



# **Kalahari**

**Robert L. Bezy**

**Dedication: To the the San people the Kalahari Desert**



**Cover: Robert Bezy**

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## Kalahari

Robert L. Bezy

**Abstract.** This work of fiction chronicles the adventures of two young friends exploring the herpetofauna in the Kalahari Desert. With an anthropologist they document the San's knowledge of reptiles and compare it with that of the Aboriginals of central Australia, another nomadic desert culture. The adventures have their roots in my explorations of Namibia in 1972 and of Botswana in 1985, but the people, places, and adventures are fictional.

**Key words:** Reptiles, Kalahari, desert, San, ethnozoology, bromance.

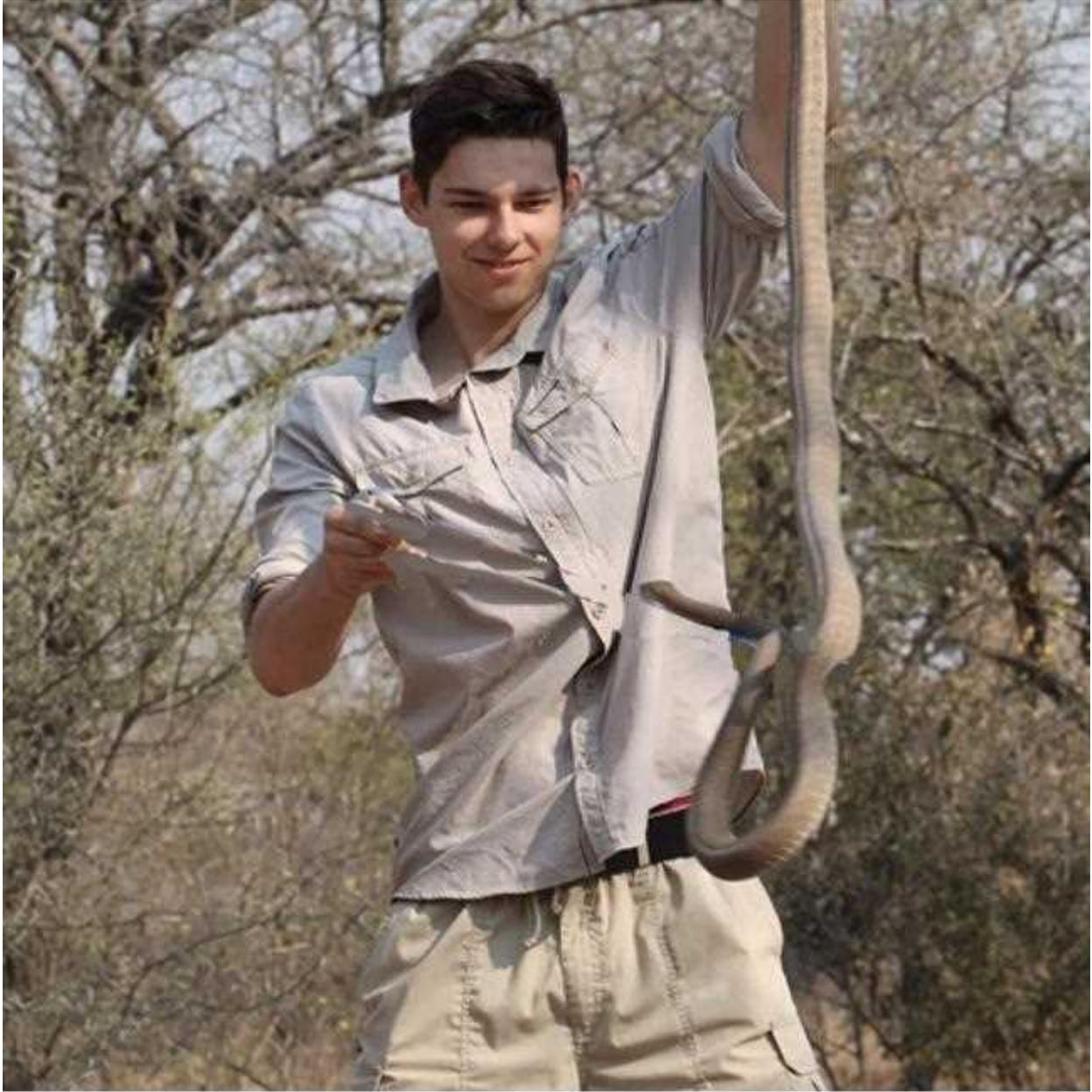
### Kalahari 1 .

Billy insisted on holding the *Naja nivea* (Cape Cobra) by its tail and the snake struck his chest. In no time he was drifting in and out of consciousness. "Billy, don't die, please don't die!" I pleaded. The minutes turned into hours as I desperately tried to keep bro alive with mouth to mouth.





***Naja nivea* (Cape Cobra) by Willem Van Zyl**

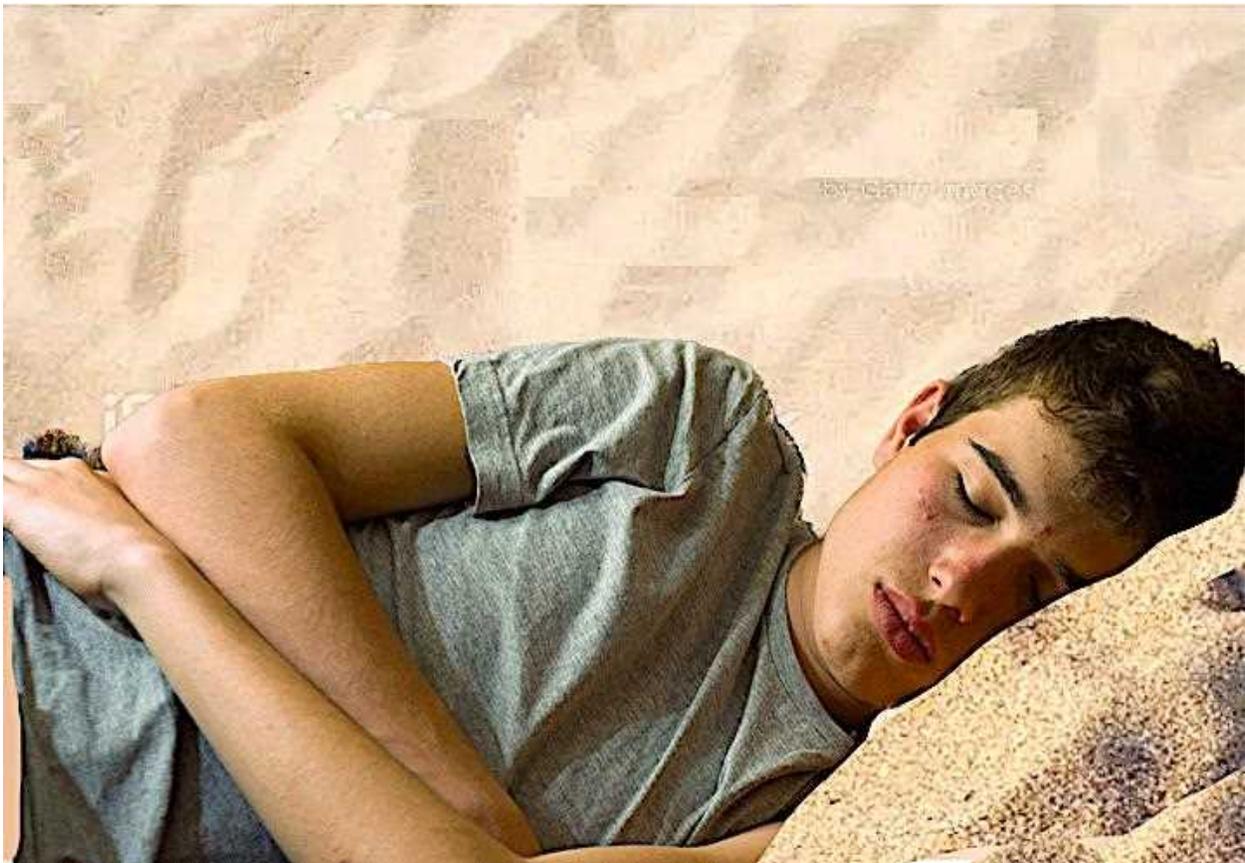


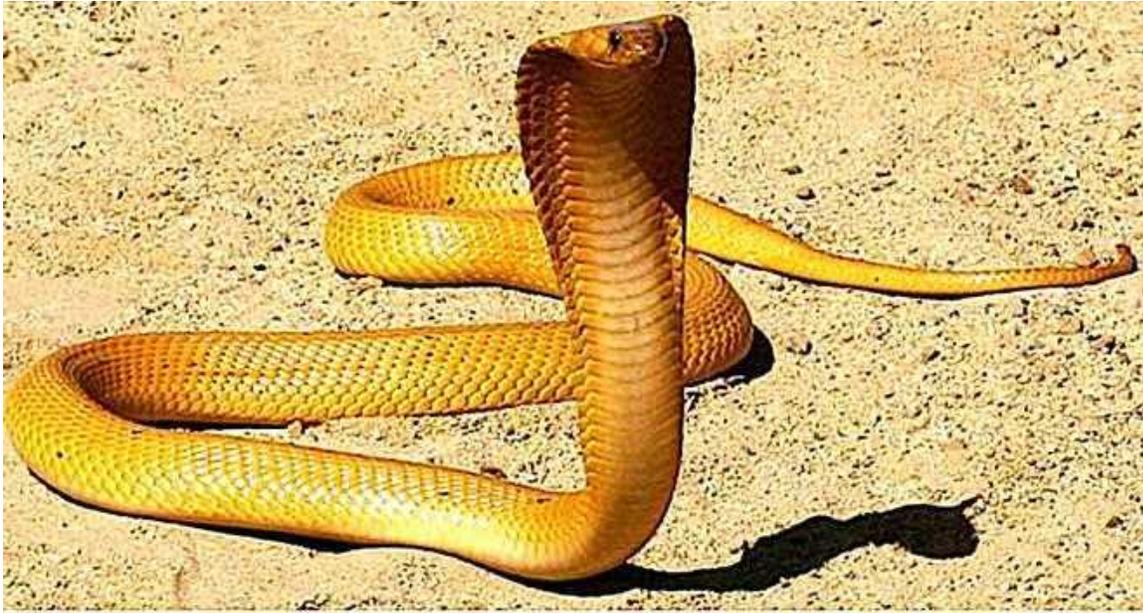
**Billy with *Naja nivea***

**Kalahari 2.**

My fear and panic was overwhelming as I struggled to keep Billybro breathing after his envenomation by the *Naja nivea*. It was a night of pure terror. I loved bro so deeply that life without him was totally unthinkable. I would have prayed for help if I believed in a higher power, but I did not.

Mom always said people most often died around 3 in the morning, so I assisted his respiration without resting in those horrible cold hours in the sand. At dawn Billy blinked and took a couple of small breaths on his own and muttered, "I love you Bobbybro." That brought a flood of tears to my eyes and I feared the sweet words might be his last.





***Naja nivea* (Cape Cobra) by K. Hopkins, J. Measey, K. Tolley**



### **Kalahari 3.**

Billy slowly started to breathe a little on his own. But his legs were paralyzed and he did not seem right in the head. "Bobbybro, there is only one cure for my paralysis. I have to kiss that cobra."

"That is absolutely absurd, Billy. Your trying to touch the snake is what got you bitten in the first place."

"Well, its all up to you, Bobbybro. If you don't want to see me paralyzed for the rest of my life bring the cobra to me."

Billy's request was nearly impossible for me to fill. When he was bitten by *Crotalus enyo* (Baja California Rattlesnake) I noticed he did not seem to make sense, and of course *Naja nivea* is much more neurotoxic and so maybe this mental impairment might be expected.

Billy dozed a while and I hoped he would wake up clear-headed. But no, "Bobby, where is the Cobra?"

I knew from having lived my life with Billy that once he became fixated on something there was no talking him down. So I just got my snake stick, found the cobra, gently lifted it, and brought it to him.

He took the frontal approach, moved in slowly, and kissed the snake's mouth. "Now that will fix one of my legs, to bring the other leg to life you will have to kiss the snake also."

"Billybro, you know there is nothing I would not do for you," and I kissed the Cape Cobra on the back of its head.

"I guess that chicken she-it approach of yours will have to do," and we both had our first laugh in days.





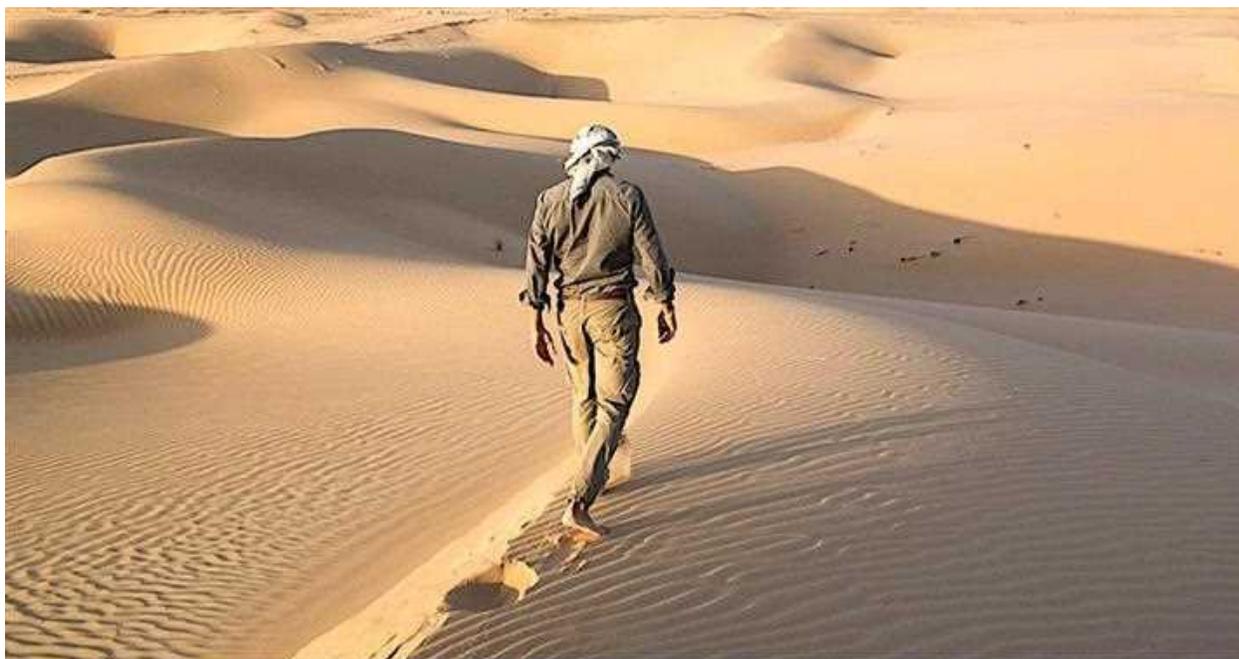
***Naja nivea* by mgkuipers**

**Kalahari 4 .**

Billy started to recover but was too weak to walk and we were out of water. It was one of the most painful decisions imaginable. Should I stay and die with bro or go on a futile search for help in this vast sea of sand?

But Billy made the decision for me. "For she-its sake Bobbybro, leave me here and go for help.'

"I will always love you Billybro" and we had a last hug. We were both sobbing uncontrollably as I turned my back on my only love and walked away.





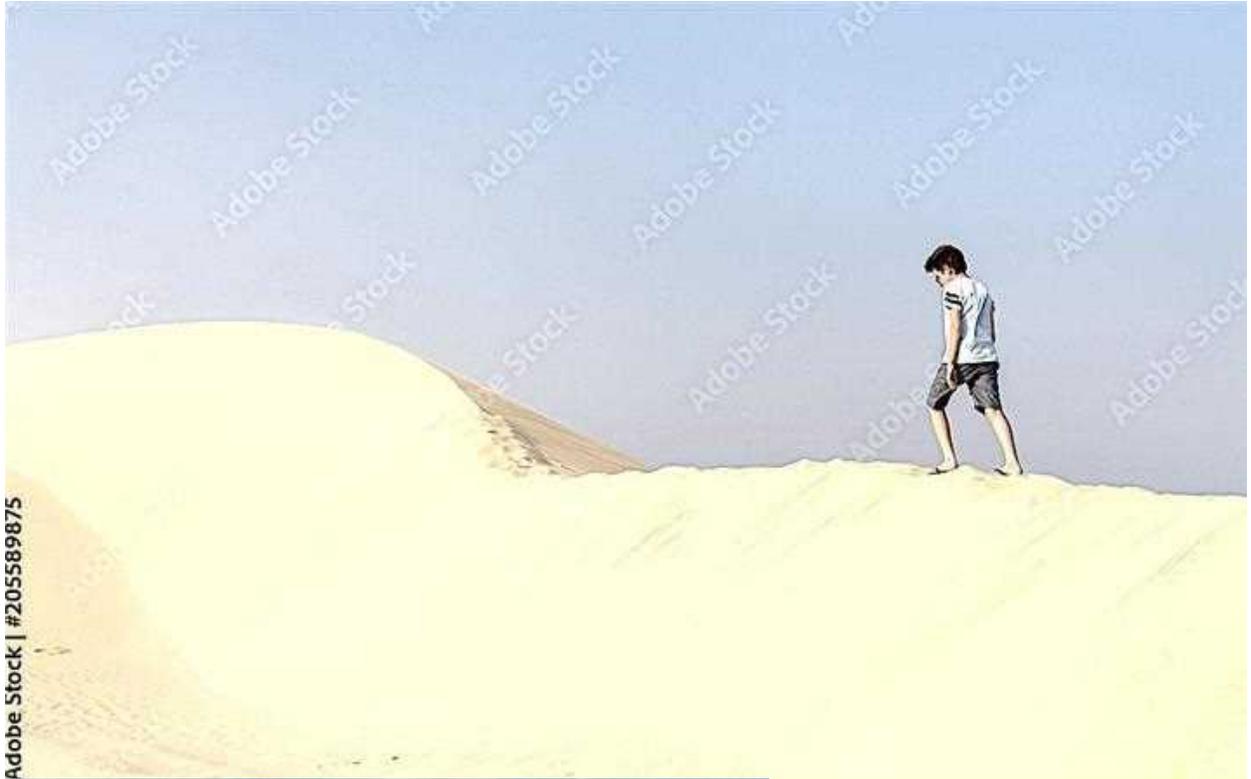
### **Kalahari 5.**

This sand sea was so enormous and I had no clue in what direction to walk. I would have preferred to just stay and die with Billy. But he asked this of me and how could I not grant him this final request.

And it was sort of poetic justice, I guess. All my life he has been my physical bro and took care of me. Now things were reversed and I had to accomplish this unbelievable physical challenge for him.

I staggered up to the top of a dune and decided that the best approach was to walk along the crest as far as I could. But without water I would not be able to get very far. Dehydration delirium was setting in and my leg muscles were starting to cease responding to my command to move. My eyesight was giving out but I managed to see the Puff Adder (*Bitis arietans*) hunkered down in the sand and I asked it to give me strength.

I fell to my knees and crawled until I collapsed into the sand and began drifting in and out of consciousness. I imagined hearing all the wonderful kids who had herped with Billybro and me over the years. They were laughing, chattering, and making strange clicking sounds. I opened my eyes and through the blur I thought there were kids standing there.



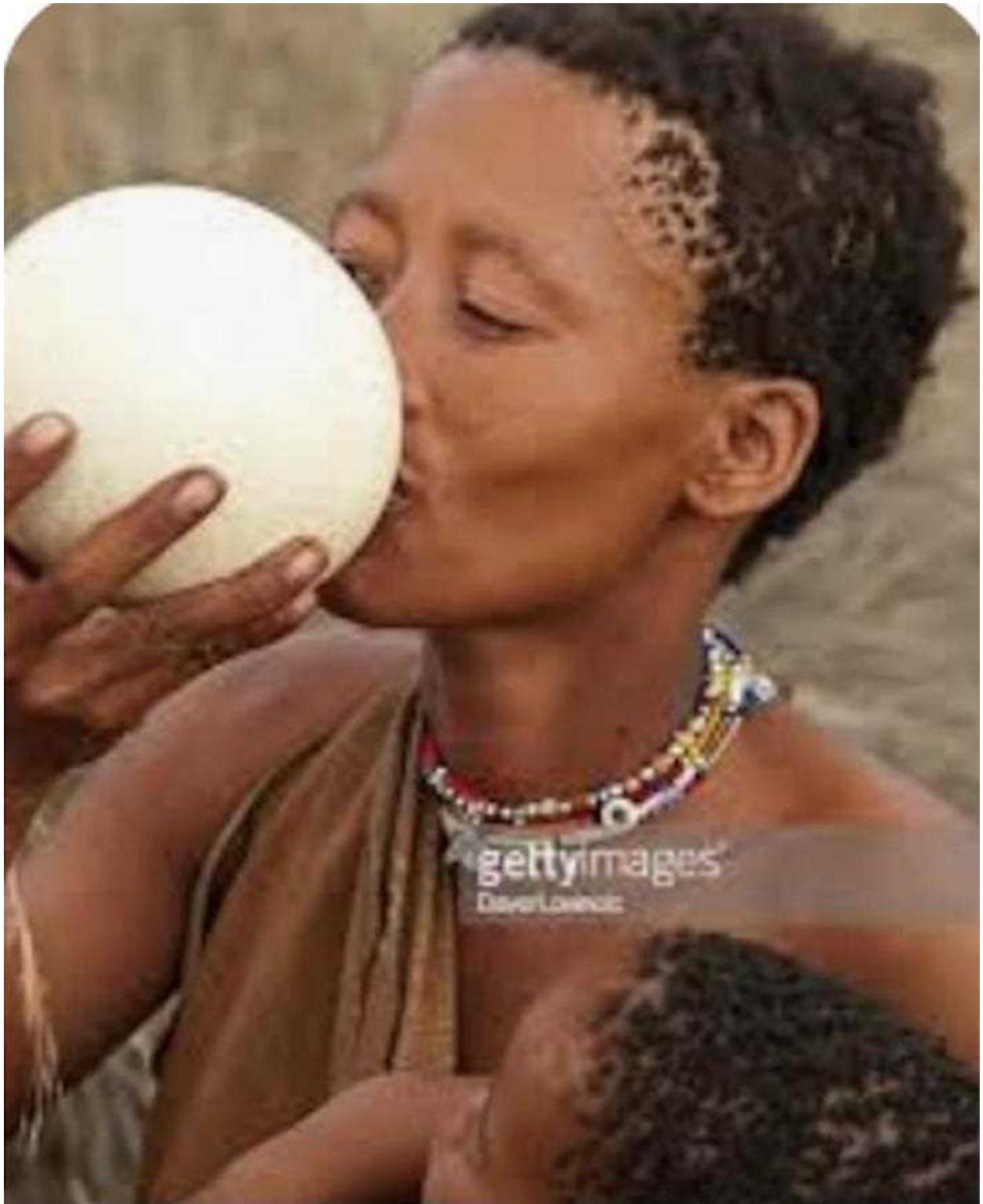


***Bitis arietans* by Duncan McKenzie**

**Kalahari 6.**

I heard the clicking sound again and I concentrated on getting my eye muscles to focus and through the blur I could make out three San kids. I managed to mutter "WAT TER" But that seemed to frighten them and they galloped off into the dunes.

I again descended it an unconscious delirium and hours passed. I heard the clicking again and forced my eyes to focus and in the blur was a San women holding her Ostrich egg water vessel to my lips.



**Kalahari 7.**

The San people nursed me back to health. I was shocked when an anthropologist Clara suddenly made her appearance with her friend Amari. Clara was a linguist studying the tongue clicking of different clans of the San. I immediately told her about Billy dying in the sand out among the dunes. She was fluent in the Khoi language and conversed with the people. They relayed to her that another band of San had found Billy and given him water and food.







## Clara

### **Kalahari 8 ,**

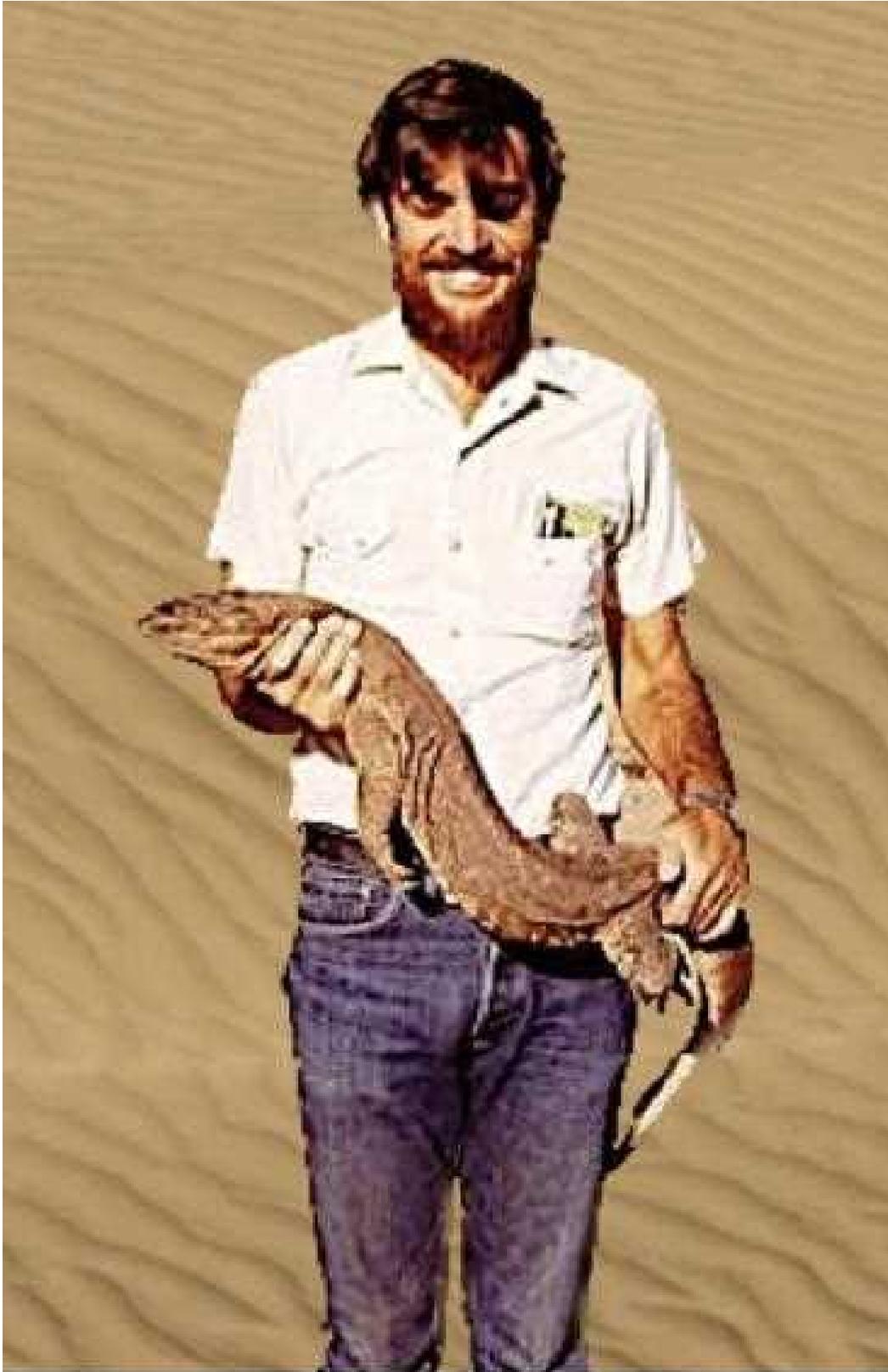
Clara and Amari said they would take me to Billy as soon as I was strong enough. I was really chomping at the bit to see bro who I had thought was dead. We eventually headed out and it was a days walk across the dunes and we stopped only to see a *Varanus albigularis* (Rock Monitor). When we reached the camp there were only two San there, and they reported that the others had gone hunting. Amari said he could track the hunting group and by nightfall there in front

of me stood Billy, the light of my life. We threw our arms around each other and hugged until we ached.

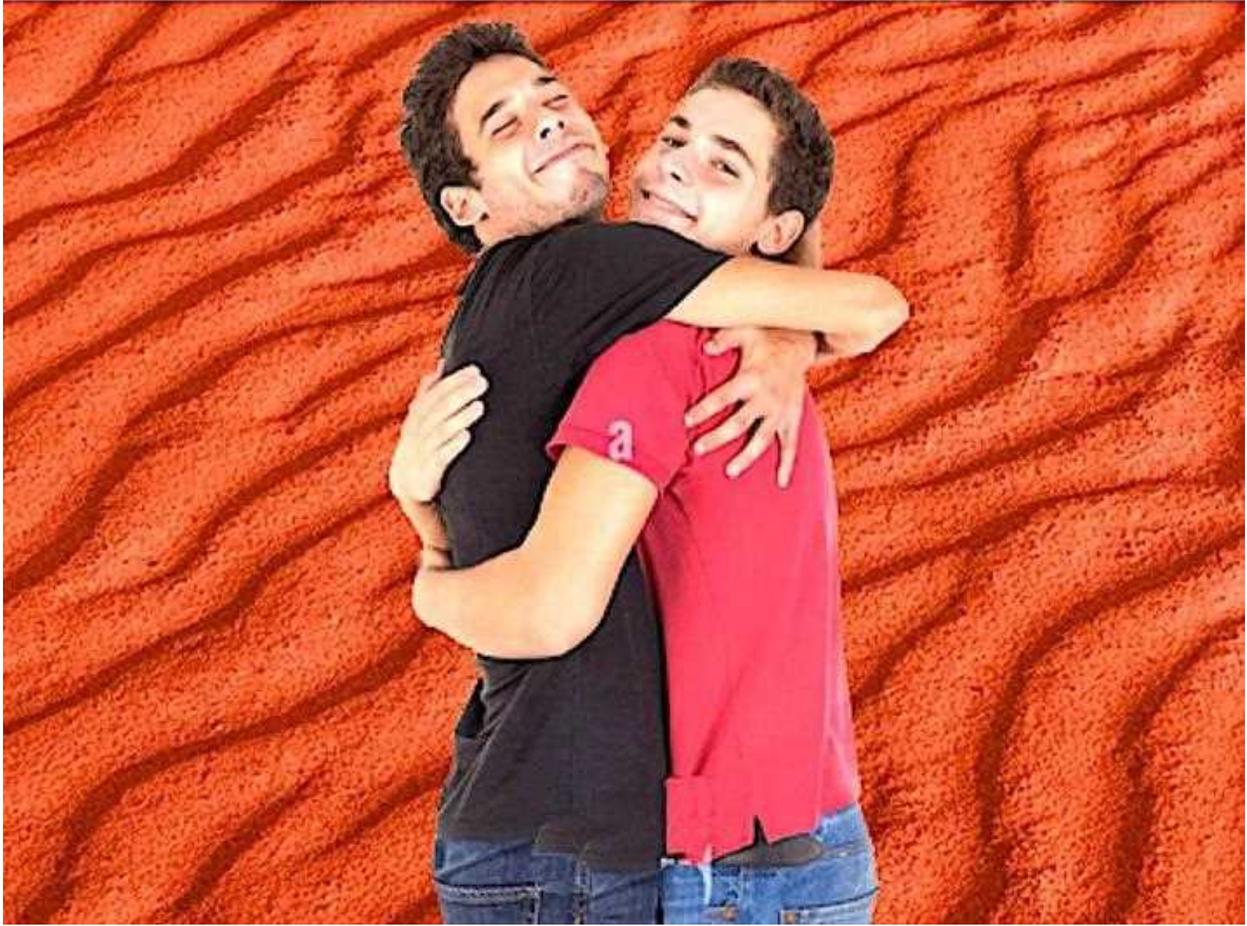


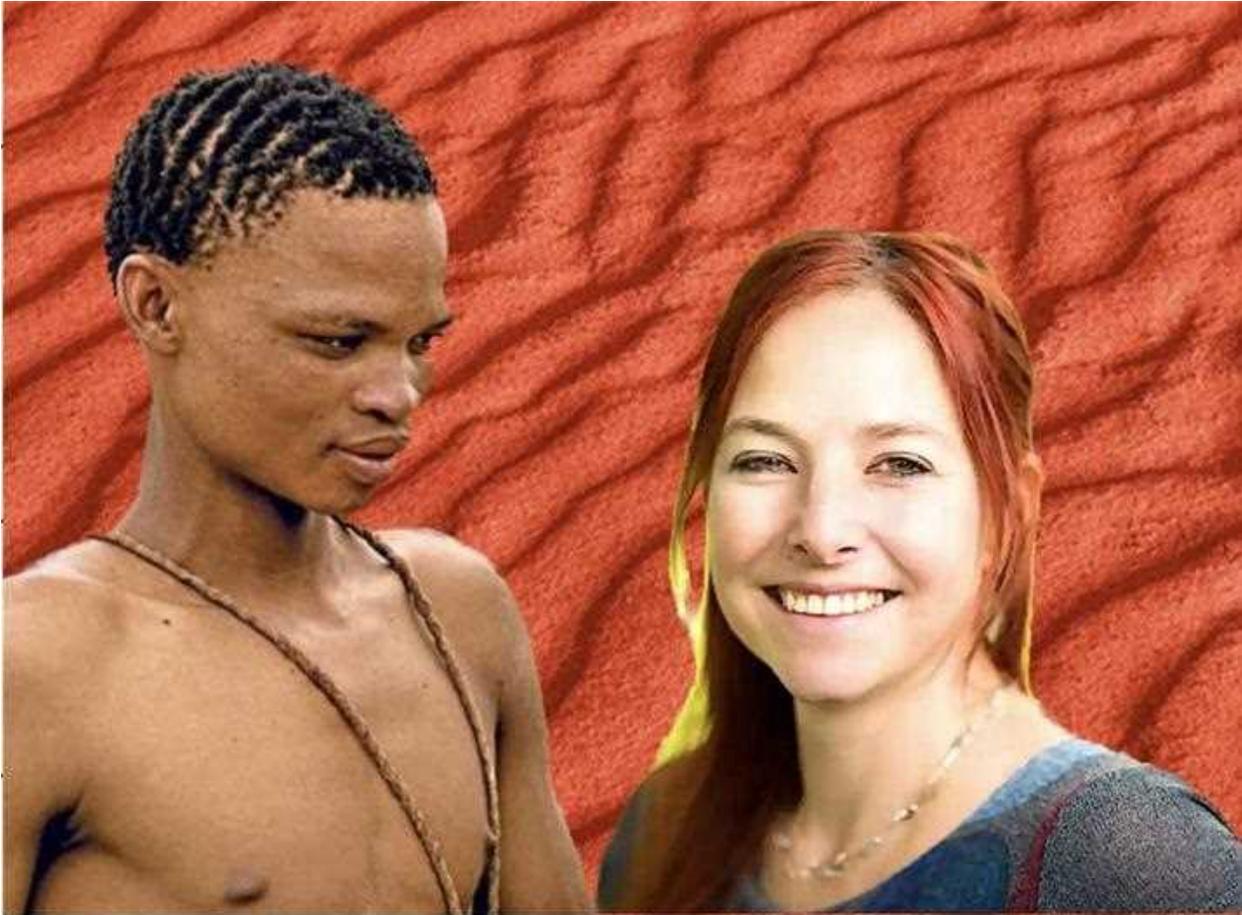
***Varanus albigularis* by kevin\_ulett**





**Robert Bezy with *Varanus albigularis* by Charles Hogue**



**Amari****Clara****Kalahari 9.**

While the rest of the band were off hunting Billy and I had long conversations with Clara and Amari about her research. It was absolutely fascinating as she was comparing linguistic and DNA data, looking at the correspondence of DNA trees with language trees. She also was comparing levels of differences in language and DNA among the San bands with those among Australian aboriginal groups, two surviving hunting and gathering people.

She had been to Australia to record the tongue clicking of the only clan outside Africa who used them as part of their language. Unfortunately she found the language of that particular clan is now extinct.

She suggested we should settle down with this hunting band and begin working with her and Amari on the ethnozoology of these people.

"Wow, would we ever like that," Billy and I responded in unison.

Just then Letsego came in with a *Naja nigricincta* (Barred Spitting Cobra) and our study began.



***Naja nigricincta* by Robin James**



***Naja nigricincta* by Daniel Danckwerts**

**Kalahari. 10 .**

Clara and Amari interviewed all the people in the clan about the Banded Spitting Cobra and found that both male and female San had incredibly deep knowledge of the ecology and distribution of the species. They have an egalitarian society in which both sexes participate fully in the hunting and gathering. They do not have a concept of "gender roles."

Among the clan Bontle stood out as having greater knowledge and interest in snakes. Clara asked him why and he said it was because he had been bitten by a Cape Cobra once and found the experience very powerful.

Billy tried to go out hunting with the clan a few times but even physical bro was not fit enough to keep up with them. Fortunately the people were not adverse to bringing the reptiles to us to photograph before they ate them.

We made a decision not to plead for the lives of the reptiles as the nourishment was essential to the survival of the clan. We photo vouchered all reptiles and Clara took detailed notes on what each person including kids in the clan knew of the species.

Just then a Bontle came running in with a beautiful *Dendroaspis polylepis* (Black Mamba).

The people had great respect for the Mamba but were not afraid of it. They described in great detail the habits and habitat of the species.



***Dendroaspis polylepis* by Wynand Uys**



***Dendroaspis polylepis* by World Leaks**



## Bontle

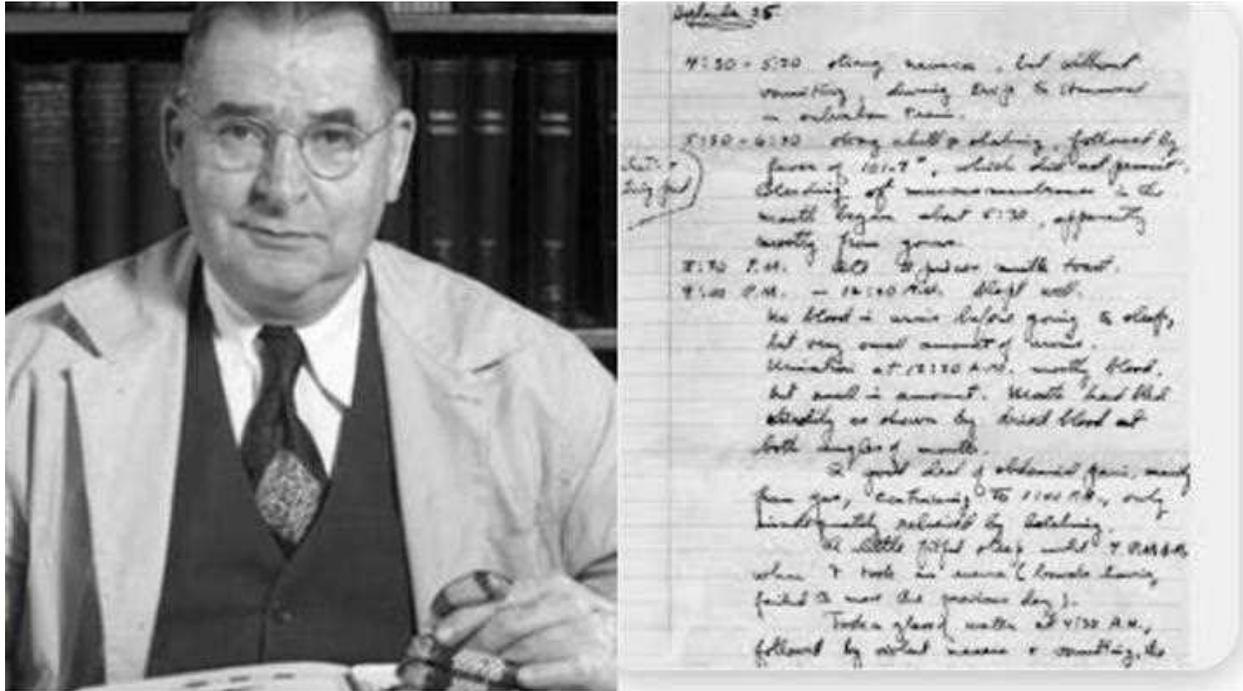
### **Kalahari 11.**

Billy and I were totally accepted by the San people. They fully understood my attachment to Billybro and that I was not interested in bonding with Boipelo even though we had fun together while Billy was with Gorata.

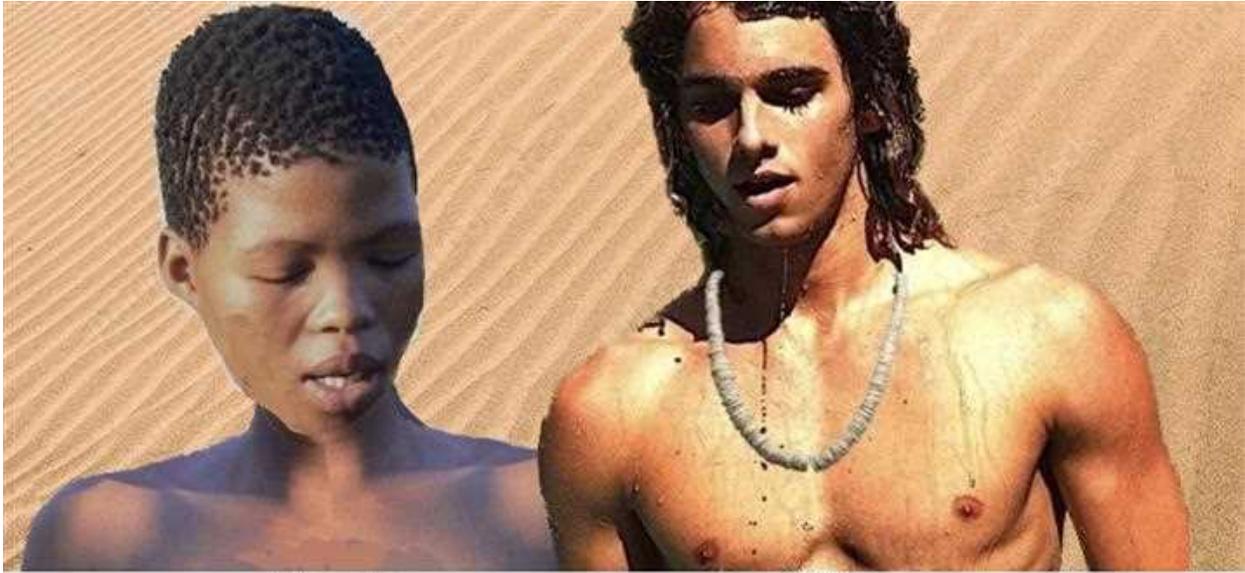
There was no water in the Kalahari for swimming so Billy started taking long runs through the dunes with Gorata and she liked his body.

While they were running Gorata saw a *Dispholidus typus* (Boomslang) and grabbed it. Billy cautioned her about the rear-fanged snake but she knew the species was venomous and that it was docile.

Back at camp Clara and Amari interviewed the entire clan about the Boomslang and even the kids knew much about the species. I told them how herpetologists did not know it was a dangerous snake until Karl Schmidt did from boomslang envenomation,



**Karl Patterson Schmidt and his notes on his *Dispholidus* envenomation**



**Gorata**

**Billy**



***Dispholidus typus* by brian reeves**



***Dispholidus typus* by Johan Marais**

**Kalahari 12. .**

I was very sad that Billy and I seemed to be drifting apart and I made brave to have an intimate brotalk. "Billy, I feel we are not spending enough time together, just the two of us."

"I hear ya talkin loud and clear, Bobbybro, and I miss ya. To rekindle our feelings let's start spending an hour close together at puesta del sol like we used to. Also, I am worried about Gorata. As you know I like people enjoying my body, but I think she is starting to get attached emotionally and that is not reciprocated by me."

Billybro gave me one of his great hugs that thrill me to the core and that we had not shared since his cobra envenomation.

"Billy also I want to go looking for reptiles with you separate from the San."

"You're on Bobbybro. There are only two things in the world I need, you and herping."

That brotalk changed everything and Billy and I became very intimate again. We also had a long talk with Clara about Gorata and Boipelo. She knew personally the strong attraction to well-built bodies like that of Billy and Amar.. She helped us communicate with Gorata and Boipelo and they wanted to continue to have fun with us, but would safe-guard their hearts.

Dawn of a new day arrived and Billybro and I set out to explore the herps of the Kalahari together. *A g a m a a c u l e a t a* (Ground Agmas) were very abundant and Billy soon noosed several. Back at camp the interviews by Clara and Amari revealed that the San knew the species quite well as it was an abundant easy-to-obtain food source. They roasted several of the lizards for us and they were delicious.



**Bobby and Billy**



***Agama aculeata* by Gigi Laidler**



***Agama aculeata* by Knut Jäger**



***Agama aculeata* by Marius Burger**



## ***Agama aculeata* by Bzymon Bzoma**

### **Kalahari 1 2 .**

It is the unexpected twists and turns of the road of life that make it such a grand adventure. Billy and I donned our head lamps and started to head out on night walkabout. A San boy came up to us and managed to utter the words, "I go." Kalahari turned out to have much better eyes than Billy and I and he spotted several geckos we missed.

When we got back to camp Kalahari laid down next to me. In the morning Billy and I consulted with Clara about the boy. She explained that Kalahari's parents were killed by a Lion and he formed strong attachments to guys as father figures. This was quite touching but Billy and I were worried this would lead to a major feeling of abandonment on his part when we eventually left this region.

As usual Clara had a good solution to the problem. She and Amari would adopt Kalahari also so he would spend part time with them and part with us.

But with the exception of our bro time Kalahari was glued to me almost continuously and I was becoming very attached to him. Billy to the rescue. Bro knew me like his hand and intuited it was I, not Kalahari, that would suffer emotional pains when we eventually left the desert and he helped me rein in my feelings.

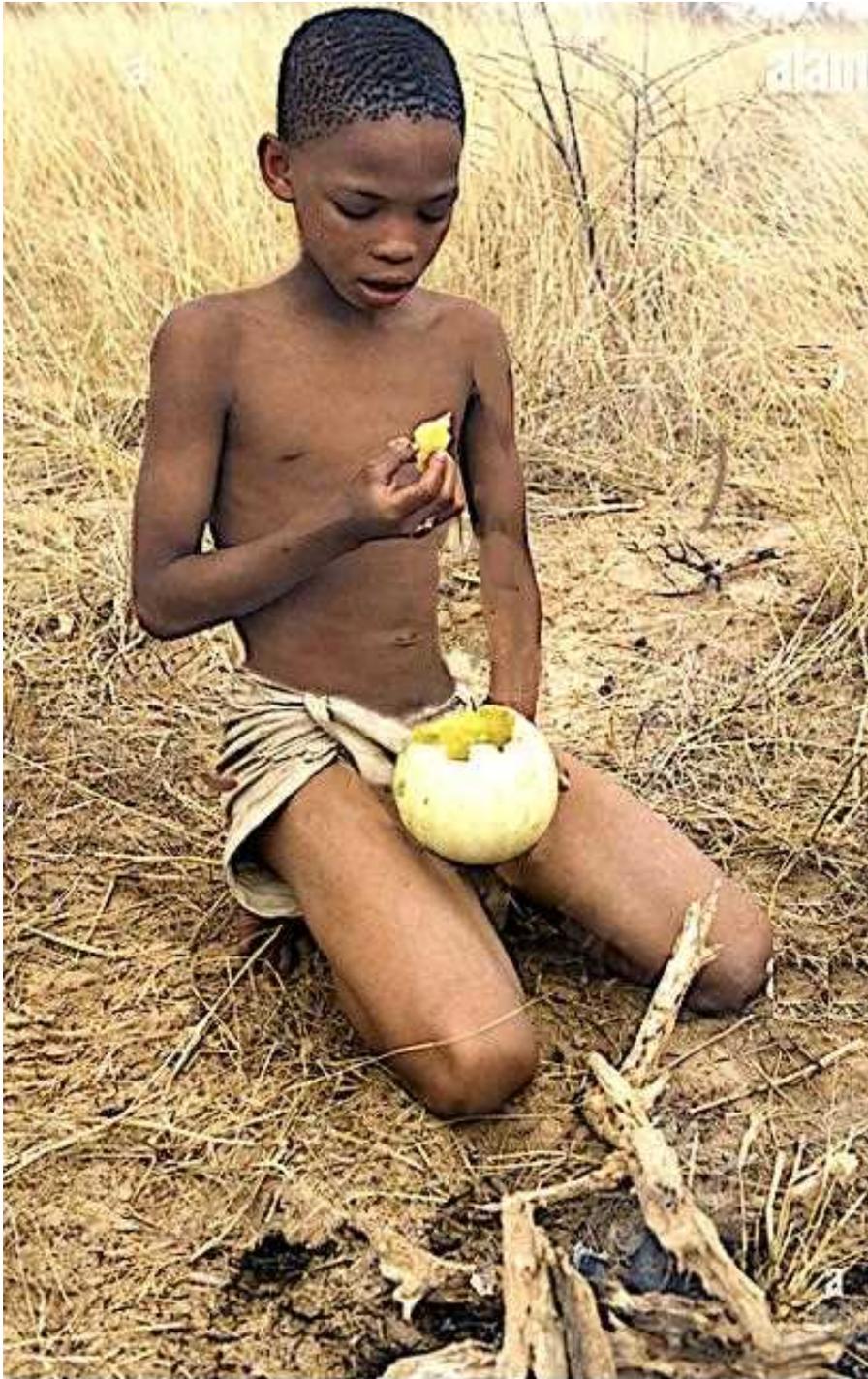
Just then a teen named Baruti. came in with a large Southern Africa Python. (*Python natalensis*). After the interviews I convinced him to release the huge snake rather than eat it.



***Python natalensis* by Joubert Heymans**



***Python natalensis* by vladimir\_onishko**



## Kalahari

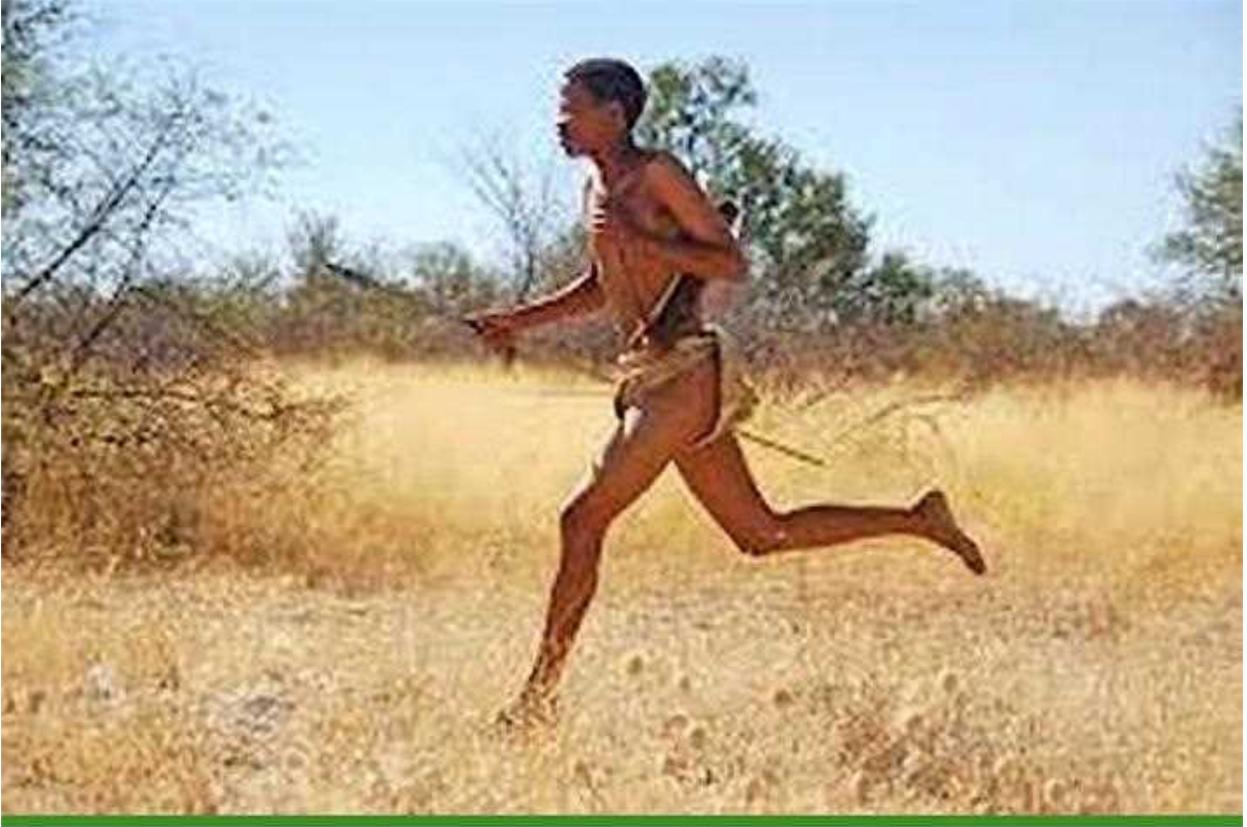
It was a hot afternoon and Billy and I were napping in the shade of an acacia when Kalahari came running yelling something. We could not understand what the boy was saying but we were able to locate Clara to translate. It turned out that Kabo,

one of the guards of the reserve, had been bitten by a *Dendroaspis polylepis* (Black Mamba ) and was in critical condition. We all trotted off to see what we could do.

Although the swelling was still confined to Kebo's foot, he was slipping in and out of consciousness. Clara explained that she did not have any Mamba antivenom or even any way to directly contact the outside world. She said that Gaone was the fastest long distance runner in the clan and he could get to the nearest ranch with radio communication in three hours to contact Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

Kabo was having trouble breathing and we all took turns giving him mouth to mouth respiration. Four hours later we heard the helicopter. Out popped the very skilled dedicated MSF team and they rapidly swung into action. In just thirty minutes they were air-borne again heading back to the Gaborone hospital and its supply of *Dendroaspis* antivenom.

We decided not to kill the Black Mamba and let it go free to bring Kabo good luck, and a few days later Clara heard that he had survived the envenomation.



**Gaone**



***Dendroaspis polylepis* by Joubert Heymans**



***Dendroaspis polylepis* by clicque**



**Kabo**



### **Kalahari 15**

Early the next morning Clara woke up Billy and me. She was very upset. Kobo had just returned from the hospital and he had some very sad news. In Gaborone he had learned that a large Arizona mining corporation, Freeport-McMoRan, was planning a huge lithium mine in a remote sector of the the San lands near Deception Valley. They had convinced the Botswana government to wall off the area and relocate the San to another region.

"But I interviewed our entire clan and learned the Deception is also the home of a species of rare gecko that lives nowhere else. So lets all go on a long bushwalk to the valley and see if we can find one of these lizards."

So Billy and I were off with Clara and the entire clan. Their pace was entirely too fast for me, but Kalahari and his friend Xander decided to walk with me while Billy zoomed along with the rest of the clan. At noon we paused and ate ostrich eggs and then about midnight stopped for the night. The clan went on a nocturnal walkabout and caught several magnificent *Chondrodactylus*

*angulifer* (Giant Ground Geckos) and two *Pseudaspis cana* (Mole Snakes).



***Chondrodactylus angulifer* by Paul Bester**



***Chondrodactylus angulifer* by Paul Bester**



***Chondrodactylus angulifer* by Totes Scelotes**



***Pseudaspis cana* by Tyrone Ping**



***Ptenopus garrulus* by Tyrone Ping**

### **Kalahari 16 . The conclusion.**

By the next afternoon we reached the Deception Valley area. Even the San were tired and we rested under acacia until evening. At dark we split into four teams each with one headlamp and headed out looking for the mystery gecko. We walked all night and found many Barking Geckos (*Ptenopus garrulus*) but not the rare unknown gecko.

In the morning Khuma warmed some ostrich eggs and after we had our fill everyone headed out on a morning lizard hunt. We caught many Bushveld Lizards (*Heliobolus lugubris*), Spotted Desert Lizards (*Meroleo suborbitalis*), Kalahari Ground Agamas (*Agama aculeata*), Kalahari Tree Skinks (*Trachylepis spilogaster*), and Rock Monitors (*Varanus albigularis*).

Clara and Amari spent the entire afternoon interviewing the people about all five lizards and were shocked how much they knew about each species. She now had enough data to show that the San had a richer ethnoherpetology of any people on earth except the Australia Aboriginals, similar desert nomadic hunters and gatherers.

This was to be the last night for Billy and me in the Kalahari Dunes as the next afternoon we were scheduled to fly out of Gaborone. We were desperate to find the Mystery Gecko and our four groups walked all night with the head lamps. Just before dawn Xander and Kalahari yelled, and gently handed the gecko to me.

It was a new species that resembled *Pachydactylus wahlbergii* (Wahlberg's Kalahari Gecko)

There were tears in my eyes as I said goodbye to the San and headed for Gaborone. The DNA sequences Billy and I obtained clearly showed it was a new species. The Nature Conservancy purchased the entire Deception Valley region as a preserve for the San and the Mystery Gecko. It is managed by Clara, Amari, Kalahari, and Xander.



**Xander**

**Kalahari**



**Clara**



***Meroles suborbitalis* by Tyrone Ping**



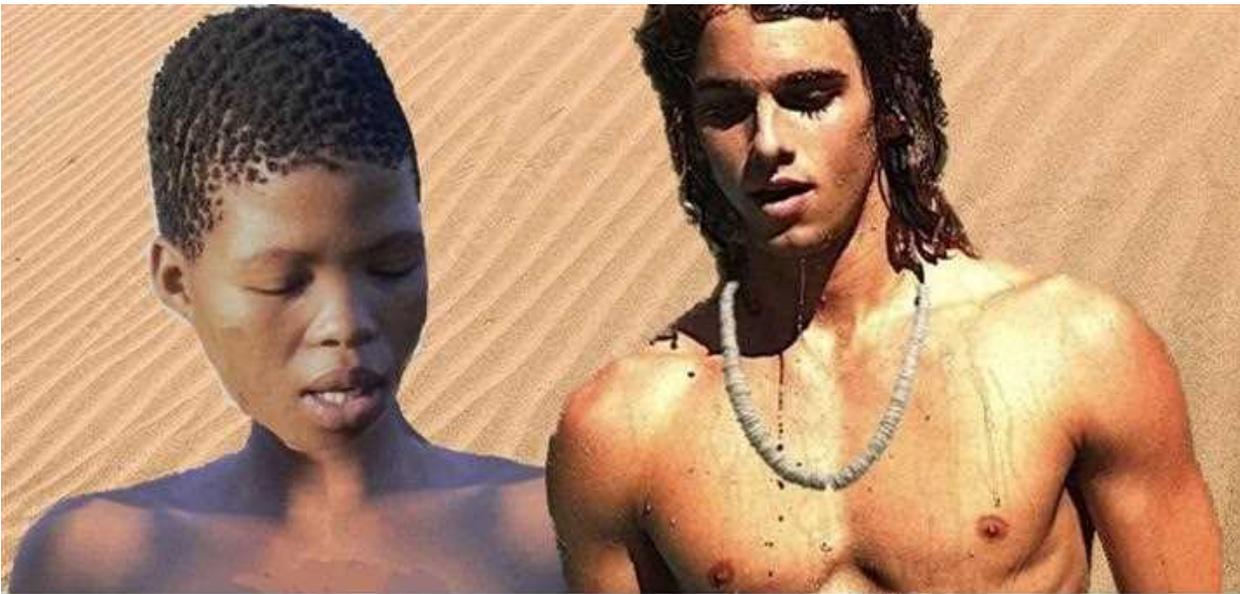
***Varanus albigularis* by ricky taylor**



***Trachylepis spilogaster* by Peter Erb**



***Agama aculeata* by Szymon Bzoma**



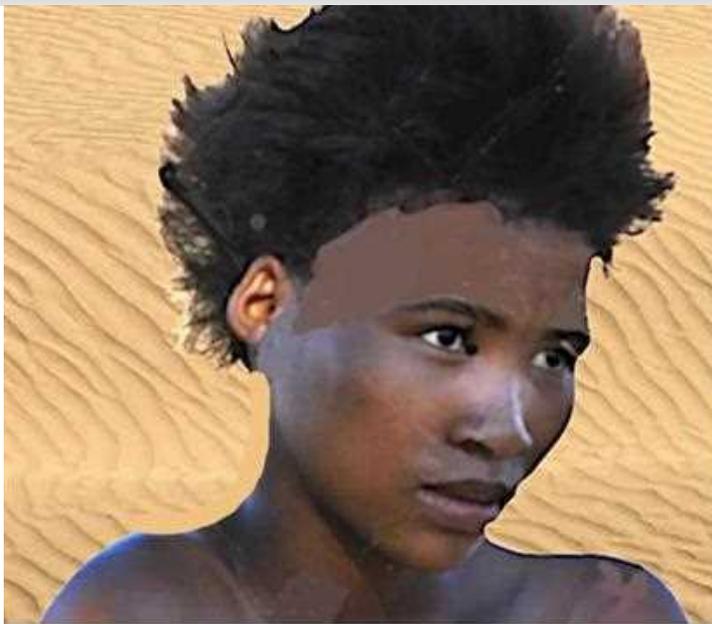
**Gorata**

**Billy**

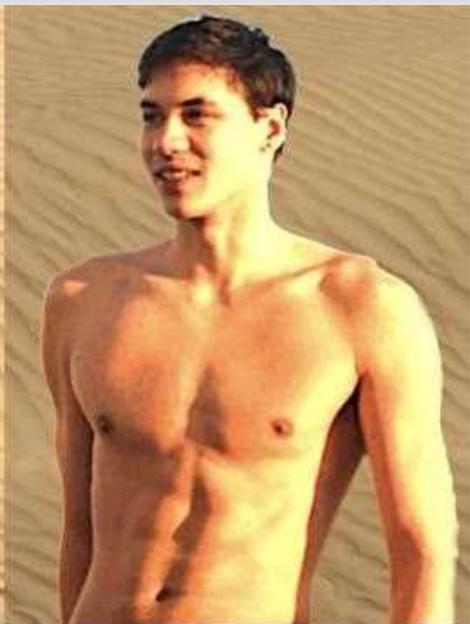


**Amari**

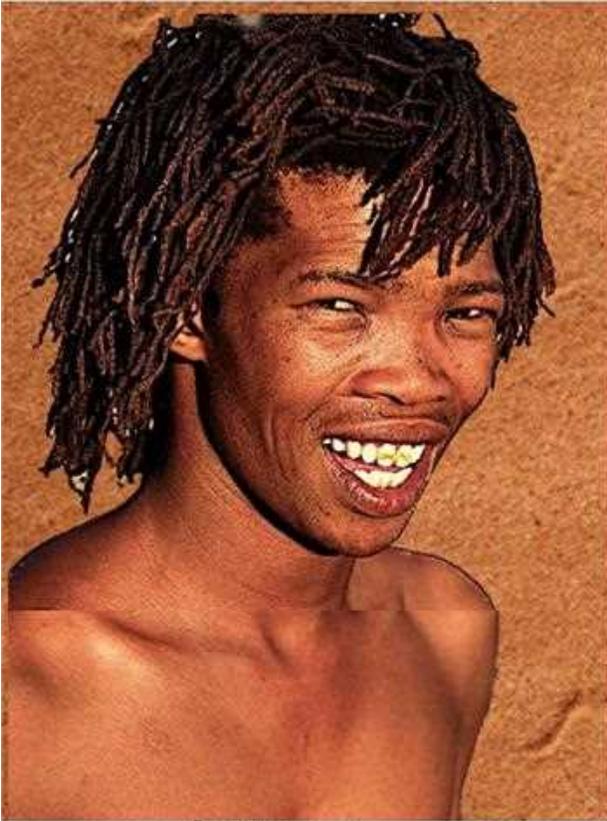
**Clara**



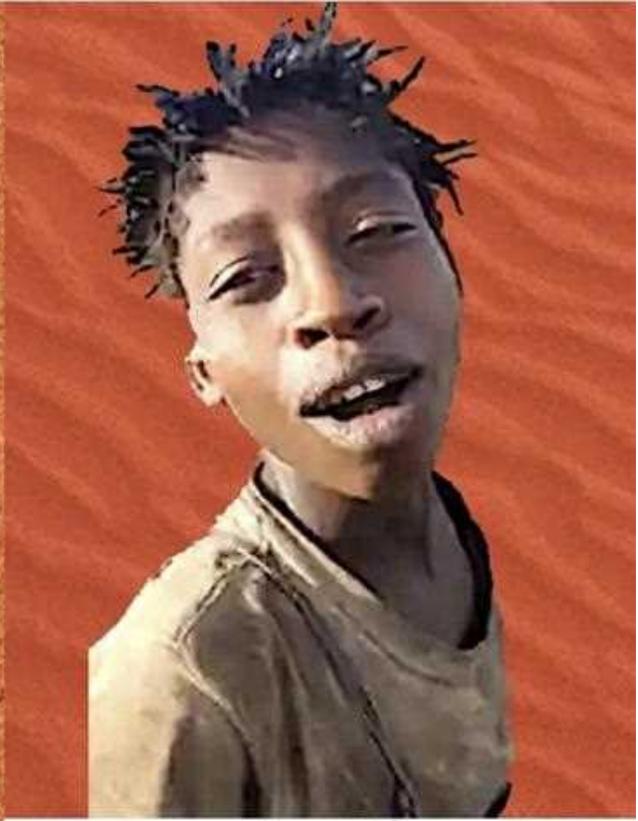
**Boipelo**



**Bobby**



**Letsego**



**Baruti**



**Gaone**



**Bontle**





***Pachydactylus wahlbergii* by Ryan van Huyssteen**

