Indigenous Identities and Military Frontiers
Reflections on San and the Military in Namibia and Angola, 1960-2000


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What was the role of San in the conflicts of Southeast Angola and Northeast Namibia during the period 1960-2000? What were the effects of this involvement on their identity-building processes? Much of this history has yet to be written. Based on field research in the period 2003-2006, and on secondary sources, this piece emphasizes that the socio-political and economic ramifications of ‘militarized’ San identities extend beyond the periods of conflict themselves.

The paper focuses on Khwe, a San group living in West Caprivi, but highlights parallels and connections between the roles and identity-building of San under the military in both Namibia and Angola. Their collaboration with the apartheid military has contributed to the construction of Khwe as a ‘subversive’ threat to nation-building. Simultaneously, Khwe in Namibia and immigrant !Xun in South Africa have often sought to gloss over their military past in favour of mobilizing identities as ‘indigenous people’ to garner support from NGOs and strengthen their claims to authority. The effects and implications of San military identities in post-conflict southeast Angola are yet to be studied; this paper offers preliminary suggestions for themes to be investigated.

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Reflexões sobre a militarização dos San na Namíbia e em Angola, 1960-2000

Qual foi o papel dos San nos conflitos do sudeste de Angola e o nordeste da Namíbia (Caprivi) entre 1960 e 2000? Quais foram os efeitos deste envolvimento nos seus processos de construção identitária? Falta escrever uma grande parte desta história. Com base no trabalho de campo realizado no período entre 2003 e 2006, e em fontes secundárias, este trabalho realça o facto que as ramificações socio-políticas e económicas das identidades «militarizadas» dos San prolongam-se além dos períodos dos conflitos.

Este artigo fala dos Khwe, um grupo San que vive na zona occidental de Caprivi, mas sublinha os paralelos e as relações entre os papéis e a construção identitária dos San num contexto militar na Namíbia e em Angola. A sua colaboração com o exército durante o apartheid contribuiu para uma imagem dos Khwe como uma ameaça «subversiva» para a nação em formação. Ao mesmo tempo, os Khwe na Namíbia e os imigrantes !Xun na África do Sul procuraram muitas vezes minimizar o seu passado militar para mobilizarem a sua identidade como «povo indígena», para garantir o apoio das ONGs e reforçar as suas reivindicações junto das autoridades. Os efeitos e as implicações na identidade dos San militarizados do sudeste de Angola no período pós-conflito precisam de ser estudados e este artigo sugere algumas pistas de investigação.

In the early years of Namibia’s Independence, the ruling party South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) has often promoted nation-building discourses captured by the slogan “One Namibia, One Nation”, as a means to counteract the multiple social and racial divisions imposed and fostered by apartheid under South African rule. Yet for all its talk of unification, SWAPO has at times also displayed exclusionist tendencies which are grounded on discourses about ethnicity and past political affiliations. SWAPO contributed in the 1990s and early 2000s to constructing a stigmatised identity for the Khwe. Critical to this is the history of San collaboration with the apartheid military during Namibia’s liberation struggle. These dynamics intersect with Angolan history in important ways, not only because Angolan San were among those recruited by the South African military, but also because by the early 1970s Angolan San were already being constructed as traitors for their collaboration with Portuguese forces. This paper focuses on Khwe in Namibia, but highlights preliminary parallels and connections between the roles and identity-building of San under the military in both Namibia and Angola. The paper argues that the ramifications of San military identities extend well beyond periods of conflict themselves.

The paper first provides an overview of recent history of San groups living in the region comprised by southeastern Angola and Namibia’s Caprivi strip, highlighting the significant dearth of research on Angolan San groups in particular. It begins with a brief overview of San-Bantu relations and the ways in which San interacted with the colonial and apartheid states in Angola and Namibia. It outlines the participation of Angolan San groups in the Angolan liberation struggle and the attitudes of other Angolans towards the San and the realm of ‘the bush’ during that period. The paper also discusses the implications of Angolan San military identities in the post-independence period, when they largely fled the country and dispersed throughout southern Africa partly due to fear of retaliation from the victorious liberation movements against whom they had fought. Many
enlisted in the South African Defense Force (SADF) alongside the Khwe to fight against SWAPO in the Namibian war of independence.

Turning to Namibia, we look at how the SADF contributed towards creating a distinctive identity for both Namibian and Angolan San during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly for those in military camps in Caprivi. This had significant social, political and economic ramifications for San groups in the post-Independence period, in relation to the relocation of many San to South Africa; Caprivi’s political instability at the end of the 1990s; and Angola’s civil war which only ended in 2002. Constructions of Khwe identity by different parties continued to inform struggles over land, resources and authority among the state, NGOs and different ethnic groups after 1990. These constructions were grounded on an intersection of discourses around ethnicity, race and nation-building. Key themes from liberation struggle narratives – those concerning collaboration with, and resistance against, white minority rule – were important for this identity construction, as employed by a range of different actors.

Many Khwe mobilised a ‘Khwe’ identity, drawing on ‘indigenous rights’ and environmental discourses in order to strengthen their claims to authority. In response, some government actors and members of other ethnic groups tried to undermine Khwe political legitimacy by narrating histories of nationalism and collaboration that stigmatised Khwe (Orth 2003, Boden 2003). The notion of Khwe political subversion (ie. their suspected collaboration with enemies of the state) also had implications for their relationships with NGOs and for NGO activities. This paper argues that discourses about Khwe subversion were a nuanced and effective means of excluding Khwe from certain civic rights. This in turn had social and economic consequences. In sum, these constructions of Khwe identity served to reinforce the construction of ethnic difference in West Caprivi, in contrast to government narratives that emphasized national, rather than ethnic, identity.

Namibian and Angolan San histories thus intersected in numerous ways through time and space. This suggests that at least to some extent there are comparisons and parallels to be drawn about their identity building processes in relation to the impact of military intervention. The experience of Namibian San since Independence may be salient for Angolan San in a context of post conflict nation-building since 2002. The struggles that have taken place in Namibia’s West Caprivi over political legitimacy, authority and land among the state, NGOs and different ethnic groups serve as a useful illustration of how San wartime identities informed, and presented challenges for nation-building. Tensions stemming from divisions between competing liberation groups suggest that historical narratives around San subversion and ethnicity could conceivably affect the degree to which San are included or excluded from reconciliation and nation-building efforts. A brief discussion of the current state of affairs in Angola and recent elections highlights the specific issues that may arise as Angola embarks upon its own process of post-conflict nation-building (McMillan 2005, UNSC 2003, Conteh-Morgan 2004). Its ruling party, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), will no doubt face similar decisions about how to deal with issues of ethnicity and wartime allegiances (Corrigan 2008).
San-Bantu Relations in the Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Periods in Southeast Angola and West Caprivi, Namibia

Although early travellers’ accounts are rich in detail, there is little thorough historical analysis of precolonial relations between San and Bantu groups in the area between the Kavango and Kwando rivers that now comprises southeast Angola and Namibia’s Caprivistrip. Regarding the relationship between Khwe and Mbukushu, Fisch (2005) suggests that the middle part of the 19th century was a period of close association and interdependence between the two groups, which was later adversely affected by broader political change. The late 19th century saw Lozi and Batawana chiefs view to bring Mbukushu under their control, as the Batawana polity strengthened (Tlou 1985, Taylor 2000). Khwe-Mbukushu relations appear to have subsequently become strained and more unequal. According to the missionary Wüst and linguist-ethnographer Köhler, by 1900 Khwe were reportedly often treated violently or even put to death for minor crimes, and their settlements were sometimes raided for slaves (Boden 2005, M. Fisch, pers. comm.). Despite the inadequacy of historical sources, in the context of broader literature about the emergence of inequality which marks San relationships with Bantu-speaking groups (Wilmsen 1989, Gordon 1992, Suzman 2000, Widlok 2000), it is likely that Mbukushu attempts at domination of Khwe in the early 20th century were successful. It is also likely, based on oral accounts collected in the last decade, that practices such as intermarriage and exchange were, and still are, integral to this domination and, accordingly, that identities were more fluid than represented today (Rousset 2003, Boden 2003). Inge Brinkman’s analysis of San-Bantu relations in southeast Angola converges with this interpretation: “trade and theft, intermarriage and servitude all feature in this relationship” (2005: 120). Despite the variable, multi-faceted nature of the relationship, San groups appear to have generally occupied a lower social status than Bantu, and were later placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy devised by the Portuguese (Brinkman 2005, Sharp & Douglas 1996).

With the onset of colonialism, and later apartheid, West Caprivi was subject to flux and migration, to alliances and divisions, and to a limited number of government interventions. Archival evidence and oral histories suggest that the South West Africa administration contributed towards the shaping of an ethnic identity and an ethnic ‘territory’ for the Khwe, firstly through veterinary policies in the early 1940s and later through the policies recommended by the 1950 Commission for the Preservation of Bushmen (Taylor 2007, Boden 2005). These policies fostered the differential treatment of Khwe and Mbukushu, altered the balance of socio-political power between them, and affected their respective access to land and natural resources, often in favour of Khwe.

Southeast Angola, however, appears to have remained relatively untouched by the colonial state. Chiefs were required to levy taxes and provide forced laborers, but rarely interacted with the administration; indeed, some villages would disappear into the bush entirely when they received word that a colonial officer was on his way (Brinkman 1999, Barnett & Harvey 1972). The scarcity of people and wide expanses of vacant land discouraged the Portuguese from establishing a vigorous presence in the region, which they described as ‘the lands at the end of the earth’ or ‘hunger country’ (Brinkman 1999: 425, Brooke 1988). Southeast
Map of West and East Caprivi
Angola was extremely marginalized in the growing colonial infrastructure, and received little in the way of the educational, economic, and medical benefits or services available in other regions of the country. The region’s development was largely overlooked, leaving many inhabitants with little in the way of material resources (Heywood 2005). As Brinkman describes, the decentralized nature of political power and limited colonial impact in the region contributed to a loose definition of ethnicity. Ethnic identity was flexible and people frequently altered their self-description based on where they were or to whom they were speaking (Brinkman 1999). A similarly loose distinction existed between people from the bush, vakamusenge; people from town, vakambongi; and vakamembo, people from the village. In the pre- and early colonial era, most people lived in villages and the bush was left to the San. When the Portuguese built towns, few Angolans chose to live in them. This changed, however, with the advent of the independence struggle and the population shifts that accompanied it.

San in the Angolan War for Independence

In 1966, five years after the beginning of the war, MPLA guerillas opened an “Eastern front” in the remote southeast, forming camps and importing supplies from neighbouring Zambia (Sellstrom 1999, Marcum 1979). União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) soon followed in establishing its own guerrilla presence in the southeast. There has been little research on the impact of these events upon San groups, estimated to number around 11,000 in the 1960s (Brenzinger ND), or the ways in which San reacted to and interacted with the newly arrived forces. Brinkman’s oral history of the political economy and identity-building processes is valuable here and is one of the few analyses in English focused on the southeastern region during this period. Her findings are based largely on her interviews with Angolan refugees living in Rundu, northern Namibia in the late 1990s. Brinkman acknowledges that “the experience of the post-colonial war, of flight and exile influenced the accounts as much as the experience of the war between 1966 and 1975” (2005: 39). Her almost exclusive reliance on oral histories from one group of refugees lacks certain details, such as the identification of specific San groups involved with the Portuguese army and the dates of particular events. Brenzinger, for example, refers to four different Khoisan language groups, though the Khwe and !Xun speakers were certainly the vast majority (2001). Moreover, Brinkman’s account does not include San perspectives on the events in which they have been implicated. Whilst an imperfect resource for analyzing the role of Angolan San in Angolan conflicts, the lack of research in this area renders it one of the more thorough accounts of the colonial war in the southeastern region.

With the arrival of conflict in the region, many villagers moved to town to escape the violence in rural areas. Brinkman argues that as populations shifted, the meanings of the words vakamusenge, vakambongi, and vakamembo changed and hardened. Whilst these terms were originally used flexibly without fixed connotations, the onset of the war meant that town and bush became diametrically opposed identities. Villages were left vacant as their residents fled or were forcibly removed, and consequently the term vakamembo became “nearly obsolete” within
two years of the outbreak of fighting in the southeast (Brinkman 2005: 143). Whereas San had been the only people living in the bush prior to the war, life in the bush quickly became associated with the guerrilla forces, both MPLA and UNITA, their camps, and their village abductees. Whereas those living in the bush were viewed as ‘bandits’ by the Portuguese, those living in town were deemed colonial stooges and ‘traitors’ by the guerrillas (Brinkman 2005). The division was more than a matter of semantics: MPLA was known to kill those who ventured into town to visit relatives or secure food on the suspicion that they would reveal MPLA’s position, while the Portuguese were equally merciless towards town dwellers who were found in the bush, wary of civilians’ attempts to offer food or aid to the guerrillas (Brinkman 2005, Breytenbach 1997).

In the bush, conditions were harsh and food was scarce. A small number of San had been abducted and taken to guerrilla camps, but for the most part were consigned to providing support to troops rather than bearing arms themselves or holding leadership positions. Portuguese forces sought recruits among the disaffected Angolans in the bush, offering food, clothing, and in some instances, pay. Knowledgeable of their particularly marginalized status, and of the inequalities between San and Bantu groups, the Portuguese recruited heavily among the San, and particularly among the Khwe in recognition of the tension between the Khwe and their Bantu neighbors, who strongly supported UNITA (Brinkman 2005, Sharp & Douglas 1996). As was the case with the Khwe in Namibia, the Angolan San were appealing allies thanks to their excellent tracking skills and knowledge of the bush areas harbouring guerrillas (Gearon 2002, Hallett 1978). Distrustful of the guerrillas and eager to reap the benefits offered by the Portuguese, many San joined the Portuguese army.

In doing so, they moved from the bush to the Portuguese barracks near town, often involuntarily, contributing to the redefinition of ‘town’ and ‘bush’. In the employ of the Portuguese army, the San developed a reputation for exceptional brutality. Brinkman reports that in her interviews with Angolan refugees in Namibia, the theme of ‘Bushmen betrayal’ came up repeatedly (2005: 121). Many of the refugees who had lived in guerrilla camps during the independence war viewed the San as the most terrifying of all those fighting, believing that San would not only kill any black person they came upon, but mutilate their victims horribly. Refugees told stories of PIDE (International and State Defense Police), the Portuguese secret police force, that depicted scenes in which “prisoners were taken to the bush, where they were offered a delicious meal with lots of alcoholic drinks and read to from the Bible before being killed by the Bushmen, who all received a bottle of booze as compensation” (2005: 118). There is little evidence to support these claims, and the effect of time and myth on people’s recollections should not be underestimated. Indeed, other reports of wartime brutality attribute vicious attacks to the Portuguese, with no mention of the Bushmen (Barnett & Harvey 1972). Yet Brinkman emphasizes that stories of San brutality were not intended symbolically, stating that “the informants wanted to preserve the horror of PIDE, not symbolically allude to their fears” (2005: 119). Regardless of its veracity, the prevailing belief was that the San were out for revenge against the Bantus who had treated them poorly in the past. Even the Portuguese, who by many accounts acted brutally themselves, seemed to view the San as barbaric killers, a characteristic
that fit in neatly with stereotypes of them as primitive people, similar to those later upheld by the SADF, with animal-like instincts.

Despite Portuguese and Bantu beliefs, a thirst for blood or revenge against the supposedly oppressive Bantu seems to have less to do with San collaboration than the desire to obtain the benefits offered by the Portuguese. Though not all soldiers received formal pay, they were fed, clothed, sheltered, and exempt from paying taxes. Additional rewards were given to those who informed the Portuguese about subversive activity and, according to Gordon (1992), to those who brought back physical evidence of their success in killing guerilla fighters. For a people who had long been relegated to inferior status in an already-marginalized region, the chance for increased material well-being was likely difficult to pass up, while the political issues at stake had much less salience to people living so removed from the colonial centers. The social benefits of increased status and authority deriving from San being designated as locally knowledgeable and valuable trackers were probably also compelling motives for joining the Portuguese army. The absence of primary testimony from the Angolan San themselves, however, means it is difficult to assess how and why they made the choices they did.

In Brinkman’s oral histories, regardless of their actual motivations, San were stigmatized as traitors and collaborators by Angola’s liberation movements, and were blamed for the repression suffered. After the war concluded in 1975, when UNITA surveyed the wishes of the southeastern population in an attempt to curry favor, many called for banishing the remaining San and for killing Khwe specifically in retribution for their collaboration with the Portuguese (Brinkman 2003). This particular animus towards the Khwe may be because they, to a greater extent than other San groups, served in the Portuguese army in a fighting capacity and were thus visible symbols of the Portuguese offensive (Sharpe & Douglas 1996). The tensions that had existed between Khwe and Bantu were likely also exacerbated by the shift in town and bush identities and the subsequent violent estrangement of the two populations. In general, calls for revenge against the ‘traitors’ were reportedly frequent (Brinkman 2003, 2005). By that time, however, few San remained in Angola. Refugees report that as many as half of the some 11,000 San living in southeast Angola in the early 1960s (Brenzinger n.d.) were killed in conflict or were massacred, whilst others were displaced in waves over the years across four countries (Angola, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia). Most of those who survived fled to the Caprivi in Namibia, hoping to escape the violence and the threat of retribution from UNITA and MPLA guerrillas (Brenzinger 2001, Boden 2005). Others, mostly !Xun, joined the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA) prior to its disintegration. At that point, some of the !Xun who had fought with the FNLA used the movement’s ties with the South African military to join the SADF in Namibia (Sharpe & Douglas 1996). Brenzinger (2001) reports that between 1974 and 1978, after the Portuguese withdrawal, approximately 6,000 !Xun left Angola. Two thousand of these, mostly Vasekele !Xun, ended up in Caprivi at the SADF’s Omega camp (Fisch 2005). The geographical shifts and displacements said to have taken place during this time are spatially depicted in a series of maps by Brenzinger (Brenzinger n.d.).
San in the Namibian War for Independence

Namibia’s independence struggle began not long after Angola’s, in 1964. From the late 1960s, a crucial factor in the ongoing formation of contemporary identities, political authority and claims to resources in West Caprivi was this area’s 20-year occupation by the SADF, when the area was used as a springboard for operations into Angola against SWAPO forces. The military occupation deeply influenced the Khwe relationship both with other ethnic groups and later with the post-apartheid state (Gordon 1995). Seegers (1996: 221) reports that the San were the first and only group drawn on by the SADF for recruits prior to 1974. In that year, the SADF established both Alpha camp and Omega bases in the Caprivi and began recruiting Khwe men, and !Xun (also called Vasekele) from southern Angola (Gordon 1995, Boden 2005). According to an army account, Khwe who crossed into Angola on SADF tracking missions also sought to convince fleeing Vasekele to join the SADF at Omega, a task that apparently took “little persuasion” (Gordon 1992: 185).

As an elderly !Xun woman in Omega described, “In Angola we were suffering; there was [armed conflict]. PW. Botha brought us [here] from Angola… the Boers told us we’d die [there] if we didn’t leave”. In the wake of their recruitment, anthropologists, UN officials and SWAPO representatives alike represented !Xun as ill-equipped to make informed decisions (Kolata 1981: 563). As Wilmsen reported, however, !Xun were clearly aware of not just the material benefits of military conscription: “they get a steady diet, prestige, and are treated, in their view, more like other Africans and less like lower class citizens” (cited in Kolata 1981: 563).

Within four years, the military base at Omega housed 3,000 people, or nearly half the area’s population. Evidence suggests that the Khwe and !Xun quickly grew dependent on the SADF, and Omega functioned as what Rob Gordon calls a ‘total institution’ – while men trained for the army, children were taught the South African curriculum and women were provided with Christian-minded ‘activities’ including sewing (Gordon 1992: 186, Boden 2005, Lee & Hurlich 1982). Some in the SADF sought to portray this as the first step towards ‘modern’ society, claiming that by militarizing the San they were in fact civilizing them (Lee 1986, Lee & Hurlich 1982).

Yet the SADF simultaneously promoted a romanticised and essentialist discourse about their ‘Bushmen soldiers’ (Lee 1986; Gordon 1988, 1992, 1995). SADF Colonel Breytenbach (1997: 83), for example, described Bushmen recruits as “Stone-Age hunter-gatherers” who lived an “innocent and idyllic life” and who “could have shown us the way back to living in harmony with nature… the secrets of the bush [and] how to feel at one with the spirit of ancient Africa”. These same qualities were claimed to enhance their capacity for tracking and soldiering (Lee & Hurlich 1982). Whilst some SADF representatives acknowledged that ‘Bushman’ society was threatened by their military involvement, others denied this: as one lieutenant claimed, “Our aim is not to try and Westernize them […] but to make them better Bushmen” (Thatcher 1983: 417).

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1 Discussion, !Xun group, Omega, 21 August 2006. PW Botha was Defence Minister from 1966-1978.
The identity politics catalysed by the SADF were more complex than Breytenbach’s excerpts suggest, and indeed the SADF’s view of San much more ambiguous, contrary to Gordon’s argument (Sharp & Douglas 1996). The Khwe and !Xun, with their respective identities, relationships and allegiances, had already been influenced by their experiences of the Angolan independence war and provided an additional pool of veteran recruits for the SADF. In 1975, during the SADF’s Operation Savannah into Angola, the Angolan Khwe who had expert knowledge of the area came to be seen as ‘crack soldiers’. These men were in particularly high demand given their experience under the Portuguese, and some Namibian Khwe felt slighted by the higher salaries and privileges that the ‘newcomers’ were afforded, including permission to carry weapons (Boden 2005). It was after this, helped by the media and visiting politicians in the late 1970s, that the ‘Bushman soldier’ myth became fully-fledged. Omega was used to show a strictly-regulated flow of visitors how SADF was ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of indigenous Namibians and working to ‘uplift’ them while preserving their culture (Boden 2005, Gordon 1992: 187). As Sharp and Douglas (1996) explain, the Bushman myth created a problem for the SADF, because it was the smaller, lighter-skinned !Xun who fitted the public stereotype of ‘Bushmen’ (we need to decide whether to capitalise or not and keep it consistent), and not the taller, ‘blacker’, Bantu-like Khwe. From the SADF’s perspective, however, the !Xun did not show the military prowess of the Khwe. Hence, to maintain the image of the SADF’s ‘crack ethnic unit’, the !Xun and Khwe were kept together.

In line with apartheid ideology, processes of racial and ethnic ‘othering’ were central to the SADF’s strategy in West Caprivi (Grundy 1983, Gordon 1988, Lee 1986). These reinforced Khwe fears of and antagonism towards Bantu groups. The SADF demonised SWAPO’s liberation forces, and claimed that primordial hatred between San and other tribes underlay the San choice to join the army: “A Bushman’s hate for SWAPO will give you the shivers... they hate SWAPO because [SWAPO] enslaved them and took their daughters for prostitutes” (Gordon 1992, Sharp & Douglas 1996). As Rousset (2003) and Taylor (2007) describe, Khwe were continually categorized by the SADF as ‘different’ from other Africans and encouraged to exercise this power (Lee 1986). Boden reports that

“Mbukushu and other blacks daring to come into the military camps were declared fair game for the Bushmen soldiers, [who were] encouraged to do as they pleased with blacks... [P]eople who were children at the time remembered [being] encouraged to throw stones at black beggars in the camps.”

Yet contrary to claims about primordial aggressions, accounts from SADF officers and observers suggest that Khwe, !Xun, and other San joined SADF battalions largely based on economic incentives, similar to those offered by the Portuguese in Angola. In the case of the !Xun as well as the Khwe, fear of retaliation from MPLA and UNITA guerrillas for having collaborated with the Portuguese was an additional incentive to join (Smith et al. 2000, Gordon 1992, Breytenbach 1997).

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3 G. Boden, pers-comm., e-mail, 13 June 2006.
In sum, whilst the contributions of the colonial and apartheid administrations to the construction of ethnicity in West Caprivi and southeast Angola should not be overstated, and whilst ethnic identities may have remained fluid in a number of manners, the SADF engagement in Caprivi undoubtedly contributed towards hardening these San identities.

The Khwe since Namibia’s Independence

In 1989, with Namibia’s independence imminent, the SADF offered Khwe and !Xun employees the option to relocate to South Africa, allegedly to escape reprisals from the SWAPO-led government. Between 3000-4000 did so (Brenzinger 2001; Gordon 1992, 1995, Sharp & Douglas 1996). For the Vasekele, it was the second time that they believed relocation was necessary to avoid retaliation from a victorious warring party, and only about three hundred chose to remain in Caprivi (Gordon 1992; Brenzinger 2001 n.d.). After arriving at the Schmidtsdrift military camp in South Africa, however, the ‘Bushmaness’ that had previously rendered them so valuable became a liability: they were now simply “former mercenaries who had outlived their usefulness” (Sharp & Douglas 1996: 326). Rather than rewarding their service to the SADF, the South African government appeared to view the Khwe and !Xun as a financial burden. Faced with this reality, the !Xun sought to mobilize a Bushman identity that had sway among international donors and NGOs. They presented a different portrait of ‘Bushmaness’ than that utilized by the SADF: instead of depicting themselves as born soldiers, they emphasized the image, fuelled by earlier anthropological research, of themselves as the ‘harmless people’ (Sharp & Douglas 1996: 327, Marshall Thomas 1959). !Xun have formed a coalition with other Northern Cape groups claiming an identity as ‘first people’ in order to press the state to recognize their traditional leadership and languages. Additionally, !Xun leaders have tapped into the global discourse around indigenous and aboriginal rights and forged links to networks of ‘first people’ around the world (Sharp & Douglas 1996).

In Namibia, meanwhile, President Nujoma criticized the SADF’s relocation of San, and his pre-occupation with colonial/apartheid ‘divide and rule’ tactics was notable in the media. His concerns were not unjustified: the apartheid government and the SADF strengthened a variety of ethnic divisions, and stirred Khwe fears about political revenge that lasted well into the 1990s. The SADF’s withdrawal from West Caprivi also signaled dramatic socio-economic change for the Khwe who constituted 80% of its population: the end of wage labour, new ambiguities over land tenure, extensive food aid, increased Khwe reliance on state welfare, and social tensions among different ethnic groups (Gordon 1995). The majority of Khwe reverted to veldfood collection, cultivation and small-scale stock farming to survive during the 1990s (Rousset 2003) and employment opportunities were extremely scarce. Lastly, unlike many other ethnic groups in Namibia, the Khwe leadership is not recognized by the government, despite Khwe efforts to

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secure such recognition. A chief from the neighbouring Mbukushu group claimed from the mid-1990s that West Caprivi and all its residents fell under his jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the !Xun population diminished even further, with some migrating to Bushmanland and Kavangoland, and by 2006 was a virtually invisible population in West Caprivi, with an estimated 65 self-identifying members (Taylor, pers. comm) who were particularly associated with foraging and ‘the bush’ by Mbukushu neighbours.

Based in part on their multi-layered socio-economic exclusion (Suzman 2002), Khwe claimed in the 1990s to have been stigmatised as traitors for their historical involvement with the SADF. They also claimed to have been tarnished for their post-independence record of supporting the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) rather than the ruling SWAPO party. Lastly, they were accused of collaborating with both UNITA rebels and Namibian secessionists. We deal with these in turn, but each was connected to contestations over legitimacy and authority among different ethnic groups and government. Some non-Khwe and government representatives cast Khwe as a politically ‘subversive’ threat to the post-apartheid nation state.

Discourses about Khwe subversion can be contextualised within processes of post-Independence ‘nation-building’ which have aimed to tear down the racial and ethnic legacies of apartheid (Forrest 1994, Fosse 1997, Kjaeret & Stokke 2003). Other significant factors include the rise of single party dominance in Namibia, the government’s increasing intolerance of criticism and opposition, and its exclusionist tendencies (Bauer 2001, Melber 2003). In this regard, Khwe were not alone in being framed as a threat to national ‘unity’ (eg. Kjaeret and Stokke 2003), but the political dynamics of East Caprivi certainly provided rich material for this framing. Specifically, Khwe ‘subversion’ must be understood in the context of the East Caprivian-led secession attempt in 1999, which clearly demonstrated the limitations, or even failure, of Namibia’s nation-building, as well as being a corollary of the political and socio-economic marginalisation of Caprivians. Caprivi as a whole became a highly politically sensitive area in the late 1990s, and this was exacerbated by the dynamics of Angola’s civil war on its borders. In turn, discourses about Khwe subversion were nuanced and effective means of political and socio-economic exclusion.

**Namibia’s Secessionist Movement and the Angolan Civil War**

The Caprivi Liberation Front’s secession attempt – southern Africa’s most recent instance of rebel armed insurrection – has surprisingly received barely any thorough analysis, the most comprehensive being Fisch (1999) and Forrest (2004) (cf. Zeller 2007). It is clear however that the secession attempt and its advocates were products of long-standing ethnic and party politics in East Caprivi (Fosse 1997, Forrest 2004), in which the vast majority of Khwe appear to have played no part (Suzman 2002). Nevertheless, this section provides a brief account of the reasons the Namibian government has for considering the Khwe subversive. It also shows how Namibian and Angolan political histories continued to intersect in ways that have affected San identities and socio-economic status in both countries.

The secession movement was mainly supported by Lozi-speaking Mafwe people who historically had an antagonistic relationship with SWAPO. It was led by
Mishake Muyongo, a member of the Mafwe royal family, and a politician with a noteworthy career since the early 1960s in the leading ranks of both the Caprivi African National Union (CANU) and SWAPO. SWAPO party divisions, witch-hunts and abuses of power in exile (Lamb 2001; Saul & Leys 2003) saw Muyongo break away to form an opposition party by 1985. This party then merged with the DTA, South Africa’s ‘puppet government’ partner in Namibia and the leading opposition party. In both Caprivi’s pre- and post-independence elections, and in contrast to the majority of other regions, DTA won significantly more voter support than SWAPO, in accordance with the region’s history of party allegiances which fell along ethnic lines (Fosse 1997).

As DTA’s President, Muyongo was Nujoma’s only rival candidate in the 1994 presidential elections. In 1998, Muyongo was banned from DTA after allegations of negotiating Caprivi’s secession with South African agents. After several arrests, 2000 secession activists and their followers, some of whom allegedly received military training from UNITA, fled to Botswana in late 1998. Namibian Defence Force (NDF) searches and interrogations were extended to Khwe villages in West Caprivi in the search for secession sympathizers (Boden 2003). As a result of harassment and intimidation, hundreds of Khwe refugees also fled to Botswana.

In August 1999 an armed attack on strategic locations in Katima Mulilo was quashed by the Namibian military, leaving 13 people dead. The government declared its first-ever State of Emergency and detained hundreds of suspected collaborators (Bauer 2001), resulting in high-level charges of extensive human rights violations (Bauer 2001, NSHR 2001, Melber 2003). On the tail of the secessionist attempt, Namibia permitted the Angolan military to use the Caprivi region to attack UNITA-controlled areas in southern Angola. West Caprivi became the site of numerous violent incidents including death and injury from mine blasts (Boden 2003).

Following UNITA attacks in January 2000, large numbers of Khwe residents once again fled into Botswana after intimidation by the NDF. NGO support for Khwe in West Caprivi during this period meant that NGOs too became suspect, and most organizations put their activities on hold. In 2000, several Khwe NGO staff were arrested and/or severely harassed, whilst other staff were questioned at length by Police and intelligence officers (Taylor 2007). Justifiably, Khwe became increasingly fearful and distrustful of the post-apartheid state. Many Khwe presented themselves as ignorant victims of wider politics and constructed their lives in ‘the bush’ similar to what Michael Taylor (2000: 49) writes for Khwe in Botswana, as a ‘domain of ignorance and powerlessness’. Khwe understood accusations of political ‘subversiveness’ as a means of excluding them from ‘the nation’ and from ‘development’.

Despite repeatedly denying accusations of collaborating with rebel forces, ‘the Khwe’ remained suspect in the eyes of government. As Boden (2003: 194) reports, government officials arguments included “that the Khwe were clever and sneaky, and it could never really be known what they did out there in the ‘bush’”, a realm of danger and obscurity. This suspicion extended to the !Xun in Angola, for whom the custom of crossing freely between Namibia and Angola on hunting trips was severely curtailed (Brenzinger 2001). Simultaneously, government suspicion of Khwe in some instances was not altogether unjustified. In the 1990s the Khwe apparently had considerable economic, though not political, ties with UNITA in
an area which some Khwe still used for gathering and as a winter residence. Some reportedly exchanged food aid and other basic necessities for guns to be used for hunting.

Another significant government concern were certain Khwe individuals who figured in UNITA attacks on West Caprivi in 2000. The alleged involvement of some Khwe individuals with UNITA created, over time, additional means by which both certain government officials and Mbukushu leaders could delegitimize Khwe authority. Atypical individuals such as these have contributed to ongoing military surveillance and intervention in West Caprivi over several years.

In sum, discourses about Khwe subversion and suspicion drew on real and alleged Khwe relationships to the SADF, the secession movement, and UNITA. Through these discourses, the peripheral area of West Caprivi and its ‘deviant’ Khwe inhabitants were constructed by government officials as in need of surveillance. In 2006, this took the form of regular intelligence activities in the area and escalations in the military’s presence around liberation war commemoration days and visits by state dignitaries. These discourses thus contributed to the continued socio-political exclusion of Khwe.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the San Legacy of Military Collaboration

Gordon writes that in the 1980s, the San were ‘perhaps the most militarized ethnic group in the world’ (1992: 2, 1995). Whether or not this is empirically true, between the 1970s and the 1990s, San in southeast Angola and northeast Namibia were heavily engaged in a series of conflicts that took place in the region. Their status as soldiers both impacted and was impacted by their San identity. The Portuguese army and SADF utilized stereotypes of the San as ‘two-legged bloodhound[s]’ with ‘unbelievable’ tracking abilities and a ‘primitive’ culture to distinguish them from other Africans and mobilize their support in wars against liberation movements (Gordon 1992: 2). Those liberation movements, in turn, utilized the image of the San as ‘distinct’ and ‘other’ to create narratives in which San were stigmatized as ‘traitors’ who collaborated with enemies, and were perceived to be especially brutal. In the case of Namibia, evidence suggests that the legacy of San military identities has contributed to their multifaceted social, political and economic marginalization since independence.

San identity-building has proved to be multi-authored and dynamic. Some government officials contributed towards the formation of a ‘subversive’ Khwe identity through constructing Khwe people as a threat to the ‘unified’ post-apartheid nation, and susceptible to the meddling of whites. Such representations were fuelled by Caprivi’s secession movement which epitomized the failures of nation-building and the persistence of ethnic separatism in the margins of the Independent state. The notion of Khwe political subversion also became interconnected with local contestations over land, resources and authority, in which NGOs were often closely involved. This gave rise in public discourse and media coverage to the theme of Khwe alliances with whites, foreigners and NGOs, in which the latter three were

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5 Interview, Trust for Okavango Cultural and Development Initiatives representative, Shakawe, Botswana, 17 September 2006.
often conflated. NGO workers often attempted to prioritize Khwe voices in development projects, based not only on their marginalized status but their identity as an ‘indigenous people’. Such efforts were often viewed as biased by government representatives and other ethnic groups, some of whose members were equally poor. In sum, the legacy of San military collaboration had implications for NGO ‘development’ activities, even 15 years after the end of the independence struggle.

Although claims of San subversion must be understood in the context of Khwe historical alliances with the SADF, many Khwe were not simply bereft of agency and prey to incitement. Nor did they see themselves as acting in ways antithetical to national unity and development. Their relationships with NGOs sometimes demonstrated how they were effectively tapping into global discourses on indigeneity and the environment, in order to bolster their authority and access to resources. From the mid-1990s, for example, a significant number of Khwe leaders and residents in West Caprivi embraced NGO-led projects and discourses concerning environmental management and community-based conservation. They quite often drew on such discourses to further their own interests. Consequently, some Khwe thus actively engaged in, and contributed to government suspicion about alliances with whites and outsiders.

Our reflections on Angola are preliminary and would benefit from more thorough investigation. Yet, as Angola begins its own process of nation-building, its newly elected government, along with NGOs concerned with inclusive development and human rights, may find useful lessons embedded in the experience of the country’s southern neighbor. The challenges facing southeast Angola are significant. The area continues to be marginalized; healthcare and education services in southeastern Angola are largely absent and of generally poor quality where they do exist (Brenzinger 2001) (Hitchcock et al. 2003). Economic opportunities are likewise limited. Angolan San are still in the process of returning home, many from refugee camps and adopted communities in Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia. Most of those who have returned have abandoned the places they once lived for new regions, by and large shifting from rural areas to urban ones (Kaun 2008).

Life in the bush remains difficult, as the prevalence of land mines poses a significant danger and food insecurity is an ongoing problem. The extent to which the place-based identities of vakambongi, vakamusenge, and vakamenbo still exists is uncertain, and the impact of these identities on people who return to Angola is unclear. Brinkman’s research among Angolan refugees in Namibia during the late 1990s indicates that the dichotomy between the categories of ‘town’ and ‘bush’ remained highly salient even after people had left those places behind, to the extent that the war itself “was framed as a conflict between townspeople and bushdwellers” (1999: 429).

Whilst a marginal and now tiny population, estimated by NGOs to be 3,400 !Xun and 3,500-4,000 Khwe out of 3.4 million returned Angolans, the Angolan San history of marginalization and alliance with both the colonial authorities and the SADF may have implications for how their welfare and development is dealt with by the state. The longstanding divisions between competing liberation

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movements may further complicate the process of unification. UNITA supporters in particular may be stigmatized for collaboration with the SADF against the MPLA; UNITA has long been dismissed as a ‘puppet organization’ and viewed as a tool of outsiders and whites (Heywood 1989).

In September 2008, Angola held its first parliamentary election in sixteen years. The previous election in 1992 plunged the country back into civil war when UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi refused to accept his second-place finish. Though UNITA finished a distant second, party leadership accepted the results of the election without protest. Yet the landslide that made MPLA’s victory indisputable could also prove dangerous, as it demonstrated that Angola has little in the way of an effective opposition party. Angola, like Namibia, is for all intents and purposes a one-party state that has been under the control of the same political party since independence. In Namibia, single-party dominance has led to increasing intolerance of disparate views and suspicion of opponents. If the same is true in Angola, UNITA supporters, like the San, may be perceived with distrust on the basis of their past ‘subversion’. As southeast Angola has long been both a UNITA stronghold and the home of San groups that collaborated first with the Portuguese and later SADF, its inhabitants may be impacted by the political, social, and economic consequences of negative discourses around collaboration, should these be invoked.

In sum, though the peacefulness of Angola’s recent elections is a sign of progress in the country’s recovery from civil war, an examination of the underlying questions of identity in a region long divided suggests that the country has yet to face many of its unresolved issues regarding authority, legitimacy, and inclusion. The place of Angolan San in this socio-political landscape remains unclear. The ways in which San identity is constructed by different parties, as repatriated Angolans begin to engage with the MPLA-led government and each other present a ripe opportunity for future study, particularly in the understudied southeast region.

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