

The 12th of August of 2022, I landed in Namibia for what was going to be the first adventurous experience of my PhD. Namibia is the land of sand, it is a beautiful country in which you can find places with a lot of wildlife, such as Etosha National Park, and beautiful landscapes, such as the red dunes around Sossusvlei. The landscape is mostly desertic, formed by miles of plains and hills of sand and rocks, only sometimes decorated in green by some acacias that grow along riverbeds that are dry for most of the year. This description is particularly suitable for the landscapes at my field site, Tsaobis, home to the Tsaobis Baboon Project, a project that has followed baboons in the center of Namibia for more than 30 years now. There, I collaborate with many long-term projects, and thanks to the Doctoral School Research Award I could go back this year to carry out a pilot study for my PhD project on baboon multi-modal communication and the evolution of human language.

I managed to collect 15 hours of video and 72 hours of behavioural data that will allow me to describe and analyse baboon gestural communication. Wild baboon gestures have never been described before and, given that great ape (our closest living relatives) gestures have been found to be highly intentional and flexible, it is crucial to understand whether these two traits are also present in the gestural communication of more distant species, like baboons. This is particularly relevant because intentionality and flexibility are cognitive traits key for human language and, thus, by looking at how they distribute across different species, we can get to understand how and when these traits characteristic of human language evolved. In the picture that accompanies this story you can see a baboon doing a 'come here face', a facial gesture that they normally do when they want to affiliate with other individuals. In addition, I took audio recordings of baboon vocalisations to try to extend my study to other communication modalities. Baboons are the animals that we see the most at Tsaobis, and we are extremely lucky to be able to observe their lives from so close, in fact, this field season we observed two births! However, we also see some other wildlife sometimes; this year we saw zebras, multiple types of antelopes (as the one you can see in the other accompanying picture), different types of birds and reptiles, and aardvarks.

I feel extremely lucky to work at this wonderful field site and to be able to live my dream of studying the life and minds of wild primates. I am enormously grateful to the Doctoral School Research Award for making this possible.



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