

# INTRODUCTION

## SETTLER COLONIALISM AND SAN SOCIETY

In 1998 David Kruiper, the leader of the ≠Khomani San people, who today live in the Kalahari Desert in the furthest reaches of South Africa's Northern Cape province, lamented of his people that '... we have been made into nothing' (Crwys-Williams, 1999: 62). The ≠Khomani San are a tiny remnant of the foraging communities that once inhabited most of the land that currently constitutes South Africa. Whereas Kruiper was voicing concern about the marginalisation of the ≠Khomani San in post-apartheid South Africa,<sup>1</sup> his judgement applies in an even more literal sense to the fate of hunter-gatherer societies of the Cape Colony that were destroyed by the impact of European colonialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much of the dispossession and slaughter happened in the eighteenth century along the northern and northeastern frontiers under Dutch East India Company (DEIC, also VOC)<sup>2</sup> rule, with continued displacement and killing under the relatively benign auspices of British imperialism through the nineteenth century. The main agents of destruction were Dutch-speaking pastoralists whose murderous land-grabbing and

- 1 The comment was made a year before the ≠Khomani San's successful land claim in the Northern Cape under South Africa's land reform programme and while they were still living in squalor at Kagga Kamma, a white-owned game farm in the Western Cape where they put on performances of 'traditional Bushman life' for tourists. The ≠Khomani San were awarded about 26,300 hectares of land in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park on South Africa's border with Namibia and Botswana (White, 1995: 8–9, 40–42; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 10–11, 88–89; Buntman, 1996: 272, 278–79).
- 2 VOC stands for its Dutch title *de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*. It was founded in 1602 to coordinate Dutch trading expeditions to the East Indies and curb damaging competition between companies involved in the lucrative spice trade. The VOC was at the centre of Dutch commercial supremacy in the East during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Eventually weighed down by debt and corruption, its charter was allowed to lapse in 1804 as the company was by then no longer commercially viable.

ecologically damaging farming practices ensured the virtual extinction of the Cape San peoples.

Historically, the destruction of Cape San societies can be viewed as part of a series of overlapping, essentially concentric, global movements of violent subjugation that were often genocidal in nature. The broadest of these is the 12,000-year history of the absorption, displacement and destruction of hunter-gatherer communities by farmers (Brody, 2000: 6–7, 43–50), an ongoing trend decidedly observable on the Cape frontier. Another worldwide process of vanquishment applicable to this case study is that of European overseas colonial conquest. The annihilation of the Cape San formed a small part of this five-century-long process which started in the Canary Islands in the late fourteenth century and included many instances of the complete extermination of indigenous peoples. Because European colonialism was such a hugely diverse and complex phase in human history, it is perhaps more helpful to view the destruction of the Cape San within the framework of a subset of settler colonial confrontations — those in which livestock farmers linked to the global capitalist market clashed with hunter-gatherers. The frequency with which encounters of this kind resulted in the near complete destruction of forager societies raises the question of whether this form of colonialism is inherently genocidal. It is possible to identify a number of shared features in conflicts between hunter-gatherers and market-oriented stock farmers that have served to intensify hostilities and tilt the balance toward genocidal outcomes.

One of the crucial dynamics at play in conflicts of this sort was the rapid occupation of extensive areas of land characteristic of capitalist stock farming entering virgin territory. Not only do commercial stock farmers move frontiers rapidly but their herds consume large amounts of grazing and water, damaging the ecosystem. This had an immediate, and often devastating, impact on the region's foraging societies, whose seasonal migrations were disrupted, and whose food supplies and other foundations of life were severely compromised. This almost inevitably led to spiralling levels of violence as afflicted indigenous peoples resisted encroachment, and settlers in turn retaliated, usually with excessive and indiscriminate force. Such conflicts often culminated in warfare and exterminatory offensives on the part of colonial society. The weakness of the colonial state and its tenuous control over frontier areas gave settlers, who had access to arms, wide discretion to act against indigenes.

A second dynamic was that access to world markets, and a concomitant desire to accumulate wealth, encouraged both intensive exploitation of natural resources for short-term gain as well as a resort to annihilatory violence to eliminate indigenes regarded as obstacles or threats to the colonial project. The privatisation and commodification of natural resources, especially land, undermined foraging societies fundamentally. Systems of land tenure based on exclusive usage, fixed boundaries, registration of title deeds, alienability and permanent settlement were completely foreign to hunter-gatherer world-views and effectively excluded them from legal ownership of vital resources. Privatisation generally meant the permanent loss of such resources and the backing of settler claims by the legal apparatus, and, ultimately, the armed might of the colonial state. Economic and political imperatives invariably resulted in the colonial state supporting settler interests and land confiscations, even in cases where both metropolitan and local governments tried to curb frontier violence (Levene, 2005: 77–78; Weaver, 2003: 147–51; Wolfe, 2006: 395; Wolfe, 2008, 104; Brody, 2000: 112–14).

A third common characteristic was the influence of Western racist thinking, modulated by local imperatives, that dehumanised the hunter-gatherer way of life as an utterly debased form of existence, proof of their racial inferiority and comparable in many respects to that of animals. Depicting foragers as merely inhabiting the land, much as animals do, rather than making productive use of it, usually underlay settler justifications for their dispossession. Stereotyped as particularly ‘savage’, as immune to ‘civilising’ influences, and their labour as unsuited to settler needs, hunter-gatherers were often regarded as expendable. That racist theorising often anticipated the dying out of the ‘savage’ (Brantlinger, 2003; McGregor, 1997; Finzsch, 2007: 12–13) further encouraged violence against indigenes and fostered an extirpatory attitude within frontier society. Because forager subsistence needs were irreconcilable with those of the settler economy, colonial society viewed the foraging way of life as one to be eliminated, whether through outright extermination, forced acculturation into some subordinate status in the colonial order, or neutralisation through segregation in reserves (Moses, 2004, 30–32; Levene, 2005: 11–12, 21, 66; Wolfe, 2006: 396–97; Jones, 2006: 28). In the case of the Cape San peoples, the interplay of these forces favoured the most radical of these options.

In cases where pastoralists producing for capitalist markets invaded the territory of hunter-gatherers, the global economic system tended to bring together the practices of metropolitan and colonial governments, the interests of providers of capital and consumers of commodities, and the agency of local actors — ranging from military commanders to graziers in remote outposts — in ways that fostered the violent dissolution of native society (see Wolfe, 2008: 104, 108). With the Cape San, the diverse impulses driving Dutch colonial expansion through the eighteenth century coalesced to radicalise settler animosity into an exterminatory campaign against them.

These observations are not in the least meant to diminish either the agency of foraging societies engaged in frontier conflict or the reality that settler society at times had a rather tenuous hold on power. It was after all hunter-gatherer resistance that usually precipitated extirpatory offensives against them. These comments are intended rather to indicate that, in the final analysis, such struggles were inherently very uneven and that the assault on the land, lives and culture of hunter-gatherer peoples was in most cases genocidal in nature. Because of its small scale and relative lack of social differentiation, almost any form of organised violence against foraging peoples took on the aspect of total war, and violence on any appreciable scale assumed genocidal proportions. That there was almost assuredly a blurring of distinctions between warriors and noncombatants in hunter-gatherer society, and that settler violence was often indiscriminate rather than targeted at fighters or stock raiders, made this doubly so (Moses, 2008: 26). This meant that in sustained clashes between foragers and capitalist stock-keepers genocide seems not so much an aberration as normative. The fate of the Cape San and the Australian Aborigines, as well as other hunter-gatherer peoples that once lived in what are now stock-farming areas of the United States, Argentina and Brazil, among others, testify to this. The counter example of San communities in Botswana's Ghanzi district cautions against making absolute claims in this regard, though.

Whereas comparable exterminations of aboriginal peoples elsewhere, most notably in Australia and the United States, have resulted in major public controversies and heated debate among academics about the nature of these killings, and whether or not they

constitute genocide,<sup>3</sup> in South Africa the issue has effectively been ignored. Aside from the occasional throwaway polemical reference to the destruction of South Africa's San population as genocide — the best-known example occurring in Thabo Mbeki's 1996 'I am an African' speech<sup>4</sup> — the matter has little presence in South African public life. Indeed, there is woeful public ignorance about the fate of the country's original inhabitants. It is not inappropriate to speak of this in terms of national amnesia, despite the odd gesture in the direction of the San.<sup>5</sup> The marginality of the San is painfully apparent in popular attitudes that range from intensely negative racial stereotyping, through indifference to condescendingly regarding them as quaint relics of humanity's 'primitive' past — 'living fossils' being a common designation. At its most benign this typecasting romanticises the San as innocent children of nature in need of protection from the vagaries of modern living.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, a number of scholars writing on the Cape San colonial experience refer to the destruction of their societies as genocide. This, however, is done in passing — sometimes almost

3 For recent evaluations of such debates in the United States and Australia, respectively, see Cave (2008) and Barta (2008).

4 The relevant part of the speech delivered to the Constitutional Assembly on the adoption of the South African Constitution on 8 May 1996 runs as follows;

*I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape — they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and dependence [sic] and they who, as a people, perished in the result.*

For the full text of the speech, see Mbeki (1996).

5 I am thinking here of the publicity surrounding the 1999 land claim in favour of the ≠Khomani San and the incorporation of San rock art and /Xam language into the national coat of arms. See also Westby-Nunn (2008: 40, 120) for photographs of a little-known 'San and Khoi genocide memorial (1702–1809)' near Graaff-Reinet. There has been a resurgence in San identity over the last two decades on the back of the Khoisan revivalist movement and global attention on the rights of 'first peoples'. A boom in eco- and cultural tourism and the attendant commodification of indigenous cultures have underpinned the process. See Comaroff (2009: 86–98).

6 For Western attitudes towards the San, see Parsons (2009: 2–5, 199–206), Guenther (1980: 123–40) and Gordon (1999: 266–90). For twentieth-century South African attitudes towards the San, see Adhikari (2005: 24, 28–29), Stone (1991: 386–87), Buntman (1996: 276–79) and Van Vuuren (2005).

inadvertently — and none have analysed this case specifically as one of genocide.

This book hopes, at least partially, to address both shortcomings. In the first place, it seeks to heighten awareness of the catastrophic impact of colonial conquest on the hunter-gatherer societies of the Cape. Secondly, drawing on the ideas and insights of the field of genocide studies, it makes the case that the annihilation of the Cape San societies constitutes genocide in terms of the relatively stringent formulation of the concept advanced above.<sup>7</sup> This study, in addition, aims to provide a succinct synthesis of scholarly knowledge on the encounter between European colonists and hunter-gatherer societies in the Cape interior.

The two opening chapters review confrontations between San and settler under Dutch colonial rule. The first of these is mainly contextual, focusing on the driving forces behind Dutch colonial expansion at the Cape. The latter elaborates on the conflict between Dutch-speaking pastoralists and the hunter-gatherer societies of the Cape interior, tracing its escalation into all-out war and an exterminatory campaign by frontier farmers with the backing of the colonial state by the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Chapter 3 explains how and why the nature of conflict with the San changed after Britain first took control of the Cape in 1795. Despite the easing of hostilities in the nineteenth century, ongoing invasion of their territory, intermittent clashes, subversion of their culture and erosion of their ability to live off the land resulted in the complete destruction of independent San society in the second half of the nineteenth century. The discussion of the eighteenth century is of necessity more comprehensive and sure-footed than that of the nineteenth, as the historiography of the latter is patchy whereas the former boasts several detailed and systematic surveys.<sup>8</sup> The next chapter sets out my reasoning behind the charge that the destruction of San society constitutes genocide. It first surveys the spectrum of scholarly opinion on the nature of these killings,

7 It is even more clearly a case of genocide in terms of the more inclusive definitions set forth in the United Nations Convention on Genocide and that espoused by Rafael Lemkin, the originator of the term.

8 Refer to the 'Guide to further reading' for a list of key works. Nigel Penn is extending his research on the colonial experience of the Cape San into the nineteenth century.

paying particular attention to the writings of Miklós Szalay, the one academic who provides a sustained challenge to the idea that the Cape San had been exterminated. The chapter then evaluates the full array of objections I have encountered to the idea that the destruction of San society constitutes genocide, in the process elaborating my own opposing points of view. The conclusion offers some insight into San perceptions of their experience.

The terms 'San' and 'Bushman' are used to refer to the hunter-gatherer peoples of southern Africa who were its earliest inhabitants. Direct ancestors of the San were living in southern Africa as long as 120,000 years ago (Mitchell, 2002: 74–75; see also Henshilwood & Sealy, 1997: 890–95). San occupied most of the subcontinent south of the Zambezi Valley before it became more densely populated with the migration of herders and cultivators into the region over the past two thousand years. Today San communities numbering not much more than 100,000 in total are to be found as far north as southern Angola and Zambia, with the largest concentrations of about 50,000 in Botswana and about 40,000 in Namibia (Smith *et al.*, 2000: 65; Hitchcock, 1999: 178; Crawhall, 2005: 1056).

The San lived in small, loosely knit, family-based, foraging bands of usually between 10 and 30 people. Bands usually consisted of a few extended families covering three generations, with married siblings as its nucleus. These groups were sometimes as small as five or six, but hardly ever exceeded 50.<sup>9</sup> At the start of European colonisation in 1652, their numbers in what was to become the Cape Colony were in

9 Archaeologist Tim Maggs used group depictions in rock art to suggest that the average size of San bands was about 16, whereas Nigel Penn used the report of the General Commando of 1774 to arrive at a commensurate figure of between 13 and 14 (Maggs, 1971: 49–53; Penn, 1996: 86). Lewis-Williams reaches similar conclusions for the /Xam of the northern Cape using ethnographic descriptions in the Bleek-Lloyd archive (Lewis-Williams, 1982: 431).

all probability in the region of 30,000.<sup>10</sup> Hunting bands were known to amalgamate or split on a seasonal basis in response to environmental changes, social tension or for communal activities such as game drives, and there was considerable movement of individuals and families between camps. Hunting bands affiliated through kinship ties formed larger cultural groupings that might encompass several hundred people tied together through a range of reciprocal arrangements, which might have included intermarriage, the sharing of resources, gift-giving and various forms of exchange.<sup>11</sup> These extended social networks acted as insurance against localised fluctuations in the availability of resources, or more severe crises, most commonly drought, by giving bands access to means outside of their territories. Individual bands moved within a defined area, determined usually by the availability of water, following game and harvesting seasonally available plant foods. They lived in makeshift shelters or in caves and used a range of stone and bone tools fashioned to serve as arrowheads, knives, axes, harpoons, scrapers, needles and other implements. San are probably best known for their exquisite paintings on cave walls and other rock faces (Hewitt, 2008: 14–26; Smith *et al*, 2000: 5–9; Tobias, 1978: chs. 2–3; Parkington 2002; Lewis-Williams, 1982: 429–38; 1985: 54).

- 10 There is no way of determining the size of the pre-colonial hunter-gatherer population in the area covered by the Cape Colony with any accuracy. Szalay (1995: 108) puts the Cape San population at between 15,000 and 30,000 at the onset of colonisation, extrapolating from figures provided by Lee (1976: 5) that estimate the San population south of the Zambezi to have been between 150,000 and 300,000. Elphick (1985: 23) gauges the Khoikhoi population of the southwestern Cape to have been no more than 100,000 while Wilson (1982: 68) puts the Khoikhoi population south of the Orange River in the region of 200,000. Feinstein (2005: 254–55) rather conservatively proposes that the combined Khoisan population south of the Orange was approximately 200,000 in 1652. These figures suggest that the lower levels of Szalay's assessment are too modest. Even if one assumed an extremely low average density of no more than one hunter-gatherer per 10 square kilometres, the area comprising the Cape Colony by the mid-nineteenth century could comfortably have supported a forager population of 30,000, and perhaps even one as high as 50,000.
- 11 Our knowledge of specific reciprocal arrangements is mainly drawn from recent studies of Kalahari San. It is quite possible that fictive associations, such as name relationships, might also have been used. In terms of this precept, people with the same name, notwithstanding the lack of any other connection, are obliged to share resources.



While a variety of plants, mainly bulbs and roots, formed the mainstay of their diet, game was crucial to the welfare of the San. Smaller animals were snared, whereas larger ones, most typically buck, were shot with poison-tipped arrows. Spears and clubs were also used. There was a distinct gendered division of labour in San society in that men did most of the hunting and women most of the gathering. In coastal and riverine environments, fish and shellfish complemented their diet. Wherever available, they also harvested wild fruit, berries, honey and insects such as locusts, caterpillars and termite larvae. Anthropologist Alan Barnard indicates that San had 'a traditional knowledge ... of several hundreds of different species of plants, as well as their seasonal locations, their ecological associations with other species, and how to prepare them as foods or medicines. They may know a hundred species of animal as well, their migration patterns, their social behaviours and psychologies, ... [and] their life cycles' (Barnard, 2007: 4). In the dry Cape interior, hunting bands might have utilised territories as large as 400 square kilometres for their subsistence. Contrary to the popular perception that the San led a precarious lifestyle, most had a fairly secure existence, except for those displaced to more extreme environments (Neville, 1996: ch. 6; Lewis-Williams, 1983: 16, 39; Barnard, 1992: ch. 1; Wright, 1971: 3–4; Parkington 2006).

Anthropologist Mathias Guenther stresses that the 'key features of Bushman society, its organization, and its institutions and ethos [are] flexibility, adaptability and diversity, fluidity and amorphousness, ambivalence and ambiguity' (Guenther, 1999: 13). According to Guenther (1999: 26), this flexibility was necessary for the effective exploitation of migratory game and unevenly distributed plant food supplies that resulted from localised and unpredictable rainfall patterns. It also accounts for San resilience in the face of extraneous disruptive forces, whether they be prolonged drought or aggressive settlers intruding on their territory. Although in general displaced by invading Khoikhoi herders and Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, San communities nevertheless interacted with them in complex ways ranging from coexistence, intermarriage and social absorption, through clientship and the provision of shamanic services such as rain-making and healing, to armed conflict (Lewis-Williams & Pearce, 2004: 209–21; Jolly, 1996b: 30–61; Penn, 2005: 18, 57, 90). It is likely that some bands acquired sheep and goats from invading pastoral people and supplemented their own foraging activities with small-

scale herding (Parkington, 2003: 110–11; Mitchell, 2009: 30). Though there is no evidence of this at the Cape, there were instances of San communities in other parts of the subcontinent developing incipient state structures in response to encroachment by herders and farmers (Guenther, 1999: 14, 18). San society was thus far from static, uniform or unable to adapt to social change, as has often been alleged.

The San were not culturally homogeneous. Apart from regional variations in social customs, cosmologies, weaponry, rock art styles and material culture, they spoke a diversity of languages, many of which were mutually unintelligible and that are today classified into three distinct linguistic families. Although they shared a similar mode of subsistence, San economies differed considerably depending on the natural environment, with groups adjusting their foraging practices as they moved from one ecological zone to another (Guenther, 1999: 26; Smith *et al*, 2000: 14–15). The San had names for hunting bands and for larger cultural and linguistic groupings but not for hunter-gatherers generally, indicating that the San did not see hunter-gatherers collectively as a distinct social entity. Although the concept of the San is thus very much a colonial construct (Wilmsen 1996: 185–90; Jolly 1996: 197–210), it is nevertheless a meaningful social and analytical category because specialist foraging communities did share a distinctive economy and way of life, as opposed to pastoralists and cultivators.<sup>12</sup>

The labels ‘San’ and ‘Bushman’ are controversial because they are pejorative and their meanings contested. There is a good deal of confusion in the historical record itself about the identities of indigenous peoples and the names applied to them. ‘Bushman’—or its Dutch equivalent ‘Bosjesman’ and its later Afrikaans version ‘Boesman’—is ambiguous because it was used by colonists to describe specialist hunter-gatherer communities as well as groups of indigenous pastoralist Khoikhoi peoples (Hottentots) who had lost their cattle. Indeed, the terms were used generically to refer to anyone, including runaway slaves, renegades and destitute colonists who resorted to foraging.

12 For detailed discussion on how the world-views and life-ways of hunter-gatherer peoples differ fundamentally from those of farming communities, usually leading to conflict and displacement of foragers, see Brody (2000). For an examination of cases where interactions also include cooperation and symbiosis see Ikeya *et al* (2009).

Often colonists did not, or were not able to, distinguish between San, on the one hand, and Khoikhoi who had been stripped of their stock, on the other. There was a degree of mixing and intermarriage between San and other indigenous peoples, and they were known to be taken up as clients by Khoikhoi. Sometimes dispossessed Khoikhoi joined hunter-gatherer communities or resisted colonial encroachment in alliance with them. In such cases, the use of 'Khoisan' makes eminent sense (Marks, 1972: 57–60, 70; Penn, 2005: 8–9, 57). Because 'Bushman' has historically been a highly pejorative term in the South African context, connoting a wide range of negative associations, including primitiveness, ugliness, stupidity, thievishness, laziness, as well as mental and moral inferiority,<sup>13</sup> scholars from the 1960s started using 'San' as an alternative. But this term is also problematic because it is a disparaging Khoikhoi word applied to hunter-gatherers, indicating social inferiority and often meaning 'thief' or 'vagabond'. In recent years, some scholars have reverted to the use of 'Bushman' because existing San communities often prefer this name. Anthropologist Robert Gordon has opted for Bushman because, 'Changing the label does not reduce the racism ... we have to confront the same terms and infuse them with new meaning' (Gordon & Douglas, 2000: 6). I favour 'San' because it is not gendered, is less pejorative, less ambiguous in denoting indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples than 'Bushman' and currently appears to be the term most widely accepted by leaders and organisations representing San people.<sup>14</sup>

13 For its pejorative connotations under apartheid and its relationship to coloured identity see Adhikari (2005: 24, 28–29) and Stone (1991: 386–87). For San identity in the post-apartheid environment see Besten (2009) and Comaroff & Comaroff (2008: 82–85).

14 For discussion around the meanings of the terms 'San' and 'Bushman', see, among others, Gordon & Douglas (2000: 4–6); Guenther (1986: 27–33); Wilmsen (1989: xv, 27–30); Jolly (1996: 197–210); Newton-King (1999: 59–63); Hewitt (2008: 1–2); Lewis-Williams (2004: xxvii); Mitchell and Smith (2009: 9); Wright (1996: 16–29); Hitchcock *et al* (2008: 4–6); Hitchcock and Biesele (n.d.: 1–4); Barnard (2007: 5–16, 138–40). Susan Newton-King tried unsuccessfully to skirt these ambiguities by referring to the San as 'mountain people'.