalbooi to reclaim authentic heritage and establish new kinds of indigenous community on old lands?

In the next of these pieces from the edge, I will attempt to give some answers to these questions.

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