



## Difference, Identity, and Access to Official Discourses

### Hai||om, “Bushmen,” and a Recent Namibian Ethnography

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**Abstract.** – Anthropology in southern Africa is conducted under a political climate charged with land and resource claims. Focusing on a recent ethnography of Namibian Hai||om, I explore the implications both of asserting the difference of the anthropological “other” in these circumstances, and of choices made regarding what constitutes the identity of “the other.” I celebrate publication of this monograph in a context in which anthropology increasingly is marginalised. However, I also question affirmation of a Hai||om identity which may be problematic in relation to constructed ideas of indigeneity and “Bushman-ness,” and the invoking of these in official discourses concerning land and institutional resources. [*Namibia, Hai||om, Khoe, “Bushmen,” immediate returns, public service anthropology, identity, official discourses*]

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### Introduction

It is both an exciting and depressing time to be involved in anthropological research in Namibia. Exciting, because independence, gained only in 1990, has provided the liberal research environment necessary for a revisionist anthropology to begin to displace the negative stereotyping produced by colonial, missionary, and apartheid-influenced ethnographic writings. Depressing, because at the moment when anthropology might fulfil

a potential to create public space for frequently unheard voices and perspectives, it is accorded less and less significance, as either a discipline in the education sector, or as a profession in staffing profiles (also see Gordon 2000). As Dr. Mafune, Head of the Dept. of Sociology at the University of Namibia (UNAM), expressed in his closing remarks at the recent (May 2000) Anthropological Association of Southern Africa annual conference hosted at UNAM, both the Department and the University expressed reservations about hosting the meeting based on doubts concerning the relevance of anthropology within Namibia today. It is heartening, therefore, to witness the publication of Thomas Widlok’s monograph “Living on Manggetti: “Bushman” Autonomy and Namibian Independence” (1999), devoted to recent ethnographic research of one of Namibia’s most little-researched and misrepresented people, the Hai||om (although at £ 48 a copy one wonders how accessible it will be to most Namibians). This article focuses on Widlok’s ethnography, which hereafter is referred to by page number only.

Reading Widlok’s monograph has raised a number of issues for myself as an anthropologist similarly working in Namibia with people, in this case Damara, whose history also is one of marginalisation in multiple contexts. As with Hai||om,<sup>1</sup> they

<sup>1</sup> Spellings of this ethnic term vary including Hai||om, Hei||om, Hei||um, Heikom, and Heikum. In this article I use Widlok’s spelling (Hai||om), except when discussing documents which use alternative spellings.