

TRACKS ACROSS SAND: the story of the Bushmen of the Southern Kalahari

In April 1999, Thabo Mbeki, president elect of South Africa, travelled to the sand dunes of the southern Kalahari. It was the last year of Nelson Mandela's presidency, and the reason for Mbeki's visit to the remote, northern corner of his country, was to recognise the existence and rights of the first victims of racism in Africa. At a ceremony lasting two days, the Mandela government acknowledged the wrongs that have been done to the people known as the =Khomani San, the last Bushman to survive the onslaughts of colonialism in South Africa. Mbeki signed an agreement that gave 45,000 hectares of farm land to the surviving =Khomani, along with a further 25,000 hectares of land and extensive hunting and gathering rights within the Kglagadi Transfrontier Park.

In this way, Mandela's administration settled a land claim that had come from a tiny group of San – people whom Apartheid South Africa had deemed not to exist, whose language had been declared to be extinct. People who had seemed to be driven from the face of the earth by successions of land hungry, often murderous, colonists. This was a symbolic moment for the Mandela revolution and a triumph for the San: a settling with history.

This story of dispossession goes back to the time when Xosa and other Bantu peoples came into the arid deserts and grasslands of what became South Africa, and through the arrival of the Dutch and then the British. Three hundred years of attack upon the San. But the story reaches back into the mists of remote history: the ancestors of the peoples whom Mandela wanted at last to recognise goes back more than 100,000 years, and could be the most recent link in a human linking us to those first migrants who spread from the southern African grasslands, savannah and deserts to occupy the rest of the world.

These are the longest possible human tracks across the sand.

When Mbeki and his team of ministers and officials signed the 1999 agreement with the =Khomani San, they met with three remarkable individuals. The man whom the San held to be their spiritual leader, Dawid Kruiper, along with his father and all his family, had been expelled from the Transfrontier Park in the 1970s. Since then he had been part of a living exhibit on a tourist farm two hours north of Cape Town. The man who had worked as Dawid's key political ally, Petrus Vaalboi, had been a bricklayer all his working life on building sites along the Namibian border. In a striking moment for all, Mbeki posed for the media with his arms around these two men. There was also an elderly, frail looking San woman whom Mbeki also embraced. This was /Una Katerin Roi. She had joined the land claim as an elder and who spoke the Bushman language that was deemed to be extinct. /Una Roi, along with fifty other Bushman from the southern Kalahari, had been exhibited at the 1936 Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg. She and her extended family had then been

expelled from the Transfrontier Park. Dawid, Petrus and /Una are the three central personalities of our film.

Each of these three individuals had emerged from extremes of poverty and oppression; they were San who led the journey from destitution to the land claim, from a life hidden at the side of dirt roads, or as the cheapest of labour on settlers' farms, or from the grimmest edges of the rural townships that apartheid created. In 1999 they were hugged and held by Mbeki, photographed by the world's media, and had reason to believe that they had at last recovered for themselves and their families land, rights, dignity and a place in the new South Africa.

This film follows the tracks of Dawid, Petrus and /Una. Tracks that lead back in time, through their own oral histories as well as through the findings of their land claim exploration of the past, to the Africa that was the land of hunting peoples and no other, to a time that marks an origin of human history and human language. Tracks that tell the story of the coming of the first herding peoples, then those who wanted to take over the lands and get rid of the Bushman and their ways of life. These are background, overview stories. The detail of their lives, the force of their testimony, takes us to the Apartheid era, when Bushman were outside even the most demeaning racial classifications and found themselves pushed beyond the margins of even that degrading society. These are tracks that lead into what it has meant to suffer complete dispossession and racist assault – stories from Dawid, Petrus and /Una that take us to the places they had been forced to live and the realities of that life.

We began to film these stories in 1997, recording the moments at which the land claim first reached the San families of the region. We captured on film the first discovery of the old woman, Elsie Vaalboi, mother of Petrus, who thought she was the only person in the world who spoke the original =Khomani language. We filmed the first time Dawid and his family began to make maps of the lands they knew and had named; and we went with them to the sand dunes and river beds of the Park, tracking animals, gathering plants and delighting in the places that they had not been allowed to visit for over twenty years. We also filmed the first testimony from the elders who spoke the original language, and went with them to the areas they had lived as children, to the trees they had lived among when they were taken from their homes to be exhibited in Johannesburg. They were returning for the first time to memories and places they had not been entitled to visit since the 1930s. Petrus, the activist, came with us on many of these first journeys.

In 2002, /Una, along with her two sisters many of their extended families, decided to leave the shacks and poverty of the township where they were living when we found them. They tore down their homes, loaded their possessions onto a truck, and had themselves driven to lands that had come with the settlement of the claim, and where they had lived as children. Making tracks back to the red dunes of the Kalahari. We filmed this move and their first days back in the desert.

In the years since the signing of the claim, many of the =Khomani families have moved into houses and areas of the sand dunes and farmlands at the edge of the Kalahari. Dawid and his group created a village of grass huts deep in the dunes, insisting that they were the upholders of San identity – rejecting modern housing and continuing to be outside the colonial and Christian societies even of the northern Cape. Petrus and his family, including his mother Elsie, now over 100 years old, took possession of a large farmhouse and one of the large farms that were part of the settlement with the government. Petrus became a political leader, then turned himself into a sheep farmer. /Una and her large family, after their move to a village of shacks in the dunes, moved to another of the farmhouses that had come with the land claim, creating a village where there had formerly been one home and a set of outbuildings. Our film follows these moves.

The process was not easy. The families with Dawid suffered from outbreaks of alcohol and drug induced violence. There were terrible beatings, assaults on women and at least three murders. Petrus became embroiled in charges of political and financial corruption, narrowly escaped convictions and jail sentences, and moved to sheep farming in a retreat from the mess of the aftermath of the land claim, in which mess he had played a leading role. /Una's extended family achieved the most stable adjustment, with the village at the farm growing from five households to over twenty-five. Crafts and eco-tourism ventures took root in this area, though also very much involving the Kruiper families in the grass huts nearby. Yet the small community / Una at first created could not escape the problems: as numbers grew, so did alcohol and drug use, and with them violence and family breakdown. The land claim seemed to have delivered as much disarray as liberation to each of those who had been its leaders and central representatives.

In July 2008, we filmed with Dawid, Petrus and /Una. We went to their new homes and the lives they have created there, and explored, with them, what had happened. What did this place within the new South Africa really mean for them? Had they exchanged one kind of dispossession for another? Was the securing of the land a return to the heritage by which they had longed to be defined, and which they had held onto despite every colonial force being pitted against them? Did they now find the pride and peace and recovery of identity that they had yearned for through all those years of suffering under Apartheid and the attacks upon them that had long preceded Apartheid? Was their wealth of a kind where there had been starvation? Or had the new rural poverty of Africa overwhelmed their chances of a better, more secure future, despite the lands they had received?

We went back to the Southern Kalahari to ask these questions. The answers came in another set of journeys, more tracks, this time across the present and into different visions of the future. Dawid, Petrus and /Una, along with members of their families, gave us their different and opposing stories. Dawid still in a grass hut, Petrus in a sheep-herder's shack, /Una in an outhouse of the farm. We have been following their stories for eleven years; they look back on the meaning of these stories to them, and

their hopes as well as their fears that have now taken the place of a struggle for rights and lands.

This film is the story of these three sets of tracks, all of them in the sand, all coming from a shared history, but now diverging and struggling to find their way forwards. We are in the depths of the Kalahari, deep in a world that has origins far away in time, but we are also caught in the new realities, of South Africa and of the world. This small group of San has compelling, poignant, troubling things to show us and to tell us. Theirs has been among the most remarkable of human histories, from ancient times to the present. And they show us and speak for more than themselves. Their tracks lead across and into some of the deepest and most troubling meanings of modern times. This is a story of hunters of the Kalahari; it is also all our stories, from the origins of humanity to the crisis of global poverty.

The structure of the film

At the heart of this film are three San individuals, who, over a period of more than ten years, show us their lives. We also have interviews with some of the outsiders who came to play important parts in the unfolding of this ten year story: Wallace Mgokwe, head of the ANC land claim office that first had to consider the San claim, Nigel Crawhall, the linguist and activist who led the land claim research and community organisation it required, Roger Chennells, the human rights lawyer who put together the arguments for the claim and oversaw its implementation, and Hugh Brody, director of this film, who was involved in the story from its earliest stages until the present.

The film will make an arc of story by following Dawid, Petrus and /Una. They have been talking on camera since 1987, and were at the centre of our filming in July, 2008. They will provide the narrative lines.

But we will include reflections on what these narratives are and what they mean for those involved, for South Africa and for the world. This will not be narration, but will have some of its narrative functions: themes, steps in the process, and links will be facilitated by outside thought, but coming from people who were very much inside the events.

We anticipate making a feature length documentary, accompanied by a DVD that has approximately 3 hours of supplementary footage.

The sources of footage include:

- Shoots in 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2008. All of these go to the same places and same central characters
- An extensive archive of stills that was put together for the land-claim, going back to 1911
- Archival footage from the 1930s

- Maps and posters made with the San, and very much with our central characters, that were designed to make the invisibles visible as basis for securing the land claim

Production so far

The filming for this production began in 1997. The most recent footage is from July 2008. We have logged, captured and begun translation of all this material, which totals 75 tapes.

We plan a final shoot in 2009.

Post production schedule

Post production began in September, 2008, though transfer and logging of the early 1997 – 2003 footage was completed by June, 2008.

In November 2008 – February 2009, we will be making a short demo for fund-raising purposes.

Translation of all the existing footage will be completed by February 2009.

With the demo done and translations all done, full editing will resume in February 2009, and continue through 2009. The rough cut of the film is scheduled to be ready by August 2009, and the fine cut to be ready for viewing by November 2009, with completion by the end of the year.

Funding thus far

The preproduction, production and early stages of postproduction have been supported by the University of the Fraser Valley through the Canada Reaearch Chair, and by the UK Charity Open Channels.

Further funds from these sources will be available throughout postproduction, covering some salary and editing costs. However, we need to raise the shortfall between money available from University of the Fraser Valley and Open Channels and the full budget for full postproduction. This shortfall is estimated at: XXX XXX

The team

Producer: Betsy Carson

Director: Hugh Brody

Editor: Haid Paul

Cinematographer: Kirk Tougas