

Title TO HOLD OUR GROUND:
A FIELD REPORT

For thousands of years Ju/'hoansi have lived in the Nyae Nyae region in northeastern Namibia. In the 1950s, most Ju/'hoansi had been exterminated or were dispossessed by white colonists and black farmers, but in Nyae Nyae Ju/'hoansi were still the only permanent inhabitants. Waterless approaches isolated their ancient communal land and protected them from enslavement.

Ju/'hoansi in Nyae Nyae were the last independent, self sufficient hunters and gatherers in southern Africa. They needed neither crops nor livestock, but they needed a great deal of land to survive by hunting and gathering. In 1970 the Ju/'hoansi lost 90% of Nyae Nyae when Bushmanland was established as the only "homeland" for people classified as "Bushmen" in Namibia.

The South African Administration gave 20,000 square kilometers of southern Nyae Nyae, where one Herero woman lived, to the Herero ethnic group. Over 11,000 square kilometers of northern Nyae Nyae became part of Kavango and were later proclaimed a game reserve. With only a fragment of their land remaining to Ju/'hoansi in Eastern Bushmanland, the hunting and gathering economy collapsed forever.

The people huddled in a rural slum at Tshumkwe, the administrative capital of Bushmanland, where some Ju/'hoan men did menial jobs for the Administration and some of the elderly received rations of mealie meal. No food was produced. The malnourished population declined from tuberculosis and other diseases.

Other people called "Bushmen," including professional soldiers from Angola, were brought into Bushmanland by the South African Defence Forces after 1978. Some hungry Ju/'hoansi joined the army. A liquor store was opened with an Administration loan and did a booming business from high army salaries. Suicides and murders resulted.

To survive, Ju/'hoansi had had to develop subsistence farming and produce food to eat in Eastern Bushmanland. They were the only people called "Bushmen" in Namibia who had the chance. In a country where most people had been reduced to extreme poverty under South African occupation, "Bushmen" were the poorest.

By 1981, after the immigration of more than 7,000 refugees from Angola, there were almost 30,000 people officially classified as "Bushmen" in Namibia. They were increasingly without work in the commercial farming districts. As "Bushmen" they had no rights to communal land, and except in Eastern Bushmanland they had no access to land on which to farm.

The census and other data showed what dispossession had done to the "Bushmen:" At least 50% died before age 10, and about 90% of the children between 5 and 19 had never been in school.

Per capita income averaged less than R 42 per year, and the total population classified as "Bushmen" declined by at least 5% in the 1970's as the result of malnutrition and disease

Until the mid 1980's, the Colonial Administration planned to complete the dispossession of the "Bushmen" by expropriating Eastern Bushmanland for a game reserve. In the reserve a few Ju/'hoansi were to be preserved wearing skins to entertain the tourists. About 2,000 people were to be evicted with no means to produce a subsistence and no work.

In 1982 a development foundation was started to help Ju/'hoansi keep Eastern Bushmanland and develop subsistence farming. The foundation was joined by a number of concerned Namibians and was funded by European Non-Government Organizations. The following visual report shows the Ju/'hoan struggle to hold onto their last fragment of land and farm for their lives.

1989 THE YEAR OF THE ELECTION FOR AN INDEPENDENT NAMIBIA