

The San People: Africa's Ultimate Survivors



The San people of southern Africa are among Africa's most intriguing people. Genetic evidence suggests that they are some of the earth's most ancient people, having been around for the past 22,000 years. These itinerant hunter-gatherer people have for ages resided in and around the Kalahari Desert. They have amazingly defied the Kalahari's harshness, and can even claim to have mastered it.

The San have always lived a distinctly aboriginal lifestyle. Through the generations, they have told their story through song and folklore, and the rock paintings that are found across large areas of southern Africa. Commonly referred to as the Bushman tribe, there are today about 100,000 of them in: South Africa (4,500), Namibia (38,000), Zambia (1,600), and

Zimbabwe (1,200) by the count of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA).

The San are believed to have inhabited the entire south of the African continent, way before the migration of the Bantu. They were displaced by the southward movement of the Zulu, Nguni, Sotho, Khoi Khoi, Nama, and other African groups. As they did not keep livestock, they did not appear to have any use for pasture. They retreated northwards and permanently occupied the drier regions. It is by their adaptation in the Kalahari- which means 'Great Thirst' - that they have earned a name for themselves as ultimate survivors.

The Kalahari Basin stretches over Botswana, Namibia and the north of South Africa, and has a little spillover into Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The parched basin covers 2,500,000 square km, with a desert core that spreads over 900,000 square km. The Kalahari is challenging, but it is really not a true desert of the Sahara kind. Most of the region is semi-arid, except for the southwest which is truly arid. It receives about 250 mm of rainfall annually. This allows it to support a rich count of flora and fauna, and its landscape is painted with vast grasslands, thorn shrubs, and strands of acacia.

The lifeline of the Kalahari and the only permanent river in the region is the Okavango. The river flows into Botswana's delta of the same name. It hosts 3 game reserves: Central Kalahari Game Reserve and Kutse Game Reserve in Botswana, and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park shared by Botswana and South Africa.

The Kalahari wilderness supports a variety of wildlife species including: the meerkat, wild dog, jackal and hyena, eland, and an array of antelopes –including oryx and gemsbok. Occasionally, some big cats -lion, leopard and cheetah are spotted.

The San are a light skinned folk, whose distinct yellow-brown skin wrinkles prematurely. They have a body structure slightly smaller than that of the average person. They appear to have bulging foreheads, ears without lobes, and have taut tufts of flimsy hair. The women tend to have ponderous posteriors- an excellent way for storing fat for lean seasons.

They wear hide slings to cover their essentials. On the move they always carry their animal skin blankets, and a small hide bag, and a cloak called 'kaross'. The kaross is a multipurpose carrier pouch in which they carry their very modest material belongings, veld goodies, babies and tools.

They speak in Khoisan, a language characterized by numerous clicks and many idiosyncratic sounds. Their phonetics are complex, such that in writing, symbols rather than letters are frequently employed. Various click sounds are expressed differently, for example, the slash (/) for the dental click, the Alveolar (!) for the palatal click, and double slash (//) for the lateral click. They have influenced the languages of many southern African tribes who have interacted with them.

The San have been under great pressure to abandon their itinerant lifestyle, and from the 1950's most have become farmers. For example, today in Botswana- the country with the largest San population, out of a population of 50,000, only about 3,000 follow the ancient way of life.

The traditional San live in small groups called bands. Each band comprises of 15 to 25 related individuals who form a close-knit clan unit. As nomads, they have no need for permanent shelters. At times they live in rough and ready accommodation - such as caves or erect tent-like structures. These makeshift structures are made with frames of sticks and thatched with grass and twigs.

In unfavourable weather, animal hide is used in place of grass. The band clusters their shelters together to form a ring, with each family living in a single tent. Each tent has its own campfire, but there is a central fireplace where the clan gathers to bond and unwind as nightly stories are told. The fires are kept alive at all times. Here, stories of hunting experiences, gathering jaunts, daily goings-on, ancient legends, past music and dance, and religious beliefs are exchanged and passed on.

Though a new birth is important, death is even more significant. The spot where a San dies is avoided, and camp must be shifted after the event. The family immediately buries its dead, and never intentionally goes back or crosses the place of burial. If accident or necessity forces them back, they throw small stones at the grave, and mumble under their breath as they seek peace with the spirit of the departed.

The San have no centralised political system or social hierarchy, and decisions touching on community affairs are arrived at through consensus of both male and female adults, and at times even children are consulted. When consensus fails, the opinion of the older members of the band is granted more weight. But when a tie is apparent among the elders or among age-mates, the name rule is invoked. The controversy is resolved in favor of the individual named after a more elderly member of the clan.

The San practice a division of labour based on gender: the men hunt, while the women gather. The children usually just trail along, helping where they can as they assimilate the experience of adults. The older members of the band mostly remain at camp, and watch over the children when their parents are out hunting and gathering.

This is an opportunity for the elders to pass on their extensive knowledge of their world to the children in the form of stories and song. The San are excellent mimics, and it is fun all round as they mimic various animals, while asking the children to name the animal in play. The elderly are the pil-

lars of San spiritual life. This is an important role as the San are quite a spiritual people, believing in the supernatural world and the existence of a supreme God. This belief permeates everyday life, and nearly every aspect of their simple lives has a spiritual dimension. For example, they believe that to hunt is to dance in the spirit.

The principle manifestation of their spiritual life is a ritual known as the trance dance. In the setting for a trance dance, the women and children sit around the fire, while singing and clapping in rhythm. The men encircle the fire in front of the singers and chant frantically, while thumping the ground with their feet. The resident shaman- a spiritual healer- runs around the fire in circles, as he communicates with the spirit world.

When the dance mood strikes right, the shaman enters into a trance. In this state he is said to have entered the spirit world, where he is able to consult with the spirits of long departed ancestors and those causing illness and pain. If the consultation goes well the sick are cured, and if not they depart unto death. The dance is usually performed at the time of the full moon. The shaman is always an elderly man, who in addition to the usual leather sling, is adorned in a beaded headband to which an ostrich feather is attached. The shaman's gift is deployed in healing, hunting, rain making, and negating ill-winds in society.

Animals and their interaction with man -especially in the hunt, have a significant role in San society. The men hunt with simple but very effective weapons –bows and arrows. Their hunting and tracking skills are second to none. They tip their arrows with poison obtained from beetles, snakes, scorpions, tree gum and many others from their catalogue of poisonous animals and plants.

The arrows are carried in quivers, and are made in such a way that the shaft dislodges from the head on impact. This is to prevent the animal from extricating the poisonous arrowhead and running off.

The San have a keen and highly trained eye for the hunt. Fresh animal droppings are an easy giveaway. But most of the time, it is not so easy. By analysing animal tracks, they are able to guess how far an animal is gone. This involves observing grass blades, trampled termite nests and other clues in the path taken by an animal.

These observations can yield surprisingly precise details: species, age, sex, and size of an animal. For example an examination of the texture of animal droppings hints at the roughage content, and thus an estimate of an animal's age: high fibre points a tired digestive system of an older animal.

In a hunt, utmost silence is essential for some animals have very sensitive hearing. Hunters communicate only through hand signals and signs. The hunt is a team work experience, and is a test of character and discipline. Tracking can sometimes go for more than a day, calling for patience and endurance. Once the prey falls within shooting range, the most advantageously placed hunter releases his arrow. There is no rush to immediately subdue the animal, for the poison must be given time to take its toll.

If the prey runs off or goes into hiding, the San call on their intimate knowledge of animal behaviour. They stand at the point where the animal was shot, mimic its movements until they are able to retrace its tracks. This they believe is done from a spiritual dimension.

Knowledge of animal behaviour is an integral part of San socialization. Reading the mood of an animal determines the hunt technique to be deployed. For example the hunters may decide that no subterfuge is required and simply chase an animal to exhaustion. This practice is well captured in a

recent documentary film, 'The Great Dance, a Hunter's Story'. This film about San hunting and tracking was made by James Hersov, Craig and Damon Foster, and Ellen Windemuth.

To the San, hunting is an imperative social and spiritual undertaking. It is a cooperative not a competitive affair, where all work together to bring down the prey and share in the reward equally. The person whose arrow brought down the animal has however first priority to pick his portion of choice. With the San certain animals score higher on the spiritual scale. The eland in particular enjoys high esteem and has a sacred place in the heart of the San. It is only hunted when necessary or for special occasions, for the San believes the eland is first among animals, and is his nearest kin in the animal world.

Folklore instructs them that animals were once humans who after a disagreement turned into elands. All the other animals were subsequently born of the eland. Every time an eland is hunted, is a time of great celebration, divination and dancing. These animals are a great subject in most San rock paintings.

The primary daily task of San women is to gather food from the open country, and to take care of the young and the elderly. All the women of a band go out gathering together, each taking her baby kaross, a digging stick and small leather bags. They gather berries and other fruits, tubers, bulbs, nuts, tortoises, lizards, snakes, insects, eggs and small mammals. These foods make a healthy low fat and low calorie diet which keeps the San very lean.

The women are very knowledgeable about the wild things of the veld. They seek out many indicators and can tell what to find where.

As the Kalahari has no surface water, the San have had to figure out how to do with little or no water. San women have a way of prospecting for water from the ground using reeds. But this is usually not necessary as their main source of drinking water is the tamma melon. This blessed fruit is a wild desert melon, whose leaves are usable as vegetables, and its seeds are a source of protein and oil.

The San's stomach is very strong and versatile. They eat tortoise, lizards, insects, nuts -either raw or roasted, tubers, bulbs, and many little animals and birds. The San waste little - ostrich egg shells are used for water storage, and tortoise shells serve as cutlery.

San children are socialised together regardless of gender. But as the children grow older, the boys are required to tag along with their fathers on hunting trips. This marks the onset of their initiation process. As they gain in knowledge, they are allowed to shoot a few arrows. When judged to be ready they are taken on their first eland hunt, and actually allowed to lead. If the hunt is successful, a boy is automatically initiated into manhood. This is marked by a celebration following the hunt, after which the boy is at liberty to marry and start a family.

Unlike many African communities, the San do not practice circumcision.

For girls, initiation into womanhood is entrusted to nature. Girls are taken as children until their first experience of menstruation. Because of the San's low fat and calorie diet, this is unlikely to happen until about the age of 19 years. After this event, the women hold a party in the girl's honour. They perform the 'eland bull dance' in which they imitate the animal's mating dance. At this point, she is considered a woman, ready to be married off to a fine young hunter.

It is acceptable for the parents to find a suitor for their daughter. But girls are not pressured to accept,

and are still free to come up with their own choice. Like the rest of their lives, the San wedding ceremony is a simple affair. On a set day, the women apply a mixture of eland fat and red ochre on the bride. They sing and make merry as they wait for the groom to return from his hunt. On return, the groom presents his hunt to the bride's parents, and takes his bride away.

The newly weds build their tent-house and start their little hearth. They are free to choose whether to live with the bride's or groom's kin. There is no immediate pressure to start a family; the women chew on a special tree bark which has contraceptive properties. If a marriage fails to work, the wife simply returns to her parents' fireplace, without any life sapping drama.

The San thrive on an economy of gift exchange. They have little understanding of the concept of private ownership, as their demands on the world are so few. Since they are nomads, and are constantly on the move, movable wealth is an unwelcome burden. There is little cause for trade as they share nearly everything they need, while the rest can almost certainly be picked from the bush with only a little exertion.

Animal skins serve as clothing, while a nice robe can be made from fibrous and climber plants. Tools are made from stones, bones, sticks and occasionally, iron.

The San and their peculiar way of life have always confounded many. You can tell this from the names others have bestowed on them. Some communities in Zimbabwe call them 'Batwa', a Bantu word meaning 'people of the unknown'. In Zambia they are referred to as Amasili; Kwankhala in Angola; Basarwa in Botswana, and San in Namibia and South Africa.

San is a Khoikhoi and Nama word meaning 'outsider'. The Dutch called them 'Boschjesmanne' meaning 'people of the boschveld', from which the name Bushman is derived. But the different Kalahari San communities call themselves by different names: for example, a Kalahari group living on the border of Botswana and Namibia call themselves the Ju/'hoansi, or "the real people." The bushman term is however today considered to be derogatory, and in South Africa they are officially referred to as the San.

The San people - and their culture and click consonant language- first came to the attention of the western world in the 1950s through Laurens van der Post's book 'The Lost World of the Kalahari'. This outstanding work was later turned into a BBC TV series.

Many more people came to know of the San through the hilarious and unforgettable 1980's movie "The Gods Must be Crazy". In this movie, a San band encounters the marvels of the outside world in the form of a coke bottle which falls from a light aircraft. They initially take the bottle to be a gift from heaven, but in the end come to see it as a curse. The documentary, 'Bushman's Secrets' by Rehad Desai also gives an excellent introduction to the world of the San.

The arrival of the Dutch and other colonials in the 17th century in San territory marked the beginning of a very difficult period for the San. They experienced the most barbaric treatment ever meted on a people. The colonials did not concede their humanity- they viewed them as animals, and treated them as such. They shot them at every encounter, and took over much of their land for farming and ranching.

The Dutch also captured the San to serve as slaves and servants. For such a free ranging people, this was a terrible fate, and very few adapted well. The British on their part made attempts to civilize them first, and then domesticate them. They met with little success, and thus begun to look at them as

vermin and competitors for good and vast grazing fields.

Believe it or not- the British began to issue licences to game hunters to wipe them out. By such measures, the San population in the affected areas was greatly thinned. By 1870, the San of the Cape of Good Hope had been hunted to extinction. The extermination lasted until 1936, when the last of the hunting licences was issued in Namibia. Most of the San had meanwhile gone into hiding, their population reduced to less than a quarter of what they are today.

The shabby treatment of the San, and that it went on for so long appears shocking today. No one spoke loudly enough for them, and perhaps only the weeping of the angels in heaven finally moved their earthly masters.

At present, about 100,000 San exist across southern Africa, with the largest populations in Botswana and Namibia. The San have remained so stubbornly attached to their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle, even into the recent past. The promise of stability, together with government efforts has pressured most of them to convert to a modern sedentary lifestyle.

It has been a long struggle -physically and spiritually: they have had to abandon the shaman's divinations in favour of hospitals, and their children miss out on instruction from elders as they attend schools.

Not all of the San are happy with change, and particularly at efforts to move them from their traditional habitats. Together with their international supporters they have recently waged a noisy media campaign against the Botswana government. In 2006 they obtained a reprieve when they won a court case against the government in contesting their forcible move from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve supposedly to preserve wildlife, but according to some to clear the way for diamond mining.

Today the San and their lifestyle arouse much the curiosity of tourists. Their ancestral lands also harbour wildlife, and numerous rock art. These ancient artworks -some dating to the Stone Age, are Africa's oldest art paintings. They can best be seen at the Twyfelfontein in Namibia, Drakensberg in Lesotho, Tsodilo Botswana, Brandberg, Kruger and Kaggas Kamma in South Africa, and the Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe.

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