

“Now that we have development”: Change and resilience among the Omaheke Ju|’hoansi, Namibia

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The paper addresses areas of encounters between former San hunter-gatherers who have lived as dispossessed farm workers or squatters for four generations, and a government that uses resettlement and formal education in an attempt to redress some of the injustices of the colonial and apartheid regimes. The case study focuses on a group of Ju|’hoansi and the impact of the Namibian government’s development initiatives to turn them into small-scale subsistence farmers on a resettlement farm. In a broader sense, the paper examines top-down development initiatives in the context of unequal power relations and seeks to explain the rationale behind the Ju|’hoansi’s responses to them.

Despite the government’s concentrated efforts to ‘develop’ the Ju|’hoansi and ‘take them out of the bush’, there is a strong continuation of traditional institutions, most notably in the sphere of kinship, gender relations, childrearing and economic subsistence. Kinship remains the single most important organizational principle in their society, and provides not only a sense of belonging and well-being but also bridges out to the outer world and offers a safety net and access to information and job opportunities. Hunting and gathering, while limited and non-sustainable, continue to play a role both in terms of diet supplementation and identity formation for many, whereas various attempts at farming are undermined by an inadequate land base and a number of social conflicts and animosity both between Ju|’hoan families and between Ju|’hoansi and others. The paper is an attempt to situate the Omaheke Ju|’hoansi in the wider field of post-forager studies by examining how the past informs their present and future.