

## Kalahari Bushmen

Copyright: Kalahari Meerkat Project, [www.kalahari-meerkats.com](http://www.kalahari-meerkats.com)

This guide or parts/content of it may not be reprinted or published for other than personal use without written permission

---

1. Who are the bushmen?	1
2. Bushmen people and language	1
3. How do they live?	2
4. What is their social structure?	2
5. Food and health	2
6. Birth, Death, Marriage and initiation	3
7. What problems do bushmen face today?	3
8. Religion and folklore	5
9. Books, sources and links	6

---

This guide is intended for visitors to the Kalahari Meerkat Project who wish to have some more background about the bushmen (also known as First People, or San) who lived in the Kalahari before black and white settlers started to culture the land.

### 1. Who are the bushmen?



The 'Bushmen' are the oldest inhabitants of southern Africa, where they have lived for at least 20,000 years. Their home is in the vast expanse of the Kalahari desert. The Bushmen are the remnants of Africa's oldest cultural group, genetically the closest surviving people to the original Homo sapiens "core" from which the Negroid people of Africa emerged. Bushmen are small in stature generally with light yellowish skin, which wrinkles very early in life.

Bushmen traditionally lived in Southern Africa in the following countries, although virtually none live purely by hunting and gathering today: Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Angola, with loosely related groups in Tanzania. Recorded history also placed them in Lesotho and Mozambique. Rock art and archaeological evidence can place them as far north as Libya, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, with the evidence of legend & racial type suggesting some traces remain.

### 2. Bushmen people and language

There are many different Bushman peoples - they have no collective name for themselves, and the terms 'Bushman', 'San', 'Basarwa' (in Botswana) and so on are used variously. Most of those which are widely understood are imposed by outsiders and have some pejorative sense; many now use and accept the term 'Bushmen'. Khoi, on the opposite, are probably of similar heritage, but have become pastoralists before Bantu tribe and white farmers immigrated into Southern Africa. "Khoisan" is used as a rather academic term referring to all bushmen of Southern Africa.

Bushmen speak a variety of languages, all of which incorporate 'click' sounds represented in writing by symbols such as ! or /. The unique clicks used in Khoisan languages are varied and complex, with many varieties and applications throughout the different Clans and groups. Here is a very simplified description of the more common ones used. They are denoted by internationally recognised symbols.

- / (Forward slash) - denotes a frontal dental click similar to the English "Tsk-Tsk" of disapproval. /? is a Glottal variation & ?/ is a nasal type.
- // (2 Forward slashes) - denotes a lateral dental click similar to the sound used to urge a horse.
- ≠ (Equals sign bisected by a forward slash, "not-equal sign") - denotes a sharp alveolar click made with the tongue against the roof of the mouth.
- ! (Exclamation mark) - denotes a sharp palato-alveolar click made with the tongue on the back of the gum ridge. Cork popping sound.

### 3. How do they live?

Bushmen were hunter/gatherers, with traditionally about 70/80% of their diet consisting of plant food, including berries, nuts, roots and melons gathered primarily by the women. The remaining 20/30% was meat (mostly antelopes), hunted by the men using poisoned arrows and spears on hunts that could last several days. They made their own temporary homes from wood that they gathered.

Their hunting & gathering economy and social structure had remained virtually unchanged for tens of thousands of years until very recently, a socio-economic culture that has sustained mankind universally during their evolution until the advent of agriculture. The Bushmen did not farm or keep livestock, having no concept of the ownership of land or animal.

### 4. What is their social structure?



Their social structure is not tribal because they have no paramount leader and their ties of kinship are fairly relaxed. They are a loosely knit family culture where decisions are made by universal discussion and agreement by consensus. An individual's opinion is naturally weighted according to their level of skill and experience in the particular field of discussion.

Families within a clan would speak a common language but neighboring clans would usually speak a different tongue, although there would normally be a fair degree of similarity & understanding between them. Apart from family relations, bearing the same name (out of only about 35 names per gender) would also foster a "name kinship".

Bushmen are generally nomadic within fairly limited boundaries, governed by the proximity of other families and clans. As a very loose guideline, the territory of a family may stretch to a 25-mile circle. Obviously, if there are no other bordering clans or other people these areas may stretch further, as far as is needed to ensure adequate food and water sources.

The roles of men & women were very distinct and rarely overlapped, which is a characteristic almost universal amongst hunter/gatherers the world over. It based on survival needs encouraging the most efficient utilisation of available skills and resources. Despite what is often perceived as a very sexist society, the importance of women is very high within the group and their opinions often take precedence, particularly where food is concerned.

### 5. Food and health

Traditionally, bushman women spent 3-4 days a week gathering veldkost (wild plants), often going out in groups to search for edible or medicinal plants. Furthermore, before the advent of trade with Bantu or white settlers, all tools, construction material, weapons or clothes were made of plants or animal products.

About 400-500 local plants and their uses were known to bushmen, along with the places where they grew – not only providing a balanced nutrition, but also moisture from roots even in time of drought. Plants were used in ways similar to western phytomedicine to treat wounds and heal illnesses; other plants were rather part of healing ceremonies in which a healer would burn plants to make rain, trance to heal an ailment, or perform a charm to bring fertility. The range of ailments treated included wounds including snake bites, colds, stomach ache, tooth ache or headache, or diarrhea but also infections like malaria, tuberculosis, or syphilis. One bushman plant, *Hoodia gordonii*, even made the worldwide news since it was patented by a pharma company as a diet support due to its traditional bushman usage to suppress appetite and hunger – a law case against "bio piracy" ensued, with the parties settling to royalties being paid to bushmen organisations.

The bushmen's diet and relaxed lifestyle have prevented most of the stress-related diseases of the western world. Bushmen health, in general, is not good though: 50% of children die before the age of 15; 20% die within their first year (mostly of gastrointestinal infections). Average life expectancy is about 45-50 years; respiratory infections and malaria are the major reasons for death in adults. Only 10% become older than 60 years.

A description of several Kalahari plants and their use by the bushmen can be found in the appendix.

## 6. Birth, Death, Marriage and initiation

Amongst the Bushman or San, birth is not generally a big issue. They don't really prepare and or go to a hospital like modern man. It is claimed that a Bushman women who is about to give birth will simply go behind a bush and "squeeze out" the baby. There is also some claims that they prepare a medicine from devils claw (*Harpagophytum* spp.), have the baby, and is back in her daily routine within a hour. In reality she is likely to take her mom or an elder aunt along, for comfort and help. The book "Shadow Bird" by Willemien le Roux, describes a Bushman birth with complications, and the old woman that was called to help, so it doesn't always go as easy as it is supposed to.

After the birth a Bushman child will receive much love and attention from his parents and other adults and even older children. Their love of children, both their own and that of other people, is one of the most noticeable things about the Bushman.

If a child is born under very severe drought conditions, when the fertility of the Bushman women are in any case low, perhaps to prevent such an occurrence. The mother will quietly relieve the just born baby of severe and certain future suffering by ending its life. This is most likely to happen in lean years, if she is still suckling another child and will obviously not be able to feed both of the children. This is accepted behaviour, and born out of necessity and not malice or any other consideration. It stems from the simple reality of live in a harsh climate, and the realisation that the life of the child that a lot has already been invested in, and that might be put at risk by tender feelings for a new-born that are in any case likely to die soon, are not likely to have a good outcome.

Death is a very natural thing to the Bushmen as shown by the following lines from a Bushman song, quoted by Coral Fourie in her book "Living Legends of a dying culture".

"The day we die a soft breeze will wipe out our footprints in the sand. When the wind dies down, who will tell the timelessness that once we walked this way in the dawn of time?"

If some-ones dies at a specific camp, the clan will move away and never camp at that spot again. Bushmen will never knowingly cross the place where some-one has been buried. If they have to pass near such a place, they will throw a pebble on the grave and mutter under their breath, to the spirits to ensure good luck. They never step on a grave and believe that the spirit remains active on that spot above ground, and they don't want to offend it.

Amongst most Bushmen, a wedding is a private event between the Bridegroom and the Bride. Only in exceptional cases may a guest be invited, but there is no celebration or other ritual as we understand it, only a private "ceremony" or agreement between the two people involved.

The Bushmen don't have initiation ceremonies. There is some dancing and cleansing ceremony after a maiden has shed her first menstrual blood. Boys are not considered men until they have killed their first large and dangerous animal. Thereafter they are treated as full members of the clan or tribe.

## 7. What problems do bushmen face today?

The Bushmen had their homelands invaded by cattle herding Bantu tribes from around 1,500 years ago, and by white colonists over the last few hundred years. From that time they faced discrimination, eviction from their ancestral lands, murder and oppression amounting to a massive though unspoken genocide, which reduced them in numbers from several million to 100,000. Today, although all suffer from a perception that their lifestyle is 'primitive' and that they need to be made to live like the majority cattle-herding tribes, specific problems vary according to where they live. In South Africa, for example, the !Khomani now have most of their land rights recognised, but many other Bushman tribes have no land rights at all.

### Situation in Namibia

A fairly large community of bushmen, the Ju/'hoansi, today live on both sides of the border between Namibia and Botswana, named Bushmanland. This group has been studied, filmed and assisted by Western scholars since 1951. The academic studies continue to this day and they are under the general guidance of the "Ju/wa Bushman Development Foundation" which is essentially a group of concerned individuals and academia. In 1991, with the formation of the "Nyae Nyae Farmers Cooperative" and with representation and guidance from the "Ju/wa Bushman Development Foundation", they managed to secure land rights within Bushmanland.

They are still permitted to hunt within the boundaries, despite being a game conservation area, as long as they use traditional methods. It means no firearms, dogs, vehicles or horses, rules that are occasionally broken and usually results in a prison term for the offenders.

One of the biggest problems is alcoholism, brought about mainly by military stationed in the local town of Tsumkwe bringing alcohol into the region despite a government ban on bringing in spirits. Having virtually no tolerance of alcohol, there was a massive increase in drunkenness, alcoholism and crime with a general decline in family structures and community well-being. <http://kalaharipeoples.org/>

### **Situation in Botswana – Central Kalahari Bushmen**

The Gana (G//ana) and Gwi (G/wi) tribes in Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve are among the most persecuted. Far from recognising their ownership rights over the land they have lived on for thousands of years, the Botswana government has in fact forced almost all of them off it. In the early 1980s, diamonds were discovered in the reserve. Soon after, government ministers went into the reserve to tell the Bushmen living there that they would have to leave because of the diamond finds.

In three big clearances, in 1997, 2002 and 2005, virtually all the Bushmen were forced out. Their homes were dismantled, their school and health post were closed, their water supply was destroyed and the people were threatened and trucked away.

Almost all were forced out by these tactics, but a large number have since returned, with many more desperate to do so. They now live in resettlement camps outside the reserve. Rarely able to hunt, and arrested and beaten when they do, they are dependent on government handouts. They are now gripped by alcoholism, boredom, depression, and illnesses such as TB and HIV/AIDS.

Although the Bushmen won the right in court to go back to their lands in 2006, the government has done everything it can to make their return impossible. Since then the government has arrested more than 50 Bushmen for hunting to feed their families, and banned the Bushmen from using their water borehole.

Hundreds still languish in resettlement camps, unable or scared to return home. Unless they can return to their ancestral lands, their unique societies and way of life will be destroyed, and many of them will die.

<http://www.iwant2gohome.org/>

<http://www.survival-international.org/tribes/bushmen/>

### **Botswana - Ghanzi Bushmen**

Bushmen around the town of Ghanzi had served as cattle herders to Afrikaans farmers since early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They worked in largely unfenced ranges. There were still some benefits for the Bushmen as game was still fairly abundant, while getting the spin-off benefits of some milk, some money and even the occasional cow that died naturally.

All this changed significantly, courtesy of the European Common Market, who in their wisdom offered a very high price for Botswana's beef as long as they instituted major disease control measures to eliminate foot & mouth, anthrax and a few other endemic ailments. This resulted in an extensive game control fencing operation to separate the cattle from the "disease ridden wildlife". Unfenced ranges with moderate levels of wildlife became fenced in lands with a catastrophic drop in game numbers due to a cut of the herds' migration routes to cope with drought. The Common Market (later the European Economic Community) were happy and paid the massively inflated prices, while subsistence game hunting became meaningless. The cattle monoculture further destroyed the bushmen's plant resources, severely impacting their traditional hunter and gatherer lifestyle.

Two organisations, D'Kar Trust and First People of the Kalahari" strive to support the local bushmen in initiatives to combine their traditional lifestyle with Western-world culture.

<http://www.kuru.co.bw/Dkar.htm>

<http://www.kalaharisunset.com>

<http://www.iwant2gohome.org/>

### **South Africa - Khomani Bushmen**

These Bushmen from the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (now the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park) region were ejected from the Reserve between 1931, upon its formation, & 1973 when the last were finally evicted. They had initially during this period been allowed limited access and work within the reserve but were finally removed by the management. Despite many attempts to get access to their traditional hunting areas, entry was denied on the basis that they would become a problem begging from tourists. This was despite the valid argument that the large south-western region requested was off limits to visitors to the reserve and therefore should not present any difficulties. They remained a small impoverished group largely integrating themselves within the mixed coloured communities that developed along the fringes of the Reserve, working where possible for local farmers.

A group of bushmen still partially adhering to their traditional life and family structure, under their leader Dawid Kruiper were finally successful in 1999 when 40 000 hectares of land next to the Kgalagadi Park was purchased by the

government from local farmers and given back to the Khomani community. In 2001 it was agreed that an additional 25 000 hectares of the Kalahari Gemsbok park was to be returned to them for managed utilisation but not for residence. Tension between the traditional and westernised bushmen led to various power struggles, but some of the bushmen continue to occasionally hunt and gather. Furthermore, the community-owned !Xaus luxury lodge recently opened in the Southwestern-most part of Kgalagadi Park.

## 8. Religion and folklore

Most Kalahari Bushmen believe in a "Greater" and a "Lesser" Supreme being or God. There are other supernatural beings as well, and the spirits of the dead.

The "God" or supreme being first created himself, then the land and its food, the water and air. He is generally a good power, that protects and wards off disease and teaches people skills. However, when he is angered, he can send bad fortune. The greater god, depending on his manifestation, is called different names by the same people at different times, and also have different names among the different language groups.

The lesser god is regarded as bad or/and evil, a black magician, a destroyer rather than builder, and a bearer of bad luck and disease. Just like the "supreme being" he is called by various names. They believe bad luck and disease is caused by the spirits of the dead, because they want to bring the living to the same place they are. Similar to the black people in South Africa, the Bushman have a strong belief that the ancestral spirits play an important role in the fate of the living, but they don't use the same rituals to appease them.

Cagn is the name the Bushmen gave their god; the first sociologists translated this as "Mantis", maybe wrongly. This god being nothing else than the unseen presence of nature and everything that surrounded them. They also prayed to the moon and the stars but they could never explain exactly why they did this. Cagn was seen as human like and also had magical powers and charms.

Here is a selection of bushman lore.

### Creation of the first Bushmen

As the Bushmen lived in a very dry area, water to them have a very magical power that could revive them. In the legend of creation Mantis appears and the entire world is still covered by water. A bee (a symbol of wisdom) carries Mantis over the turbulent waters of the ocean. The bee however, became very tired and flew lower and lower. He searched for solid land to make his decent to but he only grew more and more tired. But then he saw a flower drifting on the water. He laid Mantis down in the flower and within in him the seed of the first human. The bee drowned but when the sun came up Mantis awoke and from the seed the bee had left the first human was born.

### Mantis and his family

The bushmen don't regard the Mantis as god but rather a superbeing. They are not the only civilization who has this belief and other African tribes do see it as a God. Even the Greeks believed it had divine and magical powers. Mantis is a Greek word meaning divine, or soothsayer. All over the world many legends is told about this magical creature. To the Bushmen however he is a "dream Bushman". He is very human. Many paintings of the bushmen figure a Bushman with the head of a Mantis.

Mantis also has a big family. His wife is Dassie (rock hyrax). His son is also a Mantis and he also has an adopted daughter, Porcupine. Her real father is the evil monster called the All-Devourer who she is too afraid of. Porcupine is married to a creature that is part of the rainbow, called Kwammanga. They have two sons, Mongoose or Ichneumon and then Kwammanga, after his dad. Mantis also has a sister, Blue Crane that he loves very much

### The Baboons

At a time long ago the baboons were little people like the Bushmen, but they were very mischievous. They loved making trouble. On a day Cagn sent his son Cogaz to go and look for sticks they could use in making bows. When the little people saw him they started dancing around the boy shouting: "Your father thinks he is clever and wants to make bows to kill us, now we will kill you!" They did as they said and Cogaz's body was hung in a tree. The little people danced again and sang: "Cagn thinks he is clever!"

Then Cagn awoke from his sleep. He had a feeling that something was wrong so he asked his wife Coti to bring him his charms. He thought and thought. Then it came to him. He realized what the little people did to his son. He immediately went in search of his son. When the little people saw him coming they started singing an other song. A little girl sitting nearby told Cagn that they were singing something else before he came. He ordered them to sing what the girl heard before. When he heard this he ordered them to stay where they are until he returns. He returned with a basket full of pegs. As they danced he drove a peg in each of their backsides. They fled to the mountains because

they now had tails and they started living with animals. Cagn then climbed into the tree and used his magic to resurrect his son.

### **How Mantis stole fire from Ostrich**

Mantis also gave the Bushmen fire. Before this people ate their food like all the other predators, raw. They also had no light at night and were surrounded by darkness. Mantis noticed that Ostrich's food always smelt very good and decided to observe what he did to his food. As he crept close one day he saw Ostrich take some fire from beneath his wing and dip his food in it. After eating he would tuck back the fire under his wing.

Mantis knew Ostrich would not give him the fire so he planned a trick on Ostrich to steal the fire from him. One day he called Ostrich and showed him a tree carrying delicious plums. As Ostrich started to eat Mantis shouted at him that the best ones were at that top. Ostrich jumped higher and higher and as soon as he opened his wings Mantis stole the fire from him and ran off. Ostrich was very ashamed of this and since that day kept his wings pressed to his sides and will never fly.

### **The Rainbow**

Rain was once a beautiful woman who lived in the sky. She wore a rainbow around her waist and she was married to the creator of the earth. They had three daughters. When the eldest daughter grew up she asked her mother to go down to earth. Her mother gave her permission but as soon as she went down she got married to a hunter. While she was gone Rain had another child. This time a boy which she called Son-eib. When he was old enough his sisters asked Rain if they could all go down to see the world. In fear of losing them all Rain didn't want them to go. But then a friend Wolf who liked the two daughters said he would accompany them down and look after them. The father believed this wicked beast and gave his permission.

As soon as they got to earth they went to a village. A woman in the village saw Son-eib and he looked very familiar to her. She offered them food and Wolf accepted this. They all ate of this food except Son-eib as Wolf told everybody that he is not a person but merely a thing. Son-eib turned away and went to sit in the grass, all by himself. While sitting there he caught a little red bird. He concealed it under his coat.

That night the woman offered them shelter in her house. But once again Wolf did not allow the boy to sleep inside the house and said that Son-eib should sleep in the small hut outside. While everybody was sleeping Wolf went and fetched all the bad people in the village. They set fire to the hut killing poor Son-eib. However, the little bird managed to escape. It flew up into the sky and went straight to Rain, the boy's mother.

As soon as it arrived it told Rain of what has happened. Rain told her husband and they were furious. A little while later the people of the village saw a great storm approaching them fast and around its waist was a rainbow. Lightning started to flash striking all around them. Only Wolf and his fellow bad people were hit and killed. Then a mighty voice came from the sky with the words: "Don't kill the children of the sky!"

Ever since this all Bushmen are afraid of the rainbow. When the bushmen see a rainbow they would hit on sticks and shout for it to go away!

### **The sun, moon and the stars**

One of the stories of the sun says that he is a man from whose armpits shine the rays of light. He did not want to share his light with all the people so he stayed in his hut. The first Bushman ordered his children to throw him into the sky. They threw him up and this is where he still shines from today. In the night he is very cold so he draws his blanket over him. This blanket is very old and has lots of little holes in it. This is the stars we see at night.

Another tale tells of a young woman who waits for the hunters to return every night. When it grows dark she throws up a handful of white ash. This becomes the Milky-way that guide the hunters home.

The moon is believed to be the old shoe of Mantis. He placed it in the air to guide him at night. The sun is very jealous of the moon when it is at its full brightness. The sun uses its sharp rays to cut of pieces of the moon bit by bit until there is almost nothing left of the moon. The moon begs the sun to stop and then he always goes away. Soon after the moon starts growing again until it is full and the whole process repeats itself.

## **9. Books, sources and links**

A broad range of books about bushmen and their culture is available at bookstores. Two I can recommend are:

Rupert Isaacson: The Healing Land - The Bushmen and the Kalahari Desert.

Rupert visits several families of bushmen across the Kalahari, to learn about their myths and healing trances, but also about their current struggles. Includes an account of the events that led to the Khomani/Mier landclaim, and !Xaus Lodge.

Marjorie Shostak: Nisa - the life and words of a !Kung woman.

A book written 30 years ago, giving insight into the life of Nisa, in her own words with annotations of the anthropologist Shostak.

This guide is based on information from the following sources:

<http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/bushmen.htm>

<http://www.kalahari-san.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/>

<http://www.khoisanpeoples.org/>

<http://abbott-infotech.co.za/tribes%20in%20the%20kalahari.html>

Specimens of bushman folklore, Bleek and Lloyd (1911): <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/sbf/index.htm>

[http://enargea.org/tales/black\\_African/sanidion.html](http://enargea.org/tales/black_African/sanidion.html)

[library.thinkquest.org/C008326/Bushmen/MantisAndHisFamilyGods.htm](http://library.thinkquest.org/C008326/Bushmen/MantisAndHisFamilyGods.htm)