



Fig. 2: ǀAoni graveyard at [U]khaeb (central Namib desert). Esau Kooitjie's fresh grave in the foreground next to that of his wife.

because their form and function have been expanded beyond the interment itself. While formal marriages have been very few in recent decades (Dentlinger 1983: 155), the importance of funerals has increased. Today Nama funerals are invigorating social solidarity and a sense of belonging. It can be argued that funerals provide the necessary occasions for reviving the exchange relations on which Khoisan social groups rely (Klocke-Daffa in preparation). Today the funerals of chiefs, and those of other important members of the community such as schoolteachers or church elders, also create new life in terms of providing new venues for creating and appropriating cultural capital. It is problematic to present a generic account of "the ǀAoni funeral" because the position of the person being buried matters much more than in the Hai||om case. This emerges from the funeral of the old chief of the ǀAoni, Esau Kooitjie, which I witnessed in June 1996 and which I want to report on in some detail.

Until shortly before his death the old retired chief lived in the valley of the !Khuseb, a usually dry river that forms a linear oasis in the central Namib desert, the symbolical centre of the ǀAoni country.² Most settlements along the !Khuseb

have a graveyard which is still in use (Fig. 2) but the ǀAoni also bury their dead at the coastal towns. Old Chief Esau Kooitjie died of natural causes on June 7, 1996, having been very weak for a number of months. After being looked after for some weeks in the coastal town of Walvis Bay, he passed away in the home of his son, the present chief of the ǀAoni. As is now commonly the case among the ǀAoni, a professional undertaker was involved in conducting the funeral, making it possible for the body to be kept (in refrigeration) for two weeks, and allowing the present chief to prepare the funeral. The involvement of undertakers among the ǀAoni is in striking contrast to funerals held among "San" groups in Namibia. Since funerals are the only remaining communal ritual that regularly brings the ǀAoni of the !Khuseb together, much preparation and finance goes into its "proper" ceremonial form. The undertakers provide the usual European style paraphernalia (hearse, coffin, even layers of artificial lawn are laid out on the burial grounds in the !Khuseb which usually lack any trace of green). The closest relatives of the deceased nevertheless carry out much of the organization. In this case the present chief, as son of the old chief, held the focal position in the funeral. He had to make use of his material resources as well as of his network of social relations to carry out the preparations and the event itself. A large number of visitors had to be informed and had to be fed after the ceremony. The funeral was to take place at [U]khaeb (Soutri-*vier*) where the wife of the deceased was already buried. The place is situated about 20 kilometres downstream from the last residence of the chief.

² This article only deals with the southern branch of the ǀAoni, leaving aside another quite separate group living in some distance to the north around Sesfontein (for a sketch of the situation at Sesfontein see Fuller 1993: 65). At this stage the Nama name "ǀAoni" and the Afrikaans name "Topnaar" are both acceptable to the people of the !Khuseb. However, as part of the cultural heritage discourse there is a tendency now to prefer the former and to use it more frequently in public discourse than in the past.