

Namibia.

Located in the South-West of the African continent, Namibia is a young, sparsely-populated country. The North-Central region, near the border with Angola, is the most densely-populated area and is home to farmers, pastoral communities and several groups of hunter-gatherers, also popularly known as “San”. Two villages (marked on the map below), Ekoka (Oshanaunama region) and !Gomais (Oshanaunama region), are home to !Xun and #Akhwe Haiilom communities, each village home to a mix of people from both ethnic backgrounds.



Members of both of these communities were nomadic or semi-nomadic foragers within living memory, although they are now almost entirely sedentary. Each village has a headman, although this authority is not necessarily officially recognised. Some members of the villages work for local farms as laborers and herders. Others make and sell handicrafts, provide blacksmithing and fletching services or work in education.

Their subsistence is mixed and contains some foraged along with grown and traded resources. Both communities are in receipt of food aid in times of drought, which have become both more frequent and more extreme in recent years due to climate change. Foraging is widespread and a large part of life in both communities, even though it forms a smaller part of the caloric intake than it did two decades ago. Hunting also occurs, though poaching legislation brings some members of the community into conflict with the law.

Namibia’s political relationship with its hunter-gatherer communities has been fraught. Members of Ekoka and !Gomais were conscripted into the South African Army during the war of independence, ostensibly because of their tracking abilities and “closeness with nature”. In the 1950s, #Akhwe Haiilom

communities in Etosha National Park were forcibly relocated in the creation of the nature reserve. During the German colonization of 1884-1915, !Xun and †Akhwe Hailom people were regarded as animals. The wider umbrella of San groups, which the !Xun and †Akhwe Hailom communities fall into, was the subject of the long-running Kalahari debate in social anthropology, in which the relationship “San people” had to the natural world and other societies was the focal point.

The relationships between subsistence, ethnicity and identity are complex and vital parts of life here, as the people of Ekoka and IGomais occupy a space outside the traditional conceptions of hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and farmers.