CHAPTER 2

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT AND EXPANSION INTO SAN TERRITORIES BEFORE 1800

“They shoot at us in the mist. We make cloud, our blood is smoking ...”

Djâlkwain, a /Xam San man.

“I must now believe that these savages have not been rendered happier by their communication with Europeans.”

William Burchell

The arrival of the Europeans

The earliest known encounter between Europeans and South African hunter-gatherers, almost certainly aboriginal San people, occurred at St Helena Bay on the south-western Cape coast. It was off this bay that Vasco da Gama anchored on the 7th of November 1497 and rested up for eight days, hoping to make contact with people who could provide him with fresh supplies of meat and water, and, he hoped, more valuable goods such as ivory and gold. This is his description of the people he met and some of the events associated with the visit:

“On Wednesday we cast anchor in said bay and here we remained for eight days ... In the land the men are swarthy. They eat only sea-wolves (seals) and whales and the flesh of gazelles and the roots of plants. They wear sheaths on their members. Their arms are staffs of wild olive trees tipped with fire-hardened horns. They have many dogs like those of Portugal ...”

A San man with his dog. Detail. By Samuel Daniell.  
Source: Library of Parliament.
On the next day … we went ashore with the Commander and captured one of these men. He was small of body … and was going about gathering honey on the moor … We took him to the Commander’s ship, who placed him with himself at his table, and he ate of everything we ate. The next day the Commander clothed him very well and ordered him to be put ashore. On Sunday … we went ashore … and bartered for shells that they wore in their ears, which looked as if they had been silvered over; and for fox-tails, which they fastened to sticks, and with which they fan their faces.”

This encounter began with an abduction, but it was followed by expressions of goodwill on both sides, and the San hosted one of the Portuguese at their camp, providing him with a meal of roasted seal meat and wild plant foods. The visit nevertheless ended in conflict when the San, alarmed by this man’s shouting to the people aboard the ships anchored off the shore, attacked him and the crew of the boat sent to fetch him. A skirmish ensued, initiating the long process of bitter conflict between the original inhabitants of southern Africa and European settlers.

![A sketch, from the imagination, of Vasco da Gama’s men clashing with San at St Helena Bay, close to Saldanha Bay.]


There are no accounts which indicate that Van Riebeeck found San hunter-gatherer groups in the region around Table Bay when the Dutch East India Company established a settlement at the Cape in 1652, more than 150 years after Da Gama’s visit to St Helena Bay, but he did find Khoe with cattle and sheep. The Dutch also encountered people without cattle or sheep who lived largely by foraging and scavenging of dead whales and seals along the shoreline. They called themselves the Goringhaicona, but were called Strandlopers (Beachwalkers) by the Dutch. In all, they numbered about 50 people and were under the leadership of Autshumato, known to the Europeans in later times as Harry.
A painting, from the imagination, of the Dutch under Van Riebeeck arriving at the Cape, and their meeting with the Khoi who were pasturing their animals there. By Charles Davidson Bell.

Source: National Library of South Africa.

A painting, from the imagination, of Van Riebeeck meeting a group of “Strandloopers”. By Charles Davidson Bell.

Source: Collection of Desmond Woolf.
The Goringhaicona were an impoverished offshoot of the Peninsular Khoe, or Goringhaiqua, whose language they spoke and with whom they had close lineage ties, but they included in their number robber Sonquas, as well as cattleless Khoe from other groups and a variety of people who, for one reason or another, had fallen on misfortune. They adopted the role of intermediaries in the cattle trade between other Khoe groups at the Cape and the European settlers, and in this way Autshumato was soon able to build up a herd of more than 200 head of cattle and an even greater number of sheep.

The Khoe, like other pastoralists, were accustomed to move from place to place with their herds as pasture for their cattle deteriorated or improved with the different seasons of the year. If pasture was plentiful in a particular area at a certain time of the year, various groups would share the resource by occupying the grazing lands for part of the year. According to Autshumato, there were three groups of people who occupied Table Bay at the time of Van Riebeeck's arrival. One of these groups was the one he headed, the Goringhaicona. Aside from the name Strandlopers, which was given to them by the Dutch, they were also known as the Watermans or Watermen. Another group, the Saldanhamen, had many cattle and sheep which they brought to the bay every year. A third group, the Vissermans or Fishermen, timed their arrival each year to coincide with the departure of the Saldanhamen. The Fishermen owned cattle but no sheep and subsisted mainly by fishing from the rocks in Table Bay and other areas that they visited on their round.

Walter Schouten, who arrived from Batavia on the Rysende Son in 1665, left a description of the inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope, probably Strandlopers or Watermen, which reveals the mixture of fascination and disgust with which the first European settlers viewed the Khoe and their impoverished offshoots. His account is particularly interesting as it indicates how similar to hunter-gatherer San communities cattleless Khoe groups must have been in their appearance and way of life:

"(It was wonderful) to see the wild nature of the people of the Cabo de Bon Esperance, who because of their beastliness bear no resemblance to mankind. They are truly the most miserable folk that I have seen on the earth. Because of their wildness and clucking speech (which seems to come forth with a stuttering from deep in their throats) they are commonly called Hottentots. ...They continually bring all sorts of beasts, principally oxen, cows and sheep, which they know how to get from their neighbours in the Sardaigne-Bay ... for sale to our people in the Table Bay, who get them by barter for a little copper, tin, beads, tobacco and other trifles.

For the most part they live (on dead fish that had been washed ashore and the entrails of cattle slaughtered by the Dutch), and from some sorts of roots that grow wild and which they eat raw. ... At night they creep together in whole troops, men, women and children, in places where horrible caves, valleys and pits are to be found ... without shelter or any covering but the hills, the rocks and the wild growths, since I have seen no houses or huts among them. Some, however, indeed spread out a few beast-skins on sticks, thus to be protected from the cold, hail, snow, rain and winter squalls ..."
Dutch Colonists bartering with Khoe for sheep.

"It is lamentable", Schouten piously concluded, "that among mankind such folk ... are to be found, who, although descended from our father Adam, yet show so little of humanity that truly they more resemble the unreasoning beasts than reasonable man ... Miserable folk, how lamentable is your pittiable condition! And Oh Christians, how blessed is ours!"

Although Autshumato frequently complained to Van Riebeeck of thefts by "Souqua" (San), the people encountered at Table Bay by the Dutch who did not have livestock all appear to have been Khoe pastoralists or impoverished Khoe who had resorted to hunting, fishing and gathering in order to survive, and it was only north of Table Bay that the Dutch encountered people whose appearance and way of life was that of typical San hunter-gatherers. Possibly the first San to be encountered by the Dutch were people, described in an entry in Van Riebeeck's journal for the 26th of November 1652, who had no cattle or sheep and who hunted antelope with bows and arrows. Van Riebeeck had travelled by ship to Saldanha Bay shortly after his arrival at the Cape when he met these people walking along a beach. He was disappointed to learn that they could offer only ostrich eggshells and tortoises "and similar trash" for barter, and they told him that if he wanted cattle he should obtain them from the Saldanhar Khoe. Although the members of this group were probably aboriginal hunter-gatherers, the Dutch called them Strandlopers, assuming that, because they had no cattle, they must form part of the same group to which Autshumato and his people belonged.

References to hunter-gatherers become more frequent in the Company record after Van Riebeeck's encounter with these people. Expeditions to the north met small people without cattle who subsisted by gathering and by hunting with bows and arrows and who lived in the mountains. Some were said to rob the Khoe of their cattle, but others attached themselves to the herders, for whom they acted as soldiers and spies. The Khoe called them Sonquas, Soaquas, Souquas, and variants of these names.

Jan Danckaert, a Company servant, also encountered typical hunter-gatherers on his exploratory journey north of Table Bay between November 1660 and January 1661, and it is clear from his description that they were different in a number of respects from Khoe pastoralists. Van Riebeeck's diarist reported that Danckaert and his party "had come across a poverty-stricken band of tiny
people, who had helped them to cross the first range and had been very friendly to them, giving them some honey and dried fish”. He went on to remark that “these small people, who have already been encountered somewhat nearer here by previous exploring parties, live in a state of poverty in shabby, low huts made of branches … They are well provided with bows and arrows, and they are adept at using these for shooting all kinds of game for food. Honey also forms part of their diet. They dress like the Hottentots, but they use very poor skins of wild animals. … They are rather modest, but in their speech they also cluck like turkey-cocks, the more so as one goes further into the interior”.

When members of Danckaert’s expedition were laid up exhausted after battling their way through thick undergrowth on their journey they were taken care of by Souquas, who fed them royally on antelope and rhinoceros meat. This was not the first account which reveals the spirit of generosity and goodwill shown by the San to the early Dutch settlers. In November 1660, for example, a party of Souquas had arrived at the Company fort on the shores of Table Bay with a present of the heads of quaggas or zebras - “young horses” which are “most beautifully striped” with “long ears like asses”. According to one account, the entire skin of the animal was stuffed and hung up on display in the fort. The potential for peaceful relations and harmonious co-existence between the San and the Dutch was therefore present from the time of first contact, but, as history was to show, it remained largely unrealised.

The first free burghers and their expansion into San territories

Cape mountains and rivers

*After maps in: Uphick (1977), Uphick and Gillmoree (1979), Geerh and Visagie (1985) and Bredenkamp and van den Berg (1986).*
Trekboer expansion 1702-1780.


Official exploratory expeditions such as Danckaert's had a minimal impact on the Khoe-San communities they encountered and, in general, did not disrupt them to any extent. When the Company allowed the first freeburghers, Company servants, to settle along the Liesbeek River in 1657, however, it initiated the long process of expansion by Dutch farmers into Khoe-San territories. Almost immediately, in 1659, war broke out between the Khoe and the Dutch, and the San were soon also to be affected by this new wave of immigrants. During the next 30 years the Company allowed farmers to settle at increasing distances from Table Bay as its need for agricultural produce increased. By 1687 new settlements had been established at the Tijgerberg, Paarl and Stellenbosch, and in 1688 two hundred Huguenots arrived and were settled in the Drakenstein Valley.

These farmers and the roaming frontier farmers, or trekboers, who were to encroach in increasing numbers upon San territories, were hardy pioneers who had to deal with great physical hardships far from any of the conveniences offered by the metropole. Few became rich, and many lived a life not that different from the Khoe pastoralists whose lands they usurped. The very real trials to which they were subjected bred in them a spirit of independence and a determination to overcome the obstacles that placed themselves in the way of any person attempting to establish a life for himself in unfamiliar and often wild terrain. Given an opportunity to establish farms in the territories of the Khoe-San, however, these qualities often translated into an almost complete disregard for Company rule and the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, who stood in the way of their acquiring this land.
It was no surprise, therefore, that the Colonists experienced considerable resistance from the Khoe and San they encountered during the course of their expansion. Conflict between the Dutch and Khoe-San persisted for much of the eighteenth century and can be divided roughly into three phases: the periods between 1700 and 1739, 1740 and 1769, and 1770 and 1795. Each of these phases was characterised by the movement of Colonists into new territories occupied by the San, the outbreak of hostilities between the farmers and the indigenous inhabitants, and the subsequent subjugation of the San either by force or, in the case of the last phase, through the establishment of conditions suitable for pacifying and “civilising” them, followed by their incorporation into the rural work force.

The period 1700-1740: expansion into the Sandveld and to the edge of the Bokkeveld mountains

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Dutch had firmly established themselves in the southernmost regions of what was to become the Cape Colony, and, as the Colonists increased in number, they looked to expand into other areas occupied by the Khoe-San. The region to the east was initially blocked by the extensive lands owned by the Company close to the Hottentots Holland Mountains, with the result that the main thrust of expansion of the Dutch farmers was to the north.

In 1700, a significant natural boundary, the Berg River, was crossed when Dutch freemen moved into the Land van Waveren, or Tulbagh Valley. The Van Waveren farmers were almost immediately raided by Khoe-San from the surrounding Ubiqua Mountains, a continuation of the Drakenstein range. These people, identified as Ubiqua, seem to have been a mixed group of Grigriques/Gurigques and Namaqua Khoe with quite a number of San adherents – a multi-ethnic group typical of many of the Khoe-San groups of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were referred to as “Bushmen or highwaymen”, probably because they subsisted largely by cattle-raiding rather than pastoralism.

In the same year, the Governor of the Cape, Willem Adriaan van der Stel, opened the cattle trade with the Khoe, which previously had been the monopoly of the Company, to the Colonists. This resulted in considerable friction between the Khoe and Dutch since some burghers attempted to force Khoe who were reluctant to participate in this trade to part with their cattle. By 1702 attacks on the Khoe by Dutch cattle traders had become so severe that van der Stel had to close the trade, only re-opening it again in 1704. Landdrost Starrenburgh, journeying to the Olifants River in 1705, reported that maverick freemen had wrought havoc amongst the Khoe. One of these burghers, “Dronke Gerrit” (Drunken Gerrit), had attacked a Khoe kraal a few years previously, setting fire to the herders’ huts and stealing their cattle. Depredations by the Dutch Colonists of this kind, Starrenburgh remarked, had disrupted Khoe society to such an extent that “from men who sustained themselves quietly by cattle-
breeding, living in peace and contentment, divided under their chiefs in their kraals, they have nearly all become Bushmen, hunters and brigands, dispersed everywhere between and in the mountains”.

The San were treated even worse than the Khoe by the freeburghers, and no attempt was made to come to any sort of accommodation with them with respect to sharing the lands into which they had moved. This was partly due to the difficulties of negotiating with an elusive enemy who usually did not have identifiable leaders, but it was also due in large measure to the fact that, in general, the San were viewed as little different from the wild animals which roamed the land they occupied. With some exceptions, the incoming farmers treated them as they would any wild creature which stood in the way of their progress - as an obstacle to be removed as quickly as possible and by any means available. This was the common, and persistent, view of the San held by the European Colonists. “He is in every sense of the word, a wild man”, the Reverend Henry Tindall was to write more than 150 years later. “He has nor religion, no laws, no government, no recognised authority, no patrimony, no fixed abode. The power of speech, the physical conformation and constitution of man, and a soul (debased, it is true, and completely bound down and clogged by his animal nature) are all that he has in common with the more favoured and enlightened portions of the human family.”

It is perhaps no surprise, considering the manner in which the Colonists conducted themselves, that the San came to rank the European farmers just as low on the scale of human qualities. Thus the naturalist, traveller and first Director of the South African Museum, Andrew Smith was to report:

“(The Bushman) has a graduated scale and readily enumerates opposite what degree each tribe will stand; and invariably maintaining that those who rank lowest in the scale of courage are the most entitled to be robbed, not, he asserts, because the danger is least, but because they partake in the smallest degree of the attributes of men and consequently less deserve to possess what he argues has been given to all men in common. The Bushmen speak of the Colonial farmers as dangerous simply on account of their possessing fire-arms, while they represent them as entirely unfit to compete in other respects with persons of their own class.”

Predictably, the Khoe-San stepped up their resistance to this onslaught by the Dutch and by 1704 repeated raids on the Colonists had forced the Company to establish a series of military posts stretching as far north as the Tulbagh Valley in order to protect the farmers. Although the Company felt it necessary to bolster its defences with these posts, the period from the early eighteenth century until 1715 was relatively peaceful. However, there were two significant developments in the years shortly preceding this date that impacted on the Khoe-San.

One was the introduction of the loan-farm, or leningplaats, system in 1714. If a farmer had no (European) neighbours, he could, legally, use as much land as he wished. But where the boundary of a leningplaats needed to be determined relative to a neighbour’s land, this was done by walking a horse for half an hour in all directions from the homestead. Thus, for a small rental each year, farmers were now allowed to claim about 6,000 acres for their own use. The springs at which the game grazed and drank became the centres of these farms, with inevitable disruptive results for the San who occupied these areas. The obvious material deprivation associated with the occupation of waterholes was accompanied by an equally destructive spiritual loss, since, as one writer has remarked, the water pit was a site “rich in theatre”, one occupied by rain animals and other spirits, where the past intersected with the future, the living with the dead and the natural world with the supernatural.

The other development was the outbreak of smallpox amongst the Khoe in 1713. This decimated
their population and was to prove an important factor in breaking the power of the Khoe chieftdoms. The extent of the destruction wrought by this plague can be judged by the following account provided by a visitor to the Cape: "The Hottentots ... died in their hundreds", he wrote. "They lay everywhere on the roads ... Cursing at the Dutchmen, who they said had bewitched them, they fled inland with their kraals, huts, and cattle in hopes there to be freed from the malign disease."

While the effects of smallpox on the Khoe were to be seen everywhere and were extensively reported, there are no reports of San suffering from the disease. It is nevertheless likely that many died unseen by the Dutch, and that in some areas they were very badly affected. Certainly, the San did not entirely escape the impact of diseases introduced by Europeans in later times. A description provided to the wife of an officer in the Colonial forces by a farmer who visited San dying of measles in the nineteenth century could well describe the plight of San hidden in caves from the Colonists as smallpox swept the country:

"A wretched sight presented itself: the measles had broken out in the community, and the dead, the dying, the sick, the old and the young, men, women and children, were all heaped together within the caves and nooks of the steep krantzes. (The farmer) dragged them from their covert, but they would listen to no suggestion calculated, if acted on, to remedy or lighten the disease, and all he could do was to rescue some of the children from the pest-house in the wilderness."

In 1715 the Dutch freemen were once again subjected to attacks by Khoe-San when the Ubiqua raided the farms of Europeans in the Tulbagh Valley. A commando was raised, which, although it was not the first to be organised in response to Khoe-San raids, differed from previous commandos in that it was authorised by the Company but did not contain a complement of Company soldiers. Peace was negotiated between the Khoe-San and Colonists in 1716, and raids decreased considerably between this date and 1739, although there were occasional outbreaks of conflict. San raided in the Riviersonderend area in 1719, and a military post was established there in 1726 to assist Khoe against San depredations. Two years later a group of about 300 "Bosjesman-Hottentoten", probably Namaquas and Chariguriquas, stole cattle from behind the Piketberg. A commando was hurriedly formed, the raiders pursued and a number of them shot.

By 1725, the first farms had been allocated to farmers in the Olifants River Valley and, despite Khoe-San resistance, it took only another seven years for it to be settled along its entire length. The harshness of the environment to the north of the Olifants and Doorn rivers, and the difficulties involved in traversing the Cedarberg and Bokkeveld mountains, constituted a significant barrier to northward expansion. The fact that the region to the north of the areas settled by about 1730 was heavily populated by Khoe-San, acted as a further deterrent to trekboers who wanted to move into the area. All these factors combined to persuade the farmers to move south-eastwards into the more hospitable valleys of the Warm and Koue Bokkeveld.

It is clear that San raiders were angered by the incursion of the trekboers into their ancestral lands, and their raids on the Colonists' farms were soon to be motivated as much by political resistance to the Dutch as by material want. Thus in 1731 a small band of raiders, "the sons of Giebenaar", told the commando pursuing them: "We Bushmen have more people, we shall give the Dutch no rest." Similar sentiments were expressed by "bosjemans" to a commando in Little Namaqualand in 1738. Asked by the commando's Khoe emissary why they stole the cattle of the Dutch, they defiantly replied: "To chase them out of their country, since they were living in their country; and that this was only a
beginning, but that they would do the same to all the people living thereabouts, and if that did not help they would burn all the corn presently standing in the fields, once it was ripe; that then the Dutch would be compelled to leave their country”.

Major fighting flared up in 1739 when the Bushman War, a general uprising by the Namaquas and San against the Dutch in the Sandveld, Piketberg and Bokkeveld, broke out. The uprising had its immediate roots in an illegal cattle bartering expedition to Namaqualand, in the course of which a Namaqua kraal was attacked by Dutch freemen and the occupants robbed of their cattle. A notable feature of this war was the prominent role played by renegade servants in the uprising. Many servants were familiar with commando tactics, and some possessed firearms which they had been taught to use by their Dutch masters and which they used to good effect. This must have served to increase the intensity and bitterness of the conflict.

Faced with this uprising of Khoe-San in response to the theft of their cattle, the Landdrost of Stellenbosch appointed the first veldkorporals (field corporals) in outlying areas, granting them authority to conscript farmers to serve in commandos. Instead of first notifying the Company’s authorities when a raid occurred, farmers were now permitted to initiate commandos and attack Khoe-San where they felt it necessary - a report simply had to be delivered after the event. Similarly, a farmer could pursue Khoe-San raiders at will, but had to notify the veldkorporaal afterwards. Burgher service in the commandos now became compulsory for all Europeans in the outlying districts.

Although, as in almost all the conflicts between them and the settlers, the San had the advantage of living in small, highly mobile groups in rugged terrain that they knew intimately, by September 1739 they had been cleared from most of the Bokkeveld and Sandveld and the Doorn and Olfants river valleys. Resistance effectively ended in this year when Swartbooi, one of the leaders of this uprising, was killed on the Langevlei near Meerhof’s Kasteel and most of his followers, including women and children, massacred and their bodies mutilated. Swartbooi’s son, Titus, escaped on this occasion but was ambushed and mortally wounded some months later.
The Bushman War of 1739 had been an unequal struggle between Khoe-San and Dutch in which the casualties of the former had far exceeded those of the farmers. During one commando expedition alone, for instance, more than 100 Khoe-San were killed, many more wounded and a small number taken prisoner, whereas in the entire war only two Europeans or Khoe auxiliaries were killed by poisoned arrows and four by musket fire. By the end of the war, the resistance of the Khoe-San communities on the north-west frontier had been crushed. All suitable grazing land south of Namaqualand and west of the Bokkeveld was now occupied by the European settlers.

A deputation of San who wished to make peace went to Stellenbosch and received copper-headed canes from the Company. Their acceptance of these staffs of office (or sometimes a brass medal, worn around the neck, with the words “Vrede” (“Peace”) inscribed on it), symbolised, if only for the Company, their official appointment as leaders of their people, and at the same time their willingness to submit to the Dutch authorities and the laws that they proclaimed. It was 15 years before any further organised attempts at resistance were repeated.

A Khoe chief with his Colonial staff of office. By Francois Le Vaillant.
Source: Library of Parliament.
The period 1740-1770: expansion into the Onder Bokkeveld and the Hantam, Roggeveld and Nieuwveld Mountains

The consequences of this defeat for Khoi-San occupying the areas to the north were profound, as the way had now been opened for the trekboers to expand northwards and eastwards beyond the control of the Company into new territories. The frontier farmers began to disperse into a much larger area than that which they had previously occupied, establishing themselves along the edge of a major environmental divide - the relatively well-watered plateaus and mountains running from the Kamiesberg in the north southwards to the Onder Bokkeveld plateau, the Hantam, the Roggeveld and ending in the Nieuwveld Mountains in the south-east.

Although the areas to the north and east of this interior escarpment were arid, and the grazing usually very poor in consequence, it was nevertheless important to the trekboers that they had access to them, since they needed to escape the cold winters in the mountains and take advantage of the good grazing on the plains after summer rains. Consequently, loan-farms were registered there. Every year their houses in the mountains would be closed up and they would remove to the plains taking their livestock and carrying their furniture and anything else that was movable.

It was customary for the farmers to erect a small house on their loan-farms in the lower-lying parts of the country. The house was usually placed in the middle of the sheep kraal as this meant that every corner of the kraal could be easily reached by the inhabitants if they were raided by the San and enabled them to protect their livestock against attacks by wild animals. William Burchell, botanist, artist, and a meticulous observer, travelled through these areas in the early years of the nineteenth century. He described a typical trekboer's dwelling as “a small, oblong, low hut built of rough bits of rock, rudely thatched with reed and sedge; having no window excepting one small opening covered with white linen, instead of glass; and the doorway but half closed with a clumsy panel of reeds.” The houses of the frontier farmers were often not much more luxurious than these crude dwellings, and most of them lived a hard life with few conveniences.

William Burchell.
Trekboer houses in the Roggeveld Karoo, c. 1810.

A Boer’s thatched house. By Charles Davidson Bell.
Source: Library of Parliament.

A trekboer’s family encamped. By Samuel Daniell.
Source: Library of Parliament.