

SCRIPT

LIVING ON THE EDGE

Councillor Rudolph Dauseb

"We are talking about land rights all over Namibia; everybody wants land. We are asking land from the government, and the government can't give us a clear answer on this specific issue. The Topnaar can rightfully claim that the Kuiseb belongs to them."

GENERAL INTRODUCTION - Kuiseb Environment, Definition of Topnaar

The Kuiseb River runs from the Khomas Hochland mountains to the ocean near Walvis Bay. Its source lies close to Windhoek and flows westwards into the Namib Desert.

The Kuiseb River is dry most of the year, only flooding when heavy rains fall in the river's upper reaches. People, plants and animals are dependent upon the river's underground water sources.

The lower portion of the Kuiseb River falls inside the Namib-Naukluft Game Park. It is here, where the Nama-speaking Topnaar community have lived for centuries, surviving on the limited resources in this dry desert.

In such a harsh environment, it's no wonder that the Dutch name "Topnaar" is derived from the Nama "=Aonin", meaning "people, living on the edge"....

TITLE: "LIVING ON THE EDGE"

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPNAAR/FIRST CONTACT

When the first pioneers arrived in the 17th century, they described a Topnaar people herding stock and harvesting the unique !nara melon. These early colonisers settled at the mouth of the Kuiseb River, part of the Topnaar's traditional living area.

Today, Walvis Bay is a thriving harbour town and important trading centre for Namibia's economy. A huge infrastructure was constructed to pump water from the Kuiseb River to the growing towns of Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and the Rossing Uranium Mine at Arandis. At the same time, Topnaar men and women were attracted to these towns by the lure of jobs and entertainment.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A GAME PARK

During the 1960's under the Odendaal plan, Namibia was carved into homelands by the occupying South African Administration. Many indigenous Namibians were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to poor farmland on the edges of Namibia.

Under this same Odendaal plan, the Topnaar were allocated land near Gibeon, but refused to leave....

Chief Kooitjie:

"The government bought farms near Gibeon for the Topnaar and said that legally this area which has been bought belongs to the Topnaar, and not the Kuiseb region."

Instead the Topnaar living area was turned into a game reserve with strict conservation laws which prevented people from practicing some of their traditional ways of life.

Park regulations were rigorously enforced creating conflict between nature conservators and the Topnaar. All the while, there was an unspoken policy to alienate the Topnaar from their land.

Rudolph Dauseb:

"As history has proven, in the past we were living freely in this area as other Namibians were living in the rest of Namibia. But unfortunately, this area was proclaimed as a natural park, and from there on our traditional way of life was completely changed as we had to adapt to the park regulations, which was so insulting and discriminating against the people, because it forced this community to change its way of life completely..."

"TRADITIONAL WAYS OF LIFE":

A. !NARA

The indigenous !nara melon plays an important role in the culture and economy of the Topnaar community.

Rudolph Dauseb:

"As one of the elders said, when they were forced by the then government to leave this area, the Topnaar community can only prosper where the !nara plant can prosper and regenerate."

For centuries, Topnaar families have travelled up to 100 km by foot or on donkey carts down to the Kuiseb delta, where annually they harvest the !nara melon.

One man, Reuben Skryver, has been coming to the delta to harvest the !nara since he was a young man.

Reuben Skryver:

"I am Reuben Skryver. Annually I'm coming down to the !nara fields to work. I'm selling !nara pips to support my family. Last year I sold 13 bags and earned 2200 dollars. But I don't sell all of the pips; I give some to my family for eating and exchanging."

The money earned from harvesting !nara was enough that Reuben's son-in-law quit his previous low paying job.

Nicholas Maasdorp:

"I am Nicholas. I was working at the Eduseb school for 300 dollars per month. Due to the low pay, I left my job, because I could not support my family. I left the job to come and work with my father-in-law here in the delta. Maybe if we are filling 6 bags of !nara pips a month, then we are getting around a thousand dollars. When I compare a thousand with the 300 from my old job, I decided to come and harvest the !nara."

B. GOAT FARMING

Rudolph Dauseb:

"Besides the !nara plant, which is an indigenous plant here, goat farming and a little bit of cattle farming in this area is very crucial, and very important, as people are depending on the goats for their day to day livelihood."

For hundreds of years, the Topnaar have herded goats and cattle along the Kuiseb River.

At his home in Homeb, Daniel Bamm explains why today it is important to teach stock farming to his children.

Daniel Bamm:

"I teach our traditional ways of living so that my children will not forget the way their ancestors lived. Farming is the most important thing which I am teaching them, so eventually they can work for themselves, independently."

Stock farming is a crucial source of income for most Topnaar families who realize that jobs are limited in the Kuiseb region, and employment in Walvis Bay is competitive. Two of Daniel's sons are studying in hopes of becoming a school principal and a lawyer, but they are also learning how to farm, in case future employment is difficult. Daniel's youngest son, Elton, explains his desire...

Elton Bamm:

"One day I want to be a carpenter, make furniture and sell it in Walvis Bay. I also want to be a farmer, then if I have problems making money as a carpenter I can always do farming."

We find a similar situation at another settlement, Swartbank, where Sophia Herero and her family live...

Sophia Herero:

"I am farming along the Kuiseb. I sell my goats to get money. I sell their milk to get money. I get food from my goats and sell their skins to get money. With this money, I've supported my children. This is how I'm living."

Sophia's son, Ritchie, also farms since finding permanent work is difficult.

Ritchie Herero:

"Farming is very important to me. I learned how to farm from my mother and I have seen how she supports us through farming. One day I will teach my children in the same way. Sometimes, if you go to Walvis Bay, you may get temporary work. If this finishes, then I have to come back to the farm. I can be chased away from work, but here, farming, I am my own boss."

CONSTRAINTS TO "WAYS OF LIFE"/CHANGES IN RESOURCE USE

While the Topnaar are reliant on !nara and stock for their cultural and economic livelihood, over the years they have witnessed environmental and political change which has affected the way they live off the land.

A. WATER

The Topnaar have long been dependent upon the Kuiseb River's natural aquifers, digging 1 to 4 metre deep hand dug wells known as "gorras".

The growth in populations and industries in Walvis Bay, Swakopmund, and Arandis meant the advanced development of water extraction schemes after World War II. The increased use of water led to the lowering of the Kuiseb's underground water table.

Reuben Skryver:

"When I was a young boy this area was flat and the river was flowing down. This whole area was green and the river was running throughout. We even dug with our hands to drink water. But a few years back, they pumped out the water, digging holes all over the Namib desert. Now the water level has dropped; even the dunes, as the eastwinds blow, are covering our !nara fields."

As a result of overpumping, most Topnaar families today must rely on boreholes up to 30 metres deep installed by Namibia's Department of Water Affairs.

The intention of installing boreholes to Topnaar settlements was to provide a permanent source of water to the community. However, it is not uncommon to find a broken water pump, and a settlement without water.

Jacobus Khurisam:

"I am Jacobus Khurisam, staying at Soutrivier, trying to fix this drive belt. Everyday as the cars pass I send messages to the chief to bring us a new belt. I use my own tools to tie the belt together, using wire, even though I know wire is not good for the engine, and when the wire becomes hot, it breaks. I don't know if I'll be able to fix the belt; but I do know it will break again."

Jacobus putting on belt, the belt breaking.

Jacobus:

"Not until now, have I had a problem with water. From the top of the Kuiseb, all the way down, the river was flowing. But now they have pumped out all the water. From here, where must we move? We use to have hand dug wells, but now the water is too deep underground. We also had gardens, eating vegetables as our ancestors did. But today, a visitor will ask, "where do you get your food because there are no shops along the Kuiseb?" We didn't have such difficult lives in the past."

The Topnaar have been suffering from a lack of consultation for decades; there is very little dialogue between farmers, scientists and government officials, working in the Kuiseb area.

Sophia Herero:

"If Water Affairs could have asked us where to put up the wind pump, then we would have told them to put the pump in the middle of the river. But without asking or informing us, they just put the wind pump in the middle of the big trees, where the roots there make the water taste bitter."

Instead, the Herero family get fresh drinking water from their own hand dug well.

Herero sequence at their hand dug well...

Ritchie Herero:

If Water Affairs helped us with financing, we could rebuild and fence in our hand dug well. We could buy spare parts for the wind pump so when it breaks we can repair it. We could have done this ourselves if only Water Affairs asked us."

B. LIVING IN A GAME PARK

During the 1960s, without consulting the Topnaar community, the South African government proclaimed the Topnaar's traditional area as part of the Namib-Naukluft Game Park. With this proclamation, the Topnaar were forced to accept park regulations which were in direct conflict with traditional land use practices.

The Topnaar were traditionally nomadic, moving their stock up and down the narrow Kuiseb River bed to avoid overgrazing.

Sophia Herero:

"In the past, we moved around and lived wherever we wanted. But when this area was proclaimed as a Game Park, their park rules constrained us from moving. We moved when the vegetation was diminishing, and returned when it had replenished. Nature Conservation told us that our stock is eating too much, and that we must settle in one place rather than move around."

Reuben also remembers, how in the past, entire families moved to the delta to harvest their inherited !nara plots. And today, how everything has changed..

Reuben Skryver:

Now when I come down to the !nara fields there is no one around to help. I long for the past when there were many people coming to the delta. We helped each other in the harvesting process and by sharing food. These days, I am so lonely, I cannot even work.

Reuben:

"We used to burn down the bushes to stimulate the growth of more fruits for the next season. But this practice ceased when Nature Conservation said we must not burn down their fields because their game is coming to the delta."

Resentment towards the Ministry of Environment and Tourism runs high amongst the Topnaar.

Daniel Bamm:

"I will just say what I have seen in the past. These are examples of what has happened to the Topnaar. The whites came to show our grandfathers the land bought for the Topnaar to move to. They came with lots of drinks, and after drinking our grandfathers were eager to get in their trucks. But us young boys, we wouldn't let them. They tried such things at other settlements but they were given a hard time."

Another time, we moved down river because the vegetation was poor here. When we moved the whites came and burned down our houses so the people could not return. And then the whites introduced rhino and hyena, to try and scare us away. Such things have happened in the past."

Today dialogue between the Ministry and the Topnaar community is at a standstill. Moreover, the Department of Water Affairs has proposed to dam the Kuiseb, redirecting 70% of the river's flow. It's no wonder that the Topnaar are afraid of what the future holds...

Jacobus Khurisam:

"The government wants us to move.... to where? What kind of government is this? We don't know where to go from this land. They must give us our land rights back. Our Topnaar ancestors were living along the Kuiseb River without shopping centres, but they were living. We just want to follow in their footsteps."

LAND RIGHTS

Camera following Hereros' going to their family graves. Slow, graveyard sequence with singing

Sophia Herero:

"My ancestors, my children, my friends, my grandchildren and my people are here. We have buried them here, that's why we are not leaving this land. We will not move! This is Topnaar land and that's why we bury each other here."

Shot of Ritchie on his tree horse, silhouette

Ritchie Herero:

"I was born here and I love this place. Even if I do leave this place, I will always come back. My ancestors are born here and my mother is still here, so I will come back."

Daniel Bamm:

"My wish is for us to get our land rights back. Our ancestors left this land to us so that our children could live freely on our land. So that we could come together as a community and develop ourselves. So that the government could see what we are aiming for. Let's start teaching our children our traditional ways so that in our absence they will know how to survive here."

Shot of children running down Homeb hill...

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT IDEAS

With legal rights to their land, the Topnaar have a vision to develop local employment opportunities based on their experience living and working in the Kuiseb.

Some would like to be involved in conservation work, with training and assistance from the Ministry of Environment and Tourism.

Ritchie Herero:

I'm very interested in game farming, although I don't know much about it. I'm asking the Ministry of Wildlife to train us how to work with the game, as many of us Topnaar are jobless.

International companies, such as "The Body Shop", have expressed interest in processing the !nara and selling its oils for cosmetics. Reuben and Nicholas have long recognised the economic potential of !nara. However, they see a !nara business owned by the Topnaar.

Nicholas Maasdorp and Reuben Skryver:

Nicholas: "What I'm thinking is that as we are selling these !nara pips to people in Walvis Bay, those people are getting more money when they sell to big companies overseas. I am worried that we are not getting paid for our labour, but just for the !nara pips.

Reuben: The Chief one day said to me that we Topnaar could maybe build a factory at Rooibank so that we could sell these pips to our own factory and earn better wages.

N: And sending these pips out overseas and getting more money. The Topnaar will get jobs and we will go forward with the processing of our !nara."

Rudolph Dauseb:

"Tourism could become one of the main income generation sources in this region, as we've got a beautiful country, a beautiful landscape, and a desert where you can enjoy yourself and be at peace with nature.... Unfortunately in the past or still even today, it's also just benefitting the government. But the community is not benefitting from tourism at all...

The Topnaar are aware that the Kuiseb environment is a valuable asset. The Government of Namibia, through the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, is keen to develop tourism throughout the country, in an effort to create jobs, and provide a vital source of government revenue.

Private tourist operators, too, recognise the potential for tourism in the Kuiseb region. The controversial company, Olympia Reisen, recently submitted a proposal with the Topnaar leadership to form a "community-based" tourism company.

CONSTRAINTS TO DEVELOPMENT IDEAS

However, in such a fragile environment, what type of development should occur? Should an auction house be set up, as suggested by local farmers, so that families can sell their goats at better prices? Should families be encouraged to grow crops and vegetables using irrigation? And what level of tourism is appropriate for the community and the environment?

Planning development projects in the Kuiseb can be difficult, since the community lacks cohesion and leaders have no real power.

Daniel Bamm:

"In the past the Topnaar had strong leaders and preachers. The people worked together, helped and visited each other and made decisions amongst themselves. Life was very good. But when the rules came, everything changed. The leaders and the preachers died, and the whites came with their rules. As the Topnaar had no one to represent them, they lost their tradition."

All over Namibia, the powers of traditional leaders have been eroded, resulting in the breakdown of community structures. As of yet, the government has not passed any legislation recognizing the role of traditional leaders.

Today, communities are less dependent on themselves and their leaders, and instead look to government for solutions to their problems.

Rudolph and Jacobus at Soutrivier...

Rudolph: "This man from the Ministry of Agriculture has brought us some belts as I ordered. Department of Water Affairs was supposed to supply us with belts; but they never responded to any of my letters. I know you have a problem with your belt, but we can not be here all the time. You are blaming the leadership - that is right, but also wrong. The government should have responded earlier. We really must not rely too much on the government; we must help ourselves, work together and develop ourselves."

Chief Kooitjie:

"What I as a leader of the Topnaar community first want is that the legal rights and the occupational rights of the Topnaar community must be recognized by the government. That the people must have the right to develop themselves not to be influenced by people from outside. We want to do our development on our own."

It is unlikely that land rights alone, will lead to an improvement in people's lives, as most families lack the money and experience to start thier own business or project. And, many Topnaar asked, if land rights are granted, and projects started, would some people benefit more than others?

Rudolph Dauseb:

"I think this might be the fear that some of the government departments and officials have at this moment to grant the people who are requesting land right they need because they are afraid of these rights being misused."

Most Topnaar believe that the community must strengthen and develop itself, working together and with outside agencies. Land rights would provide them with the security and confidence they need to decide the best way foward.

Geingob sequence with voice-over...

Rudolph Dauseb:

"The president always says we must stand up and help ourselves to be helped. That's what we're trying to do at this moment, but unfortunately, the same government which is saying that we must develop ourselves is constraining our development through park laws which are restricting our development. What I'd like to see is that the Ministry or even the government to become involved in our development ideas to assist us in what ever proposals and projects we want to implement. The projects can only be a benefit to the community and Namibia as a whole."