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EQUILIBRIAL DYNAMICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SEASONALITY MODELS IN THE LATE HOLOCENE HUMAN ECOLOGY OF THE NAMIB DESERT

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INTRODUCTION

The Namib Desert environment is for the most part so dry that it supports little permanent vegetation, other than sparse thornscrubs and scattered trees lining dry river courses. Artesian springs are found at widely separated intervals, and are usually brackish, while runoff from occasional rainfall lies briefly in open rocky pools, or disappears beneath the sand of ephemeral rivers. Sometimes this water is accessible in shallow, hand-dug wells known colloquially as *gorra*, the most basic essential of life in the Namib before the arrival in colonial times, of the borehole and wind-pump.

In these conditions, it is relatively easy to predict the location of Holocene archaeological sites, especially those dating to within the last 5,000 years, during which human responses to the aridity of the Namib developed certain distinctive features. Early archaeological investigations located many sites, including important concentrations of rock-art and extensive surface accumulations of stone artefacts. These observations defined in broad terms a cultural sequence consistent with that of the southern African region. It is only with more detailed recent research that the Namib has begun to shed new light on the regional sequence and the nature of human adaptation to the desert environment.

Microlithic assemblages from rock shelter excavations in the Namib are mainly related to lightweight hunting equipment such as the bow and composite arrow, with some evidence of leatherwork and other crafts (Richter 1984; Wendt 1972). Evidence of food remains indicates a primary dependence on small game, as well as seasonally available plant foods which in some areas formed the main staple (Wadley 1979, 1984). Hunter-gatherer subsistence in the Namib was essentially centripetal to reliable water sources, and so, too, was the land-use pattern of the nomadic pastoral economy that rose to dominate the desert and its fringes during the last two millennia.