

*The Least Sexist Society? Perspectives on Gender, Change and Violence among southern African San**

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This article refutes essentialist popular and academic discourses revolving around the presumption of primordial gender equality and harmony among the San of southern Africa. These discourses continue to ignore the devastating gendered consequences of land and cultural dispossession, poverty and the large-scale militarisation of the San. The discussion focuses on contemporary gender-based violence among San communities against the background of those socio-economic, political and cultural influences that have fundamentally altered gender relations among southern African San. The central argument presented is that, relatively recently, and as a result of specific social and historical circumstances, distinct and hierarchically organised perceptions of 'men' and 'women' have begun to establish themselves to varying degrees among southern African San communities. It is argued that violence between San men and women has been reproduced and exacerbated by the San people's re-appropriation of gender as a significant social category, which is, however, highly ambiguous and contradictory. The comparative analysis employed in this paper draws on recent field research among three major communities of San, at Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape (South Africa), Ghanzi district in western Botswana, and Tsumkwe West, the area formerly known as 'Western Bushmanland', in north-eastern Namibia. In conclusion, the paper takes up again the cultural discourse of 'traditional' gender equality and harmony, and asks how this, within the wider context of contemporary cultural reclamation, may become a strategic, although contested, tool to address contemporary gender concerns among San people.

Introduction

An influential publication in recent 'Bushmen' studies opens with a chapter entitled 'The Bushmen: A Merger of Fantasy and Nightmare'.¹ The San of southern Africa² have served

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1 R. Gordon, *The Bushman Myth. The Making of a Namibian Underclass* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford, Westview Press, 1992), p. 1.

2 The term 'San' is currently the most commonly used collective label for the people otherwise also known as 'Bushmen', or 'Basarwa' in Botswana. Although there are ongoing academic and political debates about an appropriate non-derogatory terminology, 'San' has been adopted by advocacy organisations such as the Working

for many years as a group on whom a wide array of fantasies, fears and hopes of different people have been projected. Colonialists, settler farmers, Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, postcolonial southern African governments, international donors, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and, last but certainly not least, anthropologists, have each created their own version of the 'Bushman Myth', to borrow Robert Gordon's term.

There have been imaginings galore of the 'Bushmen' or 'San' (depending on one's persuasion), instrumental for as many purposes. Recent examples include attempts by international donors and regional southern African NGOs to recreate images of authenticity through discourses on the San as 'First People'.³ In the case of South Africa, the national government has taken up this discourse when, on the occasion of the land restitution to the !Khomani in the Northern Cape, then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki spoke of how the return of the land would 'mend the broken strings of the distant past so that our dreams can take root'.⁴ These discourses 'from above' have been re-appropriated and reconfigured, in diverse ways, 'from below' by San communities in their current claims for land and human rights. As Steven Robins has recently argued, it would be too simplistic to dismiss the discourses of San identity as merely instrumental reinventions of culture and identity.⁵ I suggest that any discussion of indigenous people's current identity discourses needs to consider the complex ways in which those emerge from the discursive and practical interactions of outside agents, such as NGOs, politicians and anthropologists, and the people themselves who, after the historical denigration of indigenous cultures under colonialism and apartheid, reclaim their dignity and their own ways to make sense of the world around them.

The recent discourses of authenticity invariably dig into the older myth of the San as 'noble savages'. The discourses range widely across the social spectrum from imaginaries of human life in environmental harmony, to peaceful conflict resolution and social equality. My concern here is with the version of the 'noble savage' myth that holds that San communities represent the primordial model of a non-sexist society. This widespread belief among feminists, NGO activists and intellectuals in contemporary southern Africa and beyond is complemented by assumptions among international donors and southern African NGOs that gender concerns are of minor relevance to contemporary San. The practical neglect of very real gender issues is occasioned by the myth of a timeless and coherent San society with a high degree of relative gender equality. This article refutes such essentialist discourse on San gender equity and harmony that continues to ignore the devastating consequences of land and cultural dispossession, poverty and the large-scale militarisation of the San. My discussion focuses on contemporary issues of gender-based violence among San communities against the background of socio-economic, political and cultural influences that have fundamentally altered gender relations among the San. It then moves on to examine in conclusion how a cultural discourse of 'traditional' gender equity and harmony within the wider context of contemporary cultural reclamation may become a strategic, although contested, tool to address contemporary gender issues in San communities.

Footnote 2 *continued*

Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) and the South African San Institute (SASI). In this article, the term 'Bushmen' will only be used where the argument refers explicitly to the social and historical constructions of 'Bushman-ness' and the Bushman myth. The problem is, of course, rooted in the different constructions of a collective ethnic (San or Bushman) identity where none existed previously. When referring to specific San communities, I shall make use of the term by which they refer to themselves, such as !Xu or Ju/'hoan.

3 See, for example, S. Robins, 'NGOs, "Bushmen" and Double Vision: The !Khomani San Land Claim and the Cultural Politics of "Community" and "Development" in the Kalahari', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27, 4 (2001), pp. 833–53.

4 As quoted in Robins, 'NGOs, "Bushmen" and Double Vision', p. 834.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 835.

Scores of anthropologists have contributed to the trope of a harmonious gender balance among the San. It first occupied a prominent place in the hunter-gatherer research that dominated San studies from roughly the 1960s through to the early 1980s. Authors like Richard Lee and Lorna Marshall, writing on the !Kung and Ju/'hoansi of the Dobe and Nyae Nyae areas in Botswana and Namibia respectively, made quite a lot of what they described as the relative equality of women and men in San societies.⁶ Marshall claimed the absence of 'the subjugation of women',⁷ and Patricia Draper of the Harvard !Kung Bushman Study Project around which these anthropologists clustered, even concluded that '!Kung society may be the least sexist of any we have experienced'.⁸ The most influential author on San gender relations has been Marjorie Shostak, another member of the Harvard group. *Nisa. The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*⁹ was translated into several European languages and reached a large general audience far beyond academic circles. The book's lively life-history format and easy readability made it highly beguiling. Since its publication twenty years ago, Shostak's conclusion that among the San, 'women's status is high and their influence considerable',¹⁰ has carried much weight with generations of students, development workers and the general public.¹¹

Contrasting these images of a harmonious, non-patriarchal society, numerous reports about high levels of violence against women have filtered out of San communities in recent years through activists who work with them in advocacy and development. Despite the frightening nature and extent of the violence, however, these reports hardly ever reach the media or general public in southern Africa. Except for rare 'footnotes', they have thus far also been omitted from the growing body of contemporary San studies. Nor has gender-based violence in particular, or the consideration of gender in general, played much of a role in the work of southern African NGOs with San communities.

Recent fieldwork in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa¹² provided an opportunity to explore a set of questions concerned with the construction of gender, identity and violence in San communities. I was particularly interested in whether changing socio-economic and political conditions had a fundamental impact on San gender relations and identities and, if so, how these changes related to the scourge of violence in San communities which differed in terms of their history and present circumstances. This question led me to examine a range of related issues, including the gendered division of labour, the differential access to income and property, gender differentials in education, and the history of the militarisation of a substantial fraction of the San in the 1970s and 1980s. This article examines how these factors have contributed to the (re-)construction of gender among southern African San. It also traces how gender practices and identities are linked to the nature of violence between men and women in San communities.

6 See R. Lee, *The !Kung San. Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979); R. Lee, 'Politics, Sexual and Non-sexual, in an Egalitarian Society', in E. Leacock and R. Lee (eds), *Politics and History in Band Societies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 37–59; L. Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* (Cambridge, MA, and London, Harvard University Press, 1976).

7 Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*, p. 176.

8 P. Draper, '!Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts', in R. Reiter (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 77.

9 M. Shostak, *Nisa. The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (London, Allen Lane, 1981).

10 Shostak, *Nisa*, p. 13.

11 I can well recall the immense influence *Nisa* had on my own thinking at the time of my first encounter with Shostak's work as an MA student in the mid-1980s.

12 The fieldwork was carried out in 2000 for an EU-commissioned study on contemporary San gender perspectives, which was part of a larger regional assessment of the situation of the San in southern Africa. The gender study was co-authored by Silke Felton (Windhoek) and myself. See S. Felton and H. Becker, *A Gender Perspective on the Status of the San in Southern Africa* (Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2001). The field research in Botswana was carried out jointly by the authors; Silke Felton undertook the Namibian leg, while I conducted the research in South Africa.

My central argument is that, relatively recently and as a result of specific social and historical circumstances, distinct and hierarchically organised perceptions of 'men' and 'women' have begun to establish themselves to varying degrees among southern African San communities. It is contended that the violence between San men and women has been reproduced and exacerbated by San re-appropriation of gender as a significant social category, albeit a highly ambiguous and contradictory one. It is with these points in mind that the research draws attention to how, contrary to the essentialist discourse on the San as living embodiments of unchanging gender equality, contemporary San gender relations are subject simultaneously both to historicity and to the cultural politics of San identity.

The comparative analysis draws on three distinct areas of current San settlement: the !Xu and Khwe San who live at Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, the predominantly Nharo-speaking San in Ghanzi district (Western Botswana) and the mostly !Kung-speaking people of Tsumkwe West, the area formerly known as 'Western Bushmanland', in north-eastern Namibia (Otjozondjupa region).

Gender and Violence in Contemporary San Life

Violence is one of the most discernible experiences of contemporary San life. In its different forms violence dominates the intra-community relations of San as well as relations with many other people in their wider national societies. There is no doubt that the prevalent violence affects both male and female members of San communities. However, there are quite obvious differences along the lines of gender. While little in-depth research has so far been done on the topic of gender-based violence affecting San women, a unique research paper – where exploratory research was carried out and the text authored by a Namibian San woman – has shown that San women throughout southern Africa experience many forms of violence, sexual and non-sexual alike, both within and outside their communities. According to Elfriede Gaeses' conclusions from her conversations with other San women, the main reasons for male violence within San communities were alcohol abuse, men's jealousy, and their fear of losing respect if women were better educated than they were. Violence against San women committed by people of other ethnic backgrounds, however, seemed to be linked to beliefs that San were inferior and San women the weakest members of their communities, and hence most easily abused.¹³

Our research investigated domestic violence at the three selected field sites,¹⁴ aiming at an examination of what *gender-based* violence involves in the context of the southern African San, as opposed to other forms of violent conflict resolution in those communities. In other words, I ask to what extent violent relations between San men and women are gender-based in terms of their cause and nature.

Gender-based violence as an analytical category recognises that not every act of violence involving men and women is based on gender. Gender-based violence is defined by the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), rather, as

any act ... that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty,

¹³ E. Gaeses, 'Violence against San Women', in A. van Achterberg (ed), *Out of the Shadows. The First African Indigenous Women's Conference (FAIWC)* (Amsterdam, International Books/NCIV – The Netherlands Centre for Indigenous People, 1998), pp. 92–98, especially p. 96.

¹⁴ Our research investigated domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual and non-sexual abuse, which San women experience within their own communities and with 'outsiders', i.e. members of their wider national societies. See Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, pp. 55–66. This article, however, only revisits the findings on domestic violence.

whether occurring in private or public life ... violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, the community, including battery, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence, violence related to exploitation, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, and violence against women perpetuated and condoned by the state.¹⁵

This definition covers an extensive range of abuses, and is explicit about the gender of the victims of gender-based violence: they are female. The definition is not explicit about the gender of the perpetrators: they can be either male or female. Implicit in the definition, however, are ideas about how gender affects the way the abuse happens: namely, who gets hurt, and who causes the injury. Furthermore, the definition implies what kind of rationalisations allow the abuse to exist: Both domestic and 'public' environments (such as work and school) tend to become sites of gender-based violence when they *rely on clear, distinct and usually hierarchically organised, perceptions of men and women*.¹⁶ This insight links distinctly constructed forms of gender with different forms of violence between men and women, as well as between men and men and between women and women, and so presents a useful tool for an analytical discussion of interpersonal violence.

A Violence-free and Egalitarian Past?

At all field sites, we heard many sad tales of rampant violence against women. The prevalent violence in contemporary San communities presents a stark contrast to the earlier 'Bushmen studies' literature that had emphasised that violence against women was very rare,¹⁷ or described the relationships between men and women as 'relaxed'.¹⁸ This is not to say that the 'traditionalist' 'Bushmen' scholarship¹⁹ did not record incidences of violent behaviour between men and women. Shostak's text of Nisa's life-history, for instance, contains several moments of serious male violence against women.²⁰

Overall, however, the American anthropologist David Levinson's literature-based, comparative study of family violence in cross-cultural perspective found that on the basis of the 'traditionalist' 'Bushmen' anthropology,²¹ 'Bushmen' society was one of only six societies worldwide (out of a sample of 90 non-Western societies from all continents) which had no – or rare – family violence.²² Levinson's conclusion that San society presented a largely violence-free environment was based on research among hunter-gatherer societies in the Kalahari, which pointed out that those communities were relatively gender-egalitarian in economic as well as community decision-making terms, and generally had sophisticated

15 Quoted in J. Bennett, 'Gender-Based Violence in South Africa', *African Gender Institute Newsletter*, 6 (May 2000), p. 4.

16 Bennett, 'Gender-Based Violence', p. 4 (my emphasis).

17 Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*, pp. 176–177.

18 Draper, '!Kung Women', p. 94.

19 This article describes as 'traditionalist' the Bushmen/San studies that set out to depict the remnants of a previously widespread hunter-gatherer culture in isolated niches in the Kalahari, otherwise also known as the 'isolationist' school., e.g. Lee, *The !Kung San* and 'Politics, Sexual and Non-sexual'; Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*; Shostak, *Nisa*. The term 'revisionist' is employed to refer to authors who emphasise the long-time integration of the Kalahari San into wider regional and global networks, e.g. E. Wilmsen, *Land Filled with Flies: a Political Economy of the Kalahari* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989); Gordon, *The Bushman Myth*, otherwise also known as the 'integrationist' school of Bushmen/San studies.

20 Shostak, *Nisa*, pp. 76, 223.

21 Such as Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*; Lee, *The !Kung San*; Lee, 'Politics, Sexual and Non-sexual'.

22 D. Levinson, *Family Violence In Cross Cultural Perspective* (Newbury Park, London, New Delhi, SAGE Publications, 1989), pp. 102–103.

ways and means of peaceful conflict resolution, as well as easy access to divorce for both men and women.

The studies done among San in Namibia (Nyae Nyae) and Botswana (Dobe) who still largely relied upon hunting and gathering in the 1950s and 1960s, greatly emphasised the high level of gender equality found in those communities. According to the observations of such anthropologists as Lee and Marshall,²³ the status and influence of women in the !Kung and Ju/'hoan societies were high due to their enormous contribution to the sustenance of the family and community. Not only were women the main providers of food, but they also retained control over the food they gathered.²⁴ The gender-egalitarian social structure extended beyond the family to the local San community, where the largely informal leadership of a territorial group (in this literature, generally described as a 'band'), i.e. the *n/ore* owners, could be provided by either a man or a woman.

Whether or not this body of scholarship presented the gender balance and harmony in hunter-gatherer San societies accurately cannot be conclusively decided here, since it requires a closer re-reading of the literature. Richard Lee, for instance, is much more guarded in some of his later work, making the point that women did not participate in public decision-making on an equal footing with men.²⁵ Hence, the level of gender egalitarianism may have been somewhat overstated in some of the anthropological scholarship on gender and power which has drawn on this body of work in order to problematise simplistic, theoretical assumptions about the universality of gender subordination.²⁶ Renée Sylvain's comprehensive study of women and gender among the San farm labourer population in the eastern Namibian Omaheke region cautiously assumes, however, that it is plausible that the condition of the San in the Omaheke just prior to large-scale white settlement resembled, in its fundamental features, the egalitarian economic and cultural traits described by authors such as Lee, Shostak and Marshall.²⁷

The ethnographic evidence we do have indicates that a foraging mode of subsistence, social recognition of the value of women's work, and a general lack of elaborate systems of private property (and therefore no conception of women as a species of property) that characterize many San groups all encourage a greater level of gender egalitarianism.²⁸

Sylvain's assertions can possibly be extended to other Kalahari San. She is certainly right in pointing out that the political and economic factors needed to explain contemporary San gender relations derive from colonial influences, and have weighed so heavily against anything approximating gender equality that earlier conditions appear irrelevant for an analysis of the current situation.²⁹ Thus, a concern with contemporary gender inequalities and gender-based violence may well lead one, for the time being, to regard any discussion of the accuracy of earlier ethnographic depictions of the foraging mode as a secondary issue. In other words, one is less concerned, faced with current domestic conflict, about whether contemporary political and economic conditions produced inequalities from earlier egalitarian conditions, or merely sustained and recast inequalities originating prior to colonisation.

23 Lee, *The !Kung San*; Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*.

24 Draper, '!Kung Women', p. 84.

25 Lee, 'Politics, Sexual and Non-sexual', p. 44.

26 For example, U. Luig, 'Sind egalitäre Gesellschaften auch geschlechtsegalitär? Untersuchungen zur Geschlechterbeziehung in afrikanischen Wildbeutergesellschaften', in I. Lenz and U. Luig (eds), *Frauenmacht ohne Herrschaft. Geschlechterverhältnisse in nichtpatriarchalischen Gesellschaften* (Berlin, Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1990), pp. 75–152.

27 Lee, *The !Kung San*; Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*; Shostak, *Nisa*.

28 R. Sylvain, '“We Work to Have Life”: Ju/'hoan Women, Work and Survival in the Omaheke Region, Namibia' (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1999), p. 39.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

My discussion of domestic violence thus examines the socio-economic, political and cultural changes in the colonial and postcolonial eras that appear to be responsible for the high incidence of gender-based violence in contemporary San communities. It starts from the assumption that the depiction rendered by the Harvard 'Kalahari group' was more or less accurate for the specific conditions of the northern and central Kalahari hunter-gatherers just prior to the wide-ranging impact of land loss and the ensuing changes in the Kalahari San's economic and social organisation.

Domestic Violence in Contemporary San Communities

At all three field-sites, in Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, domestic violence was reported to be a common occurrence. However, the extent and underlying causes at the sites were found to differ widely. Therefore, the situation at each deserves some detailed discussion.

Ghanzi District

The predominantly Nharo-speaking San of the Ghanzi district mostly described domestic violence as a largely non-gendered phenomenon of 'fighting' between men and women. It was reputed to be, primarily, a consequence of heavy drinking by men and women alike. Except for two old women who had only recently been removed from Xade in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which takes up the eastern half of the Ghanzi district, all informants unanimously asserted that it could be either the husband or the wife who usually started the fight. 'Sexual jealousy' or 'misunderstandings between husbands and wives' were regarded as the main grounds for violent conflicts between men and women.

Indications are that domestic violence in Ghanzi district is not strongly gendered, i.e. based on distinct, hierarchically organised perceptions of women and men. The general picture suggests that the victims as well as the perpetrators can be either male or female to not dissimilar degrees. It appears that the changes that have challenged the earlier relative gender equality among western Botswana San, particularly the shift to a sedentary lifestyle and the influence of neighbouring, dominant agro-pastoralist societies³⁰ have not (not yet?) resulted in forms of violence that would be rooted in a wide gender gap. This view was also confirmed by a development worker who had worked with the Kuru Trust at D'Kar for many years. She suggested that the largely non-gendered nature of domestic violence was an indication of San women's relatively strong position in their relationships with men.³¹

Tsumkwe West

The situation emerged as partly different in Tsumkwe West. Here, domestic violence appears to be more gender-specific. Violent acts were reported to be predominantly initiated by men. Informants emphasised that women normally just 'rail(ed) verbally' in a domestic dispute whereas men exerted physical violence. Women were said, though, to 'hit back' occasionally. However, our female and male informants made it quite clear that women did not launch physical fights with men: only if she were drunk, they said, might a woman occasionally start a fight.

30 See Draper, 'Kung Women'; H. Loermans, 'Sustainable Development in the Kalahari from a Gender Perspective' (unpublished paper, San Francisco, 1992); S. Kent, 'Does Sedentarization Promote Gender Inequality? A Case Study from the Kalahari', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1, 3 (1995), pp. 513-536.

31 Personal communication, Willemien Le Roux, May 2000.

The difference between Ghanzi and Tsumkwe West becomes even more apparent in terms of the factors that local San residents thought responsible for domestic violence. As in Ghanzi, informants in Tsumkwe West said that sexual jealousy might provide grounds for either spouse to start a fight. However, some clearly gendered underlying reasons were given, too. Men were said to beat their wives if they got angry with them for not doing their chores properly. Men might also beat women for being 'cheeky' (*stout* in Afrikaans, also meaning 'naughty'). On the other hand, some women felt that their sex had no physical rejoinder to male violence because women were said to be 'too weak to hit back'.

Thus, indications are that distinct perceptions of 'men' and 'women' are more pronounced in Tsumkwe West than in Ghanzi, and that they are hierarchically organised. Men in Tsumkwe have apparently begun to develop a sense of entitlement to their wives' deference and the 'right' to chastise them if the women do not comply – which is a common notion elsewhere in Namibia.³² It appears that the rampant poverty and lack of productive work for San men in Tsumkwe West makes men feel unable to live up to masculinist ideals, including the notion of the male 'breadwinner', which prevail in dominant gender discourses in contemporary, national Namibian society.³³

The self-perceptions of Tsumkwe West women as physically 'too weak' to hit back also provide interesting clues, as these women, who commonly carry children and often very heavy bags of gathered food during long gatherings trips, are certainly not physically weak. It is also known that in the foraging Ju/'hoan society, women apparently were quite involved in cases of less serious fighting, although not in deadly fights. Richard Lee observed that Ju/'hoan women in the foraging society fought back when attacked and 'often gave as good or better than they got'.³⁴ The trope of female 'weakness' may well be an adaptation from dominant constructions of femininity in Namibia, and perhaps partly a legacy of the presence of the former South African army.

The San community in Tsumkwe West largely came about as a product of the militarisation of the San in the 1980s. Numerous male residents of the area are former South African Defence Force (SADF) soldiers. Time constraints do not permit a conclusive examination of how lasting the impact of the military experience has been in Tsumkwe West. A set of focused questions on the experience of war, the military and the aftermath of the South African 'bush war' in Namibia, which we could only touch upon in the course of our recent research, would include: what has happened to those ex-soldiers since their demobilisation at the time of Namibian independence in 1990? Where are they today and what are they doing? It is quite obvious that the ex-soldiers – who once earned a comparatively high wage – will feel deprived. Evidence from elsewhere in southern African societies, and internationally, indicates that resorting to violence is a common reaction of men who feel threatened economically, politically, or in different social and cultural ways.³⁵ Changing masculinities may indeed feature strongly among the reasons behind the perceptible trend towards gender-based domestic violence in Tsumkwe West.

32 See, for example, H. Becker and P. Claassen, 'Violence against Women and Children: Community Attitudes and Practices' (unpublished research report, Windhoek, 1996).

33 It is noteworthy that, unlike in other Namibian communities, in particular in the marginalised southern regions where this author has conducted research into domestic violence before (Becker and Claassen, 'Violence against Women and Children'), feelings of male frustration and marginalisation related to experiences of unemployment and poverty were *not* explicitly mentioned as causes of domestic violence. This does not necessarily mean that they do not play a role, though.

34 Lee, *The !Kung San*, p. 377.

35 See, for example, the recent volume on men and masculinities in southern Africa, Morrell (ed), *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, London and New York, University of Natal Press and Zed Books, 2001).

Schmidtsdrift

While the legacy of the military is largely a matter of speculation in the Tsumkwe West case, for the !Xu and Khwe San who have been living at Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape since 1990, the impact of militarisation on the reconstruction of gender and gender-based violence is blatant.

While there was a paucity of earlier work on domestic violence for the Namibian and Botswana field sites, this was certainly not the case for Schmidtsdrift. Several previous researchers had commented on the prevalence of gender-based domestic violence. Linda Waldman, for instance, had observed in the mid-1990s that 'it was fairly obvious that many of the women in the camp were regularly beaten by their husbands'.³⁶

Waldman spent several months at the Schmidtsdrift camp, then still firmly under military control, focusing her research on several aspects of the !Xu and Khwe women's lives at the base. The following is one of a number of case studies she collected.

Case Study: Maria Ngala

Maria Ngala wanted to return to Namibia because her husband, Private Kambinda, and the children from his first marriage repeatedly beat her. Her friends commented that there was nothing she could do, she could not move away. She complained to her husband about his children, but he never spoke to them. If she had approached the army chaplain, the children would have been punished and then she would, in turn, be beaten by her husband. Maria was unable to defend herself and commented that if her family had been in South Africa then she would not have felt so powerless ... Recently Kambinda had poured boiling water over Maria's thighs and said that she should return to her family. Maria said that she did not have any family. Her husband responded that she should go, if she did not have family she could go elsewhere, as he did not want her there.³⁷

During my own research in the Northern Cape, more than five years later, I was also constantly confronted by the highly visible domestic violence at the Schmidtsdrift camp. Every female informant volunteered ample information and, unlike the instance of rape which many denied as 'not being in our culture', male interviewees also expressed concern about the high incidence of female battery by partners. In the words of one of the few young, secondary school-educated women, the co-ordinator of the !Xu & Khwe women's textile project, domestic violence presented 'the biggest problem we [Schmidtsdrift women] have'.³⁸

Domestic violence is rampant among both the !Xu and the Khwe at Schmidtsdrift. It affects all age groups, from teenagers to the elderly. Informants were unanimous that it was, in almost every case, a matter of men 'doing it to' women. Apparently, the level of violence is extreme at times; several cases were reported where domestic violence had resulted in a woman's death. Women were said to 'fight back' occasionally but no one suggested that a woman might also start a physical fight with her husband or boyfriend.

Sexual jealousy and alcohol abuse were held partly responsible for domestic violence, but drinking was mentioned, in particular, far less frequently than at the other field

³⁶ L. Waldman, 'Women and the Army: "Bushmen" Women at Schmidtsdrift Military Camp' (unpublished paper, Nairobi, 1995), p. 5.

³⁷ Waldman, 'Women and the Army', p. 10.

³⁸ Interview, Tumba Alfrino, Schmidtsdrift, 13 June 2000. A volunteer community psychologist who had lived on the camp site for the first year of her contract had found the atmosphere so 'draining' because of the pervasive presence of violence that she had moved out to the town of Kimberley, more than 70 km east of Schmidtsdrift, and was now commuting daily. When she still lived at the camp, women in distress kept calling on her for support at all times of the day and night. Interview, Joan Ryan, Kimberley, 14 June 2000.

sites. Instead, many rationalisations were reported which are directly linked to distinct, hierarchically-organised perceptions of 'men' and 'women': a man may resort to violence if a woman comes home late or if she refuses to do what he tells her to do. This may happen even if a woman is tired and therefore refuses the man's orders. A woman who 'talks back' was said to put herself in danger. So does a wife who has nothing available when her man asks for food. Generally, the feeling was conveyed to me that, very often, battery was triggered off by 'small things'.

There can be no doubt that in Schmidtsdrift domestic violence is a matter of *gender-based* violence. In virtually every case, the perpetrators are male and the victims are female. The rationalisations given were clearly based on distinct, hierarchically organised perceptions of 'men' and 'women'.

It appears that !Xu and Khwe women and men are deeply concerned about the high incidence of gender-based violence, and many women are obviously aware of the links between gross gender inequalities and domestic violence. The violence was largely blamed on the wider society of South Africa, the country that has been home to the 500 former soldiers and their dependants since the SADF moved them to the Northern Cape at the time of Namibian independence.³⁹ On the other hand, no one in the population of more than 4,000 drew a direct connection between the distressing degree of social, and particularly gender-based violence, and the Schmidtsdrift San's traumatic experience of war, violence, removals and long immersion in a paternalistic and autocratic military culture.

Violence, Gender and Alcohol

At all field sites, informants suspected widespread alcohol abuse was the main culprit for the violence rampant among the southern African San. There is no doubt that heavy drinking plays a part in the present violent intra-community environment in most San communities. However, far from presenting a straightforward link, the connections between heavy drinking, violence and gender are complex. Alcohol abuse as such cannot be blamed for the prevalence of domestic violence. Instead, it may be just one contributing factor. The stresses of social and economic change are also significant contributors. Drinking may release bottled-up feelings (so to speak).

A possible explanation of the relationship between alcohol and violence might therefore be that a state of inebriation has become an acceptable way of showing frustration and anger, which otherwise tend to be suppressed. In addition, ways of dissolving conflict through talk and joking, which were part of older cultural patterns among many San groups, might not work when everyone is drunk. Feelings may escalate too quickly.⁴⁰ As a Tsumkwe resident explained almost twenty years ago, 'The fight was always there inside us. Liquor let it out'.⁴¹

That women are more often than not on the receiving end of domestic violence seems to be a result of contemporary unequal gender relations in many San communities. However, the differences between our three field sites in the degree of *gender-based* domestic violence are remarkable. They range from the near absence of gender-based violence in the Ghanzi district through a trend towards gender-based violence in Tsumkwe West to finally, the unmistakable manifestation of gender-based violence in Schmidts-

39 Several informants insisted that violence and irresponsible male behaviour were a 'South African thing'. They admitted that the problem had existed in their communities before 1990, but were adamant that it had been far less serious when the !Xu and Khwe SADF soldiers and their dependants were still based in Namibia.

40 Sylvain, "We Work to Have Life", p. 284.

41 Quoted in J. Marshall and C. Ritchie, *Where are the Ju/wasi of Nyae Nyae? Changes in a Bushman Society: 1958-1981* (Cape Town, Centre for African Studies, 1984), p. 95.

drift. These differences seem to be largely consequences of the distinct histories and present situation of the different communities.

What is also remarkable is the open admission that, not too infrequently, women 'hit back', even among the clearly male-dominated !Xu and Khwe communities.⁴² Thus, indications are that San women may indeed have more resilience in the face of domestic violence than other women in southern African societies.

Gender and Change among Southern African San

The following sketches a tentative historicisation of gender in San communities aimed at identifying factors that may be responsible for the current violent scourge. A note of caution is necessary, though: in no way do I wish to suggest that uniform developments have taken place in all San communities, and certainly the trajectories have not occurred in temporally even manner. What the following section aims to provide, rather, are indications of trends in socio-economic and political developments and their impact on the construction of gender among the San.

First, ethnographic studies of hunter-gatherer societies that showed features of social and gender equality exist only for those societies that the protagonists of the earlier 'Bushman studies' thought had survived in isolated niches in the Kalahari. No descriptions exist of the relative social and gender equality or inequality among San communities who followed lifestyles that were based only partly on foraging, such as the !Xu (northern !Kung) of southern Angola, the Kxoe of north-eastern Namibia and south-eastern Angola, or the Namibian Hai//om. All these communities have long been integrated into agricultural and pastoral economic systems in one way or another, and in some cases also into the colonial cash economy as farm workers or migrant labourers.⁴³ The Angolan !Xu, for example, had engaged in agriculture and (male) migrant labour for many decades. Elderly !Xu women, now resident in Schmidtsdrift, whom I interviewed in 2000, indeed, considered agriculture and migrant labour as integral parts of their 'traditional' lifestyle.

In the absence of reliable sources on earlier forms of San culture and social organisation outside the central Kalahari, oral history may be a useful tool for a tentative reconstruction, but this has to be based on living people's memory, and thus remains firmly anchored in the present.⁴⁴ Hence my discussion starts from the profound socio-economic and political changes that affected the ethnographically well-documented former hunter-gatherer societies in the Kalahari, and charts how, in their wake, gender relations among the Kalahari San began to change.

Sedentarisation, Animal Husbandry and Change

A range of interconnected socio-economic and political factors has been responsible for gendered social and cultural change in the former hunter-gatherer societies of the Kalahari.

42 Such open admission of women's physical violence is very unusual among other Namibian communities where I have conducted research on domestic violence against women and children. (See Becker and Claassen, 'Violence against Women and Children').

43 On the Hai//om, see T. Widlok, *Living on Mangetti. 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

44 I have discussed elsewhere popular postcolonial discourses on gender, 'culture' and 'tradition' in social memory as it is derived from imaginaries of the past, with special reference to the instance of postcolonial Namibian society. See H. Becker, 'A Concise History of Gender, "Tradition" and the State in Namibia', in C. Keulder (ed), *State, Society and Democracy. A Reader in Namibian Politics* (Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2000), pp. 171-199 and H. Becker, 'Living the Postcolonial Empirical. New Perspectives on Doing Anthropology in Southern Africa' (unpublished paper, Washington, DC, 2001).

We have argued elsewhere that, in the first place, it came about with sedentarisation, i.e. the settling down of formerly mobile people in a fixed abode. San across southern Africa drifted towards a more sedentary lifestyle as they lost their territories because of colonial conquest and settlement, and, later, also the creation of national game parks.⁴⁵

Furthermore, work patterns changed with the introduction of cattle husbandry when San men became labourers on cattle ranches, thereby also acquiring small numbers of livestock. The division of labour according to gender became more rigid than before, and boys and girls were increasingly socialised in different ways. Men gained increased power and influence with access to and control over new, important resources, in particular domestic animals and wage labour. Women lost autonomy and influence in this reconstruction of gender as their mobility was increasingly confined to a limited area around the new settlements. This was reinforced by growing domestic privacy, partly due to expanding individual ownership of material property.⁴⁶

The processes through which men gained control over material and immaterial resources, enhancing their influence and power within their communities, were matched by women's loss of resources, power and influence. These developments were not merely of a structural nature. They were incorporated in San male and female identities. Patricia Draper, in an early paper on change in formerly gender-egalitarian !Kung society, reminded us of the negative impact on San women's self-esteem of their diminishing role as providers.⁴⁷ She pointed out, further, that a more rigid division of labour was enforced by men who came to regard women's work as unworthy whereas, in the hunter-gatherer society, men had frequently crossed gender lines, participating especially in gathering and water collecting. The sedentary lifestyle also had a profound impact on marriage and family patterns. The earlier long birth-spacing of about four years was reduced to much shorter gaps between a woman's children, and fathers became less involved with child-raising than they had been before. Divorce, formerly very common, easy to obtain and often initiated by the woman, was made more difficult. This host of related changes resulted in !Kung women's confinement to a newly-created 'domestic space'. Men, by contrast, gained increasing access to the outside world by involving themselves in wage labour, extra-village politics, and other external relations.⁴⁸

A sedentary lifestyle was perhaps less significant for women's status loss than the adoption of new socio-economic modes. This has been pointed out by Susan Kent and others – such as Hannie Loermans, a one-time development worker in Ghanzi district. Kent argues that animal husbandry, in particular, brought along more male-dominated cultural patterns that San partly adopted from surrounding pastoralist communities.⁴⁹ Consequently, gender relations among the San changed with the adoption of distinctive male-dominant features characteristic of southern African pastoralists, such as the Tswana, Herero or white settlers.⁵⁰

45 Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, p. 16.

46 See Draper, '!Kung Women', p. 78.

47 Draper, '!Kung Women'.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 82; 85–86; 90–91; 96–97; 103–104.

49 Loermans, 'Sustainable Development in the Kalahari'; Kent, 'Does Sedentarization Promote Gender Inequality?'

50 In the past, male stock-raising labour did not automatically and everywhere preclude women's property rights in small stock or cattle. However, in the context of modern agro-pastoralist southern African societies, the idea has gained currency that not only is livestock-tending a job for men, but also property rights in domestic animals, particularly cattle, are a male prerogative. Contemporary San who have been in contact with, or incorporated into, pastoralist socio-economic systems seem to have adopted this line of thinking. In Tsumkwe East, for instance, where cattle farming was first introduced in the 1970s, it was found in the early 1990s that 85 per cent of all individuals responsible for herding, watering, kraaling and milking cattle were male. See A. Botelle and R. Rhode, *Those Who Live on the Land. A Socio-economic Baseline Survey for Land Use Planning in the Communal Areas of Eastern Otjozondjupa*. (Windhoek, Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation, 1995), p. 73. Women

Women lost economic power and social status where they were excluded from the high social and cultural value placed on cattle ownership as a new resource, not to mention the higher monetary value of cattle compared with small stock. Whereas, earlier, their high status and self-esteem were based on their importance as providers, their exclusion from the main new economic mode has undoubtedly affected women's thinking about themselves. The idea that 'women don't work' because they 'just stay at home' is instrumental in this respect. We found this idea to be widespread among different contemporary San communities.⁵¹

Gendered Life on the Farms

Renée Sylvain's work has shown that the central feature of gender relations among those San living and working on commercial farms is women's extreme dependency on their menfolk. This is caused by the link between residence and employment, and by the gendered nature of farm work itself.⁵² Sylvain's and our own researches show that, in eastern Namibia and western Botswana, residency on a farm is tied directly to employment, and primary employment is usually restricted to men. Women are allowed to live on a farm, and are perhaps given some residual employment, only if they are kin of a male worker.⁵³

A new image of San women has arisen in the farm situation and has added to their predicament. A common feature among white commercial farmers and black, non-San farm labourers alike seems to be the portrayal of the San woman as a 'childish, over-sexed animal – for breeding, prostitution and rape'.⁵⁴ In the view of white farm-owners, San women are considered 'useless'. Commercial farmers in the Ghanzi district often think that San women are overly sexually active, and generally 'lazy' and 'unhygienic'.⁵⁵ In the Omaheke region, one elderly Afrikaner farmer bluntly summarised his perception: 'All they do', he told a researcher, 'is breed'.⁵⁶ This image of San women as the embodiment of 'primitive promiscuity' is not restricted to white farmers. It is also evident in exploitative temporary relationships of San women with black, male workers of a different ethnic background on the farms. In these temporary relationships, sexual services, a 'nebulous blend of prostitution with concubinage', blurs into domestic service.⁵⁷

It is not entirely clear to what extent these images of San women have been adopted by San themselves. An observer who has worked with farm workers in the Ghanzi district noted that male San farm workers tended to complain that women were 'lazy' and 'bossy'.⁵⁸ However, observers have expressed different views on how the link between almost exclusively male wage labour and residence rights has translated into the self-perception of farm San as 'men' or 'women' with distinct gendered characteristics and needs. Gendered

Footnote 50 *continued*

in Schmidtsdrift whom I asked whether they might be interested in animal husbandry projects, found the mere idea of women handling livestock unthinkable.

51 Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, p. 23.

52 Sylvain, "We Work to Have Life", p. 7.

53 *Ibid.*; Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, pp. 29–31. White and black cattle ranchers in the Ghanzi district depend on San labour. An estimated 80 per cent of all farm-workers are San (Interview, Rein Dekker, D'Kar, 26 May 2000). This labour force is exclusively male. Common justifications have it that the herding or fencing jobs on the farms can only be done by men, in accordance with the conventional gender division of labour. Unlike Sylvain's findings from Namibia, we found that in Ghanzi, San women are even excluded from domestic service jobs on farms. These seem to be the prerogative of women from different backgrounds, such as Bakgalagadi. Hence, San women on the Ghanzi farms are doubly marginalised on the grounds of their minority status and gender. They are fully dependent on their male relatives or sexual partners for their livelihood and residence.

54 Sylvain, "We Work to Have Life", p. 112.

55 Interview, Bep van Oostrom, Ghanzi, 26 May 2000.

56 Quoted in Sylvain, "We Work to Have Life", p. 90.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

58 Interview, Bep van Oostrom, Ghanzi, 26 May 2000.

identities of farm San appear to result from a complex web of discourses and practices. Renée Sylvain reminds us that the primary question concerns the meanings that women's dependency and the 'historically tangled knot of mythologies'⁵⁹ assume. We need to know whether they translate into *feelings* of dependency or inferiority among women.

Sylvain is doubtless correct in believing that the situation on the farms has caused a radical change in gender perceptions among the San people concerned: 'Ju/'hoan women were subordinated, not only to the white "*baas*" and "*miesis*" on the farm, but also to their own menfolk'.⁶⁰ The portrayal of the San farm-worker's wife as a presumably non-working 'housewife' has been embraced by San women. However, Sylvain also found that San women seemed to derive some pride, social recognition and even authority from their role of primary care-taker of the domestic space. Women insisted that they were the '*baas* of the house'. Our interviews with San women on Ghanzi farms largely confirmed these findings from Sylvain's long-term Namibian research.⁶¹ Hence, it appears that San women have not simply appropriated the notion of the 'housewife', but that they have also reconfigured it in specific ways to preserve some of their autonomy and dignity.

The other large segment of San people in Ghanzi district live in the Remote Area Dwellers (RAD) settlements, established by the Botswana government as part of their overall strategy to solve the 'Bushman problem'. RAD settlements are intended to fulfil three main components of the Botswana government's policy of development and control of the San; (1) the designation of San settlements; (2) the establishment of traditional authorities in San areas; and (3) the fostering of social infrastructure within suitable reach of the San.⁶² The RAD settlements provide relatively comprehensive social services. While largely steeped in welfare policy, they tentatively attempt to foster pastoralist economic activities among the San. At least in the Ghanzi district, the relevant policy has assumed an obvious male bias, with free cattle handed out to San men, but not to women, who only received handouts of small stock.⁶³

Life on the commercial farms and cattle-posts owned by rich Tswana landlords, or in the RAD settlements, has deprived the Nharo San of their previous economic activities. However, gathering bush foods is still a significant economic activity of San women in Ghanzi district, whether they live as dependants on commercial farms or in the RAD settlements. Men's hunting activities, on the other hand, have been largely curtailed by legal and bureaucratic constraints.

Our research in Ghanzi thus showed that sedentarisation, combined with the shift to wage labour (predominantly farm labour) and to animal husbandry, has led to a decrease in San women's autonomy and influence and a corresponding increase in gender inequality. Rein Dekker's observations during his tenure as the co-ordinator of the Kuru Development Trust at D'Kar in the Ghanzi district also suggest a growing gender gap, which includes the escalating rigidity of the gendered division of labour, including domestic chores and child-raising, as well as an increase in domestic violence.⁶⁴

59 Renée Sylvain, personal communication, October 2000.

60 Sylvain, "We Work to Have Life", p. 166.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 241. However, Bep van Oostrom, who has been in charge of a farm labourers' project in Ghanzi district, also stressed that San women on the farms see themselves as 'housewives'. According to her observations, though, these women suffered from a severe lack of self-esteem because of their dependent situation. In an attempt to redress this problem, the Ghanzi farm labourers' project has introduced gardening and handicrafts projects specifically directed at women. Interview, Bep van Oostrom, Ghanzi, 26 May 2000.

62 R. Hitchcock and J. D. Holm, 'Bureaucratic Domination of Hunter-Gatherer Societies: a Study of the San in Botswana' (unpublished paper, St. Louis, Missouri, 1991), p. 8.

63 Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, p. 10.

64 R. Dekker, 'Contribution to Millennium Lecture and Panel Series. Vision 2016: a Gender Perspective. Lecture 2: Building a Moral and Tolerant Nation: No Citizen of Botswana will be Disadvantaged' (unpublished paper, no place given; probably Gaborone, 1999), p. 3.

These factors have caused increasing levels of gender inequality among San communities in areas affected by large-scale socio-economic change. And yet, in the Ghanzi district, domestic violence was not necessarily based on rigid gender boundaries and gender power imbalances. There are strong indications that, despite the socio-economic, political and cultural changes to the detriment of women, the Nharo San's gender relations at a personal level, and their subjective perceptions of manhood and womanhood, may not be so strongly affected as to result in distinct and hierarchically-organised female and male identities.⁶⁵

The Gendered Impact of the Militarisation of the San

The situation was very different at Schmidtsdrift. Unlike at the other field sites, women in Schmidtsdrift told me, over and over again, that they suffered badly due to gross gender inequality in the public as well as the domestic sphere of their communities. The repeated statements that 'we women are always oppressed' and 'always come after (i.e. under) the man' graphically capture the spirit of gender relations and women's gendered identity at Schmidtsdrift.

There can be no doubt that the Schmidtsdrift San's continuous immersion in military culture has created, or at the very least reproduced, male hierarchies. The conditions of extreme dependency of !Xu and Khwe women go back to the 1970s and 1980s, when the then SADF recruited male !Xu and Khwe soldiers, mostly of Angolan origin.⁶⁶ All soldiers in army service were male. Most were fairly young. The San soldiers were paid generous salaries, topped up by substantial food rations. Observers at the time of the South African 'bush war' against the Namibian liberation forces of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation), noted that in 'Bushmanland', 'a great deal of food and money was flowing through the hands of a few young men'.⁶⁷

The women affiliated to these soldiers developed an extreme dependency on men. Not only did the families of San soldiers come to depend on their menfolk's substantial pay cheques, but the large civilian population associated with the 'Bushman soldiers' found themselves pinned down administratively by the army in many respects. The bureaucratic objectification of the San started with the official registration of births, deaths and marriages by SADF company and battalion offices. It extended to the handing-out of food rations, the provision of education in army-run schools, and – finally – spiritual catering through Christian missionary activities carried out by army chaplains. Wives of the white SADF officers contributed their gendered share by teaching the San women 'appropriate' female skills such as Western-style needlework, bakery, cooking and various home industries. These activities were continued after their move to South Africa in 1990.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Willemien le Roux, who worked for sixteen years with San communities in Ghanzi district, suggested that, while there was a level of 'structural oppression' that operated against San women, they were not so much 'oppressed' in their personal relations with their menfolk. Interview, 8 September 2000, Windhoek.

⁶⁶ This section focuses on the Schmidtsdrift !Xu and Khwe. It must not be forgotten, however, that the majority of the estimated 10,000 San who were directly affected by the South African military as soldiers or their dependants, remained in Namibia after the country's independence. Whereas it is more difficult to assess the exact impact the militarisation had on the Namibian ex-soldier communities in the West Caprivi and Tsumkwe constituency, the massive changes the army caused in San society can certainly not be dismissed. To all appearances, the legacy of the military experience has vanished without trace in Tsumkwe constituency. Focused research on the impact of war and violence may be able to tell a different story, though. What is clear is that, by the early 1980s, the San had the distinction of being the most militarised ethnic group in the world. See R. Gordon and S. Douglas, *The Bushman Myth. The Making of a Namibian Underclass* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 2000), p. 2. Serious cleavages within San communities have been created, or at the very least, reinforced. See Marshall and Ritchie, *Where are the Ju/wasi of Nyae Nyae?*, pp. 98–122.

⁶⁷ Marshall and Ritchie, *Where are the Ju/wasi of Nyae Nyae?*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ I. Uys, *Bushman Soldiers. Their Alpha and their Omega* (Germiston, Fortress Publishers, 1993), pp. 45, 53, 165, 274–275.

South African military culture was paternalistic, authoritarian and autocratic. It was also a very male world. There was simply no place in it for women, except as men's appendages. At the army bases in Namibia, two ethnically-based councils, for the !Xu and Khwe soldiers respectively, had been established within the army structures. These gave the male San a residual influence over the administration of their lives. Women, on the other hand, had no influence whatsoever in the thoroughly male-dominated structures of army life. Nor had women any weight when it came to the move to South Africa. When the SADF offered to relocate 500 San soldiers and their families from newly independent Namibia to South Africa,⁶⁹ men made the decisions on behalf of women. For most of the !Xu and Khwe men, relocation meant, primarily, continued well-paid army employment. On the other hand, there is only anecdotal evidence as to how the women felt about the move to South Africa, but it appears that they may have been more sceptical than the men.⁷⁰

Life in Schmidtsdrift was, and still continues to be, shaped by a hierarchical and male-dominated military culture. Although the numbers of !Xu and Khwe men employed by the army have dropped significantly over the past few years, this culture was still highly visible and dominating the life at the camp at the time of my research there in 2000. The military's activities have produced a pronounced separation between women and men. Women have had no part in the distinctly male, dominant military sphere.

Gender discourse among the Schmidtsdrift San revolves around the 'male provider and female housewife' pattern, complete with a zealous male quest for absolute female subservience. In the dominant gender discourse, it does not make a difference that many men do not fulfil the obligations of the provider. They still insist that their wives conform to the image of the obedient housewife. Women's economic dependence has combined with the hierarchical military culture and the creation of rigidly policed male and female spheres to produce gross gender imbalances. As Linda Waldman's case study of Maria Ngala points out,⁷¹ the absence of kinship-based support networks among the relocated !Xu and Khwe further prevents women from employing kin-based strategies in attempts to mitigate male domination and violence. The emergence of the idea that the 'housewife' role was appropriate for the San women of Schmidtsdrift must be seen in this context of the widening gender gap. Unlike San women on the farms, the Schmidtsdrift women have not succeeded in reconfiguring the housewife pattern to avoid the loss of autonomy. The gendered power imbalances are also experienced at the personal level and have become normalised as quasi-ontological femininities and masculinities. The present reality of the

69 In 1990, 500 soldiers of the SADF 'Bushmen' battalions, along with 3,500 of their dependants, were relocated from Namibia to Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape. About 3,000 of these people were !Xu-speakers, the remainder spoke Khwe. Most adults of 1990 were born and had grown up in Angola, from where the soldiers had been recruited into the SADF after the collapse of Portuguese colonial rule. In Namibia they had been stationed either in the West Caprivi military base of Omega, or in the area then known as 'Bushmanland'. More than ten years later, the people still live in army tents in the temporary resettlement camp at Schmidtsdrift military base. In June 1999, the ANC government granted title deeds to Platfontein farm on the outskirts of Kimberley to the Schmidtsdrift people, but housing and infrastructure development at Platfontein appears to be a protracted process, still not concluded at the time of writing in early 2002. Several community members and leaders have expressed their frustration about the continuing delays in the allocation of a permanent home over the past decade (various interviews, June 2000, Schmidtsdrift).

70 Once arrived in South Africa, women's autonomy and influence did not increase. In the mid-1990s, still no support networks existed for the San women in South Africa. Unwanted wives were sent back to Namibia or, alternatively, had no option but to stay in untenable marriages (see the Maria Ngala case study, Waldman, *Women and the Army*, pp. 8–10). Characteristically, the number of female-headed households has remained very low among the !Xu and Khwe at Schmidtsdrift. See S. Robins, E. Madzudzo, M. Brenzinger, *An Assessment of the Status of the San in South Africa, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Windhoek, Legal Assistance Centre, 2001); personal communication, Linda Waldman, July 2000.

71 See above.

Schmidtsdrift San is thus characterised by grossly unequal gender relations, and finds an expression in women's low self-esteem, among !Xu women in particular.

The impact of militarisation on community structures and gender relations has remained obscured to the San people themselves. Schmidtsdrift male and female leaders and rank and file residents tend to accredit a nebulous 'traditional culture' for the gross gender imbalances.⁷² In the absence of detailed analyses of social relations among the !Xu and Khwe before they became subject to South African military culture in the 1970s, these claims are difficult either to substantiate or to refute. However, there are strong indications that the present situation is, first and foremost, due to the Schmidtsdrift San's history of war, violence and apartheid. Thus far, there has been no discourse on these experiences either within the – deeply divided – !Xu and Khwe communities nor through development programmes facilitated by South African NGOs; certainly nothing much has happened pertaining to the gender inequalities and gender-based violence that are so rife at the camp. During my field research, I found that the !Xu and Khwe women had no idea what their menfolk's 'jobs' in the army involved, and what it had meant to participate in the Namibian war on the side of the South African colonial forces. The male soldiers lived through traumatic experiences of war and violence in the 'bush war' against SWAPO, but apparently did not share them with their womenfolk. Then there is the trauma of repeated removals. The Schmidtsdrift San present an extreme case in this respect. By far the majority of the adults at the camp have experienced severe uprooting twice within fifteen years, from Angola to Namibia in the mid-1970s, and then in 1990 from Namibia to South Africa.⁷³ The social cohesion of any people who have gone through such an experience has inevitably suffered. Social problems, including widespread domestic violence, are rife at Schmidtsdrift and regularly erupt into the public sphere, as I could witness on occasion during my stay in the Northern Cape.

It is fairly obvious that the rampant domestic violence at Schmidtsdrift is inextricably entwined with gross gender inequality. The inequality of women and men is, in part, a consequence of the persistent unequal employment opportunities for men and women.⁷⁴ However, the militarisation of the San has also resulted in a clear sense of male superiority, quite at odds with what was reported about the ideology of gender relations at the other two field sites. The Schmidtsdrift communities have seen the emergence of clearly distinct and hierarchically-organised perceptions of 'men' and 'women'. By contrast with the other field sites, domestic violence is predominantly a case of male violence against women born out of a sense of male entitlement to enjoy superiority and attempts to control women.⁷⁵ Hence the high incidence of gender-based violence at Schmidtsdrift.

72 The disparity between the !Xu and the Khwe women's female identities was also ascribed to 'cultural' differences. Most informants related that !Xu women were 'traditionally' more modest, shy and subservient than the more assertive Khwe women.

73 According to a survey conducted in 1996, 87 per cent of the adults at Schmidtsdrift were born in Angola: F. Archer, *Participatory Research and Planning. Schmidtsdrift San* (Cape Town, 1996), quoted in Robins, Madzudzo, Brenzinger, *Assessment*. In the case of those !Xu soldiers and their families who were sent from Omega in West Caprivi to serve in 'Bushmanland' when the SADF started to set up the second 'Bushman' battalion in the latter area in 1978, this entailed an additional upheaval.

74 Schmidtsdrift women named the high female unemployment rate as their foremost gender problem. While, in June 2000, only 122 men were still employed by the army, now known as the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), the retrenched former soldiers had left with huge packages. New employment opportunities for men have also opened up over the past few years, particularly on farms throughout South Africa. For the women of Schmidtsdrift, on the other hand, employment opportunities remain virtually non-existent. Unlike at the other field sites, the gendered division between male 'haves' and female 'have-nots' was described by many women as a major problem.

75 Reportedly, the incidence of gender-based violence is also very high among teenagers, involving beatings as well as brutal gang rapes of female high-school students. Interview, Joan Ryan, Kimberley, 14 June 2000.

Conclusion: Towards a Culturalist Approach in San Gender Politics?

Increasing gender-based violence is an indication of the erosion of the formerly relatively high degree of gender egalitarianism in many San communities. Gender relations and gender identities among the San communities in southern Africa have been grossly affected by socio-economic, political and cultural changes. While San men generally remain marginalised within their national societies and economies, they have gained social, economic and cultural power at the expense of women in their communities. To varying degrees, San women have lost influence and autonomy everywhere due to a range of socio-economic, political and cultural developments. These include, notably, sedentarisation due to the wide-scale loss of land, the shift to pastoralism, the turn to wage labour, the influence of male-dominant neighbouring communities and, most dramatically, the militarisation of San life in the 1970s and 1980s. Gender imbalances have proved most severe in communities critically affected by military structures, the experience of war and violence, and the trauma of repeated removals. Although more research still needs to be done on the effects of militarisation in Tsumkwe West, the discernible trend to gender-based violence in the area is a strong indication of the lasting legacy of the SADF's presence in the area. A decade has passed since the South African army withdrew from the former 'Bushmanland' in Namibia. This may have helped to mitigate, though not erase, the history of war and violence among the Tsumkwe San, in contrast to the Schmidtsdrift San's continued immersion in military culture. At Schmidtsdrift, on the other hand – which has the largest grouping of San anywhere in southern Africa – a truly male supremacist culture has emerged.

Despite abundant evidence at variance with the stereotype of primordial San gender egalitarianism, the discourse of San exceptionalism in terms of gender and gendered identities has thus far hardly been challenged. Except for a few, mostly unpublished, brief papers⁷⁶ and one recent doctoral dissertation,⁷⁷ scant attention has been paid to the social and cultural reality of gender, masculinities and femininities in studies of contemporary San life. Renée Sylvain has rightly pointed out that, while the 'revisionist' school of Bushmen/San studies has been particularly silent on gender, neither camp of the 'Kalahari debate' has paid much attention to how San women experienced colonialism and the development of capitalism or how gender featured in rural class formation.⁷⁸

Most recently, however, a concern has been growing among academics, activists and development practitioners that the increasing power differentials between San women and men require more attention in project design and human rights advocacy.⁷⁹ International donors and southern African NGOs are also slowly beginning to take note of the internal differentiations of San communities, particularly along the faultlines of gender and generation. The South African San Institute (SASI) in particular, which has played an influential role in San communities in South Africa, has paid increasing attention to gender issues, and internal cleavages along other lines of stratification, such as age, in its programme activities.⁸⁰ SASI is currently in the process of developing a focused gender strategy for their work with South African San communities.⁸¹

76 Dekker, 'Contribution to Millennium Lecture'; Loermans, 'Sustainable Development in the Kalahari'; Kent, 'Does Sedentarization Promote Gender Inequality?'; Waldman, 'Women and the Army'.

77 Sylvain, 'We Work to Have Life'.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

79 See Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, pp. 94–98; also M. Bollig, R. Hitchcock, C. Nduku and J. Reynders, *At the Crossroads: The Future of a Development Initiative. Evaluation of Kuru Development Trust, Ghanzi and Ngamiland Districts of Botswana* (The Hague and Harare, Hivos Foundation, 2000), p. 88.

80 Felton and Becker, *Gender Perspective*, pp. 92–3.

81 This researcher has more recently assisted SASI with additional gender-focused research among the #Khomani geared towards the development of a SASI gender strategy document.

Although it is still early days, it may be noted that the incipient debate on how to approach gender issues in contemporary San communities has begun to embrace and articulate a culturalist approach to gender. The resolution adopted by the Shakawe Indigenous Peoples' Consultation in 1998, attended by San community leaders and NGOs working with San communities from throughout southern Africa and beyond, offers an example of the recent inclusion of gender in the cultural politics of San identity.⁸² This discourse has begun to draw on images of an egalitarian past in order to remind the communities of the need to redress gross gender imbalances: 'Our communities must address the present inequality between men and women in society. *Inequality does not honour our traditions and culture*. Strategies to rectify gender inequality must be developed by each community.'⁸³

Such statements raise critical questions about the appropriateness of the cultural politics of gender among southern African San. Steven Robins has pointed out that the cultural politics of San identity have proven a powerful resource in certain instances, such as the successful land claim of the ‡Khomani San in the Northern Cape. Despite the inherent dangers of a culturalist approach, he argues that the reappropriation and reconfiguration of 'traditional' Bushman images 'from below', by San communities themselves, are not merely instrumental manipulations of culture and identity in order to gain access to material resources, such as land or income generated from cultural tourism. They are also cultural practices aimed at the recuperation of social memory and identity.⁸⁴

By analogy, strategies drawing on the collective memory of earlier, but in many instances historically not very distant, more egalitarian gender relations may sound appealing. The SASI cultural programme, which has now been run for a few years among the ‡Khomani in the Northern Cape, has some relevant success stories to tell. Oral histories collected and disseminated by the project have proven an excellent tool here, for example by telling the narratives of successful women hunters of the past, which will be used in educational programmes geared to school-going San youth.⁸⁵ Crucial questions remain, however, concerning the agency of the discourse on San gender relations, femininities and masculinities. Donors, NGOs, anthropologists and other 'friends of the San' can hardly be too careful about their design of discursive, as well as practical, interventions. An unqualified appeal by outsiders to 'traditions and culture' may well be nothing but a paternalistic resuscitation of the essentialist discourse on primordial San gender harmony. Worse still, it may submerge the very real gender concerns in San communities, such as economic imbalances or gender-based violence. Whether or not (and if so, how) cultural reclamations, with all their inherent ambiguities and contradictions, may be a way forward in San gender politics, remains to be seen in the years to come.

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82 A similar assertion has been included in the Kuru Development Trust's mission statement, quoted in Bollig, Hitchcock, Nduku, Reynders, *At the Crossroads*, p. 92.

83 *Principles Adopted by an Indigenous People's Consultation. Held in Shakawe, Botswana from 6 to 9 September 1998* (D'Kar and Windhoek, Kuru Development Trust and WIMSA, 1999).

84 Robins, 'NGOs, "Bushman" and Double Vision', p. 835.

85 Interview, Nigel Crawhall, Cape Town, 25 June 2001.

