

CHAPTER 8

THE FINAL YEARS

Coming at length to the copies of some dances, old 'Kouke immediately exclaimed, "That is a grand dance ... I know it! I know it! I know the song!"

An old San couple, on being shown a portfolio of copies of rock paintings by George Stow, in about 1878.



19th century San farm workers in the Free State.

Source: Fritsch, G. (1872). *Die Eingeborenen Südafrika's Ethnographisch und Anatomisch*. Breslau: F. Hirst.

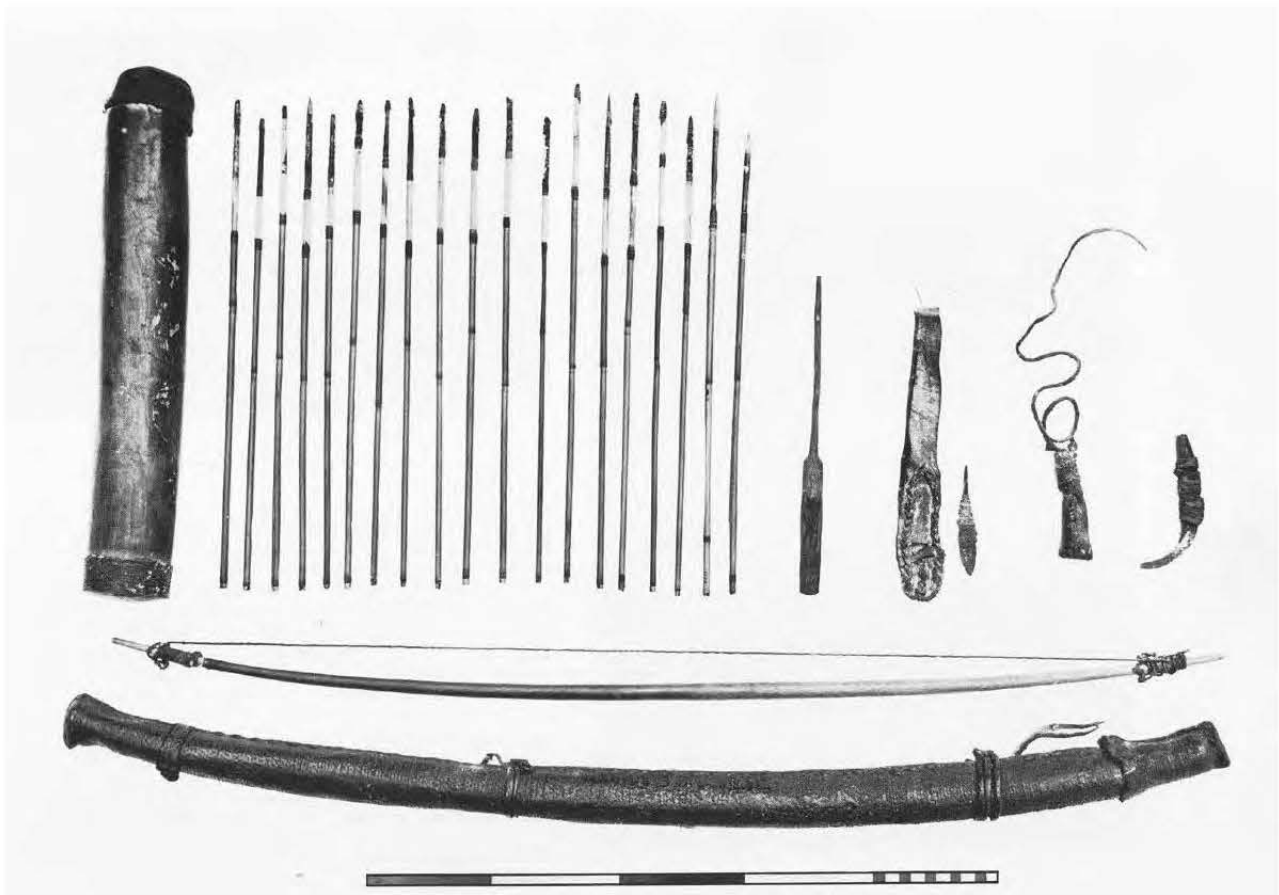
Although San raids in KwaZulu-Natal ceased after 1872, some San continued to live a relatively independent existence in the remoter areas of the Maloti-Drakensberg. The last San of the Leqoa and Tsoelike rivers in the Lesotho mountains were said to have been killed in 1886, and some isolated south-eastern San individuals were sighted in the last decades of the nineteenth century. One of these sightings occurred in 1878 when Edith Kelly and her husband were honeymooning in the Drakensberg and were astonished to come across a small San band. "Strange, weird-looking creatures they were, hardly bigger than a child of ten", Kelly wrote, "We saw them in their natural state, which, it seemed to me, was little removed from that of wild animals".



A photograph of a "wild Bushman" from East Griqualand (Nomansland).

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

There is indirect evidence, moreover, that a few San individuals continued to live by hunting and gathering in the Maloti-Drakensberg in the earlier years of the twentieth century. In 1926 a farmer, Johannes Lombard, came across a large cave decorated with many paintings while he was tending his sheep in the Mhlwazini Valley, within the present-day Cathkin Park. Exploring the inside of this cave, now known as Eland Cave, he discovered a ledge of rock which sloped gradually upwards to a point about six metres above floor-level. Here he found grass bedding and, next to it, a hunting kit consisting of a bow, quiver, arrows, a spatula, a curved metal blade and a small leather pouch. The whole outfit was wrapped in baboon skin and covered with a resinous substance. According to another farmer who saw the bedding kit in situ, everything was very well preserved, and the bows and arrows gave the impression of having been handled not long before. It is quite possible, therefore, that a lone San hunter continued to live in the area long after his fellow San had departed.



The San hunting kit from Eland Cave.

Source: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.

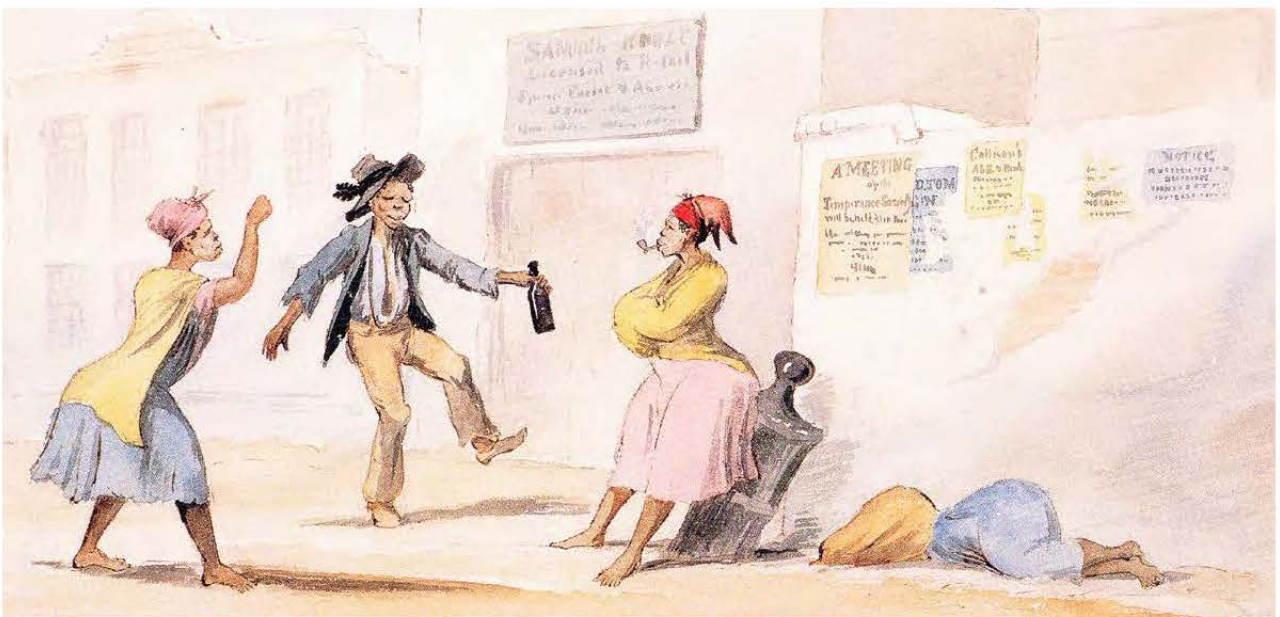
The sighting of San by Edith Kelly and her husband and the find of the hunting kit in Eland Cave provide rare and tantalising glimpses of the last San individuals occupying the fastnesses of the Maloti-Drakensberg. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, almost all those residual San communities and individuals living within the territory of European farmers as well as the southern Nguni and southern Sotho appear to have been completely absorbed into the urban and rural proletariat, or into the societies of Nguni and Sotho farmers and other groups, such as the Griquas. This appears to have been a relatively gradual process which accelerated with the progressive unviability of particular regions for hunting, gathering and raiding. A variety of strategies were adopted in the face of the incursions of Nguni, Sotho and European farmers into their territories, and the adaptations which San were forced, or chose, to make in the face of ever-increasing pressures or opportunities resulting from their encapsulation by farmers would have formed a complex mosaic of different, and probably interchangeable, ways of life.

Some San attached themselves to farms, swelling the rural labour force, while others began to drift into the towns, where they were incorporated into the mixed “non-European” communities that lived in, and on the edge of, these settlements. Those who attached themselves to Colesberg, which lay at the heart of the area occupied by the Seekoei River San, provide a good example of the fate of later San communities. Most of the San who drifted into this town squatted on the commonage, falling prey to the vices of alcoholism and theft commonly associated with an impoverished proletariat living on the fringes of European society. Periodic droughts in the Seekoei River valley were responsible for swelling their numbers as farms were abandoned and labourers moved to Colesberg in search of employment.



A drunk Kho-San man. By "W.J."

Source: Library of Parliament.



Drunk Kho-San. By Charles Davidson Bell.

Source: Bell Heritage Trust, UCT.

Others continued to live in the interstices of European farmer society, basing themselves in the kopjes and mountains of the unleased Crown Lands and the more remote and inaccessible regions of farms, from where they subsisted partly by gathering and partly by raiding the livestock of the farmers as well as cattle and sheep put out by the Colesberg inhabitants to graze on the commonage. As the Colonial noose tightened, an independent existence became increasingly difficult for these remnant San groups and individuals. The erection of fences, and the shrinking of the more arid Crown Lands, which were sold off to farmers after borehole technology was introduced, were further problems that had to be faced. Confronted with these difficulties, some independent San in the Seekoei River valley were unable to subsist off the veld and starved to death. All these factors forced “free” San to look for work on farms or in the towns in order to survive. Perhaps the last of the independent San of the Seekoei River was a “wizened little Bushman”, Booï Lynx, who was traced to a secluded part of the farm Rietfontein in August 1894. Arrested for stock theft, he was discovered near a cleft in the rocks in which he had hidden the carcasses of a number of sheep he had stolen.



A later, residual, San group encountered by Thomas Baines. Note the gun and the metal pot and kettle. By Thomas Baines.

Source: Museum Africa.



A European farmer dwarfs an old San couple. Northern Cape.

Source: Iziko Museums.



San farm workers from the Lake Chrissie area.

Source: Museum Africa.

In the arid Northern Cape, an area still known today as Bushmanland and which included the region in which the LMS established the Blyde Vooruitzicht mission, some /Xam San continued to lead a semi-independent existence until about the end of the nineteenth century – although massacres of San by the farmers of this area had occurred periodically throughout the first 60 years of the nineteenth century. Louis Anthing, Resident Magistrate and Civil Commissioner to Namaqualand, was sent to investigate reports of atrocities against the Bushmanland San in 1862. He found that the Boers and Bastards/Basters had been the main culprits, but Korana from the Gariep and from Schietfontein, in the eastern foothills of the Kareeberg, had also played a part.

Anthing found that parties of Boers were in the habit of going out to hunt and shoot any San they could find “for the fun of the thing”, as one Roggeveld farmer put it. A servant of one of the farmers who was interviewed by the Commissioner described a commando attack on a San kraal:

“They surrounded the place during the night, spying the Bushmen’s fires. At daybreak the firing commenced and it lasted until the sun was up a little way. The commando loaded and fired, and reloaded many times before they had finished. A great many people were killed that day. The men were absent. Only a few little children escaped, and they were distributed amongst the people composing the commando. The women threw up their arms, crying for mercy, but no mercy was shown them. Great sin was perpetrated that day.”

As a result of these actions many San were forced off the land, and Anthing estimated that by the time he arrived in Bushmanland there were no more than 500 independent San remaining there. Most combined hunting and gathering with occasional employment on the farms of Europeans, stealing the occasional sheep to supplement their meagre diet. Frequent droughts and denial of access to

natural resources by the Colonists meant that many lived a precarious existence, often, like those in other areas, on the brink of starvation. The death throes of the northern Cape San's resistance to the stock farmers who had usurped their lands occurred during the Korana wars of the late 1860s and 1870s. /Xam San joined up with Korana on the Gariiep to fight the Colonists - unsuccessfully. Many San were killed and others were taken captive and distributed as labourers to farmers in the arid northern Cape district.



San taken prisoner by Germans. Namibia 1910.

Source: State Archives, Windhoek.

In 1870 /Xam San convicted of sheep theft and a variety of other offences were sent, together with Korana who were taken prisoner of war after rebelling against the Colonial government, to the Breakwater Prison in Cape Town. While the treatment handed out to these people by the Colonial authorities was very harsh, their imprisonment had a beneficial, if unintended, consequence - the compilation of a comprehensive record of the language and culture of the /Xam San. This came about as the result of the efforts of the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, who were living in the village of Mowbray in Cape Town at the time when the /Xam San were imprisoned at the Breakwater. Bleek received permission for some of the San to stay on his premises in Mowbray, where he and Lloyd built up an extensive record of their way of life, language, folklore, and religious beliefs and rites. These, together with information about the religious beliefs and rites of the Maloti San given to Joseph Orpen by Qing in 1873, as well as ethnographic material from more recent San communities, have proved to be the most valuable sources we have for decoding the religious symbolism of much of the rock art of the San.



Wilhelm Bleek.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



Lucy Lloyd.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



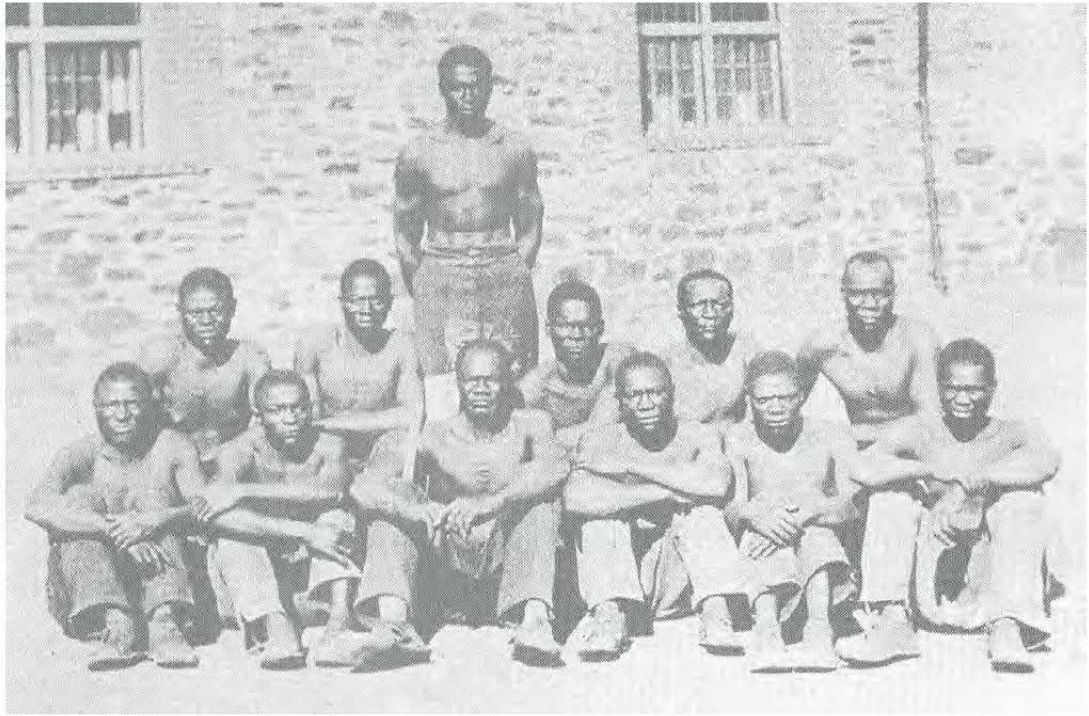
Dorothea Bleek.

Source: Special Collections, UCT



Charlton House in Mowbray, where Bleek and his family, and the /Xam San informants, lived.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



/Xam San convicts at the Breakwater Prison in Cape Town.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



/Han=kasso, also known as Klein Jantje, one of Bleek and Lloyd's San informants.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



//Kabbo, also known as Jantje Toren, another of Bleek and Lloyd's San informants.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



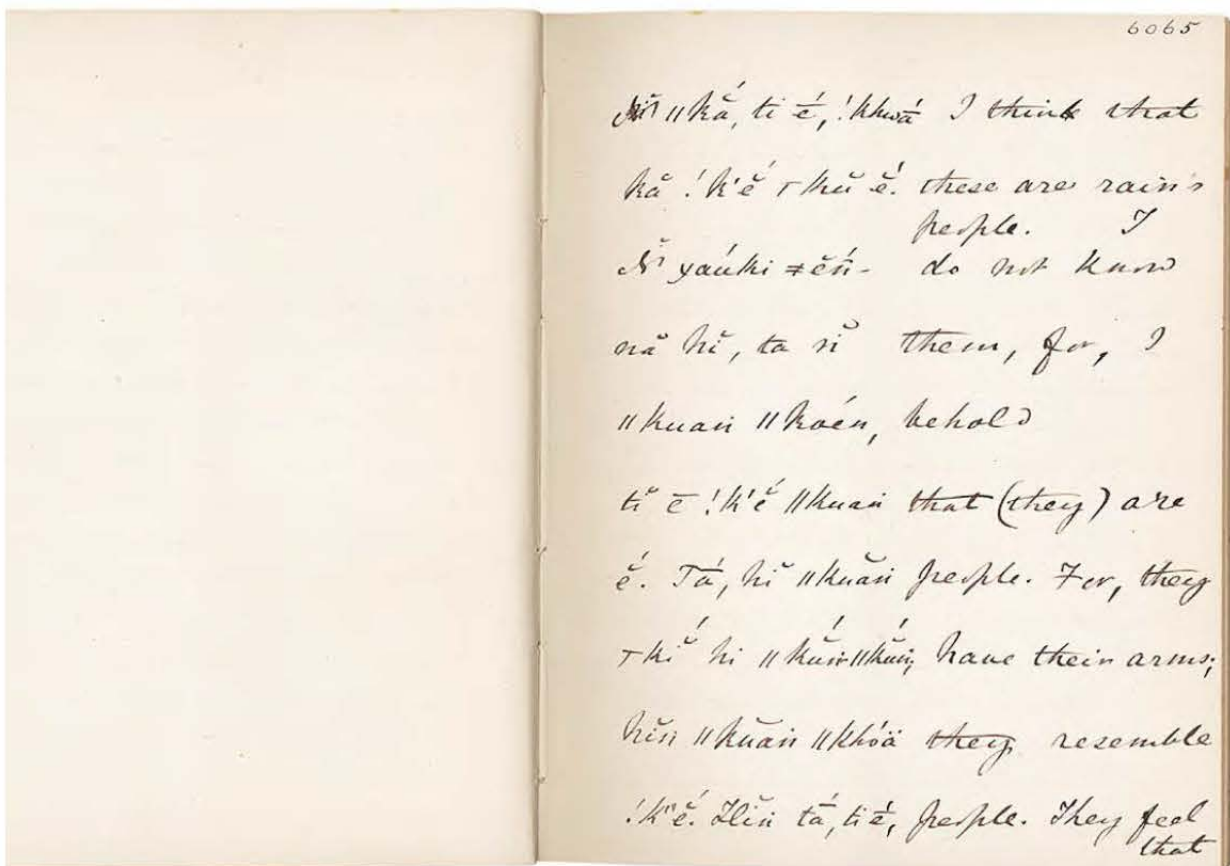
San children in front of a hut they constructed in the garden of the Bleeks' house.

Source: Iziko Museums.



A painting from Ezeljagtspoort that was commented upon by /Han≠kasso.

Source: the author.



One of the pages in Lucy Lloyd's notebooks in which she recorded the comments of /Han≠kasso on the Ezeljagtspoort panel.

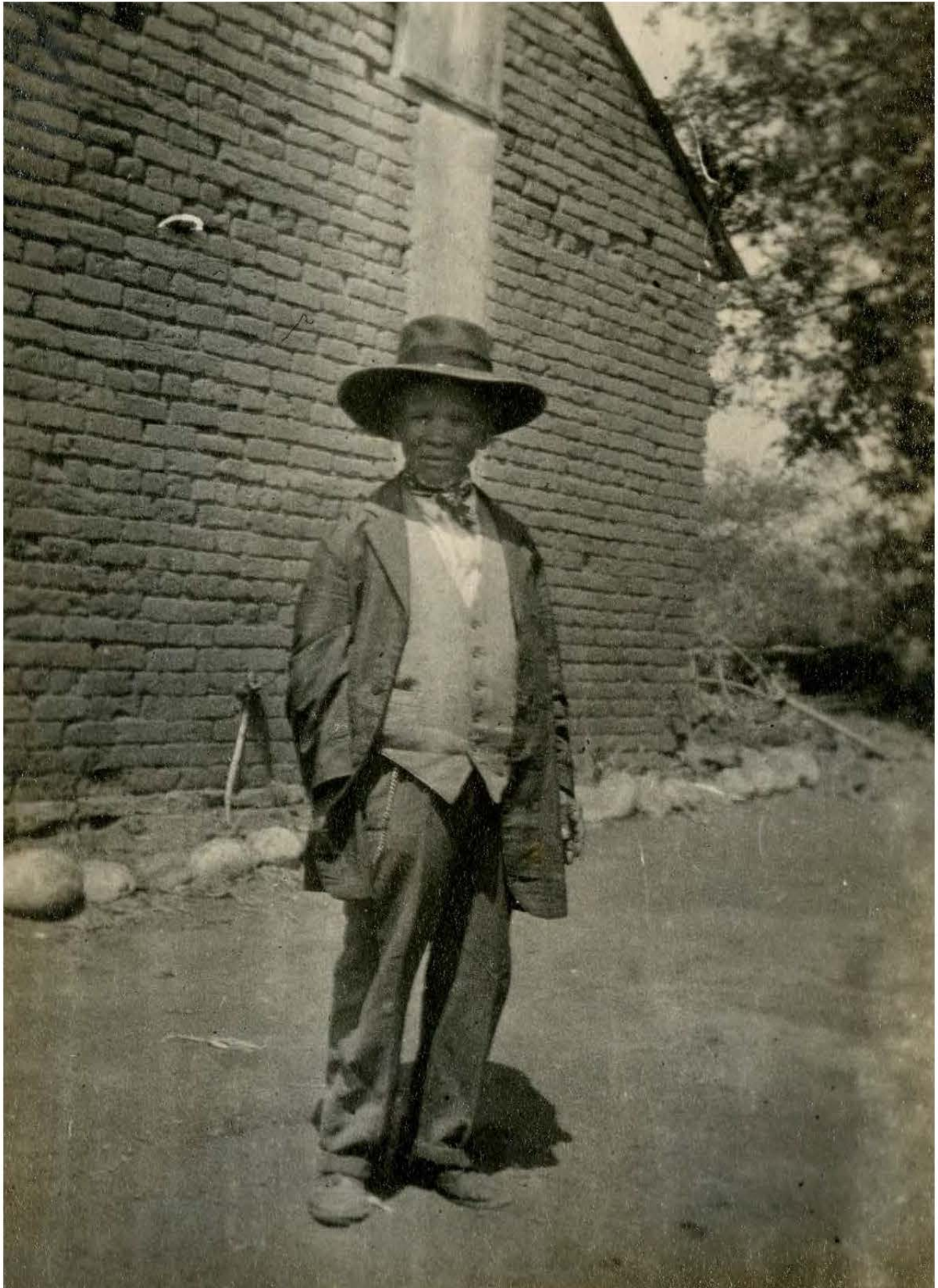
Source: Special Collections, UCT.

Wilhelm Bleek died in 1875, but Lucy Lloyd continued with their work until 1884, when her poor health and Bleek's widow's wish to educate her daughters in Germany persuaded her to leave South Africa. The household now dispersed, some of the San informants making the long journey back to the farms on which they had formerly lived in the Northern Cape. Many years later Bleek's daughter, Dorothea, returned to South Africa and made a visit to the northern parts of the Cape Colony. To her distress, she found that, although a few old people remembered some of the customs mentioned in the texts recorded by her father and Lucy Lloyd, "the folklore was dead, killed by a life of service among strangers and the breaking up of families".



San from the Langeberg, with a Mr Lankman. Photographed by Dorothea Bleek in about 1910.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.



"Punch", a very old San man living in the Weenen District in KwaZulu-Natal. The photograph was probably taken in the 1920s.

Source: Special Collections, UCT;



"Punch" with two unidentified people. Taken at the same time as the previous photograph.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.

The assimilation of San into Nguni and Sotho communities

San encapsulated by Nguni and Sotho communities, in a similar manner to the /Xam, Sneeuwberg San, and other San who attached themselves to the farms and towns of Europeans, took a variety of paths in their movement towards assimilation by these communities. Some initially established themselves as farmers under their own chiefs. The San chief, Yele, for example, as has been mentioned, had settled at the mouth of the Mzombe River on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal by 1840. His band of ten men, including “Bushman Kaffirs”, had all married Nguni women, and possessed cattle and were cultivating crops by this time.

Other San bands continued to live more or less permanently by hunting and gathering in secluded areas, while kin who had intermarried with Bantu-speakers lived in villages. With time, those who had continued to live by hunting and gathering were assimilated into the farming or herding communities in which their kin were living. San who were completely absorbed into Nguni and Sotho communities were sometimes accepted into these groups on the basis of the specialist skills they could provide, such as leather-working and tanning. A number were even employed as jockeys by Sotho chiefs, riding their mounts for them in local horse races.

Some residual San groups in the process of being assimilated into the society of Nguni and Sotho farmers appear to have adopted agropastoralism on an ad hoc basis, spending the cold winter months at the homesteads or villages of Nguni and Sotho farmers, but reverting to a nomadic, hunting and gathering existence during summer. Thus a small San band continued to roam the Great Kei valley until at least 1874. They were on friendly terms with the people of Mapasa, the principal chief in that area, and spent a good deal of their time with these people in winter. In summer they moved off and resumed their hunter-gatherer way of life. One of the last haunts of relatively independent San groups was in the Prentjiesberg, near the present-day towns of Maclear and Ugie.

Still other San communities established relatively permanent settlements on the outskirts of Nguni and Sotho villages, probably attaching themselves to these communities as clients and undertaking certain tasks such as herding for them in return for milk and a share of their crops. These settlements were established in forested areas or river valleys near to villages, where it would have been possible for the San to hunt and gather to a limited extent, but where they would also have been able to maintain regular contact with their farmer neighbours.

The last San rainmakers

Those San that maintained a limited degree of independence from their farmer neighbours until the end of the nineteenth century appear to have split into small groups of related individuals who maintained close links with particular chiefdoms and had intermarried with Nguni and Sotho farmers. The San living amongst the Mpondomise were considered by the latter to be great rainmakers. The farmers patronised San rainmaking families, and it was the role of a specific sub-clan within the Mpondomise, the Cesana, to negotiate for rain with the San on behalf of the Mpondomise. The Mpondomise's patronage of the San continued well into the nineteenth century .

According to Mpondomise tradition there were three main San or San-Mpondomise groups of related individuals living under the protection of Mditshwa, chief of the western section of the Mpondomise in the later nineteenth century. These families were employed as rainmakers by the farmers to whom they were affiliated, and would wander from kraal to kraal after rain collecting tribute which the chief ordered the people to pay. In times of drought, San rainmakers were sent

for by Mditshwa, who presented them with goats, or even a bullock, as tribute. The payment which they received for this “symbolic labour”, possibly supplemented by a limited amount of hunting and gathering, enabled these groups to subsist on the margins of farmer society.

If rain fell, San rainmaker families such as these were well rewarded, but, as with other rainmakers in Nguni society, if it did not they incurred the displeasure of the chief and his people and were severely chastised or punished for their inability to open the heavens - the rainmaker’s “celestial tap”. Joseph Orpen, for example, was told by Mditshwa of an occasion when this chief invited more than 20 of his San subjects to his kraal to make rain. After giving a signal to his warriors, the San were slain in a heap before him because, according to Mditshwa, it was they who “had made the heavens hard as brass”. On another occasion he sent an emissary to the homestead of San rainmakers living within his territory to chide them for their failure to relieve a drought. In what must have appeared an unusual spectacle to the San gathered below him, this man, anointed with melted butter, approached their huts from above, berating them for being wizards and for withholding the rain.

There are a number of other accounts of San rainmaker families living within the territory of the Mpondomise in the later years of the nineteenth century, and Major D. B. Hook, Chief Magistrate of Tsolo from 1884 to 1886, left a vivid description of his encounter with one of these families:

“There is much beauty in the hills on the Buffalo River”, he wrote, “with bush and cliffs, high mountains and ravines where the only known bushmen in Kaffirland dwelt in the ‘krantz’, living in their earlier primitive condition, practising as rainmakers to the tribes, revered and wooed as prophets. In a sauntering mood I met them on the height, and caused amazement by the beard I wore - mistaken for a Boer. They were a scrap of pigmy life, pure and simple rock men by their flinty form and manner - jabber, laugh and capers.”

Some time after his appointment as Chief Magistrate of East Griqualand in 1885, Walter (later Sir Walter) Stanford met a San family of rainmakers living amongst the Mpondomise. He first met them on the Umnga River, a tributary of the Inxu, probably in 1888, and then “many years later” they “came out of their rocks” to meet him in the Tsitsa River valley. Mditshwa employed them as rainmakers, and they had been under the protection of the Mpondomise for a good many years before Stanford’s first encounter with them at the Umnga. In 1905, on the instructions of Stanford, who by then was Chief Magistrate of the Transkeian territories, all the San in the Umnga area, including Mamxabela, were brought together at Jengca store in the Tsolo District. There were about 30 men, women and children present. It seems probable that this was the second occasion of their meeting, “many years later”, to which Stanford refers.

One of the members of the “family”, Mamxabela, described as “a likeable talkative little being” by Stanford, was typically San in looks and still had some recollection of a San language, unlike some of the other members of the band, who appeared to be of Mpondomise or mixed descent. Mamxabela’s husband, who had died a few years earlier, had been a painter. It must have been a moving, certainly an historical, scene as the last San who inhabited the area, some of them probably still living like their ancestors in caves, gathered together in front of the small store - called in from the wilds by a distant Colonial government. They eventually disappeared from the area and were last reported to be living on farms in the Ugie area.



Mamxabela.

Source: Special Collections, UCT.