

Tracks across Sand

Hugh Brody, dir. 270 min. Distributed by Face to Face Media, 2012.

Megan Biesele

First published: 26 May 2014 <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12106>

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The subject of this lengthy and affecting film is Africa's first land claim by and for a group of "Bushmen" (or "San"). The #Khomani San, like the more familiar Kalahari Desert San such as the G|ui, G||ana, !Xoo, and Naro of Botswana and Ju|'hoansi of Botswana and Namibia, are former foragers (hunter-gatherers). The #Khomani were evicted from their red dune lands in the far Northern Cape of South Africa in 1931 so the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (KGNP) could be created by the government.

After effectively disappearing into the mixed-race category of "coloured" under apartheid, the #Khomani eventually received lands in 1999 under the Restitution Laws of the new South African land-reform program. To do so, this no-longer-cohesive group, scattered for two generations, had to form a semblance of a community as defined by the Communal Property Associations Act adopted in South Africa after independence. With the help of human rights lawyer Roger Chennells of Cape Town, this complex and unwieldy group elected a representative committee and worked with nongovernment organizations, development personnel, linguists, and anthropologists to hold negotiations with the South African government. Between 1995 and 1998, they pushed for land use rights to the KGNP (now known as the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, KTP), which in April of 1999 became a "peace park," combining the Kalahari Gemsbok Park areas of South Africa and Botswana. The total size of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is 37,991 square kilometers. The #Khomani won their land claim in two phases in 1999 and 2002, gaining 36,000 hectares of farmland outside of the park and 25,000 hectares in the Transfrontier Park.

The film traces the story of the land claim and its complex local effects through six major segments, titled "Overture," "Before the Land Claim," "Aftermath," "Interviews," "Gallery" (made up of photographs), and "Locator Map." "Overture" sets the tone with joyous scenes of return to the land—but a few of the #Khomani commentators appear slightly drunk, which calls attention in a nonjudgmental way to underlying complications, setting up some productive wondering in the viewer. The central portion of the film is devoted to "Before the Land Claim," which is further broken up into the subsections "Evictions," "Language,"

"Making Maps," and "Tree Stories." "Before the Land Claim" presents complicated interactions between, on the one hand, prehistory and cultural expectations (as seen in attitudes toward language and old stories) and, on the other hand, the background of the whole claim process. These involve grim evictions from the land as well as the community map making and other efforts that led to the reversal of evictions and to the settlement. The mapping was a kind of Rorschach that gave each participant a chance to tell the story in his or her own way, from different positions in genealogy and geography. It outlines the critical oral-history process of creating a new community from the fragmented genealogies and geographical affiliations of the hunter-gatherer groups evicted from their lands by apartheid and by parks designation processes. "Tree Stories" demonstrates the connectedness of the #Khomani to specific growing species and sites on their much-loved land. "Aftermath," viewed toward the end by what may now be a newly sophisticated audience, shows how the contradictions between different #Khomani speakers, and between #Khomani speakers and outsiders, all flatten into the same ethnography—that of the massively complex phenomenon of the land claim.

The final segments of the film are accessible on computer and include a photo gallery of people who appear in the film and a locator map. These "still" components are research tools providing other entries to the material and to the experience and do not interfere with the main video component conveyed quietly but dramatically in "Overture," "Before the Land Claim," and "Aftermath."

Robert Fleming Puckett, in his thesis entitled "The Strange Case of the Landed Poor" (Puckett 2013), makes the point that in attempting to restore land to the dispossessed after independence, South Africa sought at the same time to

inculcate the ideals of South Africa's dominant agropastoral-based society into defined, cohesive land-recipient "communities." These ideals include centralized, hierarchical, representative, democratic leadership and decision-making structures that the West takes for granted. However, these concepts of control are not typically found among foraging or post-foraging peoples, who tend to base their societies on decentralized, small-group, egalitarian social structures that strongly oppose hierarchies, representation, or accumulation. Such social organization remains intact even after these groups become settled or adopt non-hunting-and-gathering livelihoods. [Puckett 2013:3]

VOLUME 116 • NUMBER 2 • JUNE 2014

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION



[Volume116, Issue2](#)

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