

Hailom engagement with land and the environment: Livelihood challenges at Tsintsabis resettlement farm, Namibia

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ABSTRACT Land is a complex issue. Ascribed economic, utilitarian, social and cultural values often conflict, challenging people's livelihoods and their connection with land. In this paper, we explore contemporary land dynamics at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm, Oshikoto Region, Namibia, and how these dynamics shape the engagement of Hailom people with their environment. Many Hailom suffered a history of land dispossession, including their eviction from the Etosha National Park. Since Namibian Independence (1990), most struggle to sustain themselves, mainly relying on social grants and food aid. In the subsequent national resettlement scheme, group resettlement farms were established with the aim for self-sufficiency through small-scale agriculture. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork and sensorial mapping, we use Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' to analyse Hailom changed relationships with their interwoven natural and social environment. This perspective emphasises that humans and their environment are interconnected and interdependent. However, we argue that droughts, a lack of land rights, and illegal land deals challenge the ability of Hailom to sustain themselves in this resettlement scheme that is largely based on agriculture.

KEYWORDS agriculture; dwelling; environment; Hailom; land; livelihoods; Namibia; resettlement

INTRODUCTION

In addition to land's economic and utilitarian value, serving as a crucial resource for people's livelihoods, it also holds important social and cultural value (Koot & Büscher 2019, Pascual et al. 2023). All of these ascribed values to land play various roles in the lives of Hailom at the Tsintsabis

resettlement farm, Namibia. The Hailom of north-central Namibia—usually considered part of the larger, southern African, indigenous¹ 'Bushmen' or 'San' group²—have suffered a long history of dispossession and oppression that is closely connected with the loss of their ancestral lands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including their eviction from the Etosha National Park (Dieckmann

¹ The term 'indigenous' has no universally accepted definition because it is impossible to constitute an inclusive or comprehensive definition for the diversity of the peoples it tries to describe (Daes 1996). Explaining the discussions around the concept is beyond the scope of this paper. We use the term because it often informs government and development policy decision-making, influencing the lives of peoples who are recognised as indigenous, including Hailom. For broader debates about indigeneity see special issues in *Anthropology Today* 2000 16 (4) and 2004 20 (2), *Social Anthropology* 2006 14 (1) and *Current Anthropology* 2004 45 (2) and 2006 47 (1). Namibia signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007 and several other international agreements that affirm its values (IWGIA, n.d.). Despite this, the government denies special Indigenous status to any group in the country (Sapignoli & Hitchcock 2013).

² Both terms 'Bushmen' and 'San' have derogatory and patronising elements (Gordon & Douglas 2000). Nonetheless, they "signify important identity markers of belonging to the larger regional group that shares cultural similarities and experiences of marginalization" (Koot et al. 2023). When applicable, we use their own language group names such as !Xung or Hailom.

2007). Their traditional livelihood as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers was thereby constrained. Despite Namibian Independence in 1990, many Haillom still struggle to sustain themselves, mainly relying on social grants and food aid.

We focus on Haillom because of their historical connection with land in this area. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on seasonal mobility. They did this in the area between present-day Outjo, Etosha National Park, Grootfontein, Tsumeb, Otavi, Otjiwarongo and former Owamboland (Dieckmann 2007). Although today Haillom live quite scattered, historically they are strongly connected to the Etosha National Park and its surroundings (Suzman 2004, Vogelsang 2005, Dieckmann 2007, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). Long before Namibia became a German colony in 1884, Haillom dwelt in this area (Suzman 2004, Vogelsang 2005, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). In 1907, German colonial authorities established 'Game Reserve No 2', a wildlife reserve that would later develop into Etosha National Park (Dieckmann 2021, Odendaal & Hebinck 2021). At first, Haillom were allowed to stay in the park. However, in 1954—while Namibia was a South African mandate—they were forcibly removed to accommodate the wish of tourists for 'pristine' wilderness and the desires of key officials to realise Etosha's full tourist potential (Suzman 2004, Barnard 2019). Thereafter, a small number of Haillom remained to work for the park (Dieckmann 2007, Hitchcock 2015). Most were, however, pushed into (low) wage labour at white commercial farms or had to resettle to 'Ovamboland', at that time a Bantustan³ (Gordon & Douglas 2000, Suzman 2004, Hitchcock 2015, Barnard 2019, Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Odendaal 2024).

Following Namibia's independence in 1990, resettlement became a key strategy in the broader land reform programme aimed at addressing extreme land inequality and rural poverty, particularly among historically marginalised groups (Koot & ||Khumûb 2024). Many Haillom

were consequently resettled from white commercial farms to 'group resettlement farms' bought by the Namibian government as compensation for the loss of their land (Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act, 1995). Group resettlement farms aim to redress historical land dispossession by promoting self-sufficiency through agriculture, to reduce pressure on communal areas, and to integrate resettled people into the national economy. Despite policies such as the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act of 1995 and the National Resettlement Policy of 2001, the resettlement programme has hardly benefitted Haillom due to poor implementation, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional support, and unresolved social complexities, including at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm (Harring & Odendaal 2007, Koot & ||Khumûb 2024). Furthermore, ethnic discrimination and tensions also still play an influential role in post-apartheid Namibia (e.g. Taylor 2008). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, including sensorial mapping, by Wahedi and a longitudinal ethnographic engagement by Koot, we interrogated contemporary land dynamics in Tsintsabis, and how these dynamics shape Haillom livelihoods and their engagement with their interwoven natural and social environment.

The paper contributes to the existing literature an analysis of the 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 2000) in the context of contemporary land and resettlement dynamics in Namibia. More specifically, it advances the concept of 'lodging' that builds on dwelling (Koot & van Beek 2017).⁴ The two interconnected concepts both refer to the ways people connect with their environment (see below). In particular the more political concept of lodging—that focuses on relations of power and domination—has been used in the context of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Namibia (Koot et al. 2016, Koot & van Beek 2017), but never in an empirical context about land reform and resettlement.

In this paper, we elaborate on the meaning of dwelling and lodging and on the methodology. Next, we describe our results which show evolving

³ Bantustans or homelands were allocated land established by the apartheid government that different black ethnic groups were forcibly moved into (Evans 2014). These settlement areas were subject to minimal state planning and provision while self-governance was highly promoted, which led to inequalities on multiple levels (e.g., social, economic, political) that still exist until this day.

⁴ Lodging should not be mixed up with 'sojourning', in the sense that lodging refers to long-term changes in the environment, while sojourners are people who physically move to another place (i.e. environment) for a demarcated time, e.g. for labour or study (Cook-Martin 2024).

processes of dwelling and lodging among the Haillom of Tsintsabis. Lastly, we analyse these findings and iterate our main argument, namely that Haillom hardly stand a chance of achieving a sustainable livelihood based on the current resettlement model which is based on agriculture.

Dwelling and lodging

We analyse the land dynamics in Tsintsabis largely through the dwelling perspective as introduced by Tim Ingold (2000). In the dwelling perspective, there is an ongoing engagement with the land—or, rather, with the total environment, including everything that happens on the land—and the human and non-human beings that ‘dwell’ there. This perspective allows us to interrogate the complex relationship between people and how they relate to their interwoven natural and social environments. When defining the perspective, Ingold (2000 p. 153) writes that it

treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. From this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity.

Dwelling thus acknowledges how humans constantly (re)structure their environment and themselves through interaction with their surroundings while simultaneously being (re)shaped by the everchanging world and its inhabitants. Dwelling is the “active, practical and perceptual engagement” of humans and other organisms with their environment while being intrinsically enmeshed in the world around them (Ingold 2000 p. 42). Here, ‘environment’ means “that which surrounds” (Ingold 1992 p. 40), encompassing everything around a living being.

We focus on the political aspect of the dwelling perspective to analyse contemporary land dynamics at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm by using the concept of ‘lodging’ (Ingold 2005, Koot et al. 2016 p. 498). Lodging highlights a condition in which people have to adapt to changes or new circumstances in their environment that are mostly “beyond their control and did not happen as a result of their interaction with [their]

environment”. Of course, this applies to all people in varying degrees. But since Haillom in Tsintsabis are essentially forced to live in an environment that is largely controlled by outside forces (e.g. changing circumstances under colonialism, the resettlement policy under land reform or climate change), lodging is highly applicable here, and this case may serve as an example of other peoples’ experiences of lodging elsewhere. As a result of their current marginalised and mostly landless status, and the ongoing process of land grabbing specifically (see below), Haillom in Tsintsabis continue to adapt to a changing environment that is mostly disadvantaging them. Although they have always adapted to new circumstances, contemporary changes in land dynamics mean they need to further adjust their way of life largely to external factors, becoming ‘lodgers’ in a continually changing ecological and political situation.

METHODS

Case Study

Tsintsabis is located in the Oshikoto Region and Guinas Constituency, about 65 kilometres north of Tsumeb. As explained to Koot over the years, a possible meaning of the word ‘Tsintsabis’ is ‘sneeze a lot’, likely due to some people experiencing serious grass allergies. From 1993 until 2012 the number of inhabitants had grown from a population of 841 to between 3 000 and 4 000 people, largely because of in-migration (GRN 2010, Dieckmann et al. 2013). Currently, no updated numbers on Tsintsabis’ population exist. A government official estimated in an interview with Wahedi in 2024 that around 600 households reside there which comes down to—when using the government’s average of five persons per household—around 3 000 inhabitants. However, we have frequently come across much bigger households. Tsintsabis differs to some extent from other resettlement farms in the sense that it did not solely serve as a commercial farm before it became a group resettlement farm. Instead, the area was also a police station under German and South African rule, later turning into a South African Defence Force (SADF) military base during the Namibian War of Independence (Koot & ||Khumûb 2024).

Most group resettlement farms in Namibia are focused on small-scale farming for self-sufficiency,

but in Tsintsabis—as well as many other resettlement farms—not much agricultural activity is happening. Haillom in Tsintsabis generally rely on social grants (e.g. old-age, disability, and child grants) and food aid from the government (Dieckmann et al. 2013, Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Hashange 2023). Furthermore, there is a lack of other income-generating activities and several development initiatives that were introduced did not make a lasting change. Finally, the resettlement farm gave way to more land issues such as illegal land deals and the privatisation of land formerly used as common land, increasing pressure on many Haillom to survive (Koot & Hitchcock 2019, Sankwasa 2023).

Haillom have no ownership or rights over the resettlement farm, which remains state property (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia 1990). Although leasehold agreements—part of the Namibian government’s resettlement policy strategy—could bring some tenure security in Tsintsabis, the government has not yet put them in place (Odendaal 2024). Haillom in Tsintsabis consequently cannot claim ownership over any land.

On 31 July 2020, a part of the Tsintsabis resettlement farm was officially declared a settlement (Simasiku 2020, NBC 2020). The Regional Council Office for the Guinas Constituency began searching for a new location after the establishment of a new constituency caused the old office to fall outside of Guinas.⁵ Since there is a tarred road running straight through Tsintsabis, it was considered the best option for a new office. The status of resettlement farm, however, does not allow for certain construction activities. For a Regional Council Office and the accompanying facilities to be established, Tsintsabis has therefore partially been declared a settlement. The greater part of Tsintsabis remains a resettlement farm. It is yet unclear what these developments will mean for the Haillom and other inhabitants (Koot & IlKhumûb 2024).

Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews

Wahedi’s fieldwork is at the heart of the empirical findings of this paper. For a period of seven months

(November 2023–June 2024) she conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tsintsabis, immersed herself into everyday life and held interviews with Haillom in Tsintsabis, government officials and persons involved in the local school and clinic. Most interviews were conducted in English. The interviews held in Afrikaans—a language Wahedi learned several years before going to Namibia—were conducted and translated by her without the use of an interpreter or translator. Interviews in Khoekhoegowab were done with the help of an interviewee’s close relative who served as translator during the interview. Koot has lived, worked, and conducted research in Tsintsabis since 1999, with multiple return visits. This includes working there as a development fieldworker between 2002 and 2007. He also conducted more research about land and conservation in Southern Africa, including among other San groups.

Sensorial mapping

Due to the central focus on land in the paper, Wahedi also used ‘sensorial mapping’. Sensorial mapping is one way to acknowledge the politics of spatial demarcations and provide the opportunity for open debates about land. The method creates insights into perceptions of spaces, places, boundaries, and borders and how people relate to these (Rekacewicz, pers. com., 2023 & 2025). It is an important method for this paper, because the relation with land is subjective, something that is often not acknowledged in conventional maps (Pickles 2003, Crampton 2009, Wood & Fels 2009, Kitchin et al. 2013).

Wahedi asked participants individually to draw maps of Tsintsabis on a blank A4-paper with colouring pencils to see what kind of feelings and sensations Haillom associate with Tsintsabis and the on-going land dynamics taking place there. After a participant drew a map, it was followed up with an interview. There is no fixed outcome because the maps take shape based on the artistic expression of an individual or a group. The resulting visual maps show spaces or territories not only through visualised objects but also, in the subsequent interviews or informal talks during the drawing, through the feelings and sensations one can experience when moving around in these spaces or territories (Rekacewicz, pers. com., 2023

⁵ Namibia is not only divided into regions but also into electoral constituencies, political units with local councillors representing voters living in that constituency (Republic of Namibia 1990).

& 2025). The maps are visualisations explaining partly how Haillom dwell in the world.

DWELLING AND LODGING PRACTICES

Although we focused predominantly on land, this strongly relates to other important issues that kept coming up (e.g. water, ownership, relations with other people, flora and fauna or the government). We are aware that these terms may have different meanings for different people. Especially land is a crucial term and in relation to the environment, it means something different than ‘environment’ as used in the dwelling perspective. Land is often treated as a two-dimensional economic resource with a variety of legal tenure systems, while the environment refers to an all-encompassing surrounding. Indigenous groups like the Haillom, after many years of colonisation, oppression and marginalisation, have now often internalised hybrid values and meanings, including those of their (former) oppressors (Koot & Büscher 2019). Furthermore, a concept like ownership can also be interpreted in multiple ways, since historically Khoi-San groups in southern Africa have often been described as egalitarian, living in a culture in which those who have more are expected to share with those who have less (Sahlins 1972). However, today when people say they do (not) own something, for instance a piece of land, it is often framed as owning in a Western-based, legal manner. This aligns well with Gluckman’s (1969) idea of a ‘bundle of rights’, in which land tenure is not considered an indivisible right of ownership but a collection of distinct, separable rights held by different actors. These include, among others, the right to use (e.g. cultivation or residence), to exclude others, to sell, to inherit or to derive income from the land. Such highly fragmented tenure arrangements imply that one person might farm a plot while another holds the legal title, and a third controls water access. Colonial, state, or market interventions have reshaped rights, often marginalising customary users who lose control.

Erfes as safe havens amid land insecurity

Land in Tsintsabis—and on group resettlement farms in general—is officially vested in the government. The idea behind the land reform programme is that people on resettlement farms lease the land from the government but as mentioned above, leasehold agreements have not

yet been arranged (Odendaal 2024). When it comes to land, Haillom in Tsintsabis generally differentiate between an ‘erf’ and a plot. In Southern Africa, erf—adopted from the Afrikaans word ‘piece of land’—refers to

every piece of land registered as an erf, lot, plot or stand in a deeds registry, and includes every defined portion, not intended to be a public place, of a piece of land laid out as a township, whether or not it has been formally recognized, approved or proclaimed as such (Deeds Registries Act, 1937 p. cclxxii).

Haillom in Tsintsabis, however, use the word erf for the relatively small piece of land they reside on that automatically comes with a house. Although important for people, they are not subject to illegal land deals. The ten hectares of land allocated by the government to engage in self-sufficient, small-scale farming—for example crop cultivation or livestock farming—are referred to as plots and are generally situated away from the houses (Koot & IlKhumûb 2024). The first erfes in Tsintsabis were allocated together with a plot but new generations, especially current younger generations, are generally not granted an erf, let alone a plot. Yet, even if someone is allocated a plot, productivity tends to be low, although Tsintsabis inhabitants generally want to cultivate them. We were told that the plots are too far away from the houses, which makes it challenging to be productive. In addition to the distance, a lack of close water sources, tools and equipment pose major hindrances. Therefore, food provision and income generation through agriculture is very limited.

Moreover, illegal trade of plots is a big issue in Tsintsabis. Since the land is government property, people cannot legally sell or lease their allocated land to others. If Haillom do not use the land, they need to return it to the government for redistribution. A government official explained:

[...] the Ministry of the Land Division [Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform] is responsible for the whole farm, the [re]settlement farm. Anything happens in the farm, it has to go through the Land Division under the Ministry of Agriculture. [...] If you cannot manage the plot, you are given the condition that you should surrender it back so that it can be

given to another person. You cannot sell it, you can only surrender it back to the ministry so that the ministry can allocate it to another beneficiary (Interview, 15-04-2024).

The issue of illegal land deals was officially recognised by the government and inhabitants of Tsintsabis were urged to refrain from engaging in this (Terblanché 2023). However, illegal land deals continue and several people told Wahedi that their plots were sold by others without their knowledge. For example, a young woman said: “Some are selling people’s plots and their lands without letting the owner know (Interview, 24-year-old female, 08-04-2024)”. An important issue in this is ethnicity and in some cases illiteracy:

[Hailom] were told that [the headman and another tribe] are just going to rent for a certain period but the next thing they know they sold the plot. There is evidence, they signed. Just because they do not know how to read and write, that is how they were robbed (Interview, 31-year-old male, 03-04-2024)

Illegal land deals have made it difficult to reclaim land for inhabitants of Tsintsabis. People who bought it feel entitled to the land and the government does not return it to the rightful owners. As a result, many of the interviewees feel they are losing land again. Initially, Hailom hardly had any resources to farm the land so instead the land was still used communally, to gather wild foods and firewood. Since many plots were traded illegally, there is hardly any space for them to still dwell on land in that way. Creating an informally shared land where they could decide for themselves how to dwell was their way of adapting as lodgers in an environment shaped by government regulations, but now their circumstances continue to change severely due to illegal land trade. This change makes Hailom dwell less and lodge even more. Not only have they lost land again, but it has also led them to prefer staying at their erf. They feel as if they cannot go anywhere without trespassing other lands in and around Tsintsabis and therefore they developed a fear of prosecution when they go anywhere. Finally, most people already did not have resources to own livestock before, but without a plot they find it even more difficult to consider

holding livestock a serious livelihood option. This also causes problems within the living area of Tsintsabis because cattle often roam the streets and sometimes enter people’s erfs, destroying their plants or crops.

So today, Hailom generally prefer to dwell in or around their houses. They see their erfs as a safe haven where they have the freedom to do as they please. Instead of merely lodging in an environment dictated by government expectations, environmental pressures, and lack of resources, erfs allow Hailom to decide for themselves how to dwell; it is a place they still have some control over. One of people’s favourite ways to pass time around the house is cleaning their erf. They take pride in having clean and well-maintained erfs, as exemplified by the following interview excerpts:

I like to stay in a clean place. I do not like to stay in dirty places. [...] I do not want to stay in dirty places. Then I do not feel nice. [...] I have to clean it so that it can look nice. And I like plants. I have to plant something like this (Interview, 35-year-old woman, 11-04-2024).

What I like a lot in the first place; I am a hardworking man so I love making a garden. That is one thing I like a lot. I like to not stay around dirt, so my ground must be clean. That is what I like. I love flowers, I like it a lot to have flowers in my garden (Interview, 59-year-old male, 23-04-2024).

Cleaning one’s erf can be seen as a way for Hailom people to exercise some control and sustain a relationship with their immediate surroundings. One Hailom inhabitant told Wahedi, when asked why his garden looked so lovely with many blooming flowers: “So that my heart can also feel beautiful because my garden looks beautiful” (Pers. com., 24 April 2024).

Those who live near a water source tend to plant limes or mangos at their erf. There was a time when the government offered free water through a tap. An elderly woman mentioned having fruit trees during that time but after she had to start paying for water herself, all the trees died. Therefore, for most interviewees the rainy season is the only time to cultivate crops or other plants. However, during Wahedi’s fieldwork, many did not bother to plant

because the rain came late and was unpredictable. Another limiting factor for planting is the very sandy soil.

Despite these limitations, some inhabitants of Tsintsabis still manage to grow fruit trees and crops successfully, such as guava, maize, beans, butternut, and various fruits. Haillom in Tsintsabis who plant take pride in this. It is their way to show that even though they are lodgers in an environment shaped largely by forces beyond their influence such as lack of water or poor soil quality, they have some impact, resilience and the ability to engage in self-sustaining activities.

Haillom in Tsintsabis know the names of numerous plants and trees in and around Tsintsabis and many enjoy going out to the fields or bushes to gather wild foods such as mushrooms, Makalani nuts, marula fruits or nuts, and a variety of berries. However, the designation of private plots in Tsintsabis and farms surrounding Tsintsabis is one of the reasons why people fear trouble when they move away from their own erf. Some have called Tsintsabis a ‘corridor’ because they feel they are only allowed to dwell in this small, narrow, empty space where access to land becomes increasingly limited. Once they set foot on any land outside of this corridor, they run the risk of being prosecuted for trespassing. The lack of ‘legal space’ discourages Haillom from engaging in activities such as gathering wild foods and firewood. This does not mean they do not engage in these activities anymore at all. Although people in Tsintsabis generally disapprove of hunting cattle owned by others, a few sometimes secretly catch a cow at another farm to satisfy their hunger (including by selling parts of the meat), but not without fear. One woman explained one could be killed for gathering or hunting on someone else’s property.

With few exceptions, Haillom do not own cattle or goats but some have chickens as a small economic leverage: “I just bought [chickens] for my girl since I am unemployed. If she will need something, I sell [the male cocks] and then I will just buy for her what she need[s] (Interview, 25-year-old female, 04-04-2024)”. Using an animal to fall back on during economically difficult times reveals how Haillom’s dwelling is interconnected with changing environments. Today, markets and domestic animals are essential to survive in Tsintsabis.

Although Haillom are generally grateful for the small quantity of land they can live on, they are highly aware of their status as a landless people. The fact that Tsintsabis remains government-owned is a constant reminder about lost freedoms and a lack of rights. Most consider this unjust based on their long history in the area and the loss of their ancestral land.

Water scarcity and livelihood challenges

Drought and the resulting water scarcity is difficult to ignore in Tsintsabis. It hardly rained during Wahedi’s fieldwork, even though she arrived at the beginning of the rainy season of 2024 (which runs from November to April). The first rains only fell in the week of 18 December and in March people gave up on the rain, removing dead crops such as maize. She heard many complaints, including: “The sun is killing us,” “The heat is killing us” or “I am evaporating” (Pers. com., 15 November 2023; 16 November 2023; 2 April 2024 respectively). 2023 was indeed an extremely hot and dry year in southern Africa, and the drought was internationally declared a humanitarian and environmental crisis for which the Namibian government declared a state of emergency (Joint Research Centre 2024, FAO 2024, Goreses 2024, WFP 2024). This affects how people dwell in Tsintsabis and their sense of agency over the activities they can undertake. When Wahedi asked a woman about the consequences, she was told that instead of combining maize porridge with leafy greens, butternut or beans, they only eat a smaller portion of maize porridge once a day. Furthermore, bush fruits have become smaller and not as sweet as they used to. It is evident that Haillom are living in an environment that is also shaped by environmental changes that create immense pressures, making them lodgers due to their decreasing options to relate to the land. They hope for the best when planting crops or gathering fruits, but uncertainty prevails.

Hope was also visible on the sensorial maps. A few people included the Ovambo River, filled with water, next to Tsintsabis in their drawings. Usually the Ovambo is dry, only flowing after heavy rainfall. Wahedi asked her interlocutors when they last saw the river flowing and answers varied. Some told her it was 2010, others 2015 or 2016, again others told her 2019 or 2020, and some claimed to have seen the river flow last year (i.e.

2023).⁶ Regardless of the year they mentioned, people have fond memories of the river. They not only perceive it as a source of food and water but also as a source of recreation. In Figure 1 a middle-aged woman has drawn a person and fish swimming in the river.

The only affordable source of water are boreholes where water must be manually pumped, most of them provided by the faith-based non-profit organisation Living Water International and some by the Namibian government. This water is used for everyday consumption, including drinking, cooking, washing dishes, bathing, laundry, watering plants and trees, and so on. These boreholes are vital because other sources of water



Figure 1 Excerpt of a sensorial map drawn by a middle-aged woman which shows the Ovambo River with a person and fish swimming in the river.

⁶ In 2025 the river flowed again.

⁷ We prefer not to name this group, because it is not our intention to contribute to potential ethnic tensions.

are unaffordable or unsanitary. Even though Tsintsabis inhabitants gratefully use them every day, several factors contribute to dissatisfaction. First, the boreholes are relatively far from most people's homes, making it an exhausting task to fetch water. Second, the quality of the water is a concern: most of it tastes salty or sour and some people mentioned becoming sick, while others saw worms in the water: "Water is not even purified, sometimes you get sick because the water comes straight from the borehole with germs and all that (Interview, 25-year-old male, 02-04-2024)". Third, people are often forced to wait long at the boreholes and fourth, the boreholes often break and have to be fixed by people themselves. Their dependence on badly maintained boreholes underscores the position of Hailom as lodgers whose agency is limited due to external forces, compelling them into a precarious position without the guarantee of clean water, a basic need for survival.

Belonging and purpose despite inter-ethnic tensions

Most interviewees in Tsintsabis indicated they prefer the company of other Hailom because they share the same culture and language. Some share friendships or romantic relationships with members of other ethnic groups. Yet, dwelling with other Hailom provides a sense of belonging and safety based on a shared cultural identity in an environment heavily shaped by others. Despite also having positive experiences in inter-ethnic relations, they generally feel further oppressed by a group that is more dominant in Tsintsabis, again making them more lodgers than dwellers.

Tsintsabis currently houses people from various ethnic groups and many Hailom blame non-Hailom groups for the misfortunes in Tsintsabis. One group is particularly present and Hailom in Tsintsabis are not fond of them.⁷ Hailom blame this group for high unemployment rates among themselves and accuse the others of nepotism. On multiple occasions, Hailom claimed that they were only considered for jobs during election times to win their votes. The other ethnic group is also partially blamed for the lack of land for younger Hailom generations.

A major concern among Haillom is the number of shebeens (informal shops where many people purchase alcoholic drinks too) in Tsintsabis and its negative effects, which they largely attribute to the other ethnic group (see also Koot & †Khumûb, 2024). Interviewees consider shebeens to be facilitators of nuisance and school dropouts and, except for one, all shebeen owners in Tsintsabis belong to this other group. Drinking at shebeens is a common habit in Tsintsabis among all generations and ethnic groups. Some visitors of shebeens explained they drink because of an absence of purpose and this way they adapt to the unpromising environment of Tsintsabis: many Haillom perceive their predicament as hopeless, which again emphasises their status as lodgers in an environment shaped by land insecurity, economic and environmental constraints, and detrimental government regulations and support. Nonetheless, shebeens also function as important social places. Some people told Wahedi that shebeens offer a purpose, a reason to dress up, go out, and socialise with others.

So, despite articulations of hopelessness, many interviewees also pointed out various examples of activities and happenings that give them purpose. Some find purpose, for example, by attending workshops or doing jobs. This is their way to adapt as lodgers to the changing, foreign environment. Through workshops and jobs, Haillom hope to become more self-sufficient. A popular job is working at farms in the vicinity. Wahedi once asked a young woman how much she was paid after receiving her money at the end of a month full of farmwork. She eventually received N\$1 200, including working overtime.⁸ Some young men who were spending their time drunk at one of the shebeens told Wahedi they were very happy with the money they received whenever they were able to do a farm job. Wahedi asked them whether they find the pay enough but they were seemingly surprised by the question, emphasising they are very satisfied with the wage and find it enough to provide themselves with the wants and needs in their life whenever they have the opportunity to work.

Finally, most Haillom remain hopeful for the future and are actively working on fulfilling their life

desires, something that was often revealed on the sensorial maps. Almost all participants included their desires for Tsintsabis in their maps on their own initiative. They created maps in accordance with an idealised image of their surroundings. Some of these images were shaped by a combination of nostalgia and hopes for the future. For example, people would include the Treesleeper campsite intended for tourists although it is currently largely defunct (Koot et al. 2020). Others drew a building designated as a community hall and referred to it as ‘the community centre’ despite an inhabitant having claimed it as her home. Another image included a building that, according to the drawer, was called the ‘bakery’. This used to be a thriving development project, but operations had come to a halt around 2003. All these places have in common that they represent a desire for a thriving community, benefitting their members. Finally, soccer was often mentioned as a favourite activity, for various reasons. It is often perceived as a career opportunity, a prevention for or remedy against alcohol and drug abuse, a healthy activity, a way to build community, and a fun activity to keep oneself busy in a proper manner. A young man who explained that he would love to become a professional soccer player drew his favourite type of soccer field: green and with all the necessary lines as displayed on TV (see Figure 2). This contrasts with the soccer field in Tsintsabis which was sandy and lacked markings.

The new settlement status, explained above, also brought hope to many inhabitants, who consider it a chance to regain some control over their life. They expect many changes, for example, to receive more attention from the government and with that more support to improve their living conditions. Moreover, many whom Wahedi spoke to think that various services such as a postal office and banks will now move to Tsintsabis. This would relieve many inhabitants from costly trips to Tsumeb, while people also expect big shops to come to Tsintsabis that they hope will provide jobs for the largely unemployed Haillom, especially the youth. Additionally, Haillom perceive the settlement status as proof that Tsintsabis is ‘developing’, mirroring conventional, depoliticised development ideologies based on infrastructure and the growth of services (Ferguson 1990, Li 2007). The newly

⁸ In 2025 this is about 60 Euro.

built regional office, along with other buildings and services around it, are seen as markers of progress. This is also shown on the sensorial maps, where most interviewees focused on what they consider the ‘central’ part of Tsintsabis. Regardless of where people lived, their starting point when drawing was the tarred road that runs straight through Tsintsabis, followed by the police station, craft centre, regional office, Oshana bar, school, and clinic (see Figure 3). Many interviewees believe these places show that they are not stuck in time and are moving forward, just like other ‘developed’ places in and outside of Namibia. In Namibia, the bush is often associated with an inferior lifestyle, in contrast to ‘modernisation’ and/or ‘development’ that are associated with infrastructure and economic progress. It is symbolic in this regard that the school in Tsintsabis used the slogan ‘backwards never’, shown with a tree representing the bush, for many years, indicating how development and modernisation seem to dominate general ideas of progress. Changing circumstances can thus also instigate hope and future dreams, and although it implies a much stronger role for external forces, it is important to acknowledge that these forces also hold a certain attractiveness.

However, there is currently still a lot of uncertainty surrounding the declaration of Tsintsabis as a settlement. It is unclear to what extent Haillom have rights over the land they inhabit and whether they will be allowed to stay in Tsintsabis in the future, underscoring their position as lodgers in an

environment shaped by forces largely beyond their control. Additionally, people fear that the settlement will raise living costs and that some basic needs (e.g. water, housing) will not be free anymore: for instance, commercial operators like parastatal NamWater need to construct a sewage system. Therefore, many Haillom think a large number of people must move since most inhabitants of Tsintsabis do not have a sufficient income to sustain themselves in the environment of a settlement.

CONCLUSION

The land dynamics we describe here are the most important regarding Haillom’s relation with the environment in Tsintsabis based on their recurrence in conversations, interviews, observations and sensorial maps. The continuing ‘dispossession’ of land means an intensifying rupture with the former livelihood practices of Haillom and with their connection to the land. Many became landless and others continue to lose rights to land and access to resources. Because a lot of land tenure takes place in the informal and illegal spheres, while there are also formal rights that local and national authorities do not follow up upon, there is currently no clear right of ownership. Instead, in line with the idea of a bundle of rights, there is a collection of distinct, separable rights held by different actors (Gluckman 1969). This severely compromises Haillom’s quality of life and challenges their ability to sustain themselves. Over the last 35 years or so, the implementation of a resettlement programme in Tsintsabis has hardly

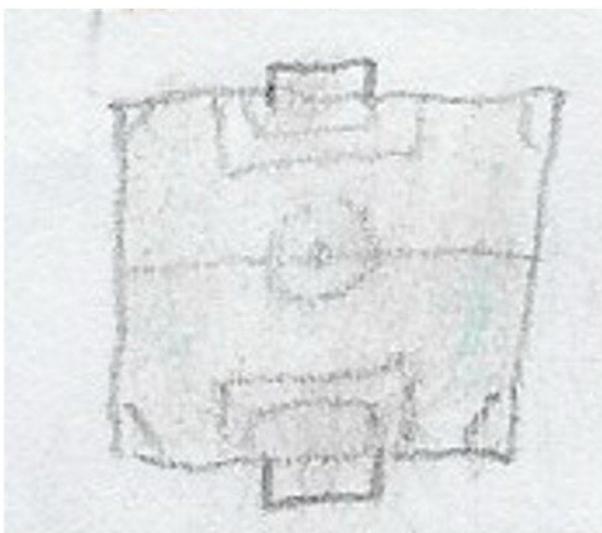


Figure 2 Excerpt of a sensorial map drawn by a young man which shows the soccer field with all the necessary lines as displayed on TV.

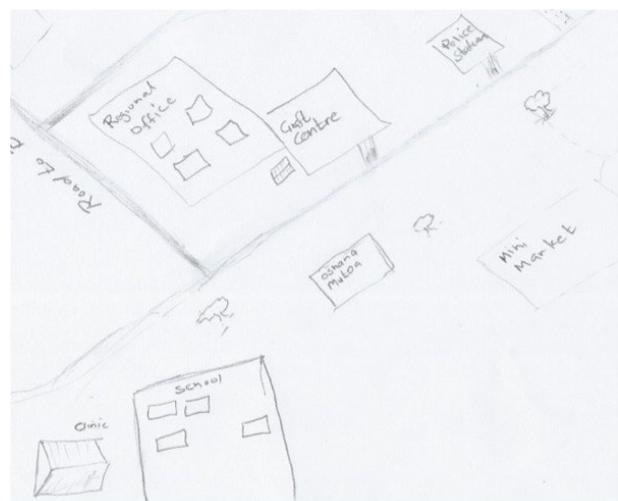


Figure 3 Sensorial map of Tsintsabis solely showing the ‘central’ part of Tsintsabis, including the tarred road, police station, craft centre, regional office, Oshana bar, school and clinic.

supported Haillom to overcome past injustices. In fact, the weak implementation of the resettlement scheme even exacerbated their current predicament, leading to more land issues that challenge their lives (e.g. illegal land trade). Haillom in Tsintsabis face numerous challenges that prevent them from successfully engaging in agricultural activities, including the distance to plots and a lack of accessible water. These constraints and more are not merely perceived by Haillom in Tsintsabis but have also been mentioned about other group resettlement farms in Namibia (Harring & Odendaal 2007, Gargallo 2010, Werner & Odendaal 2010, e.g. Dieckmann et al. 2013, Hitchcock 2015, Koot & ||Khumûb 2024, Odendaal 2024). The main issues are a lack of water sources, insufficient capital, little to no infrastructure, ineffective policies and policy implementation, and inadequate government support.

Thus, Haillom in Tsintsabis can hardly live a decent life based on self-sufficient agriculture. Ethnic tensions simultaneously worsen the problems as they continue to feel dominated by others (see also Koot 2023) and external forces. To be clear: this does not mean that Haillom are without agency, but it shows that ongoing changes in their environment generally further limit it. Haillom are especially disempowered regarding changes about land access, employment, or environmental pressures (e.g. droughts, changing rain patterns). Although well-intended, resettlement fails to offer secure land tenure and gives way to more problems, perpetuating the vulnerability and marginalisation of Haillom. They are pushed into a relatively passive lifestyle as lodgers, increasingly depending on aid and charity from outsiders to survive. Since independence, circumstances have changed rapidly and this may have intensified their status as lodgers instead of dwellers. Without disregarding the hope and future dreams that some developments also bring, the general tendency shows a precarious situation in which Haillom increasingly lose control over their environment. Similar to Haillom, many other indigenous groups are victims of historical as well as ongoing land appropriation and displacement (UNDESA 2021). Having no (access to) land consequently undermines the sovereignty of these groups. Haillom in Tsintsabis have experienced historical injustices that continue to disadvantage them today while changing circumstances intensify these

injustices further. We thus argue that Haillom hardly stand a chance of achieving a sustainable livelihood based on the current resettlement model based on agriculture.

Our research has shown the importance of including the Haillom's perceptions and ideas in addressing land injustices. Their own aspirations for the future are important in this regard, and an important suggestion for future research. Koot is currently involved in research specifically focused on such aspirations.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Both authors do not have a potential financial, personal and/or professional conflict of interest. The second author used to live and work at the Tsintsabis resettlement farm between 2002 and 2007, but he currently does not have other ties with the farm apart from social ones. Furthermore, he is an adviser for the Tsintsabis Trust, a community-based organisation that is responsible for the Treesleeper Camp in Tsintsabis. However, neither Treesleeper nor the Tsintsabis Trust are foci in this paper (albeit Treesleeper is mentioned briefly).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wahedi conducted her ethnographic fieldwork in Tsintsabis with permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Namibia, through a research permit. Both authors follow the ethical guidelines of the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (<https://www.nwo.nl/en/netherlands-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity>). We sincerely thank the Government of Namibia for providing permission to conduct research. Additionally, the two anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of Namibian Journal of the Environment all deserve credit for their very constructive engagements. Last but not least, we thank the inhabitants of Tsintsabis for their openness and welcoming attitude over the years.

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