

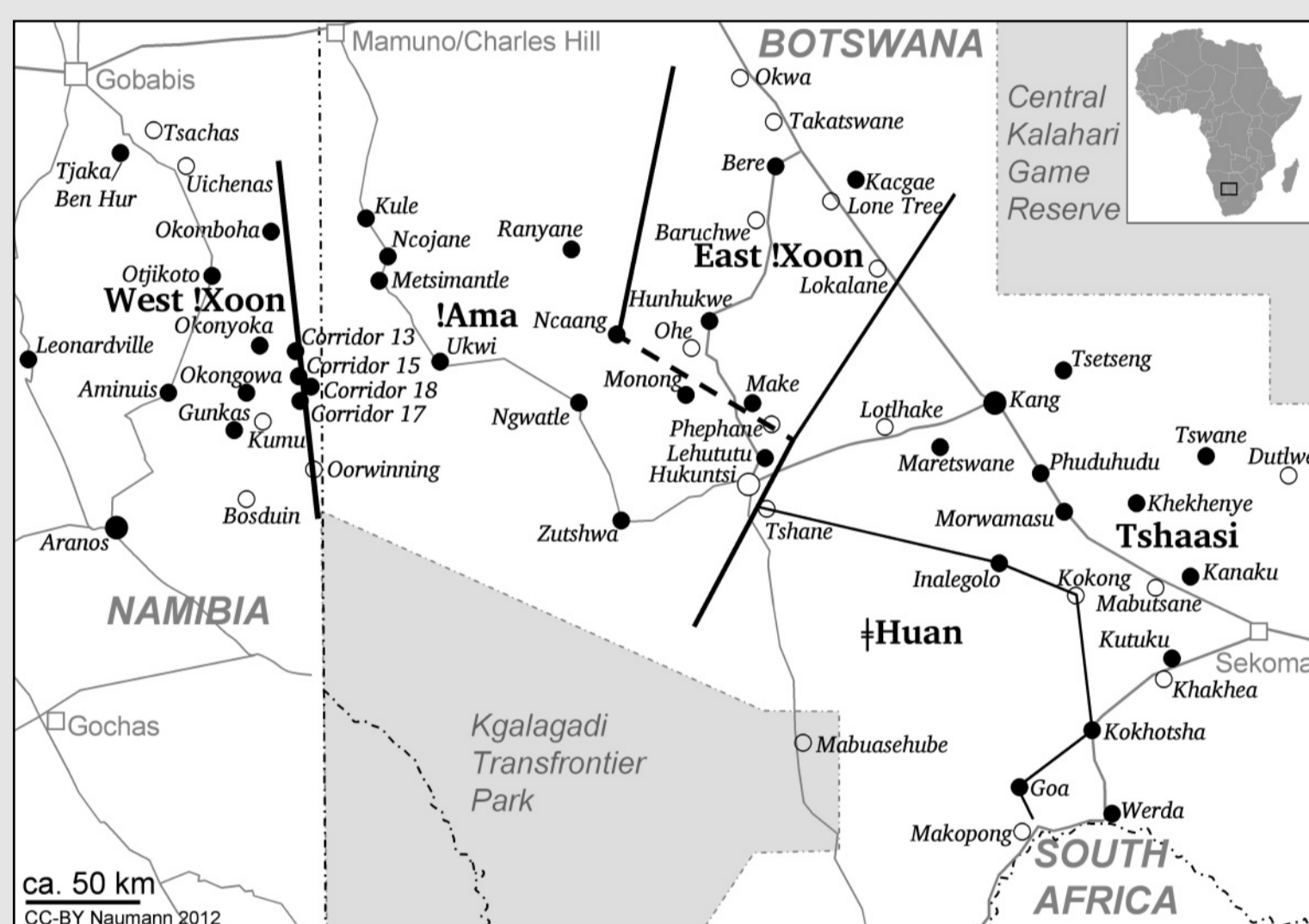


A Pan-dialectal Documentation of Taa (Namibia/Botswana)

The People

The speakers of the Taa language complex (aka '!Xoon/!Xóó') belong to the former hunter-gatherer populations in Southern Africa often called 'San', 'Bushmen' or 'Basarwa'. They live in the xeric shrublands of the central Kalahari, from the Molopo river on the Botswana-South Africa border in the southeast to Leonardville on the Nossob river in Namibia in the north-west. While Taa speakers refer to themselves by different group names or ethnonyms and do not necessarily think of themselves as one group, all of them may refer to their common language as 'taa-#aan', literally meaning "person's language".

Due to the huge geographical area, social histories and current political settings are quite different. Some Taa live as farm labourers on commercial farms, others in patron-client relationships with Kgalagadi or Herero pastoralists and again others relatively independently in communal areas or in resettlement schemes. Hunting and gathering activities were once the main means of subsistence but have become restricted by the law or are even illegal.



Geographical distribution of Taa dialects. Black circles indicate contemporary places with Taa speakers (DoBeS, 2004-2009). White circles mark places attested in the past.

The Language

Taa is the last vital language of the Tuu language family - formerly called 'Southern Khoisan' - and spoken by about 3 000 people in Namibia and Botswana. It is famous for an extremely large repertoire of speech sounds, i.e., it has been cited as the language with the largest known inventory of consonants (122 consonants) or phonemes (160 segments). This is mainly due to the contrastive use of clicks (ǀ, ǁ, ǃ, ǂ as basic types) and nine series of stops (contrastive use of voicing, aspiration, ejection/glottalization and prenasalization). With an analysis that treats various syllable onsets as consonant clusters (such as [tχ] analyzed as /t+χ/ instead of /tχ/), the consonant inventory can be reduced to about 88 segments.



Man and boy listening to a storyteller.

Taa shares several typological features with other Khoisan languages of the area, such as lexical stems largely restricted to the phonotactic patterns C(C)V(C)V and C(C)VN, or little bound morphology. The basic constituent order is Subject - Predicate (- Object) (- Adjunct),



Homestead of a !Njoha family, comprising traditional and modern houses.

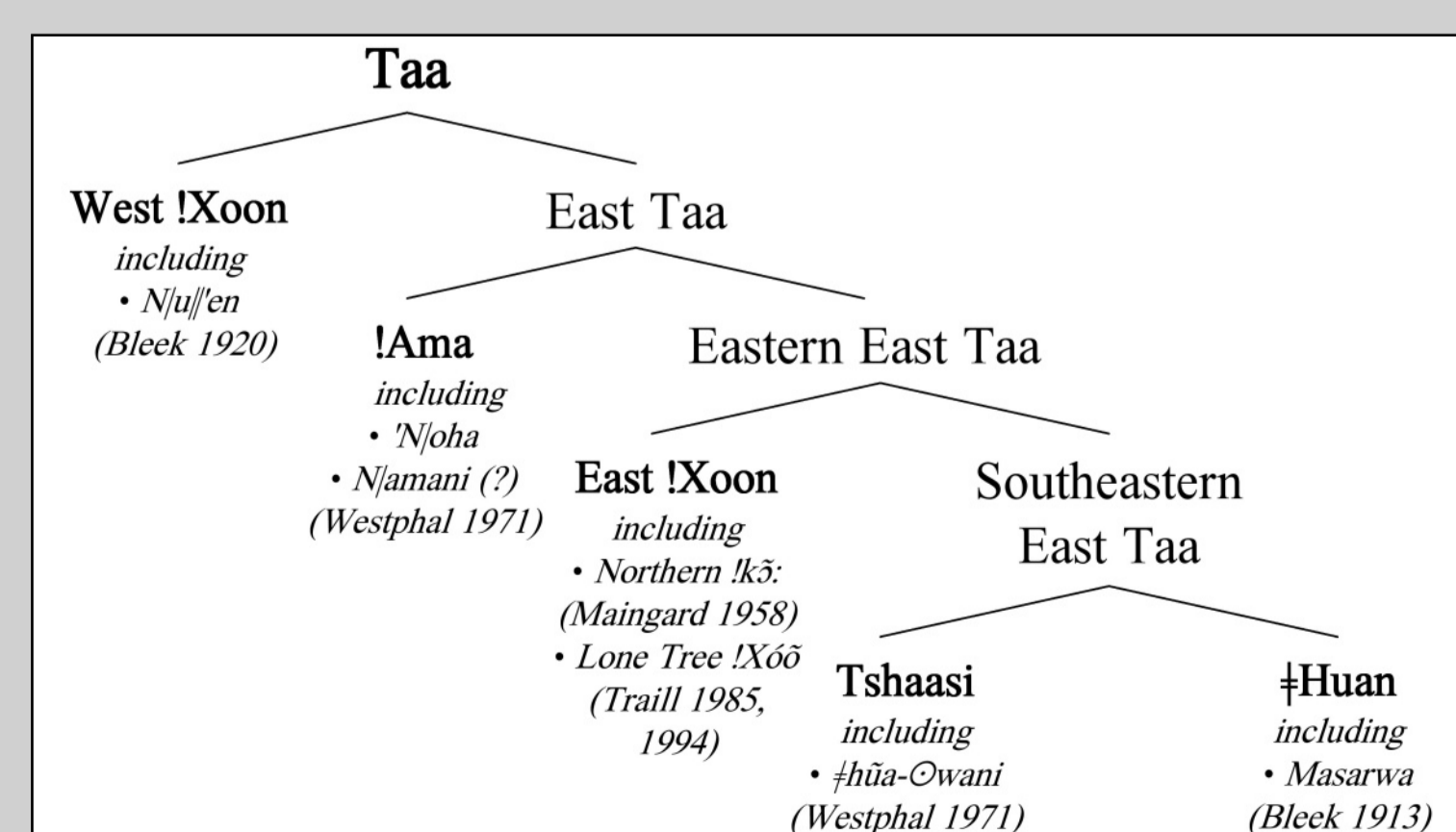
whereby adjuncts are often marked by a default preposition ('multi-purpose oblique marker'). An outstanding feature of Taa is that nouns fall into several genders that are conveyed by agreement classes. These are consistently indexed on dependent forms by means of segmental agreement markers (concord), such as -i (agreement class 1) in #hai #u-i [dog.1 one-1] "one dog" or -e (agreement class 3) in n||àhè #u-e [house.3 one-3] "one house".



Taa lady from Phuduhudu.

Taa Dialects

Previous research distinguished two dialect groups (Anthony Traill's 'Eastern !Xóó' vs. 'Western !Xóó'). During the DOBES and subsequent projects, however, sufficient evidence has been collected for a reclassification into five dialect groups (West !Xoon, !Ama, East !Xoon, Tshaasi, and #Huan) that seem to have split successively from west to east. The most likely scenario is that Taa has spread comparatively recently from somewhere along the Nossob River. This process seems to have been accompanied by the partial incorporation of speakers of other languages in the east and have been followed subsequently by the emergence of a central zone of linguistic convergence comprising !Ama, East !Xoon, and Tshaasi.



Internal linguistic classification of Taa. The split between !Ama and Eastern East Taa corresponds to Traill's distinction between western and eastern dialects of !Xóó (Traill 1985).

The Documentation Project

Research in the Taa DOBES projects (2004-2009) focused on underanalyzed morphosyntactic features, phonology, oral history, the mapping of former land use patterns, and the kinship system, especially for the Taa communities in Namibia. In 2008 and 2009, a survey including all major Taa settlements in Botswana was carried out. The documentary work has been and still is continuing after the DOBES project. By 2012 about 1 400 sessions including 1 768 audio files, 414 video files and 2 783 photos have been recorded.

Activities carried out in order to support the speech community especially in Namibia for the promotion and official recognition of the Taa language included the organization of meetings with officials and NGOs, computer training, and several orthography workshops.



Two !Xoon ladies from Corridor 18 (left) interviewing a remnant speaker at Leonardville.

The Team

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