

# Who are the Bushmen?

## **Introduction**

There seems to be conflicting usage of the terminology that refers to the Bushmen. Sometimes they are referred to as the San, sometimes as the Khoi, sometimes as the Khoi-Khoi and sometimes as the Khoisan. This unfortunately has led to much confusion. It is generally accepted that the correct reference to the Bushman is the San, while the Khoisan is the collective name when referred to both the Bushmen and the Strandloper or Hottentot ethnic groups. These two ethnic groups shares many ethnic traits, but yet are very distinctive from one another. This is a very short introduction to the Bushmen of Southern Africa and by no means an academic work. This will require some more in depth study and reporting.

## **A Very Short History of the San in SA**

It is generally accepted by historians and anthropologists that the Bushmen were the first inhabitants of Southern Africa, long before any other tribes. The San were pre-eminently hunter-gatherers in contrast to the Khoi (Hottentots) who were pastoralists, a tribe closely related to but still very distinguishable in their way of living, from the San. When Jan van Riebeeck landed in the Cape, history recorded a close encounter with the Khoi that initially led to a confrontation but later to a more favorable relationship in which goods and animals were traded. This was in contrast to the first contact with the San, further a field which proved to be very hostile and unfortunately remained that way, so much so that it eventually led to the complete demise of the San in South Africa. A book written on the history of Uitenahge summarizes it as follows. "If the Hottentot accepted his position as bondman to the Dutch, not so the Bushman-the Ishmael of South Africa. He followed the Dutch trekkers wherever he went, but always as an enemy. Socially therefore, the Boer had nothing to do with the Bushmen, and he has consequently disappeared entirely from the greater part of this country. His lasting influence on the pioneer consequently, has been practically nil." This once again is in contrast with the Khoi who integrated many of the customs of the Trek Boer culture into their own and vice versa. In spite of the negative perceptions that originated from the initial contact with the San a more intimate look at their culture proved them to be highly intellectual and sophisticated race in the way they related to their natural environment. They managed to adapt and survive in the most hostile climates for thousands of years, something no other tribe ever managed to do. They had developed a unique language and intricate social systems which outsiders took many many years to understand. Sadly, it must have been one of the reasons why no one, up to more or less fifty years ago, struggled to engage with them in any meaningful relationship. For hundreds of years they have been seen as vermin and "animals" which prompted their enemies, both Black and White to wipe them off the face of the earth.

## **The Extermination of the Bushmen in South Africa – A Sad Story**

From the first encounter between the San and other tribes to the last one the contact was hostile. Even between the Khoi and the San. Peaceful encounters were far and few between. The hostility towards the San intensified during the 1700's into what must have been the saddest time in their history. This part of their history is documented as follows in a chapter by Nigel Penn in a book compiled by Pippa Skotnes: "Colonial attitudes towards the San came to a head in the crisis years of the 1770's, the same years in which the characteristic structures and features of the commando system were perfected. In this regard 1774 is important, for it is the year of the General Commando, a large-scale colonial attempt to destroy San resistance by means of a co-ordinated, three pronged attack throughout the length and breadth of the frontier zone. The three sections of the General Commando left between August and September in 1774. The first section to leave was under the command of Nicolaas van der Merwe. It left the Bokkeveld with 27 Europeans and 38 Khoikhoi on 16 August. The commando searched the Middle and Klein Roggeveld but went as far east as the Sak River. It returned to the Bokkeveld on 7 November, having destroyed 17 kraals, killed 142

people and captured 89. Only one commando member was killed, dying many days after being hit by a poisoned arrow. The second section, under the leadership of Gerrit van Wyk, assembled at the Vis River in the Roggeveld on 2 September and proceeded to search the region to the north and the north-east of the Sak River, that is, Bushmanland. This commando consisted of at least 31 Europeans and a slightly greater number of Khoikhoi. They killed 96 San and captured 21. None of this commando's members were killed although a "bastaard" had come close to death when an arrow pierced his hat. The third section, under, Opperman, left to crush resistance in the Sneeuberg, Camdeboo, Nieuweveld and Koup. It killed 265 San and captured 129. Some of the commando members, including Opperman himself were wounded but none fatally." (From: Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen, Pippa Skotnes, 1998)

It can be clearly seen from this piece of historical writing that the San were not spared an inch and those that survived the onslaught were exposed to slavery and brutality that led many of them to perish later on and many others to flee at the first opportunity. During 1777 the Company (Government of the day) sanctioned the extermination of the San by a formal resolution. It was not the end of hostilities as it continued unabated.

Other writings also document these attacks against the San: "From the commando reports of the District of Graaff-Reinet it would appear that during the period from 1786 to 1795 almost 2500 San were killed and 654 were captured, according to the historian H.J. van Aswegen. The numbers are probably underestimated, as not all commandos reported regularly to the landdrost. Van Aswegen stated that commandos were also sent out regularly in the other districts and, taking the Graaf-Reinett statistics as a basis, it is clear that thousands of San must have perished during these attacks. San women and especially children were also forced to work as laborers on the farms. Their position was comparable with that of the slaves in the colony. According to reports there was a continuing widespread traffic in San children by 1817. (From: Uitenhage, The Garden Town. Otto Terblanche. 2004)

One of the greatest advocates of the cause of the San, Laurens van der Post, summarizes their situation as follows: "'The significance of all this of course, did not escape the attention of his enemies. I repeat, their justification for exterminating him was always that he was no better than an animal. Whenever they captured him they called the process of bending him to their will "taming" him, just as if he were really a wild animal". (The Lost World of the Kalahari- Laurens van der Post. 1958.)

### **Where do one find the Bushmen today?**

Small communities of Bushmen are widely distributed in Southern Angola, Namibia and Botswana. The natural geographical migration of people, government policies, globalization and modern society had a huge impact on their traditional way of living. Very few of them still live like they used to live. The majority of them are confined to settlements that had forced them to adapt to a way of living that they are not accustomed to, and that they do not particularly like. This unfortunately has led to various social problems in Bushmen communities. The Bushmen today are still marginalized and more than often looked upon as "intruders" by other ethnic groups sharing communities with them.

On our website one can find more information about where one can find the Bushmen today, and their plight. You are welcome to browse through the information.

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