

## CHAPTER 1

### EARLY CONTACT BETWEEN SOUTHERN SAN AND KHOE AND BANTU-SPEAKING GROUPS

*The Sonquas are a people dwelling in massive mountainous country. They number several thousands, and are very small in size, both men and women. They have no cattle, but live by shooting rock rabbits with the bow and arrow, which they use with remarkable skill ... They also go out hunting big game, especially wild horses and mules ... The meat of the rock rabbits constitutes a pleasant food for the Sonquas who live principally on it and on certain roots growing in the ground ... Their little cloaks are sewn together from the skins of wild oxen which live on the rocks.*

Olfert Dapper

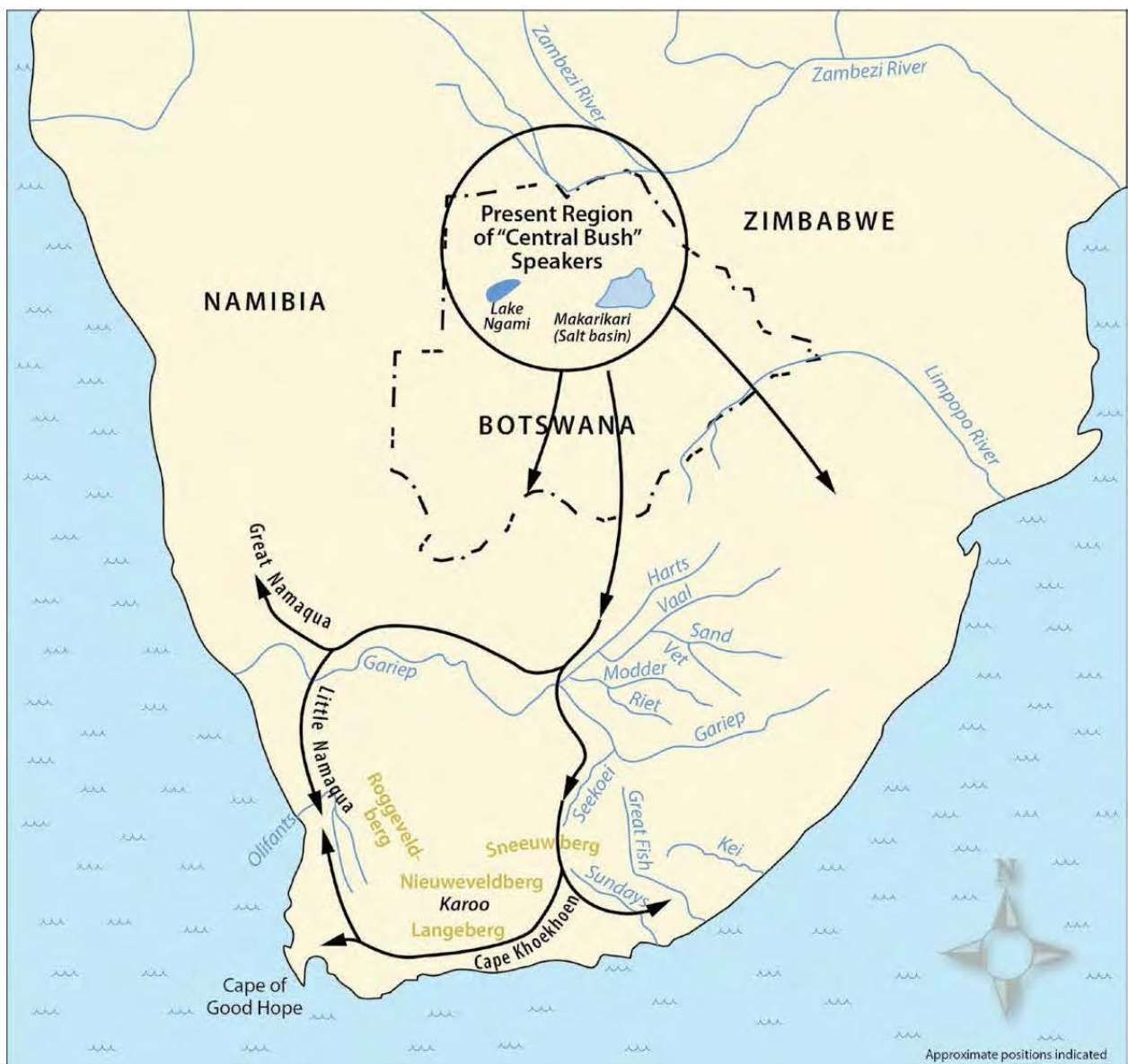
This account by Dapper of people inhabiting the western Cape mountains is one of the earliest descriptions we have of San hunter-gatherers after the arrival of Van Riebeeck at the Cape in 1652. Its references to “wild horses and mules” (zebras or quaggas) show that many elements of the environment were alien to the Dutch and were interpreted in terms of the European world they knew. Yet European explorers, travellers and settlers were not the first people to encounter the original inhabitants of southern Africa. Long before their arrival, iron-using agropastoralists whose identity is uncertain had moved down the south-east coast into KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, establishing themselves there by about 450 AD. Khoe pastoralists, too, had moved southwards into Namibia and the Cape by 800 AD, and possibly much earlier. The ancestors of the present day Nguni people probably arrived in KwaZulu-Natal in about 1000 AD, while the Sotho groups arrived later in southern San territories, crossing the Vaal River from the north and occupying the southern Highveld, roughly the present Free State, in about 1600 AD.

When Europeans first arrived at the Cape, therefore, the southern San had been sharing the South African landscape with other groups for more than 1000 years. All the immigrant groups introduced the indigenous hunter-gatherers to new animals, new ways of utilising the environment and new cultures centred on the keeping of livestock. Where did these people come from and what do we know of the relationships they formed with the southern San?

#### **The arrival of Khoe in Namibia and the Cape**

It appears that the Khoe originated as a pastoralist group at least 2000 years ago when southern African hunter-gatherer groups acquired sheep and pottery from pastoralists or mixed farmers who had moved into northern Botswana. The San who became Khoe pastoralists in this manner were probably the Naron and G/wi people. This is suggested by the fact that there are certain cultural similarities between the extinct Cape Khoe and Naron and G/wi hunter-gatherers still living in Botswana. Not only are their languages closely related but they also share other cultural features, such as a similar kinship system, which sets them apart from most San groups. Some time after acquiring livestock these proto-Khoe pastoralists dispersed southwards with their flocks into the Cape, but there is debate both as to what routes these people took and when this migration occurred.

One route followed by the early pastoralists may have involved the main stream of Khoe dispersing southwards from northern Botswana and dividing when they reached the Gariep River. It is suggested that one section then moved westwards along the banks of the Gariep until they reached the coast, where they again split - one group, the ancestors of the Great Namaqua, moving north into modern Namibia, while those who were to form the Little Namaqua moved south into Namaqualand. Another section, it is proposed, the ancestors of the Cape Khoe, instead of moving westwards along the Gariep to the coast, moved southwards, probably up the Seekoei River valley in the Karoo and then over the Sneeuwberg into the valleys of the Sundays or Fish rivers. After reaching the south-east coast, they would have expanded westwards along the coast, perhaps as a result of pressure from Bantu-speakers, until they reached the south-western Cape. Here they would have increased rapidly to form the cluster of Cape Khoe groups, the most northerly of which later encountered the southern Namaqua groups near the Olifants River.



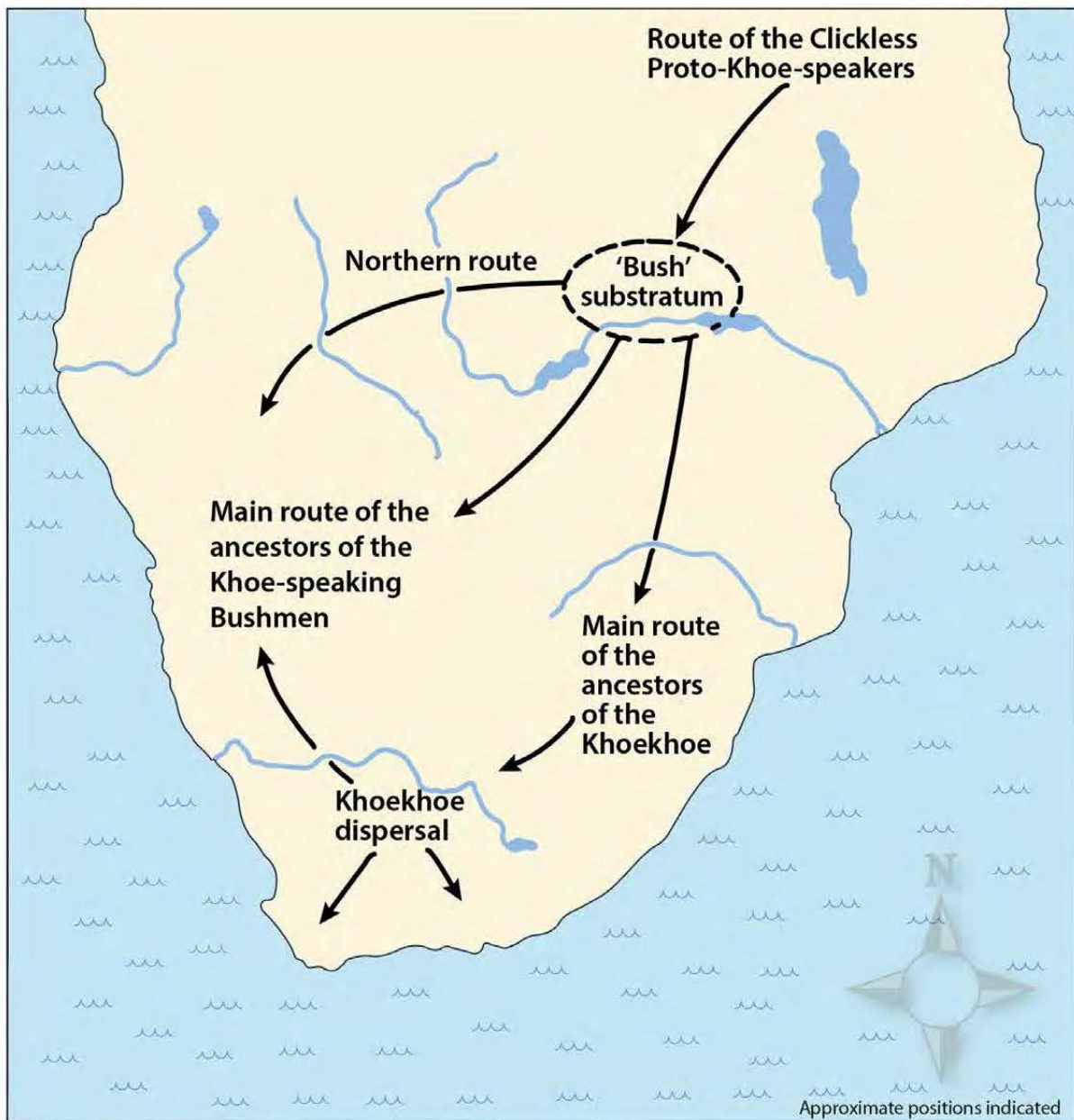
Probable Khoe migration routes, according to Elphick.

*After a map in Elphick (1977).*



While there is some evidence to support the above scenario, the absence of any sheep bones dated to a period earlier than 1400 at archaeological sites in the Seekoei River valley is difficult to explain in terms of this hypothesis. If early pastoralists migrated through this valley we would expect to find sheep remains dating to the time of this migration at herder sites in the region.

An alternative route that has been proposed has better support. This involves a movement by early Khoe westwards from the original dispersal area in northern Botswana to the Atlantic coast, and then southwards to the Cape Peninsula. From there, groups probably moved along the east coast towards the Fish River, where their advance would have been halted by the presence of Nguni and Sotho farmers. This is the route that a number of archaeologists believe was taken by early Khoe. However, linguistic evidence has been used to suggest yet another scenario.



**Probable migration routes of Khoe-speakers, according to Barnard - based on linguistic evidence.**

*After a map in Barnard (1992).*

As far as the timing of the arrival of early pastoralists in the Cape is concerned, we know that sheep bones and pottery dated to between 2000 and 1800 BP (Before Present) have been found in this region. According to one model of pastoralist migration from Botswana into the Western Cape, pottery and sheep were first introduced into Namibia and the Cape when herders migrated into these areas approximately 2000 years ago. An alternative, more favoured, model suggests that pottery and sheep were introduced independently by diffusion from one hunter-gatherer group to another, thus pre-dating the arrival of pastoralists themselves. The diffusionists argue that the migration of Khoe pastoralist groups into Namibia and South Africa probably only occurred about 800 years after hunter-gatherers in Namibia and South Africa had acquired pottery and livestock from pastoralist groups further to the north.



Fat-tailed sheep.

Source: Barrow, J. (1801-1804). *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa, in the Years 1797 and 1798*. London: Cadell and Davies.

The issues surrounding the arrival of herder communities in Namibia and the Cape are only likely to be resolved fully once we have more archaeological data, including additional dated material, from a wider range of sites containing pottery, sheep and cattle. As new herder sites are located and investigated, and as more early pottery and sheep bones become available for analysis, we will be in a better position to assess which of the different models put forward for the arrival of the Khoe most closely approximates the real situation.



A Colonial period Khoe kraal on the shores of Table Bay. By A. Bogaerts.

Source: National Library of South Africa.



## **Early interaction between the Khoe and southern San**

Whatever the date of their earliest contacts with the southern San, and whatever the route they may have followed into territories occupied by these people, we can expect that early pastoralists in Namibia and the Cape entered into a variety of relationships with the aboriginal hunter-gatherers they encountered. Analysis of herder and hunter-gatherer sites as well as historical accounts of relations between San and Khoe can help us to model the kinds of relationships which these groups are likely to have formed after first contact. We nevertheless need to bear in mind that settlement by European people brought about many changes in San and Khoe society, and relations which existed in Colonial times between Khoe and San groups, particularly in the later Colonial period, would not necessarily have existed before contact with Europeans.

One response by the San to the arrival of the Khoe would have been to resist the occupation by the pastoralists of their hunting and gathering grounds - specifically the lower lying coastal plains that were more suitable for pastoralism than the inland mountains. Some San would have perceived the arrival of the Khoe as a direct threat to their ancient way of life and fought to maintain their hunting and gathering existence in the face of competing claims to these areas from pastoralists. Those that did not succeed in this would have been forced to move off into the more inaccessible and, for the Khoe pastoralists, less desirable mountainous areas - where the grazing was less suitable for livestock than that on the lower plains. In the mountains they may have joined up with other San groups with whom they had marital and other ties, or they may have been forced to compete with other San groups for resources in these areas. The relatively small quantities of pottery and sheep bone present at most mountain sites in the south-western Cape suggests that the majority of San who occupied the mountains remained in contact with, but relatively independent of, Khoe. Historical accounts also indicate that many mountain Sonquas, such as the Ubiquas, who inhabited the mountains east of the Berg River, subsisted to a large extent on cattle stolen from Khoe groups occupying the lower-lying areas. This suggests that relations between some Khoe and the San groups inhabiting the mountains were poor.

Other San groups, like hunter-gatherers living on the coastal plain at Witklip, near the pastoralist site of Kasteelberg north of Saldanha Bay, appear to have continued to practise a way of life largely unaltered by the close proximity of pastoralists at the latter site. With time, however, they may have become clients of the herders, providing services for them such as tending their sheep and cattle in return for payment in kind of these animals. Khoe in the Colonial period, for example, used San to look after their livestock, and these hunter-gatherers probably received milk and the occasional cow or sheep in return for this service. Similar arrangements are common in Botswana today, where San have attached themselves as clients to Tswana and Herero families. In some cases, livestock acquired from Khoe in this way by San may have been simply slaughtered for food. Alternatively, domestic animals could have been accumulated to form a sufficiently large herd or flock for the owner to be assimilated into pastoralist society.

Other services besides herding are also likely to have been rendered by the San to neighbouring Khoe people. This is suggested by historical accounts which indicate that San acted as soldiers, messengers, hunters and spies for Khoe groups to whom they had attached themselves. San are recorded as having fought together with Khoe against the herders' enemies, and Landdrost Starrenburgh reported at the beginning of the eighteenth century that San would tell their Khoe patrons where to find elephants

to hunt. He remarked that some Khoe had “fallen into the most extreme poverty, and are compelled to resort to elephant-hunting ... (and) as soon as one is perceived by their Sonquas who daily roam over the plains to catch dassies, jackals and other animals they come out with all their young men.”

Similarly, San were used by the Khoe to warn them of the approach of hostile groups whom they had sighted while on hunting and gathering expeditions or while looking after the livestock of the Khoe at outlying cattle posts. Thus Simon Van der Stel remarked in 1685 that Sonquas near the confluence of the Olifants and Doorn rivers “are like the poor (or troops) in Europe, of whom each tribe of the Hottentots has its own, used by them to give warning should they hear of (the approach of) any strange tribe”. As a reward for these services they were given meat or other gifts during peacetime, and in times of war they were given a share of the spoils. Although not pastoralists themselves, client San groups such as these were considered part of the larger Khoe grouping to which they were attached.

It is likely, too, that trade would have been an important aspect of the relationships established between San and early Khoe groups. San, and other hunter-gatherers in the sub-continent, are known to have traded a wide range of foods and goods with neighbouring pastoralists and agriculturists. In return, the San would have received milk, the occasional sheep or cow, and, when the Khoe gained access to European trade goods, tobacco and beads. Where there was enough demand from the Khoe for “bush goods”, it is possible that some hunter-gatherers specialised in trading with pastoralists and became “professional primitives”, so that hunting and gathering for subsistence became secondary to hunting and gathering for exchange. In other words, they may not have traded in order to remain hunter-gatherers, but rather remained hunter-gatherers in order to trade. This is a strategy that has been adopted by a number of hunter-gatherer groups in other areas of Africa and the world who live in forested or mountainous areas adjacent to agriculturists or pastoralists.

Still other San groups probably entered into close relationships with pastoralist groups which were based on intermarriage. Reports by both early and later European settlers and travellers in the Cape indicate that Khoe and San were not always easily distinguishable to these observers, suggesting that a considerable degree of mixing had occurred between Khoe and San. This would have acted to blur the distinction between pastoralist and hunter-gatherer during the long period in which they occupied the same landscape. Like those Khoe who were absorbed by Nguni and Sotho farmers so that, through intermarriage and the adoption of the culture of the farmers, the distinction between the pastoralists and agropastoralists was almost completely lost, some San in close contact with Khoe would have been completely absorbed into their society. As has been mentioned, a number of the terms used by the European settlers to describe the indigenous people, such as Bosjesmans-Hottentot, Hottentots-Bosjesman, and Bushman Boor, may indicate this mixing of peoples and cultures, as well as confusion on the part of Europeans when attempting to identify the various groups with whom they came into contact.

Finally, some San would have acquired livestock and become herders themselves. This is how the Khoe originally came into being and there is no reason to suppose it only happened once and only in Botswana. Some San groups in the present Free State and other areas close to the Maloti-Drakensberg possessed large herds of cattle and sheep in Colonial times. San were even reported, on one occasion at least, to have ridden cattle “into battle”. New pastoralist groups may therefore have formed when San groups acquired cattle and sheep from Khoe. Van Riebeeck reported, for example, that the Little Chariguriqua, a Khoe group who lived between Saldanha Bay and mid-way between Robben and

Dassen Islands, were originally subject to Oedaso, chief of the Cochoqua Khoe, and “were accustomed to be his stock-keepers, but appropriated his cattle to their own use”. The Little Chariguriqua may well have been San clients of Oedaso. Some San who acquired cattle in this way and became pastoralists may have been distinguished in certain respects from “true” Khoe groups, as was the case with the Little Chariguriqua. Others may have adopted the culture and lifestyle of other Khoe groups so completely that no distinction was made between them and the Khoe in general.



Khoe with riding ox and matjieshuis - a transportable house made of reed mats on a frame of branches. By Charles Davidson Bell.

Source: Bell Heritage Trust, UCT.



“A view of a Bushman kraal”. Note the similarity of their huts to those of the Khoe.

Source (original): Burchell, W.J. (1822/24). *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*. 2 vols. London: Printed by Longman et al.





A San family with pack ox, on the move. By Robert Jacob Gordon.

Source: Cape Archives.

The picture that emerges, then, is of the Dutch encountering a range of groups in the years after their arrival at the Cape. At opposite ends of this social spectrum there were solid cores of archetypal hunter-gatherer and herder societies who were clearly very different and easily distinguished from each other. Long histories of conflict developing out of the occupation of the territories of the hunter-gatherers by the Khoe and subsequent raids by hunter-gatherers on their cattle, sometimes served to separate these groups and maintain cultural and other distinctions between them. The real, but not insurmountable, difficulties associated with changing a lifestyle based on hunting and gathering to one based on herding with its emphasis on accumulation of livestock rather than immediate consumption probably also served to maintain the distinction between these groups. Between these two poles there were San who lived in a manner similar to Khoe groups and Khoe who lived largely or exclusively by hunting and gathering, as well as groups of mixed ethnic identity composed of San, Khoe and even slaves and criminals who had escaped from the Colony.

### **Early interaction between Bantu-speaking agriculturists and the south-eastern San**

In the fourth century AD, about 300 years after sheep had been introduced to hunter-gatherers on the west coast, Bantu-speaking agriculturists from East Africa, with Urewe tradition pottery, moved into the present Limpopo Province in South Africa. Evidence for this comes from the site of Silver Leaves in this area (about 50 kilometres south of present-day Tzaneen). They brought with them characteristic elements of the Early Iron Age way of life - crop cultivation, livestock herding, iron production, settled village life, and a particular ceramic tradition. The Urewe at Silver Leaves developed into the Mzonjani tradition, and by 450 AD people with this style of pottery had reached the coastal belt of KwaZulu-Natal and were settled 100 kilometres south of present-day Durban.

This was succeeded by the Kalundu tradition, specifically a form known as the Msuluzi style. It indicated the arrival of a new group of people, also Bantu-speakers, originating in West Africa. These farmers gradually expanded southwards and towards the interior. By about 800 AD, Bantu-speaking agriculturists had spread to the edge of the summer rainfall regions of the Eastern Cape and into



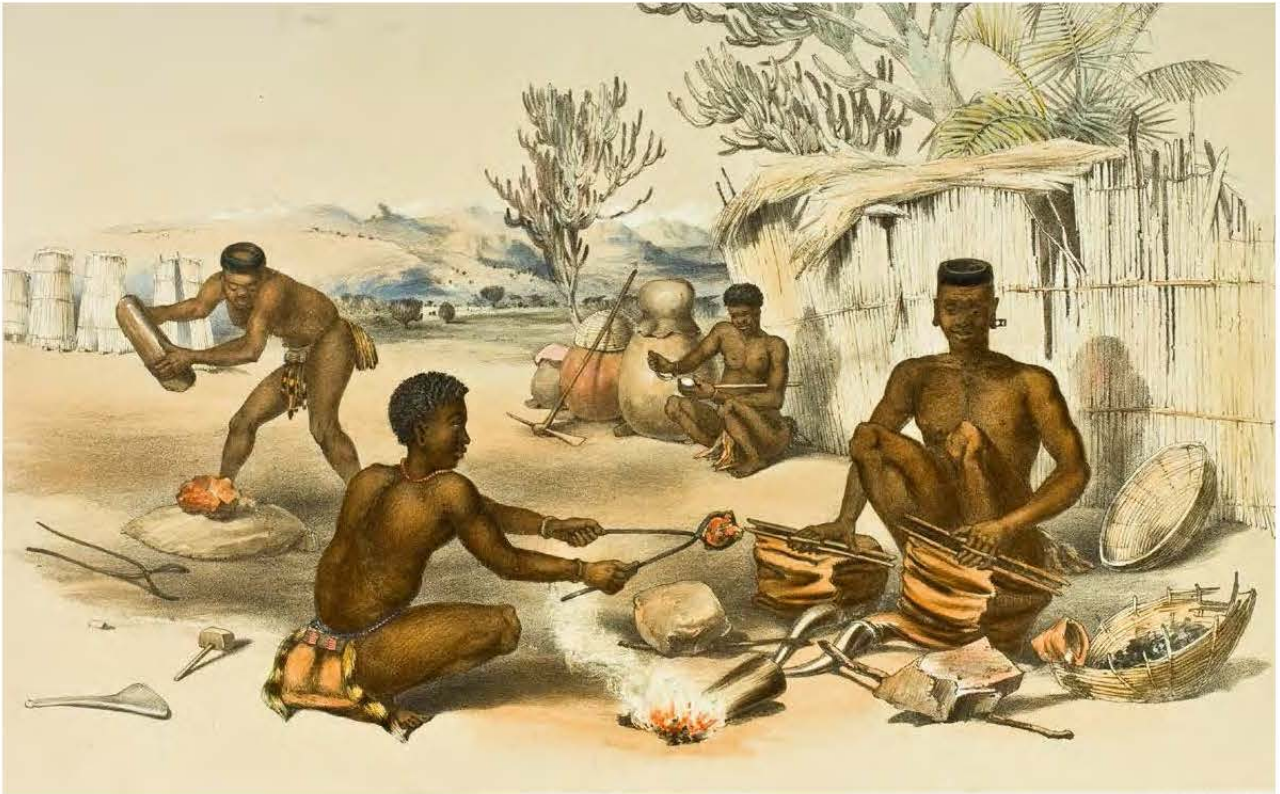
much of KwaZulu-Natal below the 1000 metre contour line. Areas above this line were less suitable for farming than the lower areas. Although these were Bantu-speakers they were almost certainly not Nguni-speakers (the Nguni languages are just one group of languages within the larger Bantu family of languages). The arrival of the ancestors of present-day Nguni-speakers in KwaZulu-Natal, indicated by the presence of a very different pottery tradition, the Blackburn tradition, only occurred much later, in about 1030 AD.

While there would almost certainly have been instances of conflict between these first millennium farmers and the south-eastern San hunter-gatherers into whose territories they moved, it is likely that while pioneer farmer groups were small in number and relatively unacquainted with the environments they had occupied it would have been in their interest to remain on good terms with the aboriginal inhabitants, who would have been in a position to assist them in a variety of ways. This is suggested by analysis of Early Iron Age sites, which indicate that, in some cases, close relationships were established between the immigrant farmers and the hunter-gatherers they encountered.

While pioneer Early Iron Age agriculturists were few in number they are likely to have had a minimal impact on the ability of the San to continue their ancient hunting and gathering lifestyle, and early farming communities may, in many cases, have been viewed by the original inhabitants as a resource to be tapped for exotic goods, such as iron, ceramics and cultivated foods. Some archaeologists have suggested that south-eastern hunter-gatherers based themselves in more densely forested refuge areas adjacent to early farming settlements, where they could both hunt and gather and trade forest products with farmers in exchange for material goods and foods not produced by hunter-gatherers. The farmers, too, would have benefited from these relationships, by gaining access to goods and services provided by the hunter-gatherers.

It is also likely that early agriculturists would have relied to an extent on the San's intimate knowledge of the areas they occupied and, like the Khoe, employed them as guides, hunters, soldiers, and to look after their animals. Hunter-gatherers and farmers in many other areas of Africa and the world, for example, depend on each other for goods and services that they lack themselves. The development of relationships that were to the mutual benefit of both the indigenous hunter-gatherers and the incoming farmers may thus well have characterised the first encounters between these groups in many cases.

The sustained period of overlap between some Later Stone Age and Early Iron Age sites in KwaZulu-Natal supports this model of interaction. Archaeological evidence from Msuluzi Confluence, a seventh century Iron Age site on the upper Thukela River, as well as from other early agriculturist sites, suggests that harmonious interaction occurred between hunter-gatherers and farmers in this area. Later Stone Age artefacts associated with the San, such as ostrich eggshell beads, bone arrow-points and link-shafts and stone tools, are found on the site together with pottery and iron, and analysis of the assemblages suggests that trade may have occurred with hunter-gatherers in the area. The farmers appear to have been provided with ostrich eggshell beads by hunter-gatherers. Ostrich eggshell beads and the necklaces and other decorative items made from them were valued not only by the San but also by Early Iron Age farmers. The hunter-gatherers, in turn, were given iron, possibly produced in excess by farmers especially for this trade.



Zulu blacksmiths. By George French Angas.

Source: Library of Parliament.



A contemporary ostrich eggshell bead necklace made by San people.

Source: Library of Parliament.

Excavations at other sites in the Thukela Basin suggest a similar pattern of co-operative co-existence between hunter-gatherers and early farmers in this area. Although not conclusive, the available evidence suggests that the central Thukela Basin was only occupied by hunter-gatherers after the arrival of farmers, and it is quite possible that it was the presence of the farmers which drew them there in the first place. Hunter-gatherers and farmers appear to have lived alongside one another in this area for a considerable period of time.



There is indirect evidence that some of the hunter-gatherers at these sites used iron tools and, as at Msuluzi Confluence, some farmer sites contain items generally associated with hunter-gatherers, such as worked bone, ostrich eggshell beads and stone tools. Moreover, one of the excavated hunter-gatherer sites contained decorated pottery associated with farming communities. This overlap can be explained as indicating that farmers and hunter-gatherers were manufacturing items traditionally associated with each others' cultures, or that the foreign items indicate sequential occupation by hunter-gatherers and farmers of the same sites, but the most plausible explanation is that the two groups were trading with one another. If so, we can expect these relationships to have resulted in the development of other ties, perhaps including intermarriage. While it is impossible to tell from the archaeological evidence whether or not this actually occurred, studies of hunter-gatherer and farmer societies involved in trade in historical times indicate that this would probably have been the case.

In the Eastern Cape, excavations at Edgehill and Welgeluk shelters near the Fish River present a slightly different picture. The initial impact of the first immigrant groups, herders, indicated by the presence of pottery in the later deposits of these shelters, appears to have been slight, but the arrival of agriculturists may have resulted in disruption of the hunter-gatherer-fishers' access to key resources. After contact with farmers, smaller game animals and less desirable riverine foods, such as crab and turtle, were increasingly exploited - probably because these animals were not an important source of food for the immigrant herders and farmers.

Pressure placed on the subsistence base of the indigenous inhabitants seems to have caused the break-up of the social organisation of some communities, and many of these people appear to have attached themselves to the settlements of the agriculturists - although it is also likely that some did so voluntarily, attracted by the new resources which these communities had to offer. Whatever the case, the net result of the occupation of the areas surrounding the Edgehill and Welgeluk shelters by farmers was almost certainly acculturation and incorporation of significant numbers of hunter-gatherer-fishers into surrounding farmer communities.

It is important to realise, however, that the impact of food producers at these and other sites in the area was not uniform. Some of the hunter-gatherer-fishers continued to co-exist with herders and farmers for a long time after the arrival of the latter groups. Others appear to have retreated to refuge areas such as the Winterberg further to the north, where a hunter-gatherer life was more viable and from where they could establish relationships with food producers that allowed them a greater degree of independence.

These excavations have allowed us to gain a better understanding of the forms of interaction that may have occurred between Early Iron Age farmers and San hunter-gatherers. Relationships that developed between southern Nguni and Sotho farmers and south-eastern San groups in later years will be discussed in another chapter, drawing upon Nguni and Sotho oral traditions, as well as written accounts by survivors of shipwrecks, travellers, government officials and missionaries. It is the history of the arrival and settlement in southern Africa of a powerful new group of people, the European Colonists, and the impact they were to have on the Cape San, to which we will now turn.