

## **Namaqualand – A Short History of Nearly Everything**

*By Berit Kostka*

With a big roar the bus that took me all the way from Cape Town pulled away from the stop at the TOTAL garage. There I was, in the pitch black darkness of the early morning hours in Springbok and did not have the faintest idea of what I would have to expect. The only vague information I had about Springbok was from story-telling friends and a picture I had spotted in a previous issue of the SM-Times. With so little mental preparation done I could not wait to see what kind of environment I just got immersed into and what its inhabitants would be like. But for now I had to leave my curiosity unsatisfied - an answer to these questions could only be found when the sun rose over the unofficial capital of Namaqualand several hours later.

Stepping out of the hotel, squinting my eyes in the bright sunlight I finally could take a first look at the new surroundings. The first impression was that Springbok did not look like anything I had imagined. Not that I had any imaginations in the first place! Walking along the main street some buildings vaguely reminded me of the towns of the Wild West era in the United States 150 year ago. Behind them I could see reddish rocky hills and outcrops rising, only scarcely dotted with shrubs. This was the succulent karoo of Namaqualand, famous for its unrivalled wealth and diversity of succulents and wildflowers during spring-time, stretching for miles and miles on either side of the road to Goegap Nature Reserve.

But where in South Africa is Namaqualand situated? It lies in the west of South Africa and is part of southern Africa's Karoo-Namib region, which can be divided into three subregions: The Namib Desert, the Nama-Karoo and the Succulent Karoo. The latter reaches from Klawer and Loeriesfontein in the south via the vicinity of Springbok and Steinkopf in

the east all the way into Namibia to the coast just north of Lüderitz. There are five geographic regions in Namaqualand, according to the distinctive landscape and climate of each one. From the south to the north these are the Knersvlakte with its broad flat plains, the central Hardeveld comprising granite hills, the vast sandy expanse of the Sandveld along the coast, the high mountains of the Kamiesberg region and, in the north-west, the Richtersveld with its mountain deserts and arid plains. The succulent karoo of Namaqualand is a winter-rainfall desert which is unusual among the other deserts of the world. The annual precipitation ranges from around 50mm on the coast to about 300mm in the Kamiesberg. Temperatures can soar as high as 45°C during summer but also drop to freezing in winter nights.

Fascinated by the barren beauty of the landscape, I started wondering, besides the immense diversity of animal and plant life, what actually made people settle here, in this seemingly hostile and waterless environment, with only scarce vegetation to graze animals on, and how they made their living. I wanted to find out more about the history of humankind in Namaqualand.

### **The Cradle of Human life**

*Australopithecus*, the first hominid, roamed Namaqualand in small clans as long as three million years ago. His descendant, the tool-using *Homo erectus*, arrived about 800000 years ago. These hunter-gatherers mainly survived on wild plants and scavenging on kills by other predators, consisting of rhino, hippo, giant wildebeest and buffalo as well as wild pigs or bushbuck. 120000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* had evolved from *H. erectus*. Relicts of their ability to manufacture tools are found widely throughout Namaqualand. Weapons enabled them to bring down animals larger than themselves, but berries, bulbs and other plant parts still formed the main part of their diet. *Homo sapiens sapiens* started to

appear in Namaqualand around 40000 years ago. He is the common ancestor of all modern day humans. Bushmen, or San, clans used to migrate from the coast to the hinterland, always in search of prey they could hunt or plants to gather. Signs of their culture are only left in symbolic rock carvings and paintings.

Namaqualand remained a very quiet place regarding cultural evolution until about 2000 years ago, when the Khoikhoi, or Nama, arrived from the area that now encompasses northern Botswana. They introduced a so far unknown means of wealth and power: domestic livestock, mostly goats and cattle. Until now their descendants in the Richtersveld move their livestock in seasonal patterns, always following the fresh growth in different areas after the autumn rainfalls.



Traditional Nama hut

However, conflict with the San arose when the Nama livestock grazed the veld of the game the San depended on, and the people with their more sophisticated society comprising leaders, private property and individual wealth occupied prime spots that were also the choice of the hunter-gatherers. The weaker San then either had to retreat to inferior areas, or they became stock thieves or were enslaved by the Nama to work as hunters.

### **The Confrontation with the Europeans**

With the arrival of Dutch pastoralists, or *trekboere*, at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 a new group of nomads invaded

Namaqualand. With the help of weapons and the affect of foreign disease, the Nama populated areas were conquered by 1750. However, between 1770 and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nama as well as the San successfully reclaimed their respective lands and thus reversed the expansion of the Dutch colony.

Only the British with their cruel and intimidating commando system that was introduced in 1806 made the indigenous people of Namaqualand surrender. San were hunted, enslaved or driven to marginal zones with little ecological value. The Nama were also enslaved or used as labourers by the *trekboere*, or were confined to areas such as the Kamiesberg or Richtersveld. Nowadays these areas are known as communal land and 40% of Namaqualand's population lives there. From the mid 1800s mission stations were established there and people earned their living mainly through agriculture such as wheat production where rainfall allowed for it. Today most descendants from the Nama are employed by the diamond and copper mining companies, which we will learn about later on, or the fishing industry of the west coast. Yet their original way of life by migrating with their stock has been more or less destroyed, apart from Nama descendants in the Richtersveld, who are said to be the last nomads of Namaqualand.



Nama woman

The end of the nomadic lifestyle of the *trekboere* came with the upcoming trend of private ownership of land. The Dutch East

India Company introduced a loan farm system in 1708 throughout the Cape Colony which provided security of tenure as well as enabled the *trekboere* to graze their sheep on unoccupied plots of land. In 1878 under British rule, white farmers were allowed by a new legislation to buy their own land, and soon after no unclaimed land was left in Namaqualand. With the erection of fences around their properties, farmers could practise an internal migrating system, or rotational grazing. Nowadays farmers also own additional pasture in the summer-rainfall areas and “migrate” their stock in large lorries across the country. Times when people moved their stock in slow treks during starlit nights following the smell of rain in the hope to find fresh pasture are long since gone.

### **Treasure Hunt**

But Namaqualand held other treasures hidden deep beneath its barren surface that enabled people to earn a living up until today: valuable metals and precious rocks. Interestingly, this mineral wealth of Namaqualand was only discovered because a Dutchman named Jan van Riebeeck, the first commander of a permanent settlement at the Cape, was eager to follow up the legend of the Golden Empire of King Monomotapa which was supposed to hold a fabulous supply of valuable minerals. This mythical Kingdom was widely believed in by the Dutch. Hence between 1660 and 1664, six expeditions travelled northwards in the search for Monomotapa’s kingdom. But because they travelled during the hot summer months, oblivious of the weather and landscape conditions, all of them failed. With the arrival of Simon van der Stel, who was to command the Cape from 1679, four more expeditions set off between 1682 and 1685, this time travelling in spring. The third of the expeditions was successful, finding the Copper Mountain or Carolusberg (today part of Goegap Nature Reserve) and bringing back some copper ore to the Cape. Van der Stel was so delighted by the

find that he personally led the last expedition, which even dug three shafts into Copper Mountain and extracted some ore. But the ore did not yield as much pure copper as they first had hoped, and additionally, the hostile characteristics of the landscape with no trees and water as well as the harbourless coast made it impossible for them to establish a viable mining industry. Under the leadership of Hendrik Hop another expedition was despatched to Namaqualand in 1761. The Copper Mountain area was once again investigated, but found as being poor, holding only small quantities of copper. However, not far away rich deposits were found, though the focus lay on certain deposits close to the Orange River in today’s Richtersveld. But again, no means for building a mining industry, like sufficient wood or water were available, and the nature of the river made it unsuitable for navigation.

Only in 1836/37, when James Alexander returned to undertake an expedition to this area, interest in the copper deposits rose again. Alexander found very copper-rich ore near the banks of the Orange River. Yet it should take another 10 years before the newly founded South African Mining Company first started working the copper ore in Namaqualand in 1846.

Some time later a German named von Schlicht went to Namaqualand and discovered by chance an immense deposit of copper ore on the farm Springbokfontein. He tried hard to find investors in Cape Town, in order to start up a mining industry, but stayed unsuccessful. In contrast to von Schlicht’s house mate, a Mr. Jencken. He was told about the copper deposits by von Schlicht, and, during the absence of von Schlicht, arranged for the company Phillips & King to invest in the copper business. They purchased the farm in 1850 together with all the mineral rights and sufficient land for the erection of any buildings and works considered necessary for the processing of any future copper ore discoveries. Furthermore they were

allowed the right to graze livestock, use water and build roads. This was the onset of the commercial exploitation of the copper deposits of Namaqualand, and should lead to a copper mining mania.

### **The Copper Mania**

The growth of Springbokfontein was directly related to the opening up of the mine. From 1852 to 1857 it developed from an assemblage of one mud cabin and a few mat huts to a large mining station comprising officer's and workmen's houses, mess rooms, stores, wagon maker's and blacksmith's shops, stables and forage stores. Not to forget necessities like a post office, a small church and of course a prison. The work force consisted of mainly coloured people, but also tradesmen, soldiers, sailors, farmers and quarrymen all contributed to the success of the mine. However, the copper ore supplies of the mine should soon be exhausted and Springbokfontein would have become deserted, had it not been chosen as the seat of the magistrate of the Cape Copper Mining Company in 1855, which was taken over from Anthing by E.A. Judge in 1861. Anthing was already planning to remove the headquarters from Springbokfontein, since the village was private property of Phillips & King. Every decision of the magistrate had to be supported by the company, even only people the company approved of were allowed to stay overnight. Nor were married people allowed to settle, which made it impossible to find a much needed attorney for Springbokfontein. Only in 1862 the village finally became public, and a lively social life began to grow. By 1866, J.F. Davis, employed by the Cape Copper Mining Company, had established the Springbokfontein Reduction Works to smelt the ore on site, which were fully operational in 1867. However, another Reduction Works at O'okiep soon superseded the one in Springbokfontein. In 1875 the population of Springbokfontein totalled 244, but it was nearly deserted by 1877 due to the removal of the

headquarters of the Cape Copper Mining Company to O'okiep.



Springbok in 1880

A reduction of shipping costs in 1881 made re-opening the mine of Springbokfontein worthwhile again, and the village population had recovered to 200 by 1886. However, the inhabitants had to suffer under the tyranny of the "Super", a representative of the Cape Copper Mining Company, not granting any rights to the people inhabiting the village. A severe drought in 1895 as well as an attack during the Anglo-Boer War<sup>1</sup> caused the population of Springbokfontein to collapse again, and the village became more or less derelict. In 1900 though, life returned once again and trees were planted, a public library opened in 1909, the first public school opened in 1911 and drivers licences were handed out from 1914.

Eventually, the copper mine had to close down, but Springbokfontein survived as a local centre. The name was shortened to its present form in 1911.

The greatest single problem affecting the profitability of mining was, and still

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<sup>1</sup> The first Anglo-Boer War, or War of Independence, took place in 1881 during which the Dutch regained their independence from the British government and formed the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR).

The second Anglo-Boer War lasted from 1899-1902. The discovery of Gold in the Witwatersrand near Johannesburg led to a flood of foreign immigrants who were not allowed to vote under Kruger yet had to pay taxes. The British besieged the Dutch army and under the "Peace of Vereeniging" the Boer republics became British colonies.

continues to be, the big distance between the mining sites and the markets. The most common vehicle was the light Cape wagon drawn by ten mules. The heavier ox-wagon was also fairly common during good seasons since it was able to carry more weight. However, the weight they could transport was limited on the sandy ground and hence this means of getting the ore to the markets was hardly worthwhile. Phillips & King systematically bought up all the farms on route to the small anchorage of Hondeklip Bay to ensure the transport of their ores to the coast. In 1852, the company exported their first 11 tons of copper ore on the steamer *Bosphorus*. During the subsequent years, the development of Hondeklip Bay proceeded immensely and by 1857 it was a bustling harbour with a lot of ship traffic going in and out. The importance of Hondeklip Bay as a trading harbour steadily grew and thus it was declared a separate magisterial district in 1862. The only thing that still could improve the export rate was a good main road between Springbokfontein and Hondeklip Bay, which later got known as the “Messelpad”, or Masonry Road. However, the opening of the railway line between O’okiep and Port Nolloth in 1873, built by the Cape Copper Mining Company, caused Hondeklip Bay to quickly decline in population and lose its status as magisterial district in 1877. Nowadays it serves as a small port for agricultural produce.

A second main road was built to Port Nolloth, formerly known as Robbe Bay. During its early days it provided income by selling seal skins and dried seal meat. Despite its geographical advantages over Hondeklip Bay it did not manage to become as important as a trading harbour for copper ore. That was partly due to the bad maintenance of the main road, but the early shut down of the northern mines at the end of the copper mining mania in 1854/55 played a major role, too. However, in 1869 the construction of an initially mule-powered rail line to Port Nolloth was taken underway and soon the

population exceeded that of Hondeklip Bay, reaching the 2000 mark in 1882. A steam engine to operate on the rail line was only introduced in 1886. Port Nolloth achieved the status of a separate magisterial district in 1874, but certain necessities of life still had to be brought in by a steamer from Cape Town once every fortnight and water for the settlement had to be obtained from a place five miles away.

Port Nolloth and its inhabitants were in a desolate state, being described as “eyesores” from either land or sea. Only in 1896 a sanitary system got installed. But even until the 1930s the poverty-stricken appearance of Port Nolloth could not be improved.



Port Nolloth in 1905

Altogether differently the situation looked in O’okiep, which by the 1860s had become the most important mine of the Cape Copper Mining Company. Black labourers worked both underground and on the surface under White supervision. Black women and children were employed to sort the ore by hand. It was a melting pot of all sorts of human races, from English, French, Colonial Dutch, German, Portuguese, Italian to African people like the San, Damara, and Nama, to name just a few. Every need of life was catered for in O’okiep, there were stores, offices, stables, workshops, a church which was also used as a school. Furthermore there were an infirmary for the sick and of course accommodation for mechanics, miners and workers. However, the smelting works



polluted the air and O'okiep was a fairly unhealthy place to live. In the late 1880s, the population was estimated at 2000, two to three burials a week were reported due to the mining.



Miners in O'okiep around 1890

After O'okiep was occupied for about one month during the Anglo-Boer War in 1902 during which the railway lines were severely damaged, a difficult time started for the Copper Mining Companies of Namaqualand. This was due to the lack of sufficient supplies like coke, the ongoing difficulty with shipping the ore, and also the prohibition of exporting matte to England. In 1919, the Cape Copper Mining Company had to shut down, affecting the villages of O'okiep and Port Nolloth to a great extent, leaving the majority of the population without enough money to buy their daily bread. The Namaqua Copper Company had to stop all mining activities in 1931.

A revival of commercial mining took place in 1939, when the O'okiep Copper Company purchased all properties that were held by the Namaqua Copper Company. At O'okiep they installed a mining, milling and power plant in 1945, thus reactivating the mines. However, the railway line to Port Nolloth was closed in 1944, after unsuccessful attempts of improving it. Port Nolloth itself was abandoned as a shipping port due to its inadequate facilities like an unprotected harbour. Instead, the copper ore was transported by rail to Cape Town for shipment. The problem of a big enough

water supply for the mining activities continued to exist until pipelines were constructed to reservoirs and the Orange River in the late 1940s.

Today only a small number of copper mines are still operated.

### **Twinkle Twinkle Little Stone**

During a day trip to Port Nolloth I saw something like fishing boats with long tubes that floated in the water anchored just off the harbour. What was their purpose I wondered? The boats were drenches with suction devices, hoovering up diamonds from the gravel fields on the sea floor, I was told. Diamonds - the second hidden treasure of Namaqualand that should provide a major source of income, but also lead to something quite close to the gold-rush in the west of the American continent.

The very first to commence the search for the twinkling gems was Fred Cornell, who arrived in South Africa in 1901. In 1910 he started his expedition at the Orange River, where he suspected large deposits of diamonds which he thought were washed down with the river from further inland. He followed its banks from Augrabies Falls to the coast, eagerly turning the shingles in the hope to discover one of the precious stones. On his way down to Alexander Bay he investigated the gravel every few yards. But Cornell seemed to be always just missing the diamonds, as we know now, yet he was convinced that in the area he was searching plenty of diamonds were to be found. In order to find investors for his diamond business Cornell went back to London, but his luck abandoned him once again and this time for good. Cornell tragically lost his life in a road accident before being able to return to Namaqualand and continue his search.

The diamond expeditions of Jack Carstens proved to be more successful. He was the first person to find the seductive crystals at Namaqualand's coast in 1925. He opened a little diamond industry south of Port Nolloth and at the farm Kleinzee in

1926, which was just about to start growing when yet another prospector commenced a search in the area north of Port Nolloth. His name was Hans Merensky, a German geologist, who is wrongly believed to have found the first sparklers in Namaqualand. In truth it should take Merensky two more years to discover diamonds on the coast at Alexander Bay in 1927, more or less exactly in the area Cornell had searched painfully years before.



Diamond fishing boats at Port Nolloth

Merensky focused on the area south of the Orange River mouth, also believing that diamonds were washed downriver from inland. He thought that once they had reached the mouth of the river, they were washed southwards by some ancient current, hence they had to be found on the southern side of the mouth. Another theory goes that Merensky believed a change in sea currents millions of years ago shifted the original river mouth northwards, so the only thing he had to do was find the site of the ancient river mouth and search for diamonds there. What he really believed in we do not know, but fact is that he found diamonds south of Alexander Bay, so his ideas led him to success in prospecting. Interestingly, he was right for the wrong reasons – a common occurrence amongst inquiring minds. Today we know that the diamonds were in fact carried northwards by the Benguela current which originates in the Antarctic. In ancient times the mouth of the Orange River met the sea roughly about where the Olifants River does today,

near the southern border of Namaqualand. This explains why diamonds nowadays can be found all along the coast.



Diamond mining plant in Kleinsee

In 1908 the discovery of diamonds in the area between the Orange River and Lüderitz in Namibia sparked off a frenzy with hordes of prospectors descending upon the town in the hope to find fabulous wealth buried in the sand. However, the situation soon got out of control and this part of Namaqualand was declared a *Sperrgebiet*, prohibited area, by the German government the same year. Independent prospecting was now forbidden and everyone who held claims was forced to form mining companies. The *Sperrgebiet* exists until the present day and not a single entity is allowed into the area without a special permit and on a guided tour only.

Namaqualand is a place that does not readily reveal its treasures. One has to look closely and the course of history shows us that it was possible for the indigenous people to survive off the harsh land by listening to nature and react to its cycles. The greed for material goods and the exploitation of the land that came with the Europeans disturbed the tranquillity of this beautiful landscape forever. In the end, the natural wonders, living or dead, of Namaqualand are the real treasures that should be conserved to be enjoyed by future generations.

Follow-up literature:

- R. Cowling, S. Pierce: *Namaqualand – A Succulent Desert* (2002), Cape Town
- J. Carstens: *A Fortune Through My Fingers* (1962), Cape Town
- F.C. Cornell: *The Glamour Of Prospecting* (1986), Claremont, SA
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- Lonely Planet: *Africa – The South* (1997), Singapore
- Lonely Planet: *Namibia* (2002), Singapore