

San Cultures and Preconceptions

By Magdalena Brörmann-Thoma

*"I think the people do not know the Bushmen.
They think that all of us are the same."*

(André Vaalbooi, †Khomani San)

For hundreds of years the San's traditional way of life and their multi-faceted culture have fascinated explorers, missionaries, colonialists, researchers, anthropologists, businessmen, filmmakers, photographers and artists. Despite the great interest they arose, it was an exception if the San were treated as equals and with respect as Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd did when they created a unique 13 000-page archive of personal narratives, traditional stories and drawings based on interviews with !Xam and !Kung (!Xun). Until recently the majority of researchers and other individuals "considered the San to be primitive, childlike, and as something one must preserve in order to realize one's own difference and superiority." (Thoma, 2009:32)

This notion is sometimes still prevalent in the way visitors approach San guides at the !Khwattu San Culture and Education Centre, situated about 80 km north-west of Cape Town. Nunke Kadhimo, a young Khwe woman, was astonished to be asked "whether I am a real Bushman," by one of the guests at the !Khwattu restaurant. When she inquired why such a question had been posed to her, she was told "You don't look like a Bushman. A Bushman is a small person with light skin." Nunke felt utterly upset that she was denied her identity because she did not fit the "stereotypical" San's physical appearance.

The preconceptions of San having the same physical characteristics, sharing one common language, being nomads, living a traditional life and

not being familiar with the amenities of the modern world are still widespread. Although the San feel saddened by the prevailing ignorance, they feel offended when they are disavowed their cultural affiliation. Particularly young San, who have only recently gained self-confidence to speak about their history in front of other people, as Collin Coetzee, a 20-year old †Khomani man put it, feel undermined by the accusation of not being 'real Bushmen'.

In Collin's case visitors thought they were entitled to their criticism as he is unable to speak N|u, the language of the †Khomani. Only when



The Bushman Bow and Arrow Proclamation, passed in Namibia in 1928 and which prohibited the San from carrying bows and arrows, contributed further to the erosion of their traditional way of life.

Collin explained to them that his parents had lost their mother tongue because they had to speak Afrikaans only on the farm where they worked, the !Khwattu guests altered at least one aspect of their

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The San have facilitated oral history programmes and promoted projects on San languages.

perception of San culture. Collin also took the opportunity to explain to them that the majority of the approximately 100 000 San in southern Africa still speak their languages which belong to four language families. These are the Ju, Khoe, Taa and !Ui language families. The thirteen distinctly different San languages all carry clicks which have been named the dental (ǀ), palatal (ǃ), alveolar-palatal (ǂ), and the lateral (ǁ) clicks.

According to socio-linguist Nigel Crawhall it is unknown why the indigenous languages of southern and east Africa are the only ones to have these clicks. Two theories exist which attempt to explain the origin of clicks. “The one is that in a dry climate, using clicks was a way of speaking while hunting, but not disturbing the animals. San hunters typically speak to each other while stalking, and it seems that clicks which have a very unusual short burst of sound may not sound like human noises to animals, and hence do not scare them. The other theory is that all early modern human languages had the clicks carried over from the time before the human voice box was fully formed, some 150 000 years ago. A click does not require a voice box, only the tongue.” (personal communication Nigel Crawhall, 25 November 2008)

Most San languages are rich in metaphors which are frequently used in everyday conversations as well as in their folklore. Anthropologist Megan Biesele reports on hundreds of ‘respect words’ which are used by the Ju’hoansi “when circumstances dictate.” She writes, “sometimes the respect words had significances which utterly escaped me. Some of them were unfamiliar words altogether, which could not be otherwise translated. But many of the words were readily translatable and their metaphorical significance apparent. For instance, one of the respect words for python is *g!u-tzum-g!a’a*, ‘water-

nose-eye’, feet are called ‘sand-pressers’, water is ‘soft throat’ and lion is ‘night’, ‘moonless night’, ‘night medicine’, ‘cries in the night’ and ‘jealousy’”. (Biesele, 1993:24) Another phenomenon in several San languages is the use of entirely different words for parts of the same plant or an ‘animal family’ where in English a word would be added to the root word. According to linguist Levy Namaseb the word for bee in the N|u language is *|x’oosi*, for bee larva *||haike* or *nʒao* and for queen bee *|oo xobesi*. And the ǂKhomani are equally descriptive in their expressions when they call a cricket ‘the grandmother of the black truffle’ because it predicts the truffle harvest.

To use figurative expressions is one of the exceptional skills of the elderly story tellers in any



Examples of San eggshell jewellery

San community. In Ju|'hoansi folklore women may be represented by the moon, honey, certain types of skin bags or gentle rain (Biesele, 1993:19). Although younger people are not hindered to tell traditional stories and all community members listen to stories shared around the fire in the evening, it seems that stories are the domain of the elderly, told to each other for pleasure. This does not mean that the stories do not contain messages for children, on the contrary as “they are brimming with environmental details in a world of revealing human relationships. This was a most effective way for Ju|'hoan children to learn.” (Katz et al, 1997:50)

San guides at !Khoa ttu can only provide a glimpse into the rich diversity of characters and themes of San traditional stories. For some San cultures such as the Naro and |Gui the millipede carries significance; others - among them the extinct group of the |Xam – attach importance to the praying mantis. “To the |Xam, the deity is represented by |Kaggen, the Mantis. |Kaggen is variously responsible for the creation of the Moon and the animals, and for the maintenance of human sociality. Unlike the Moon, he is not prayed to. He is a trickster figure, but one with the power to bring the dead back to life and to change himself and other animals into different forms. There are other deities too, notably !Khoa, the Rain.” (Barnard, 1992:84) People and relationships are often represented in traditional San stories by animals such as the eland and gemsbok, which are emphasized by the northern and southern San respectively. Folklore themes may focus on creation, the universe, birth and death, trickster figures, problems in relationships, resources and numerous other topics. Some stories such as the ‘Moon and the Hare’ are known by both the Ju|'hoansi and the Naro, but their versions differ considerably. And the fact that a story which was recorded by Lucy Lloyd in 1879 was a hundred years later told by a Ju|'hoan woman to Megan Biesele illustrate both continuity and change in oral tradition. (Biesele, 1993:2)

In recent years the number of young San,

who developed a sincere appreciation for their culture and traditions has considerably increased. In this regard Vinkie van der Westhuizen, a young †Khomani woman, states, “I see the future for us young people that we can learn things from our elders, because they are not going to live longer, they are dying and the history and everything, the knowledge will die with them. So, we must learn things and then we can give it to our generation so the history and knowledge does not get lost. The young people must stand together and do these things because our people were the first people.” (Thoma, 2009:60) Vinkie’s request has not fallen on deaf ears among the young San at !Khoa ttu. However, they also agree with Andre Vaalbooi when he emphasises, “we do not live like the people in the past. My ancestors did not have to worry about money. I think we can live a traditional and a modern life at the same time.”

Visitors who sympathise with this view and show genuine interest in both the San’s history and their contemporary experiences are appreciated. Whether the guests ignite a discussion about ancient rock art or inquire about the current !Khoa ttu training programme, the San guides will gladly attempt to answer any questions as long as they are posed without prejudice. For example, the guides take pleasure in reporting on their initiative to contact archaeologist Janette Deacon which resulted not only in a joint effort of cleaning rock art graffiti at Eland’s Bay Cave but also in a training session on rock art and stone tools. The training fascinated them as they understood that “southern African San rock art is essentially religious in nature,” (Deacon, 1998:30) and that depictions of shamans and trance dances can have various meanings. They were equally captivated when they felt and smelled ochre, silica, clay, gypsum and charcoal which their ancestors had used to make rock paintings. It was easy for them to imagine that brushes had been made from reeds into which hairs from an antelope’s tail were inserted and that quills or bones might have been used for fine lines. Ivan Vaalbooi, 21, wrote



A wonderfully preserved rock painting north of the Pakhuis Pass.

about the occasion: “Being able to assist in cleaning rock paintings and gaining more knowledge was a big and great experience for me. I am really proud of having been part of the group cleaning the amazing work of my ancestors.”

Another much valued tradition is the production of ornaments from ostrich eggshell beads. A number of San women in Botswana, South Africa and Namibia have lately combined ancient patterns with modern shaped jewellery. They still use the traditional technique of making bracelets, necklaces, headbands and belts as they break an ostrich egg into small pieces and pierce tiny holes into them with a home-made drill, consisting of wire and wood. The sinew on which they commonly thread the beads has in recent years often been replaced by nylon-like thread. The rough edges of the ostrich eggshell beads are then chipped off with a horn and finally rubbed smooth with a stone. The beads are strung into differently long chains, which are traditionally worn as necklaces, bracelets or around the waist. They are also ‘woven’ into the most intriguing patterns which demand a creative mind, dexterous fingers, a sharp eye and patience. Those skills have enabled numerous San women to generate income and thus sustain their families. !Khwatlu is one of the places where authentic traditional and contemporary ostrich eggshell jewellery is sold.

Authenticity is one of the key aspects of the !Khwatlu San Culture and Education Centre and thus the San guides’ objective is to convey a sincere portrait of the San of today. According to what they have been told by members of the various San communities, most San would encourage the !Khwatlu visitor to understand what Andre Vaalbooi summarised as follows: “It’s good that our children go to school, but they must also know about our traditions. We can teach our children about the way our forefathers lived but they can not live like that anymore. We, the young generation, must let our elders know that we will not lose our tradition but we also want to go forward. We want to know all the



stuff of the past and the present.” It is the San guides’ hope that in the future more visitors will wholeheartedly respect the way in which the San choose to represent themselves at !Khwatlu and understand that their decision to not perform a trance dance for the public and not to wear traditional clothes does not interfere with being ‘a real Bushman’.

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