

## CHAPTER 4

### SAN LABOUR AND THE TRADE IN SAN CHILDREN

*Bushmen appear to think that there is no justice for them in this world ... they are now so in despair that most have resolved to cease complaining.*

Andrew Smith, after encountering San journeying to trace their kidnapped children.

*The only game ... which receives such treatment is the family of wild fowl, and then the sportsmen would scorn to steal the eggs*

Joseph Orpen, on the killing of San and the enslavement of their children.

#### **Captive and “free” San labour**

During the course of the eighteenth century many San were captured during commando expeditions, and most of these war captives ended up as labourers on the farms of the Dutch Colonists. The earliest recorded capture of Khoe-San women and children by Europeans and their distribution to farmers as captive labour occurred in 1731 when a woman and three children captured by a commando in the Western Cape were given to farmers as servants. This practice increased greatly during the period of intense conflict between the San and Boers after 1774. Between that year and 1795 there were probably more than 1,000 Khoe-San war captives in the Graaff-Reinet district, and during the last decade of the eighteenth century they probably outnumbered the official slave population of Graaff-Reinet by two to one.

It is difficult to be sure exactly how many Khoe-San were taken captive by commandos, but the numbers of Khoe-San captives listed in official reports of the time are almost certainly too low as veldwachtmeesters sometimes omitted to mention the taking of captives in the reports they submitted after commandos had been mounted. As a result, the landdrosts' lists of San prisoners were generally very inaccurate. For example, more than 100 San are known to have been captured by commandos in the eastern frontier districts between 1787 and 1788, but the landdrost listed only 13 captives for this period.

The capture of San by the members of commandos was not simply an unavoidable consequence of these expeditions. Few of the farmers could afford to buy slaves or pay for free labour. Thus, while the primary aim of most commandos was usually the breaking up of San raider groups, in many cases an important objective in mounting an expedition against the San was the taking of prisoners to meet the labour needs of commando members. John Barrow, who was sent to the eastern frontier in 1797 by Macartney to investigate the causes of the unrest there, put it bluntly when he stated that “the boors are chiefly induced to undertake (commandos) with the view of securing for their service the women and children”.

That some commandos were mounted specifically to obtain captive labour is corroborated by other observers, including Anders Sparrman. Sparrman recounts how, travelling through the Zuurveld of the Eastern Cape, he was approached by San who came to beg tobacco and complain of the manner in which they had been treated by the Boers. They told him that a Boer commando had taken all the young San children in their area from their parents, leaving them to look after themselves and their cattle alone in their old age. It is clear that commando members often derived significant benefits from these expeditions in the form of free captive labour and that their intention when deciding to



mount commandos was not always limited to putting an end to San raids. Barrow's assertion that the primary aim of all the commandos was to procure San captives is probably extreme, however, since there were many reports of the shooting of San who could, rather, have been taken captive and employed as servants – although this can hardly be said to be a mitigating factor.

In general, San men were not taken prisoner by the commandos. This was partly due to the fact that many of them refused to hand themselves over to the Boers and were shot while fighting to the last. Some were not given the opportunity to surrender, however, since adult males were considered largely unsuitable for service on farms. It was feared that they would try to escape and even perhaps attack their masters. Furthermore, it was difficult to secure adult male captives and keep them prisoner for the time that the commando was in the field. San women and children, however, were a valuable source of labour, and their capture came to play an increasingly important part in commando activities. During the eighteenth century, female San captives had sometimes been given to Khoe auxiliaries as wives or concubines, but more often they were distributed with their children to the European commando members, who kept them as servants on their farms. A number were even employed as nurses for the Boers' children, some of whom, as a result, became fluent in a San language. Young children, however, were considered the most valuable captives as they could be conditioned to life as a farm labourer from an early age, and we find the farmer Dirk Koetse sending the following note to a commando leader: "I have asked my Hottentot to catch a little one for me and I beg that if he gets one he may be allowed to keep it".



A Boer woman and her child servant.

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 official status of San captured by commandos was neither that of "free Hottentots" nor that of slaves. Rather, it was similar to that of the "ingeboekte Bastard-Hottentots" or "inboekelingen", the offspring of slaves and Khoe, whose names and details, since 1775, were registered, and who were

then indentured to their masters until the ages of 18 or 25. After 1790 they could be apprenticed for 25 years from the time of their capture. In practice, San were often kept as unpaid labourers for their entire lives, and, although by law they could not be sold or inherited like slaves, it was not uncommon for the farmers to claim that San captives, as well as any children born to them while they were in their service, were their property. Thus in 1794 we find W. Prinsloo of the Graaff-Reinet area making a present of a young “Bastard Hottentot” to one G. Jordaan - prompting the Secretary of the District to chastise him with the remark that “this kind of thing conflicts not only with the laws, but with humanity”. It was to prevent actions of this kind that, in 1792, the Council of Policy had decided to pay a sum of money for every man, woman or child captured by Colonists who were serving on official commandos. Although well-intentioned, this edict nevertheless sometimes served to encourage trekboers to hunt down and capture San for profit.

During the course of the nineteenth century things improved for some San communities, while for others the situation became worse. In the former case, in some areas a peace of sorts had been negotiated between some San and the farmers and accommodation reached between them, even if this arrangement was unfavourable in many respects for the San. The establishment of peace in many areas on the frontier was partly due to the efforts of Stockenstrom and his son, Andries Junior, also a Landdrost of Graaff-Reinet. They put in place a policy for the treatment of San between 1804 and 1828 which went some way to ensuring that they were treated more humanely than in the past. Boer commandos were made subject to strict regulations that were designed to ensure that these expeditions were not marked by the wholesale slaughter of San men, women and children as in the past. Greater attention was also given to the manner in which captured and apprenticed San were treated. These efforts to establish peace with the San after the wars with the Boers in the last quarter of the eighteenth century initiated the large-scale movement of independent San into the ambit of European society, as servants.



Andries Stockenstrom Junior.

Source: Oipen, J.M. (1964), *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik.

Initially the San living adjacent to areas claimed by the Colonists based themselves in the mountains, but made periodic visits to farms to receive presents of livestock and game shot for them by the

farmers. It was not long before hunger and presents of food by the farmers caused them to base their kraals permanently in the neighbourhood of the farms. Here they were supported by the farmers in return for the rendering of services. From time to time, in some cases, they would leave the farms to resume their previous way of life in the veld, but their dependence on tobacco and dagga, which was sometimes cultivated by the farmers specifically in order to attract and retain San labour, as well as the establishment of relationships with the mixed Khoe-San labour force on the farms and their absorption into this class through intermarriage, bound them increasingly firmly to the farms and the servant families who lived on them. Stockenström, for example, reported that “on every farm between the Great Sneeuwberg chain and the Orange River, we found a Bushman family, or kraal, easily maintained by the enormous flocks of sheep and game, and very useful to the farmer”. And when he travelled from the Winterberg to the Seekoei River valley in 1821 he encountered no San living independently from the Boers except for one kraal. Between about 1800 and 1830 much of the labour force on the north-eastern frontier farms was reported to consist of San, who provided a variety of services to the farmers and attached themselves to the farms to varying extents - ranging from full time service to occasional visits and provision of services on their hunting and gathering round.

The primary role of male San servants was to herd the farmers’ livestock, whereas the women worked as domestic servants. The men also acted as messengers, as trackers, and as translators and mediators in the dealings the farmers had with the “wild” San. Some San servants were given livestock as wages and were allowed to build up their own herds and graze them on their masters’ farms. Many, however, desperate simply to survive after their territories had been occupied and they were unable to continue roaming and hunting in these areas, were prepared to work on the farms in return for no more than shelter, food and blankets - sometimes supplemented by the gathering of veldkos. This, added to the fact that they were usually reliable and faithful servants, made them a favoured source of labour for the frontier farmers.

Between 1809 and 1819 a number of laws relating to the status and treatment of “Hottentots” were passed by the British government at the Cape, which had an effect on the San labour force. Prominent amongst these was the Hottentot Code of 1809. San who were living permanently in the Colony were automatically subsumed within this ethnic category, and these laws therefore impacted on them. They followed the prohibition on the importation of slaves into the Colony by Britain in 1807, and while ostensibly designed to ameliorate the conditions of service of the Khoe-San, they effectively limited their movement within the Colony, through a pass system, and forced them to attach themselves to farms and provide labour to the Colonists.

Those San who lived outside the Colonial borders were not subject to the “Hottentot” laws, and so should have had greater freedom of movement. However, their children, once of a certain age, fell under the laws of apprenticeship established in 1775 and had to be registered with, and apprenticed to, a farmer. Bound to their children, the parents were therefore also automatically bound to the farms on which their children were registered. Naturally this made it extremely difficult for the parents to leave the service of a farmer who maltreated them - something that occurred very commonly. In 1817 a government proclamation regulated the treatment of Khoe-San child “apprentices”, but it was largely ignored and had little real effect on their working conditions. It was only with the passing of Ordinance 50 in 1828, which gave the Khoe-San equality with Europeans under the law, that a measure of real protection and freedom was given to San and Khoe serving farmers within the Colony. In 1834 an Imperial Act was passed which gave the thousands of slaves at the Cape their freedom, although even then some were forced to serve their masters for another four years.



In general, the measures taken to make peace with the San held some benefits for the former hunter-gatherers, who, although now reduced to the status of servants or clients, were nevertheless provided with regular contributions of food, and sometimes livestock, in return for services rendered to the farmers. Many were encouraged to build up their own herds. However, it was also clear that the change in policy with respect to the San formed part of a wider strategy adopted by the farmers to subdue and pacify their former enemies. The effect of the peace measures was to disempower the San and facilitate the establishment of new farms and the re-occupation of farms previously abandoned by the trekboers in the face of attacks by San raiders. Encouraged by the cessation of hostilities, for example, farmers began to move back into the Seekoei River valley, and in the early years of the nineteenth century there was a rush for land in this area as new farms were established and old ones re-occupied.

### **The development of the trade in captive San children**

Contemporary accounts and surveys make it clear that many San serving the Colonists in the north-eastern frontier districts were children. A survey taken in 1823 and 1824, for example, revealed that the Colonists in the Graaff-Reinet district had more than 1,000 San children working for them - or, as it was described, "apprenticed" to them, or "under their protection". The practice of capturing San children while on commando for employment as farm servants developed in later years into a large-scale trade in captive children, primarily by the Boers, but also by other groups, including the Griquas, Bergenaars, Basters, Korana and Tlhaping. Renegade freebooters such as Jan Bloem, Pieter Pienaar, Coenraad de Buys, and the Afrikaner family also participated in the trade.

This practice grew out of the increased demand for labour, caused by the establishment of new farms and the growth in the farmer population during the early nineteenth century. Captive Khoe-San labour had always provided a cheap alternative to the purchasing of slaves, but the cost of slaves increased dramatically after the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, and many farmers who could not afford slaves became heavily dependent on captive labour, and captive women and children in particular. Although the focus here is on the capture of San children, children from a number of other groups were captured in war or in raids and were sold on to Boers in the Colony and beyond its borders. Besides conducting raids for their own labour, the Boers, a reliable source of guns and ammunition, provided a ready market for children captured in war by Nguni, Sotho and Tswana groups, which would usually have kept these children as their own servants, or ransomed them back to their relatives in the communities from which they originated.

The acquisition of free or cheap San labour was an inducement to Boers to settle in the areas where this labour was available, and many a farmer was able to establish himself and prosper with the aid of his San workforce. When John Philip met up with a party of Colonists on their way to "Bushman country", in the north of the Colony, and asked them how they expected to succeed, "they stated that the boers in that country were acquiring stock, and with the help of Bushmen, and Bushmen children, whom they would be able to get for nothing, they hoped to do as well as the others had done".

When, as often occurred, the Boers found they could obtain neither inexpensive nor voluntary labour they looked to obtain Khoe-San servants by capturing them themselves, or by buying them from others. As early as the 1790s, renegade freebooters such as Jan Bloem, a German deserter who had fled the Colony to the badlands of the Gariiep after murdering his wife, raided Khoe-San of the Northern Cape and sold their children to European farmers. In 1817 Stockenstrom drew the attention of the authorities in the Cape to this trade after he noticed two small San girls in Graaff-Reinet in the company of a merchant from Cape Town. The merchant would give him no details about these young

children other than that he had got them at a San kraal and that he had been told that they were orphans. Stockenstrom subsequently wrote to the Colonial Secretary advocating much stricter controls of “this (as it is called) ancient custom” of placing San children in the care of the Dutch farmers, but although legislation was passed in 1817 and 1822 protecting the rights of San children living on farms and banning their purchase and trade this was largely ignored. In about 1824, for example, Stockenstrom found that almost 200 San children had been “placed under the protection” of the inhabitants of the Graaff-Reinet District, while 55 had been “apprenticed”. In the sub-drostdy of Cradock, more than 400 San children above the age of 16 years, and almost 450 under this age, were living with European Colonists without contract or indenture. San children were reported to be very useful to the Graaff-Reinet farmers and were usually employed as leaders of the teams of oxen.

The claim that they were simply rescuing orphans as well as the claim that San had voluntarily given up or sold children whom they could not support were common justifications given by the Boers for their trading in or owning San children. In many cases, however, the children had been forcibly removed from their parents’ care and had not been surrendered voluntarily. In other cases the children had no parents because they had been killed by their European “guardians”. Those San who gave up their children as servants to the Boers had usually been reduced to extreme poverty by the Dutch Colonists. They gave them up under duress, and then only on the understanding that they would receive their children back when they were again in a position to support them.

Once in the service of the Boers, the children were treated, to all extents and purposes, as slaves. The proprietary attitude of farmers towards captive San children was particularly clearly expressed by farmers in the Winburg district, who were ordered by a court to release San who had worked all their lives on their farm without receiving wages. “Ons het de oues dood gemaak en de kleintjes groot gemaak” they protested to the magistrate, “en nou is dit mos onse goed” (“We killed the parents and raised the young ones, and now they are our property”).

Some San children tried to escape, but this was usually very difficult, particularly from the isolated farms of the frontier farmers. If they did manage to leave the farm and successfully elude their masters, they often faced a long journey through inhospitable country before reaching their homes. Campbell, for example, described how two San children who had run away from the farm where they were to be trained as servants were found “half-starved in the wilderness, fast locked in each other’s arms”; and the French missionaries, Arbousset and Daumas reported seeing two San children about seven or eight years of age who had escaped from their Boer masters in KwaZulu-Natal, and had journeyed all the way back to their parents in the Free State, surviving off roots and sleeping in the bush.

Burchell, too, recounts how one of his Khoe servants, Juli, and this man’s sister had been captured by a Boer, who refused to allow their mother to remain on the farm as she was of less value to him as a servant than her children. Burchell writes:

“He therefore procured Juli and his sister to be registered in the field-cornet’s books, as legally bound to him for twenty-five years; which was in fact to make them his actual slaves for that time. The mother clung to her children ... but the farmer repeatedly drove her off, and at last, with a resolution to deter her from coming there again, he one evening flogged her so unmercifully that she died the next morning! This, and the harsh treatment which he himself received, were sufficient to drive Juli to despair; and he, in consequence, took the first favourable opportunity to escape.”



Juli.

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

The situation worsened for San communities targeted by slave raiders when European and multi-ethnic Griqua and other raider groups moved, from about the turn of the eighteenth century, into the central Transgariep. Here they were, to an even greater extent than before, beyond the influence of the Colonial government. With regard to the European farmers, the San in Transgariep, as well as Sotho, now found themselves regularly attacked by Boers seeking cheap labour for their farms. According to the French missionaries, Arbousset and Daumas, by the mid-1830s San from Philippolis to the Maloti-Drakensberg had “lost a great part of their children” to these raiders. In some cases, not content with simply abducting the children, they tortured their parents by dragging them behind a horse, tied to its tail. Depredations of this sort by the Boers had become so common, Arbousset and Daumas remarked, that “the cry of alarm and signal for flight amongst the Bushmen is ... ‘*Tuntsi, a sea a nge a kunte*’ (‘There is the white man; he is coming to take away our children’). *Tuntsi*, the San word for a European person in this region, derived from the sound made by the report of a gun.

The forced removal of children from their parents caused great bitterness amongst the San of Transgariep, some of whom journeyed to the Colony to try and find their children on the Boers’ farms. Farmers who were responsible for these acts were sometimes singled out for special attention. When visiting a kraal between the Gariep and the Sneeuwberg in 1835, Andrew Smith was told that a party of San had recently passed through the area looking for one of the farmers who had stolen their children. Smith wrote: “The Bushmen and even the Hottentots keep telling their children of the injuries they have experienced at the hands of the farmers, and that they must never cease following such and such a one till they spill his blood on the ground ...”

However, some of those trading in San children got their fingers burnt. Joseph Orpen, magistrate, surveyor, and now best-known for his recording of nineteenth century Maloti San mythology, rites and rock art, was told of a farmer, Daniel Pietersen, who, with a number of his companions, “had been in the habit of murdering Bushmen and driving a large trade in the children, often selling a child for a cask of brandy to the smouses (itinerant traders) from the Cape Colony. ... (I)t was told as an amusing story how he had one Bush boy, whom he had caught young and who was very bright and

handy, and that when a brandy smous would come along, Pietersen would offer him other Bushman children, but the smous would press for the nice one and give him a good price for him and go on his journey. But after a day or two the Bush boy would run back to Daniel Pietersen and served to humbug another brandy smous another time.”



Joseph Orpen.

Source: Orpen, J.M. (1964). *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik.

While the Boers were at the centre of the trade, other groups also took San children into slavery. Paravicini di Capelli, a captain in the Batavian military forces at the Cape, relates how a Khoe man, whom he encountered around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Graaff-Reinet, came to complain to the officers that a young San boy, whom he claimed to have bartered from the mother for a handkerchief, had been stolen from him by another resident of this town.

The Tlhaping, too, became involved in the trade in young San “prisoners of war”. Andries Stockenstrom gives a graphic account of the return of Tlhaping warriors to “New Lattakoo” (Kuruman) in 1818 after an attack on a San kraal:

“I could not help lamenting to find here, as much as amongst the Griquas, a horrible animosity towards the Bosjesman, rendered still more frightful by an ancient prejudice which considers the murder of a Bosjesman, woman, or child, meritorious under any circumstances, and entitles the murderer to speak at the piazza, or national assemblies. One of their Commandos returned while I was there, after having annihilated a whole kraal. The honours paid to these blood-thirsty warriors indicated the spirit of the nation. They were saluted with the surrounding shouts of hundreds of women ... (The leader of the warriors gave) a full and apparently exaggerated account of the exploits and hardships the Commando had executed and suffered, interrupted only by the occasional shouts of the women, who seemed most vociferous at the description of the fears and shrieks of the women and children among the victims, and carried to the greatest height of enthusiasm when the death of a Bosjesman by the hand of Matabee’s son and apparent successor, and the narrow escape of the prince himself, was related.”



According to Burchell, San children captured by the Tlhaping were kept as servants, although they were sometimes ransomed back to their parents. One of these children, in a state of semi-starvation, was offered to Burchell in return for a sheep.

James Backhouse reported that maltreated captive San servants of Basters had put themselves under the protection of Moshoehoe. Griquas and Korana, too, armed with firearms said to have been provided by the Boers, raided San, Sotho and Tswana kraals, kidnapping their children and selling them on to the frontier farmers. Thus, in 1830, Andries Stockenstrom reported: "I had discovered that a kraal of Bushmen living among the migratory Boers ... were attacked by a commando of Griquas of (Adam) Kok's party, who killed fifteen, left two for dead badly wounded and carried off the only survivors (three children), after offering them for sale to the Farmers".

And the traveller and hunter, Gordon Cumming, provided this description of a Griqua hunting party in the 1840s:

"(We came across) a party of ruffianly Griquas who were proceeding with a dilapidated-looking wagon, which had no sail, to hunt hartebeests and blue wildebeests in the vicinity of a small spring to the north-east where game was reported to be abundant. They were accompanied by several wild-looking, naked Bushman attendants, whom they had captured when young and domesticated."

The Griqua legislative council at Philippolis was later to condemn the enslavement of San. However, an indication of the extent to which the Griquas were feared by the San as child kidnappers is made clear by Andrew Smith's reporting that San who attacked the horse-wagon of a Griqua man, killing or injuring all the horses, stated that they did so because "the Boers, Griquas and Korana, through possessing horses, were better enabled to carry off the children of the Bushmen, who were determined not to leave a horse alive".

Like the Griquas, the Korana sometimes mounted expeditions specifically to kill San and capture their children. As has been mentioned, the freebooter, Jan Bloem, who had several Korana wives and many Korana adherents, as well as his son of the same name, participated in the trade in captive San children. Some of the children were given to their followers, and most of these were incorporated into Korana society.

Slave raiding by Boers continued in the Free State with the approval of the Republican government until well into the 1850s, and it was also practised in KwaZulu-Natal in the second half of the nineteenth century. While surveying farms in KwaZulu-Natal in 1855, Joseph Orpen discovered that San children had been enslaved by Boers in that area as well as in the Boer republic of Utrecht, formed when Mpande provided land to European farmers north of the sources of the Pongola and Mkhonto Rivers. Orpen found evidence of intensive traffic in children of mixed Zulu-San descent from the latter area, in which the Zulus were complicit. So many children of San descent had been abducted, he learned, that there were hardly any left in their kraals.

Orpen attempted to rescue two San children from the family of Christian Odendaal, son of the member of the Volksraad for the area in which he was working, and this led to a dramatic chase of the Odendaals' wagon. He provides a graphic account of his subsequent confrontation with these people in which Mrs Odendaal played a "pivotal" role:

“I said ‘How dare you take the children from my custody?’. Suddenly the three full-grown men of the party rushed at me and seized hold of my gun, while Mrs Odendaal got hold of me round the neck from behind and held on with her weight (some two hundred pounds). That was my salvation. I simply held my arms straight down still, with my hands wide apart, gripping the stock and barrrel. They cursed and tugged and misdirected their efforts and exhausted themselves ... Anchored by the heavy woman, I was immovable ... “

Orpen eventually managed to escape from the Odendaals’ clutches, and when they then tried to flee he cut the reins of their wagon and leapt onto his horse. ‘Stooping down, I caught the little boy by the arm and swung him behind me astride the horse. The little girl trotted between me and the after-rider, and the mite behind me turned and cried “Mooi!” (“Beautiful!”), waving his hand. And so we rode away, leaving the Odendaals to mend their reins and go home thoroughly baffled.”



A young San servant. By Charles Davidson Bell.

Source: Bell Heritage Trust, UCT.

## TIMELINE

1731

First recorded capture of Khoe-San women and children and their distribution to farmers as captive labour

1775

Legislation passed requiring servants (including San) to be registered and indentured until the ages of 18 or 25

1790

Legislation passed allowing captured Khoe-San to be apprenticed to Colonists for 25 years from the time of capture

1792

Council of Policy pay a sum of money for each person captured by official commandos

1804

Stockenström draws up the first in a series of regulations concerned with the amelioration of the treatment of San captives

1808

Abolition of the slave trade

1809

The Hottentot Code is passed

1817

A proclamation is issued regulating the treatment of Khoe-San child “apprentices”

1825

Boers start to move across the Colony’s border into Transgariep, and, like other groups in the area, take San children into slavery as labourers, and trade in San children.

1828

Ordinance 50 passed