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ARTICLE

There was no future in the past

Time and the environment in rural Namibia

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To explain how Namibian pastoralists envision the future of the climate and the environment, I develop a phenomenological framework that uses objects and events (e.g., their livestock, people, drought) as entry points. When pastoralism structured most of people's lives, things approached as rhythmic reiterations of the past. Therefore, some pastoralists say, there was no future in the past. By contrast, in the increasingly important capitalist domain, the subject experiences itself as moving in time towards objects, albeit different objects, such as money and success. With climatic change and increasing involvement in the market economy, pastoralism and the environment become more unclear. This changes the perception of time in the environmental domain. I describe the emerging temporality as an *ascending spiral* in which rhythms lose importance while a linearity towards a more open future gains saliency. Whereas the new future-making awakens potentialities, it also implies insecurities and stress.

Keywords: future, temporality, phenomenology, climate change, environment, capitalist time, Namibia

Introduction

On a recent trip to Namibia, I sat with some of my neighbors in front of my dwelling in the rural hinterlands of Fransfontein, some 450 kilometers northwest of the capital, Windhoek. The surrounding landscape is arid. My neighbors, Epson, Olga, and Pete, like most people here, describe themselves as Damara pastoralists (ǂ*Nūkhoen*, in their language Khoekhoegowab).[1] I wanted to learn how people here imagine the future of the climate and the weather (ǂ*oab tsî* ǀ*nanub masib*, literally "the fact about the wind and the rain") and how they felt they needed to adapt their lives.[2] After chatting awhile, I threw my main question to the group: "How do you imagine the weather in 2050 to be?" The entertaining conversation we had been enjoying until then ended abruptly.

Epson, a man in his forties who struggled to make a living keeping a small number of livestock, replied. "How should it be? Like yesterday, today, and tomorrow, unless you have a job for us, Michael. We struggle to get something every day." To talk about "yesterday, today, tomorrow," he used the words *netsē tsi* ǁ*ari*, which I will come back to later. I could feel that Epson was irritated by my question, maybe even a bit annoyed. Then Olga stepped in, saying that she imagined owning a large herd of cattle by then, not just the few she had at that time. Pete commented briefly, "Only God knows."

Their answers give you a glimpse into how the interview went: not so well. People found it difficult to talk about the future and the implications climate change

1. All names are pseudonyms. Khoekhoegowab is a language of the Khoe-Kwadi family with four (primary) click sounds (ǂ palatal; ǁ lateral; ǀ dental; ! alveolar). Khoe-Kwadi languages belong to the southern African non-Bantu languages with click phonemes that, although not forming a single linguistic unit, are conventionally subsumed under the cover term "Khoisan" (Güldemann and Fehn 2014: 2).

2. In my interviews I have used the question about the future of the climate or the weather as an entry point. The most salient element of the weather in an arid environment is the rain. This typically leads to narrations about whether or not there will be rain, and the implications the answer has for people and other living beings. Because the fields of weather and the environment are so intertwined, I sometimes speak about the future of the environment in reference to both fields.

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might have for their lives. Given that I experienced the same unease in other conversations with other people, I felt that it might be better to drop the topic and focus on some other aspect of climate change. But I slowly began to realize that their unease was part of the answer itself. What is the future? How does it come about? And I began to understand that their difficulty in answering revealed something about their conception of time.

A few days later I met Magdalena, a thirty-year-old woman who lived with her mother in a household close to Fransfontein where they kept a small number of livestock. With the themes of my discussions still in mind, I asked her about the changing environment. "Michael," she said. "I want to farm in the Outjo area. Have you been there around this time? There is plenty of grazing and the animals are fat. They will not suffer when the dry season comes. Not like us now." Outjo is situated on the central Namibian plateau where the precipitation is higher than in Fransfontein. Therefore, the pastures are much better and greener. Across Namibia, fattened animals are a metaphor for, and indication of, a better life. As we talked about her visions of a better life, children played in front of us. I asked Magdalena in a figurative way how this place—with its one-room homes, livestock, pastures, people, and so forth—would be when the five-year-olds were sitting here in thirty years' time. She replied, "It will be like when our parents grew up and as it is now. People will farm with cattle, struggling to survive. Maybe there will be rain again. Not like now in this drought." Again, as she went on, she used she used ǁ*ari* to talk about "yesterday" and "tomorrow" and hence about what was and what is about to come.

These two vignettes give a glimpse into how Khoekhoegowab-speaking people envision the future of the climate and the environment. While some aspects of the environment are anticipated to be similar or the same (pastoralism, the settlement, the huts, animals), others are hoped and sometimes feared to change (employment, status, possessions). In a sense, when people communicated a vision of the future in these conversations, they were describing a kind of scene, an image of a landscape in which people dwell. In this picture, much remained the same between now and then. Only the position of the individuals changed.

Against this backdrop, this article has two aims. The first is to explain people's uneasiness in talking about the future of the environment. This leads me into the second aim which is to understand how different temporalities coexist in this future-making, and what potentialities this opens up in the present. To address both, I propose to access the abstract notion of the climate's future through the objects those narrations contain.

Future-making

In his impressive attempt to explain what is "modern" about future-making, Reinhart Kosselleck goes back to eighteenth-century Europe, mostly to Germany (Koselleck 2004). He posits that what is new about the modern age (*Neuzeit* in German, literally "new time") is that time is continuously experienced as something new. Kosselleck develops two categories to account for this: "*Erfahrungsraum*" (space of experience) and "*Erwartungshorizont*" (horizon of expectation). He argues that since around the middle of the eighteenth century, the gap between the two has significantly increased. What people previously experienced no longer works as well for anticipating what will come (Koselleck 2004). This opened a gap in which the future as "open" and "new" emerged. Through his historical evidence, Koselleck analyzes future-making as a process in which a group has a comparably homogeneous way of imagining what will be. This approach might be justified when people have one dominant context within which they relate to the future. However, in many contemporary societies (and possibly not only there) this approach is oversimplified. People typically interact in myriad social worlds—the economy, politics, media, education, households, and so forth—and each of these worlds has its own "proper time" or *Eigenzeit* as Helga Nowotny (1996) says.

To account for the interactions between different senses of time anthropological theorizing emphasizes the multiplicity of temporalities, their interactions, and frictions (Bear, 2014, 2017; Bryant 2020; Das 2006; Kockelman and Bernstein 2012; Pels 2015). To get a methodological and conceptual grip on these multiplicities, Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight (2019) focus on objects through which people relate to time. Those objects can be houses, property, the state in which one lives, and other things (Bryant and Knight 2019: 74). In their seminal outline of an anthropology of the future they argue with Theodore Schatzki (Schatzki 2002, 2010) that these objects have distinct but overlapping temporalities, which they get through the "teleoaffective structures" of which they are part. Teleoaffective structures are the goals that people connect with an object and the orientations toward the future that derive from them (e.g., anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality,

hope, and destiny). Bryant and Knight find that those teleoaffects are often described in epochal terms, for example when people talk about "war times," the "time of Brexit," and so forth.

In this article, I build on these approaches to address visions about the future of the climate and the environment in Namibia. I call this an object-oriented approach to time. With objects I do not only refer to material objects like animals and rain but also to immaterial objects to which people equally direct intentions, desires, and hope, including education and wealth. This theorizing rests on the proposition that when people construct narratives about "the future of the climate" (or any other abstract domain), they draw on objects, for example people, animals, rain, wealth, education, etc. They make something knowable that is otherwise very abstract. All those objects have a temporality which contributes to the future visions of which they become a part. But how do they get this temporality? From a phenomenological viewpoint, people construct the temporality by interacting with them within social systems that have their "proper times," the environment, the capitalist economy, religion, and so forth. To better understand this, some more theory is necessary.

An object-oriented approach to time

From a phenomenological viewpoint, objects do not possess temporality but acquire it through experience (Schnegg 2021a). In sociology, Schatzki applied this basic insight from Heidegger's phenomenology to show that these temporalities are established through practical activities (Schatzki 2002, 2010) or, to use Heidegger's term, through use (*Zuhandenheit*, sometimes translated as readiness-to-hand or availableness) (Schnegg 2019).[3] In a one-sentence summary of *Being and time*, Heidegger writes that *being* is *Zeitlichkeit* (temporality) (Heidegger [1927] 2006: 235). Time structures how we make things meaningful. Why? The fundamental difference between humans and other animals is that we anticipate our own death. Anticipating death, humans experience themselves in a directional movement (towards death), which makes them anticipate future stages along this path. Heidegger refers to this aspect of being-in-the-world as *Sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in-(der-Welt-)* (being-ahead-of-itself-already-in-the-world) (Heidegger [1927] 2006: 192, 249). Imagining themselves in their own future motivates humans to make choices about the possible paths they want to take. It opens or "awakens" the present and creates potentialities. We might think of these as paths that can be actualized, as Giorgio Agamben says (Agamben 1999). Or, as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz wrote more than three centuries ago, the present is "big with the future" (*le présent est gros de l'avenir*). This "being big with" structures our relationships with objects in the world in which we live.

I am writing and submitting this article to the journal *Hau*. Why? I have things I aspire to as an academic and would like to achieve one day. What does that accomplish? If I don't want to die (or retire) without having published in a journal (or, alternatively having married, found employment, owned an especially strong bull for breeding my animals, etc.) the resulting me-before-me structures how I relate to the world today. For example, it structures the relationship I have with my work (I spend much time on it and am eager), with my colleagues (I try to be nice to potential reviewers or learn from others how to publish), my students (I neglect them for publication plans), the editors (I try to impress), and so forth. In short, a particular vision of the future opens potentialities in the relationships and things I find in the present that might be actualized at some stage.

While Heidegger's insights are first and foremost philosophical, he describes a fundamental aspect of our being-in-the-world that has been utilized productively in the social sciences, mostly in sociology and anthropology (Bryant and Knight 2019; Nielsen and Skotnicki 2018; Schatzki 2010). My contribution also builds on Heidegger's analysis. However, I differentiate in more detail than he does (and others, too) how one can be ahead of oneself and what effects this has. Different conceptions of time have implications for how temporality is inscribed into objects and the potential futures various temporalities may open up.[4] This is already apparent when we consider

3. Heidegger's personal involvement with the National Socialist Party in Germany has made him a highly controversial figure. Critics claim that his affiliation with the Nazi Party reveals the more general problems inherent in his philosophy, but his supporters argue that political and philosophical engagements can be separated. I agree that his thinking romanticizes in problematic ways, but I also suggest that particular aspects of his work should be developed further—as long as the problematic aspects of his thinking are kept in mind.

4. In a similar manner, but without explicit reference to Heidegger, Nielsen observed how causal and chronological relationships are structured through practices and

Heidegger's own analyses and the role of death in them. For him, death marks an end of which we are aware and toward which we live. Thus, his analysis is based on a particular understanding of life and time (early twentieth-century European, nonreligious, etc.). But if we assume, as many ontologies do, that death is a moment in a cycle, then the way death radiates in or influences our lives changes. Or, we might assume, as Martin Luther—who lived only a couple centuries before Heidegger—did, that the earthly world will have an imminent end in days or weeks. This view of the future would also have serious consequences for how we relate to the objects with which we interact. How do we relate to our work, for example? What is the meaning of our job?

Through use, different conceptions of time are inscribed into the objects with which we interact. To understand which ones and how, I introduce an ethnographic context.

Pastoral lifeworlds

I first came to the Kunene region in 2003 with my wife and colleague, Julia Pauli. We lived in Fransfontein for more than a year, working on a community ethnography (Pauli 2019; Schnegg 2016). Since then, I have returned many times. To learn pastoralism myself, I bought some sheep, goats, and cattle, which I care for when I am there. When I am not there, they join my neighbor's herd. Owning a small number of livestock helps me understand and partly sense the pastoral livelihood and how it structures the ways in which the world is experienced. Over those years, I also learned their language, Khoekhoegowab, well enough to engage in everyday conversations.

The data presented here was collected between 2019 and 2022. In 2019 I started to work with an interdisciplinary project on climate futures. As part of this work, I tried to understand both how Damara people in the area imagine the future to be, and what the underlying assumptions of this conception are. The data I present here is based on my encounters and interviews with Damara people in and around Fransfontein. To further explore the temporalities of distinct objects in those future visions, I conducted a survey in 2021 in Fransfontein and three surrounding communities.

The Kunene region in which Fransfontein (a community of about 250 households) is situated is sparsely populated, and most people live pastoral lives. Around Fransfontein, as in other communities of the Southern Kunene region, pastoralists are sedentary and dwell in communities of about 4–15 households that are dotted around permanent boreholes. Most of these boreholes were drilled during the South African apartheid regime and have increased the Damara's access to pastures tremendously (Bollig 2009). While the relatively few permanent fountains in the area only allowed for a small number of livestock in the past, the year-round availability of borehole water has increased the carrying capacity of farming system—but also its vulnerability (Bollig 2020; Sullivan and Ganuses 2020). Why?

In this arid environment, the availability of grazing largely depends on precipitation (Sullivan 2002; Sullivan and Rohde 2002). In previous times, people could count on two rainy seasons: a short one between October and November and a longer one from February to April. As memories and colonial records equally reveal, people could expect about 150–200 millimeters of precipitation a year. As in many arid environments, droughts regularly interrupt people's lives. In the past, the droughts' effects were not as stark. Because water was scarce and the overall number of livestock small, there would be some grazing left for the animals to survive even during periods with less rain (Bollig 2020). Now, with boreholes and very high stocking densities, the system is always on the edge, and even small droughts have severe effects (Schnegg and Bollig 2016).

The availability of grazing is also reflected in how people conceptualize drought. In Damara people's understanding, which is comparable to that of other pastoralists, drought is not just the absence of rain but encompasses a totality of conditions that lead to suffering or death (Bollig 2006; Goldman, Daly, and Lovell 2016). In Khoekhoegowab, the term directly translated as drought is */khurub*. However, when talking about drought, many people also use the phrase *ǂû-i ǀkhai*, which translates to "there is no food." First for animals, and eventually for humans too. As I have shown elsewhere, this idea draws many other aspects of life—moral, political, and social—into the construction of the phenomenon (Schnegg 2021b, 2021c). Therefore, in addition to the absence of rain, the

entities and how they can even be reversed. To describe this, he coined the term "reverse future." As he shows through his analysis of house-building in Maputo (Mozambique), this future can cause the present to take different trajectories (Nielsen 2011, 2014).

politics that led to overstocking in the area are an equally salient component of drought.

While people are aware that there have always been better and worse years, they also describe a long-term change in the precipitation patterns. Some people say there were more rains in the past; others will tell you there have always been ups and down. There is more consensus in terms of the span of rains. Almost everyone I interviewed agreed that the rain now starts later, which negatively impacts the dispersal of the grass seed and its growth. This indicates that there is a certain perception of a change into something which is not a reiteration of the past but possibly entirely new.

Moving-ego versus moving-time

How do people think about the future of the climate and their own futures within this world? As I said, I want to explore this through the objects which those visions contain. To understand their temporality, it is productive to distinguish two different ways of relating to the future that are sometimes referred to as the moving-ego (ME) perspective and the moving-time (MT) perspective (Bender, Beller, and Bennardo 2010: 284). What does this mean? Let's imagine time as flowing like a river. With the moving-ego (ME) perspective, we perceive ourselves as moving downstream to some place or event happening there and then (downstream, in the future). Under the complementary moving-time (MT) perspective, we perceive ourselves as fixed, standing beside the river, so to speak, while the water, carrying pieces of wood, leaves, and other things, approaches us and passes by. Similarly, the future approaches us and passes by.

A marked characteristic of future narrations is that they draw on diverse objects with their proper temporalities. In the case of Damara pastoralists, these are livestock, rain, drought, money, food, poverty, success in farming, and so forth (see Table 1). When talking about climate futures, they use two different verbs in Khoekhoegowab to describe the relationship between the now and the not-yet. Things that are yet-to-be would be expressed using either *ī* or *|khī* (or sometimes *hā*). *I* means "to go" and would also be used for "going to my neighbor's house." It describes the active movement of an agent toward some (spatial or temporal) destination. *|Khī*, instead, translates to "coming towards" someone and would be used to tell someone, "come towards me" or "come here," a temporal movement. *Hā*, which is interchangeable with *ī* or *|khī*, puts less emphasis on expressing the agency of the approaching event—it just comes.

Table 1. Percent of objects moving toward the subject or with the subject in time (N=56)

	hā, *|khī* (come here)	*ī* (get there, go)	*hā*, *|khī* or *ī* (both come or get here)	objects have agency
drought	100	0	0	33.9
rain	100	0	0	7.1
climate change	98.2	1.8	0	3.6
poverty	58.9	32.1	8.9	55.4
success in farming	14.3	85.7	0	96.4
employment	1.8	3.6	94.6	96.4
money	1.8	91.1	3.6	98.2
food/groceries	0	96.4	3.6	100

These different ways of talking about the future of objects largely correspond to the moving-ego and moving-time perspectives. But Damara mix the two perspectives. When Damara people talk about "the" future of the climate and the environment, some objects move towards them, while in other cases they move towards the object. But which objects, and how? To better understand this, my research partners Jorries Seibeb, Melitta Ortner, and I conducted a survey with about fifty people. We selected them by interviewing all the adults in three economically heterogeneous neighborhoods in Fransfontein and three communal farms surrounding it. The survey listed twenty objects, eight of which related to climate change more broadly. In addition to the question of whether people experience the objects as approaching them or whether they move along with them, I asked them how much influence humans could exercise over these events.

The results of the survey are given in Table 1. They show a clear consensus on what comes and where people go. The things that move towards the subject include the rain, drought, and climate change. All these objects are from the environmental domain. But how do they come, specifically?

The movements towards the subject became clearer to me in a conversation I had with Tom about the arrival of the rains. We were sitting in front of Tom's house when the wind announced the approach of the rain. It was a cloudless summer day and it had started raining recently. One could feel the humidity from past

precipitation in the air and the cold, which would make it rain. The present contained the intimation of the future to come. As we talked, Tom said, *|Nanus ge !goaxa*, "The rain is coming towards me/us." The way he talked about a future event, the rain, revealed something about his experience of time and the environment. The rain, which was expected to occur in the future, was approaching us as we sat there. It was coming towards us. The German word for future, *Zukunft*, conveys this meaning too. It derives from the word *kommen*, which means "to come" and implies that something comes to us (e.g., God)—much like the Latin *ad-ventus* describes the near arrival of God and is the root of the French *avenir*.[5]

Table 1 reveals a second tendency. One has comparably little influence on the future of things such as rain. They just come, independent of what people do and intend. The only exception is drought; about one third of the people felt it was under their influence. This has to do with the complex construction of what a drought is. Droughts have a political dimension because they are related to land scarcity. In contrast to objects that come toward people, there are some objects that people approach. People move toward them with time. They include food, money, employment, and success in farming. Poverty is somehow in between; it both approaches the subject and is approached by it. Table 1 also shows in which circumstances people feel they can influence the course of these events. Maybe not surprisingly, the movement and the extent to which one can exercise agency are correlated. People feel they have less control over those aspects of the future that come, while they can influence where they themselves go. While agency and choice are possible in some worlds, they are much less so in others. This resonates with a differentiation Victor Turner introduced when he wrote that agrarian societies allow little individual liberty and choice, whereas industrialized societies are much more focused on both (Turner 2017: 130).

Thus, comparing the objects in the table indicates a difference between objects relating predominantly to the environmental domain and those that are to a larger extent structured by capitalist modernity and the segments of society strongly permeated by it. Put frankly, the environment *comes* to one, while one *goes with* the capitalist economy. Below, I explore how this movement is structured through practices in particular domains.

Rhythms of the environment

The experience of the course of the day makes the perception of time as a movement towards the subject and its body very evident. In the communities around Fransfontein, people live in the open landscape and houses are built of sticks, cow dung, and sand, with windows made of wire mesh. In this environment, the sun is an immediate, felt presence upon its arrival. Getting out before sunrise to start the day, people are likely to greet each other with, "*Sores (ge) ni ǂoaxa*" (the sun will come to us). In this description of the beginning of the day, the sun approaches those who speak. Linguistically, the suffix *-xa* (indicating a movement towards the speaker) is attached to the verb *ǂoa* (come), indicating that the speaker is already there. As time passes, the sun is standing there, *sores ge mâ*. Towards the evening, the sun goes in, *sores ge ni ǂgâ*. This linguistic framing of the course of the day expresses how time is experienced as a reiterative movement of an object towards the subject: the object approaches them, is with them, and passes them by. The rhythmic movement is also expressed when people indicate a time of day, for example, when to meet. In the absence of a clock, they use their arm to point to the position on the horizon on which the sun will stand—at *that* time. Time and space merge into a position in the sky.

There are larger rhythms, too. Khoekhoegowab-speaking people distinguish two seasons, *soreb* and *saob*. *Soreb* is the hot, rainy summer season. It is followed by the cold, dry winter season, *saob*. During the summer, the rain makes it easier to find grazing for the livestock. When the summer ends, the pastures dry up and it is difficult to find fodder. The animals lose the weight they gained. At the end of winter, they are often so thin they can hardly walk. In this basic and fundamental sense, the availability of rain during this cycle structures human being-in-the-environment and humans' well-being at the same time.

But how do people in Fransfontein think of this reiteration of *soreb* and *saob* coming and going? They make two loving and caring winds responsible for the weather and the arrival of the rain (Schnegg 2019). During the morning hours, the female wind, *huriǂoab*, comes from the seaside to search for its male counterpart, *tūǂoab*, far inland. There, some hundred kilometers east of Fransfontein, the two meet. They propose to each other and

5. The English word future, instead, seems to point more to a state of being, and derives from the Latin *futurum*.

quarrel, just like lovers do. Only if they can agree will they jointly return to bring the rain. Around Fransfontein, the views are vast, and one can see from afar the clouds forming from the east where the two winds meet. The formation of clouds indicates how well the two winds communicate and whether they will eventually agree. People watch the clouds and wait, talking about the rain, wondering if it will come. As they do so, they use the Khoekhoegowab term, *!audi*, clouds. Tellingly, *!audi* is a female nominalization of the verb *!au*, to wait or to expect. Thus, clouds are literally "the ones you wait for."

As we talked about clouds and the waiting, my neighbor Charles told me about an experience he had with his grandfather growing up in the communal hinterlands around Fransfontein. They were watching the clouds form over the dry and exhausted arid landscape, imagining whether they would come to bring the rain, and his grandfather asked him if he could see the milk and honey in the sky. He could not, but was too shy to admit it. Only later, he said laughingly, did he realize that his grandfather was talking about the things the clouds would bring for them through the rain: food and a less laborious life.

But just as the two winds come, they also go. According to what people say, the *tū‡oab* leave towards the end of the *soreb* (summer) to stay in the north, where they will sleep behind some *!gûdi* trees (*Vachellia reficiens*). From there, they will only return the next year (Schnegg 2021a). Taken together, the way people reason about seasons and the course of the year makes it evident that they perceive time as a reiterative movement in which other agents are more active than humans. Those agents, the winds, the clouds, and the rains, come towards people and go away from them.

The largest rhythms people refer to when talking about the environment relate to drought. In 2015, when a four-year drought began, I already owned several livestock. When I returned to Fransfontein that year, I learned that half of them had died. As part of my fieldwork, I did interviews in many households on livestock ownership and losses. It surprised me that people were relatively relaxed concerning their recent losses. In some cases, people had lost up to ninety percent of what they had owned. I tried to picture the pain I would feel if such a loss were to occur in my personal life, or how investors would react if the markets were to fall that steeply.

Tina explained it to me: "You know that we had more than one hundred head of cattle when you came last. We were rich and had plenty of milk and meat every day. Now we are left with less than ten animals. But there are some females among those, and the herds grow fast. It has happened before." I made some calculations myself regarding how fast the herds would grow. A cow gives birth roughly every year and a half, and sometimes the calf dies (or it is stolen, eaten by a predator, lost, etc.). Thinking of my animals, the calculation I made left me rather frustrated with how many years it would take before my small herd would reach its original size again: possibly ten, maybe fifteen. But Tina saw the loss as part of a cycle that would eventually lead to wealth once again. In this situation, the temporality of cattle or the herd was reiterative. Not only optimists have experienced that the wealth of the past will come again.

To summarize, this rhythmic and reiterative way of experiencing drought periods, time during the day, the month, and the seasons both structures and is structured by pastoral being-in-the-world. Things like food, livestock, and rain come, go, and return. And when they come again, they are much the same as they were before. Many things just come, and humans have comparably little control over them. In a nutshell, then, the conception of time that is made and experienced in relation to the environment can be described as a rhythmic reiteration that brings the future to the subject.

But what are the consequences of such a conception of time?

There was no future in the past

When I stay in Namibia, I have a habit of drinking tea in the evening. People know this, and from time to time someone passes by to join me. Most people in Fransfontein sweeten their tea with lots of sugar. I also like sweetness in the evening, but I maintain the luxury of using honey instead. Because it is difficult to buy honey in the area, I typically bring it from Windhoek. While drinking tea in these evenings, my neighbor Charles often tells me that they have honey, too. It does not come from a shop like mine, but from the environment (*!garob*, the bush).

During a recent stay, I replied that I would love to taste it myself. I knew that the honey he referred to was made by a nonstinging bee (*|guis*) that builds its combs underground. The *|guis* use old termite hills in which an approximately two-meter-long channel leads to a hole, typically about one meter underground. As one can only see the entrance from above, it is difficult to estimate how long the channel is, and therefore how difficult it

will be to get the honey out. Charles and I selected a hole to give it a try. What followed were two of the most physically demanding days of my life. Digging mostly with our hands, a long iron stick, and an old metal plate, it was hard and painful work. After two days we finally uncovered the comb and collected the honey from the ground. I tried to measure our success: less than two cups! When I asked Charles how long the *dani-i* (honey) would stay fresh, his answer frustrated me. "A couple of days. Then we must dig another one. The bees are there. They will collect more, in another hole," he laughed. My entire body was in pain and I knew that I would not be digging again soon.

I chatted with Charles about how things had changed between now, when one could buy honey in the shops, and the past. He said, "There was no future in the past." I did not understand, so I asked, "What do you mean?" "Well," he went on, "in this world, every day, life began anew. You got up, knowing what to do. You had to go to the field to collect some wood, you had to fetch some water to make tea, you had to collect some fruits to have something to eat, and so forth. And, on special days, maybe when you wanted to propose to a girl, you also went to get some *dani-i* (honey) from the field. Almost like a jackal," he laughed again.

Charles's explanation revealed some of the consequences of the rhythmic conception of time that I have outlined. Things—here, food one needs to provide—approach again and again in similar ways. One needs to respond to them. In many ways, responding is a reaction. Accordingly, the future is not perceived as something that can or must be made. It is also neither new nor unknown. On the contrary, it reiterates possibilities and challenges that have already been there. For Charles, such a closed future of the environment opens few potentialities in the present. However, the other side of such a restriction of agency is that it reduces stress. Charles does not feel responsible to manage and control things that are far ahead in the future.

Charles's interpretation that "there was no future in the past" for Khoekhoegowab-speaking people is supported by etymological evidence. The word for the future is *hānî‖aeb*, literally the time (*‖aeb*) that will (*nî*) come (*hā*). It is most likely a direct translation of the German *Zukunft*. This suggests that the concept did not exist in precolonial times and that the word (and hence this notion of a future) was created by missionaries when they translated the Bible and other Christian texts.

But how did the future as a distinct time come into people's lives?

Linearity as accelerated increase or decline

Since the beginning of the German colonial occupation in the late nineteenth century, the influence of capitalist markets has continuously grown in Namibia (Bollig 2020; Friedman 2011). To consolidate its claim to the land and to exploit its natural resources, the German government recruited settlers who established commercial cattle farming on large areas of land (Botha 2013; Dieckmann 2013; Sullivan and Ganuses 2020). The settlers were often former members of the so-called *Schutztruppe*, who had themselves participated in the violent suppression of the population. Colonization had far-reaching consequences for the people around Fransfontein. They were deprived of much of the land they had used in the past (Schnegg, Pauli, and Greiner 2013). In addition to depriving the people of significant portions of their livelihoods, the colonial state also levied taxes to quickly integrate the people into the colonial project. Such taxes were primarily levied on goats, sheep, and cattle, but also the dogs people used for herding livestock and hunting (Gordon 2007). Overall, taxation forced people to produce agricultural products for the market in order to pay. In addition to taxes, another factor was crucial in changing living conditions. The areas designated as reserves for the people were far too small to sustainably practice livestock farming there. This was a calculated strategy of the colonial government because it forced people to work on the adjacent farms for very low wages.

With Namibia's independence from a South African government in 1990, the opportunities for realizing one's own life goals have improved significantly. Overall, Namibia's economy, which had—in terms of state planning—some socialist elements during apartheid, is now increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideologies. This includes notions of achievement, progress, and success that have become salient cultural models during recent decades. These economic transformations and their ideologies are increasingly inscribed in institutions as diverse as marriage (Pauli 2022), land management (Koot, Hitchcock, and Gressier 2019; Silva and Motzer 2015), and water (Schnegg and Kiaka 2019).

With these economic transformations, a conception of time typically described as capitalist time has become salient (Bear 2016). A first distinctive feature of

capitalist time is that it becomes an abstract container, allowing for the measuring and disciplining of labor. Time can therefore be perceived as an accumulative process characterized by productivity. In Namibia, this is especially evident in relation to work on commercial farms, which are typically owned by the descendants of the colonial elite. Time "works" for the capitalist, the farmer—when he forces his workers to be on time (no matter whether there is something to do or not) and to work the hours he defines. A second and somewhat contractionary characteristic of capitalist time is its increasing speed. Time is perceived as the actor's time. My time. It becomes a finite resource that needs to be controlled. Under capitalist time regimes, people are cautious not to "lose" time that is "running away" (Bear 2014: 78). Accordingly, sociologist Hartmut Rosa has shown how social and economic acceleration leads to alienation from time and the world at large (Rosa 2013). Whereas the fear of "losing time" is more prevalent among the urban middle class, I have also encountered some people in rural hinterlands who talk about time in this way.

Richard is one of them. In his early thirties, he is one of few men in Fransfontein who has traveled internationally. He did not get to finish his university degree because he had to take economic responsibility for his family. He took a job in the regional public administration. In our conversation, he regretted that failing to finish his degree "blocked [his] career." Because of this, he was not getting ahead. At this point he had to accept that he was eventually replaced by someone with a university degree. This man is now his boss and they do not get along well.

Richard had imagined himself being the head of the regional administration one day. While we talked about the advantages and disadvantages of getting a degree abroad or finishing his studies in Namibia first, he said, "I need to do something; I need to continue my studies to go ahead. Time is running out. The younger people are pushing at my back. They come from the universities, and they all have degrees."

Richard had a specific understanding of what he wanted to attain, an imagined end. In his life plan, this was a degree that would enable him to get the position he wanted. He felt that he must use his time effectively to get there. Time was running out. Much of what he said, including the aspirations and the anxieties he had, reflected how he experienced himself as moving with time towards some hopefully better end. The end he imagined opened potentialities in the ways he interacted with other people, mostly his boss and the younger people with university degrees, whom he saw as threats. His imagined future structured his social relationships and his being-in-the-world. His possible otherwise created potentialities that were both liberating and threatening at the same time.

We begin to see how the capitalist conception of time goes hand in hand with a particular orientation towards the future (Beckert 2013). In a capitalist ideology, future orientations are framed by the idea of growth—and the fear of decline. It feels "never enough," as Pauli (2022) says about intimate relations and love. A linear and often metric conception of time is a precondition for both. It allows for the comparison and the calculation of difference, which becomes a main indicator of how much one is getting ahead, or conversely, falling behind. Moreover, to get ahead, we need to plan.

When Charles told me that there was no future in the past, he added, "There was nothing like banks at that time." When I asked him what he meant by this, he explained that he experienced many demands of the present as exhausting. Life was easier in the past. You did not have to plan the future, he said. You did not have to worry about how to pay the school fees in January or the DStv (a popular pay-to-view TV service) that your children cry for at the end of the month. By referring to planning, bank accounts, and money, Charles indicated some of the ways in which such an "open" time, a time open to different futures, induces insecurity and stress in him. Things could be otherwise, if one only strives hard enough, the new ideology holds. It is up to yourself.

But stress is only one side of the coin. An open future creates potentialities, possibilities that are not yet actualized but are dormant in the objects with which one interacts, as Agamben, building on Heidegger, says (Agamben 1999). The goats in Charles's kraal could be sold to pay for the DStv his children are crying for, or a new car tire, or to invest in further education. As we talk about his animals, Charles mentions how he plans to take some of them to an auction and how he would drive with his boys to the nearby town to buy new clothes. They had been complaining that their peers mock them for being poor. He feels pity and shame. It could be otherwise. These are all possibilities for a not-yet, a possible otherwise which is dormant in these objects with which people interact. Thus, while an open future brings some liberating potentialities, capitalism also creates an environment that is experienced as scarcity, and the having-to-plan-for implies stress.

This model of the future can be summarized as people moving towards a future that is open and new. This movement also enhances the potentialities of the objects with which one interacts. But then, how do those two perspectives now combine?

Future as ascending spiral

To some extent, the rhythmic experience of time that I have described in relation to the environment has always been embedded in linear conceptions. All events still end. Therefore, I try to avoid the term "cyclical time," which suggests that the circulation does not end, resulting in only one ontological entity (Barnes 1971; Gell 1992: 34). Then there would not be days, just one day. With the iterations I describe as days, months, seasons, and droughts, this is not the case. Smaller rhythms (e.g., days) are nested either in larger ones (e.g., months) or in a linear conception of time, which gives smaller rhythms like days some direction, transition, and change.

With this, the understanding of time I found is described better as an ascending spiral than as a cycle, a rhythm, or linearity. Within this image of an ascending spiral, there is a spiral movement which is mostly horizontal and describes the rhythmic approaching of things (objects) in the environment—rains, droughts, and so forth. These come again, to me. However, the spiral is not flat. There is also a vertical movement which involves the agency of the individual, a movement towards a future which is open and new. As I have shown, this linear component gained saliency during recent decades. There are two main reasons for this.

For one, Damara people experience that the environment is changing lastingly (Schnegg 2021b, 2021c). Most people agree that the rainy season starts later today. This cannot be explained, though, as a regular drought, which is mostly experienced as less precipitation that, in combination with other factors, will lead to insecurity and death. Therefore, with the changing timing of rainy seasons, environmental reiterations are increasingly embedded in the experience of longer-term transformations, towards something that is entirely different. The fact that people experience it as increasingly unlikely that this tendency will reverse supports a linear time reckoning, possibly leading to an experience in which the vertical movement towards something which is open and exclusive remains.

For another, the increasing involvement in the market economy and the aspirations and pressures that come with it give the movement towards something open a new saliency. The feeling that it is never enough, that one needs to advance, accelerate, improve, and get ahead, encourages a linear time reckoning, as in the image of futures being the different paths one can choose or take. Increasingly, these feelings do not only shape general being-in-the-world in rural Namibia but also the pastoral domain, when, for example, animals are held and herded to be sold at a fixed age. To stay in the image I suggest, the spirals get smaller and eventually vanish so that most likely only a vertical movement remains.

Conclusion

My first aim in this article was to come to grips with my experience that many people in this part of Namibia find it difficult to talk about the future. When I started this research, I assumed the past, present, and future were different from each other. Some of the problems I encountered while trying to interview Damara pastoralists about the future had to do with the fact that they did not agree with me on this point. I might have expected this. Epson said that the world in the future will be like *netsē tsi ǁari*. His words translate to "today and tomorrow" or "today and yesterday." In Khoekhoegowab, *ǁari* refers to yesterday and tomorrow at the same time.[6] Khoekhoegowab, like a number of other languages including Sango (Central African Republic) and Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), underlines the structural equality between yesterday and tomorrow.[7] Where the future does not exist as a distinct orientation of life, it is not surprising that it is difficult to talk about it.

As we have seen, this orientation that there was "no future in the past," mostly applies to the environmental domain. Over the past decades, however, this has changed to an extent as the visions people have about their future come with a bricolage of different temporalities. To describe the bricolage, I compared it to a landscape they had drawn of the future with themselves standing inside. When people narrated their visions of the future to me, the landscape was largely the same as the present landscape, while their position as the actor within it had changed. But how does such a myriad

6. This holds true for the day that comes next, *aetsē*, which refers to the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow as well.

7. I thank Louisa Lombard for pointing me to these examples.

come about? And what consequences does it have? To explore both, I have developed an approach to future-making that puts objects center stage. They make the future knowable.

Such an object-oriented analysis has revealed a distinction. My interlocutors distinguish between objects that approach them and objects towards which they move. People combine these two models of time (i.e., moving ego and moving time), which have often been treated as separate in the literature. I find that many of the objects that approach the individual are rooted in the environmental domain, while most objects towards which people move belong to the capitalist economy. Building on this I have explored how objects come and how people go to them. Here, we find a second distinction. Within the environmental domain, most objects come in reiterations. Environmental cycles—the day, the season, the rain—structure their experience of time, inscribing these cycles into the objects that belong to these domains. Most of what is expected in the environment has already occurred. There was no future, as Charles said of a time when capitalism was not so dominant yet.

Over the past decades, both the environment and people's conceptions of time have changed. The rains have become less foreseeable. This has fueled a perception of the future as more unpredictable, open, and new. While the environment remains reiterative, these cycles are not cycles in the strict sense; they increasingly lead to more and more unknown and unprecedented events and conditions. I describe this as an ascending spiral. Even more importantly, the rise of capitalist markets has fostered thinking along the lines of continued achievement, progress, and success. This has pushed a lineal reckoning of time. In the ascending spiral the spirals lose significance while the linearity of a movement towards some open future solely remains.

What are consequences of such a future vision? One of Heidegger's aims was to show how future orientation creates openings to the world. It creates potentialities that make distinct ways for relating in the present possible (Agamben 1999). Looking at climate futures as potentialities points to an important difference between ways of envisioning the future. A future perceived to be approaching as a reiteration of the past opens fewer, or other, potentialities than a future perceived to be open and new. The environmental domain is experienced as something that comes to people, who then respond to it. With this rhythm, the conception of time also provides security. Things will be—more or less—how they were in the past. This is, I would suspect, one of the reasons why Damara people in the Fransfontein area are, on average, much less concerned about the long-term consequences of climate change than are media discourses with their dystopic visions. While responding can lead to adaptations, it does not open the present radically, it does not lead to climate anxiety.

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