

# **A total extinction confidently hoped for: the destruction of Cape San society under Dutch colonial rule, 1700–1795**

MOHAMED ADHIKARI

San (Bushman) society in the Cape Colony was almost completely annihilated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of land confiscation, massacre, forced labour and cultural suppression that accompanied colonial rule. Whereas similar obliterations of indigenous peoples in other parts of the world have resulted in major public controversies and heated debate amongst academics about the genocidal nature of these episodes, in South Africa the issue has effectively been ignored aside from passing, often polemical, references to it as genocide. Even recent studies that have approached the mass killing of the Cape San with sensitivity and insight do not address it as a case of genocide. This article sets out to redress this imbalance in part by analysing the dynamic of frontier conflict between San and settler under Dutch colonial rule as genocide. It demonstrates both the exterminatory intent underlying settler violence as well as the complicity of a weak colonial state in these depredations, including its sanctioning of the root-and-branch eradication of the San.

In 1998, David Kruiper, the leader of the ≠ Khomani San people, who today live in the Kalahari Desert in the furthest reaches of South Africa's Northern Cape province, lamented of his people that '...we have been made into nothing.'<sup>1</sup> The ≠ Khomani San are a tiny remnant of the foraging communities that once inhabited most of the area that currently constitutes South Africa. Whereas Kruiper was voicing concern about the marginalization of the ≠ Khomani San in post-apartheid South Africa, his judgement applies in an even more literal sense to the fate of hunter-gatherer societies of the Cape Colony that were destroyed by the impact of European colonialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Much of the dispossession and slaughter happened in the eighteenth century along the northern and northeastern frontiers under Dutch East India Company (DEIC, also VOC)<sup>2</sup> rule, with continued displacement and killing under the relatively benign auspices of British imperialism through the nineteenth

century. The main agents of destruction were Dutch-speaking pastoralists whose murderous land-grabbing and ecologically damaging farming practices ensured the virtual extinction of Cape San society.

Historically, the destruction of Cape San societies can be viewed as part of a series of overlapping, essentially concentric, global movements of violent subjugation that were often genocidal in nature. The broadest of these is the 12,000 year history of the absorption, displacement and destruction of hunter-gatherer communities by farmers,<sup>3</sup> an ongoing trend decidedly observable on the Cape frontier. Another worldwide process of vanquishment applicable to this case study is that of European overseas colonial conquest. The annihilation of the Cape San formed a small part of this five-century long process that started in the Canary Islands in the late fourteenth century and included many instances of the complete extermination of indigenous peoples. Since European colonialism was such a hugely diverse and complex phase in human history, it is perhaps more helpful to view the destruction of the Cape San within the framework of a subset of settler colonial confrontations—those in which livestock farmers linked to the global capitalist market clashed with hunter-gatherers. The frequency with which encounters of this kind resulted in the near complete destruction of forager societies raises the question of whether this form of colonialism is inherently genocidal. It is possible to identify a number of shared features in conflicts between hunter-gatherers and market-oriented stock farmers that had served to intensify hostilities and tilt the balance toward genocidal outcomes.

One of the crucial dynamics at play in conflicts of this sort was the rapid occupation of extensive areas of land characteristic of capitalist stock farming entering new territory. Not only did stock farmers move frontiers rapidly but their herds consumed large amounts of grazing and water, damaging the ecosystem. This had an immediate, and often devastating, impact on the region's foraging societies whose seasonal migrations were disrupted, and whose food supplies and other foundations of life were severely compromised. This almost inevitably led to spiralling levels of violence as afflicted indigenous peoples resisted encroachment, and settlers in turn retaliated, usually with excessive and indiscriminate force. Such conflicts often culminated in warfare and exterminatory offensives on the part of colonial society. The weakness of the colonial state and its tenuous control over frontier areas gave settlers who had access to arms wide discretion to act against indigenes.

A second dynamic was that access to world markets and a concomitant desire to accumulate wealth encouraged both intensive exploitation of natural resources for short term gain as well as a resort to annihilatory violence to eliminate indigenes regarded as obstacles or threats to the colonial project. The privatization and commodification of natural resources, especially land, undermined foraging societies fundamentally. Systems of land tenure based on exclusive usage, fixed boundaries, registration of title deeds, alienability and permanent settlement were completely foreign to hunter-gatherer world views and effectively excluded them from legal ownership of vital resources. Privatization generally meant the permanent loss of such resources and that settler claims were backed by the

legal apparatus, and ultimately, the armed might of the colonial state. Economic and political imperatives invariably resulted in the colonial state supporting settler interests and land confiscations, even in cases where both metropolitan and local governments tried to curb frontier violence.<sup>4</sup>

A third common characteristic was the influence of Western racist thinking, modulated by local imperatives, that dehumanized the hunter-gatherer way of life as an utterly debased form of existence, proof of their racial inferiority, and comparable in many respects to that of animals. Depicting foragers as merely inhabiting the land—much as animals do, rather than making productive use of it—usually underlay settler justifications for their dispossession. Stereotyped as particularly ‘savage,’ as immune to ‘civilizing’ influences, and their labour as unsuited to settler needs, hunter-gatherers were often regarded as expendable. That racist theorising often anticipated the dying out of the ‘savage’<sup>5</sup> further encouraged violence against indigenes and fostered an extirpatory attitude within frontier society. Because forager subsistence needs were irreconcilable with those of the settler economy, colonial society viewed the foraging way of life as one to be eliminated, whether through outright extermination, forced acculturation into some subordinate status in the colonial order, or being neutralized through segregation in reserves.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Cape San peoples the interplay of forces propelling eighteenth-century settler expansion at the Cape favoured the most radical of these options.

The terms ‘San’ and ‘Bushman’ are used to refer to the hunter-gatherer peoples of southern Africa who were its earliest inhabitants. San occupied most of the subcontinent south of the Zambezi Valley before it became more densely populated with the migration of herders and cultivators into the region over the past 2,000 years. They lived in small, loosely-knit, family-based, foraging bands of usually between ten and thirty people. These groups were sometimes as small as five or six but hardly ever exceeded fifty. At the start of European colonization in 1652, their numbers in what was to become the Cape Colony was in all probability in the region of 30,000. Hunting bands were known to amalgamate or split on a seasonal basis in response to environmental changes, social tension, or for communal activities such as game drives, and there was considerable movement of individuals and families between camps. Hunting bands affiliated through kinship ties formed larger cultural groupings that might encompass several hundred people that were tied together through a range of reciprocal arrangements which might have included inter-marriage, the sharing of resources, gift giving and various forms of exchange. These extended social networks acted as insurance against localized fluctuations in the availability of resources by giving bands access to means outside of their territories. Individual bands moved within a defined area, determined usually by the availability of water, following game and harvesting seasonally available plant foods. They lived in makeshift shelters or in caves and used a range of stone and bone tools. The San are probably best known for their exquisite paintings on cave walls and rock faces.<sup>7</sup>

While a variety of plants, mainly bulbs and roots, formed the mainstay of their diet, game was crucial to the welfare of the San. Smaller animals were snared while

larger ones, most typically buck, were shot with poison-tipped arrows. Spears and clubs were also used. There was a distinct gendered division of labour in San society in that men did most of the hunting and women most of the gathering. In coastal and riverine environments fish and shell fish complemented their diet. Wherever available they also harvested wild fruit, berries, honey and insects such as locusts, caterpillars and termite larvae. In the dry Cape interior hunting bands might have utilized territories as large as 400km<sup>2</sup> for their subsistence. Contrary to the popular perception that San led a precarious lifestyle, most had a fairly secure existence, except for those displaced to more extreme environments.<sup>8</sup>

Anthropologist Mathias Guenther stresses that the 'key features of Bushman society, its organization, and its institutions and ethos [are] flexibility, adaptability and diversity, fluidity and amorphousness, ambivalence and ambiguity.' According to Guenther, this flexibility was necessary for the effective exploitation of migratory game and unevenly distributed plant food supplies that resulted from localized and unpredictable rainfall patterns.<sup>9</sup> It also accounts for San resilience in the face of extraneous disruptive forces whether they be prolonged drought or aggressive settlers intruding on their territory. Although in general displaced by invading Khoikhoi herders and Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, San communities nevertheless interacted with them in complex ways ranging from co-existence, inter-marriage and social absorption, through clientship and the provision of shamanic services such as rain-making and healing, to armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> San society was thus far from static, uniform or unable to adapt to social change as has often been alleged.

The San were not culturally homogeneous. Besides social customs, cosmologies, weaponry, rock art styles and material culture varying regionally, they spoke a wide diversity of languages, today classified into three distinct linguistic families. Although they shared a similar mode of subsistence, San economies differed considerably depending on the natural environment, with groups adjusting their foraging practices as they moved from one ecological zone to another. The San had names for hunting bands and for larger cultural and linguistic groupings but not for hunter-gatherers generally, indicating that the San did not see hunter-gatherers collectively as a distinct social entity. Although the concept of San is thus very much a colonial construct, it is nevertheless a meaningful social and analytical category because specialist foraging communities did share a distinctive economy and way of life as opposed to pastoralists and cultivators.<sup>11</sup>

The labels 'San' and 'Bushman' are controversial because they are pejorative and their meanings contested. There is a good deal of confusion in the historical record itself about the identities of indigenous peoples and the names applied to them. 'Bushman,' and its Dutch equivalent 'Bosjesman,' are ambiguous because they were used by colonists to describe specialist hunter-gatherer communities as well as groups of indigenous pastoralist Khoikhoi peoples (Hottentots) who had lost their cattle. Indeed, the terms were used generically to refer to anyone, including runaway slaves, renegades and destitute colonists who resorted to foraging. Often colonists did not, or were not able to, distinguish between San, on the one hand, and Khoikhoi who had been stripped of their stock, on the other.

There was a degree of mixing and inter-marriage between San and other indigenous peoples, and they were known to be taken up as clients by Khoikhoi. Sometimes, dispossessed Khoikhoi joined hunter-gatherer communities or resisted colonial encroachment in alliance with them. In such cases the use of 'Khoisan' makes eminent sense. Because 'Bushman' has historically been a highly pejorative term in the South African context, scholars from the 1960s started using 'San' as an alternative. But this term is also problematic because it is a disparaging Khoikhoi word applied to hunter-gatherers, indicating social inferiority and often meaning 'thief' or 'vagabond.' In recent years some scholars have reverted to the use of 'Bushman' because existing San communities often prefer this name. I favour 'San' because it is not gendered, is less pejorative, less ambiguous in denoting indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples than 'Bushman,' and currently appears to be the term most widely accepted by leaders and organizations representing San people.<sup>12</sup>

### **Colonial expansion through the eighteenth century**

By the start of European colonization the San had largely been displaced to the drier and more rugged interior areas by Khoikhoi pastoralists and Bantu-speaking cultivators, both of whom had migrated into the region about 2,000 years ago. The first European colonial settlement in southern Africa came in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company set up a refreshment station on the shores of Table Bay. The colony soon started spreading from this base because the VOC in 1657 decided that, instead of trying to do so itself, allowing independent farmers to work the land was the most expeditious way of meeting its need for agricultural produce. This opening of the agrarian frontier, together with natural population increase and immigration, ensured colonial expansion from its hub around the garrison and refreshment station from which the city of Cape Town would grow. By the end of the 1670s the indigenous peoples of the Cape Peninsula and the immediate interior, mainly Khoikhoi (Hottentot) herders, were subjugated and dispossessed of their land and livestock. It took roughly half a century for most of the arable south-western Cape to be occupied by European farmers, whose main task it was to supply passing DEIC fleets and the growing settlement at Table Bay with fresh produce.<sup>13</sup>

From the early eighteenth century Dutch-speaking, semi-nomadic pastoralists rapidly infiltrated the dry Cape interior, the greater part of which was only suitable for transhumant pastoralism. Population growth and a lack of economic opportunity in the more settled areas fuelled this expansion while VOC landholding policies also promoted the dispersal of stockmen into the hinterland. The Cape government from 1714 started issuing grazing rights to extensive 6,000 acre farms beyond the arable freehold areas in return for an annual rental.<sup>14</sup> This was the origin of the Cape's loan farm system, a form of leasehold which had the effect of accelerating movement into the interior and dispersing the population into tiny isolated groupings across the landscape.<sup>15</sup>

The penetration of the interior by stock farmers brought into existence a new social group in Cape colonial society, the trekboers. 'Trekboer,' which means

‘migrant farmer’ in Dutch, refers to the need for these pastoralists to move around with their flocks and herds in search of seasonally available grazing and water using their loan farms as a base. Even the more prosperous, established farmers, those with well watered loan farms, needed to engage in a degree of transhumance.<sup>16</sup> The poorest stockmen, unable to afford the rental, did not have loan farms. They tended to live wayfaring lives out of tented wagons, looking for grazing and hopeful of finding a permanent place to settle. Several families might share a loan farm to reduce costs and for greater security.<sup>17</sup> Hardy and resourceful, but vulnerable because of their isolation, trekboers generally were ruthless in their appropriation of natural resources and their treatment of indigenous peoples.

The decision by the DEIC in 1699 to lift its ban on livestock trading between colonist and Khoikhoi in an attempt to improve meat supplies was not only a major impetus for expansion into the interior but also for violence against indigenous peoples. This policy change and the resultant push into the hinterland held dire consequences for the pastoralist Khoikhoi peoples occupying the winter rainfall area of the south-western Cape, and even for those further north, as far away as Namaqualand. Freebooting colonists saw this as an opportunity to enrich themselves and set up as stock farmers. Within a few years most Khoikhoi in the region were stripped of their herds as marauding gangs of raiders, sometimes up to fifty strong and generally consisting of poorer colonists, adventurers and desperados, spread havoc amongst indigenous stock-keepers. Independent Khoikhoi society in the region had been destroyed by the time the VOC re-introduced the prohibition on livestock trading in 1725.<sup>18</sup>

Their land occupied by Dutch-speaking interlopers, Khoikhoi societies along the frontier zone rapidly disintegrated. Some dispossessed Khoikhoi resorted to hunter-gathering, while others migrated beyond the reach of colonial influence. A number became stock raiders, at times in collaboration with San, putting up fierce resistance to further colonial incursions. Epidemics, in particular, the smallpox outbreak of 1713, took a huge toll on Khoikhoi society.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, many Khoikhoi were also taken up as labourers by farmers. Their labour was valued by trekboers because the Khoikhoi had intimate knowledge of the natural environment and were highly skilled at animal husbandry. Useful also as guides, hunters, and trackers, some became trusted servants. While it initially often suited destitute Khoikhoi to work temporarily for farmers in return for payment in food and livestock—just as it suited farmers to allow such servants to keep stock and exercise a degree of autonomy—their status deteriorated through the course of the eighteenth century. As options for leading an independent lifestyle diminished for Khoikhoi, so farmers were able to assert greater control over their workers by paying subsistence wages, denying them the right to keep stock, confiscating their animals, and retaining children to tie parents to the farm. By the end of the eighteenth century most Khoikhoi in the employ of farmers were in effect forced labourers little better off than serfs.<sup>20</sup>

As they moved beyond the cultivable south-western Cape from about 1700 onwards, colonists started coming into growing conflict with hunter-gatherers.



The dynamic behind the encounter with San tended to be markedly different to that with Khoikhoi. Whereas traditional Khoikhoi society crumbled in the face of colonial conflict, San social formations proved to be much more resilient. The basic reason for this contrast seems clear enough. The Khoikhoi's pastoralist way of life was fragile when confronted with the superior military force at the disposal of settler society and was relatively easily undermined by stock raids or by depriving them of access to grazing or water.<sup>21</sup> San bands were by comparison hardy and adaptable, being much more mobile and able to live off the land. Their dispersal in small groups across extensive, rugged terrain made it considerably more difficult for the sparsely spread trekboer population to subjugate the San.

Although these farmers did participate in the international capitalist economy by supplying meat and products such as soap, butter, hides and tallow to passing VOC fleets and the settlement at Cape Town, the trekboer economy was not principally driven by market forces but by subsistence considerations.<sup>22</sup> Because VOC demand for meat was limited and the environment harsh, trekboers were not so much commercial ranchers motivated by profit than pastoralists with access to a substantial market through which they could dispense of their surplus and procure the goods and services on which their way of life depended. Wagons, guns, ammunition, and an array of tools and household goods were their main requirements. Frontier farmers were particularly dependent on their contact with Cape Town for firearms and ammunition without which they would not have been able to hunt, defend themselves or take the offensive against indigenous people. These links were also important for trekboer society maintaining an image of itself as Christian and 'civilized.'<sup>23</sup> Their muted profit motive, however, did little to mitigate the ultimate fate of hunter-gatherer peoples on the Cape frontier as trekboer demographic growth, and secondarily, growing VOC demand for meat through the eighteenth century, ensured colonial expansion into the interior and the displacement of indigenous peoples. The dynamic behind the violence between trekboer and San thus had less to do with a voracious, international, capitalist market for meat than with the far older, more pervasive displacement of hunter-gatherers by farming communities. Production for the market was not irrelevant to this process because overgrazing as a result of trekboer ignorance and a desire to turn a profit resulted in the progressive reduction in the carrying capacity of the veld as it was stripped of edible plants and replaced by vegetation their stock found unpalatable.<sup>24</sup>

Because of limited water resources in the Cape interior and the nature of transhumant pastoralism, the trekboer economy was expansive and a relatively small trekboer population, together with their dependents, appropriated large swathes of land for their use. With a growing number of colonists entering the interior as farmers through the eighteenth century, and as the sons of trekboers set themselves up as independent stockmen, there was intensifying pressure on resources and a continuous drive to find new pastures to exploit. Trekboers, though thin on the ground—there being no more than about 1,000 independent stockholders and a freeburgher population of 15,000 by 1795<sup>25</sup>—were nevertheless able to control extensive tracts of land. Their access to superior military technology allowed

colonists to take possession of scarce permanent water supplies, which in turn gave them dominion over the surrounding grazing. By establishing their farms around perennial springs and water holes in the parched landscape and being able to defend their occupation of these strategic nodes, trekboers were able to exercise power over an area of land greatly disproportionate to their numbers.<sup>26</sup>

From 1700 onwards settlers started moving across the Berg River into the Tulbagh basin about 100km from Cape Town. Here they encountered significant resistance, both from dispossessed Khoikhoi as well as from San, in particular a group known as the Ubiqua who had a reputation as fearsome stock raiders. By the early 1710s pastoral farmers were migrating northwards into the Olifants River valley and beyond that into the Bokkeveld region. The intrusion of trekboers into this locality provoked concerted Khoisan resistance and it was not until 1739 that this frontier zone was closed when a series of major military campaigns by frontier farmers organized by the Cape government quelled indigenous opposition. From about 1740 the frontier advanced rapidly as trekboers started moving into the harsher environment of the escarpment formed by the Hantam, Roggeveld, Nieuweveld and Sneeuwberg mountains. The escarpment marked the transition between the narrow coastal plains and the open expanses of the interior plateau, as well as between the winter and summer rainfall areas. Farmers needed to be even more mobile in this environmental zone to exploit both summer and winter grazing to obtain year-round nourishment for their stock.<sup>27</sup> To the north they came into conflict with /Xam-speaking San and along the north-eastern frontier in the Sneeuwberg region, with the Swy Ei, amongst others. The further colonists moved from Cape Town, the more tenuous VOC control over its subjects became and the greater the degree of lawlessness in the border regions and beyond.

Across the escarpment lay the Cape thirstrand, an uninviting prospect for both San and frontier farmer. Over the next three decades a growing number of trekboers established loan farms along the escarpment in the face of sporadic but intensifying resistance from foraging communities not prepared to retreat into the arid reaches of the Karoo and Bushmanland. By the late 1760s pressure on resources reached critical levels, initiating sustained and co-ordinated San insurgency and guerrilla attacks against settlers along the length and breadth of the frontier.<sup>28</sup> During the last three decades of the eighteenth century San resistance halted the colonial advance into the interior and in places even rolled it back as farmers abandoned outlying farms. The stalling of the frontier advance precipitated a major crisis for trekboer society which depended on continuous expansion to accommodate demographic growth and compensate for the deterioration of pastures in settled areas. During this period trekboers, with the help of the VOC government, embarked on an exterminatory military offensive against the San.<sup>29</sup>

### **The dynamic of frontier conflict**

Trekboers severely disrupted the lives of foraging communities whose territories they invaded. San and trekboer were bound to clash because they were in direct



competition for the same environmental resources, namely, water, game, grazing, and access to land, which included the right simply to be in a particular location at a given time. San bands suddenly found that they were denied access to traditional watering places by trekboers who occupied springs and water-holes. Trekboer livestock muddied and contaminated water supplies, and trampled plants on which the San subsisted. Overgrazing damaged and, in many areas, permanently changed the ecology for the worse. Colonists decimated the herds of game, a primary source of food for the San, with their firearms and their stock consumed the grazing on which these animals fed. Trekboer hunting practices were extremely wasteful for they not only shot game for sport but destroyed herds of buck to make *biltong*—dried, salted strips of meat that became a staple of the frontier diet. That they were able to preserve the meat and that there was a ready market for *biltong* in Cape Town encouraged over-exploitation of this resource.<sup>30</sup> A growing scarcity of game and ecological deterioration often gave hungry San little option but to raid trekboer livestock. Trekboer destructiveness went beyond damaging the San's subsistence base because the natural environment, fundamental to their spirituality, was being desecrated and species of game central to San belief systems were being eradicated. The arrival of colonial graziers generally did not mean immediate dispossession for hunting bands but rather the disruption of their seasonal movements and their ability to exploit resources optimally. It nevertheless did not take long for the trekboer presence to put San communities under enormous stress.<sup>31</sup>

During the eighteenth century, the San responded to trekboer intrusion in one of two ways. The first was to withdraw. This was not an attractive option as it inevitably meant moving to more marginal and inhospitable terrain and perhaps encroaching on another, usually hostile, group's territory. Antagonistic neighbours might include other San bands, Bantu-speaking peoples such as the Xhosa toward the east and Tswana in the northeast, or Khoikhoi pastoralist groups such as Nama, Griqua or Korana towards the north and along the Orange River. As with all hunter-gatherers, the San had a deeply spiritual connection to their territories and would abandon their domains only as a last resort.<sup>32</sup> While on the one hand, colonial invasion resulted in a degree of co-operation amongst indigenous peoples against a common enemy, on the other hand, it also gave rise to intensified conflict between them as groups were displaced and pressure on resources mounted. There is evidence that the time-honoured tradition of reciprocity whereby San groups allowed other bands access to their territory in times of need broke down as a result of the stresses brought about by settler land seizures.<sup>33</sup>

A second, increasingly more common, reaction was for San to resist trekboer incursions using guerrilla tactics. This included raiding or killing trekboer stock, slaying herders, destroying crops and attacking farmsteads which were sometimes burnt down. Not content with killing the enemy, San raiders might torture their victims or mutilate their bodies. San usually attacked at night, striking where farmers were most vulnerable, their herds.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes San wreaked severe damage. Hinrich Lichtenstein, a German physician who toured the frontier

extensively during the early nineteenth century, cited the example of the farmer who ‘when he went out in the morning found near his house his whole herd, consisting of forty oxen, together with two hundred sheep, several dogs and horses, and some Hottentots who were employed to guard them, all murdered, not a single one having escaped.’<sup>35</sup> Occasionally large herds of sheep or cattle were rustled. In one daring ambush the van Reenen brothers, main suppliers of meat to the VOC, had 6,000 sheep and 253 cattle stolen in 1792.<sup>36</sup> Stock raiders under pressure from pursuing farmers usually maimed or killed the animals to deny them to their foes, a tactic that enraged farmers. San sometimes also poisoned water-holes.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that the motives for these offensives generally went beyond simply stealing stock. They were also intended to drive trekboers from the land. These attacks were at first sporadic and small scale but became ever more frequent and co-ordinated as the eighteenth century progressed and pressure on the San intensified.<sup>38</sup>

It is apparent that San bands increasingly coalesced to fight off colonial intrusion and that they were often joined by dispossessed Khoikhoi. These larger attacking parties drew on kinship and cultural ties to mobilize temporarily against what was clearly a mortal threat to their way of life. Although San society, because of its small size and egalitarian structure, did not have hereditary leaders, they must have developed some form of temporary leadership akin to war chiefs to co-ordinate their joint resistance. Khoisan raiding gangs were sometimes several hundred strong especially in the latter decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> There was at times a degree of collaboration between San attackers and farm servants, many of whom were captives or coerced into working for farmers. Increasingly, Khoisan deserters stole guns, lead shot, powder and even horses where the opportunity presented itself. In some cases it was farm servants—‘the enemy within’ in Newton-King’s words—who instigated attacks or acts of sabotage. Masters’ fear of betrayal goes a long way toward explaining pervasive cruelty toward Khoisan servants and why desertion was so severely punished.<sup>40</sup>

Colonists responded to San aggression with individual acts of slaughter and the massacre of bands. They also organized retaliatory raids by armed, mounted, militia units known as commandos. Beyond the limited reach of the VOC garrison in Cape Town, the commando was the main institution of military force at the Cape under Dutch rule and the main instrument of war against indigenous peoples. The first official commando was organized in 1676 against the Khoikhoi of the southwestern Cape.<sup>41</sup> Whereas initially commandos were organized by the DEIC and consisted of Company soldiers and servants as well as colonists, by 1715 officially sanctioned commandos consisting entirely of colonists and their dependents, and led by frontier farmers, were being formed.<sup>42</sup> The institution evolved through the eighteenth century to meet the military needs of trekboer society.

Commandos mobilized men between the ages of 16 and 60 who were organized by district, elected their own officers, and were required to attend annual drills. These militias mounted state sanctioned, punitive expeditions led by *veldwachtmeesters* (field sergeants), officials who represented the VOC government at local level, and were themselves prominent frontier farmers. They were appointed

by the *landdrost* (magistrate), the chief administrator of the district, who was far removed from the frontier. *Veldvachtmeesters* had the authority to raise commandos on their own and only needed to report their activities to the *landdrost* afterwards. *Veldwachtmeesters* thus had a good deal of freedom to act and were usually extremely influential because they controlled ammunition supplies, could requisition provisions, and conscript members. The VOC government provided commandos with powder, shot, and usually guns for Khoikhoi members, and gave instructions regarding its aims and conduct. Instructions were often perfunctory and ignored by commandos. In addition to its principal functions of defending trekboer society and crushing indigenous resistance, commandos served as a means of acquiring forced labour.<sup>43</sup>

Unofficial commandos, that could be mobilized rapidly and that in effect allowed farmers to take the law into their own hands, were a common occurrence along the frontier. Unofficial commandos were posses formed on an ad hoc basis, usually for the purpose of hot pursuit, but also for land grabs, pre-emptive attacks against San considered a threat, or for razzias to round up forced labour. From the point of view of the frontier farmer it was essential that they be allowed to react immediately to San attacks and cattle raids as it might take weeks to mobilize an official commando. While leaders of unofficial commandos were required to submit a report to the *veldwachtmeester* upon their return, it is clear that there were many trekboer forays against Khoisan that went unreported. Historian Nigel Penn estimates that several hundred such unofficial sorties were mounted along the frontier during the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup> Though most informal commandos consisted of smaller parties in pursuit of stock raiders there were some substantive, well co-ordinated, informal expeditions as deadly as any of the official commandos.<sup>45</sup>

Besides countering guerrilla tactics of the Khoisan, this flexibility and devolution of authority directly served the interests of the VOC. It allowed the DEIC government to withdraw from military activity on the frontier by giving colonists a free hand in dealing with indigenous peoples. Being a commercial company concerned with its bottom line and servicing its maritime empire, the VOC was more loathe than most colonial governments to incur costs arising from frontier conflict. That it at no point managed to run the Cape Colony at a profit reinforced this reluctance.<sup>46</sup> The commando system fulfilled its need for a cheap form of frontier defence because trekboers bore the greater part of the overall cost of conducting commando raids. Members were not paid and brought their own provisions. They used their own guns, horses and wagons, all of which were costly items and suffered severe wear and tear on commando.<sup>47</sup> Although it tried to curb, and in some cases punished, trekboer excesses against indigenes the VOC generally overlooked the abuses of commandos and vigilante action by colonists because the system suited its interests so well. The VOC abetted settler violence by recognizing individual trekboer title to land confiscated from indigenes and derived an income from it through loan farm rentals.

As frontier conflict escalated through the eighteenth century going on commando for a few weeks a year became an accepted part of life for many trekboers

and their dependents. From 1739 the VOC made commando service compulsory for frontier farmers but allowed them to send a *knecht* (white employee) or a Khoi-khoi servant instead. Wealthier farmers or those not directly threatened were usually not eager to go on commando. Some evaded militia service and many sent substitutes. Farmers resented these arduous tours of duty because it consumed valuable resources, meant weeks of discomfort in rough terrain and insalubrious weather, and exposed them to danger. While they were away their farms and families were vulnerable to attack and insubordination by servants.<sup>48</sup> Trekboers nevertheless went on commando because they perceived there to be little alternative to eliminating the threat posed by San. There were some advantages to going on commando as it held out the promise of augmenting their workforce with captives, the possibility of gaining a share of recovered livestock and opening up new areas for settlement. Official commandos against San generally operated in late winter and early spring unless there was reason to take the field at another time. Not only was there enough water and fodder for horses in the veld but it was also a quiet period in the agricultural cycle that made it easier for crop-growing farmers to join these offensives. An added advantage was that from August through to October it was still cold enough for San bands to light fires for warmth, making it easy to locate their camps.<sup>49</sup>

In the spiral of attack and counter-attack in these frontier confrontations trekboers enjoyed huge military advantages. Most obviously, this superiority rested on trekboer access to firearms, their flintlock rifles being far superior to the stone-age weapons of the San. Whereas San arrows could accurately be shot at a distance of sixty or seventy metres, the front-loading muskets of the colonists were effective at more than twice that range.<sup>50</sup> This commonly allowed trekboers to pick off hunter-gatherer foes at a safe distance. Muskets fired in volleys were extremely effective when opponents were massed together and allowed relatively small commandos to inflict severe casualties on much larger Khoisan raiding parties. Most trekboers also carried pistols and sabres.<sup>51</sup>

San were able to acquire a fair number of guns from absconding servants by raiding farm houses or taking them from armed Khoikhoi herders in the employ of trekboers. Although used against settlers from time to time, these firearms did little to alter the balance of power on the frontier partly because Khoisan acquired relatively few guns, and it took some skill and practice to use them effectively. Importantly, they did not have ready access to supplies of shot, gunpowder or flints.<sup>52</sup> That indigenes were able to lay their hands on guns nevertheless caused a great deal of anxiety amongst colonists and the VOC government, the latter on various occasions prohibiting the possession of arms by Khoisan. There were isolated occasions, particularly toward the end of the eighteenth century, when Khoisan resisters were able to muster sufficient fire power to repel commando attacks.<sup>53</sup>

Importantly, the speed and power of horses gave trekboers the ascendancy in mobility, both in covering longer distances rapidly as well as in closer encounters. To paraphrase historian William Keleher Storey, the combination of guns and horses allowed commandos to travel like cavalry but attack like infantry, a

pairing particularly potent in the open country and low scrub of the arid interior. A small contingent of armed, mounted trekboers were thus capable of defeating a much larger throng of San on an open plain, but not in mountainous terrain.<sup>54</sup> Horses were invaluable in instances of hot pursuit where farmers needed to catch up with fleeing adversaries. Few San tried to steal or ride horses themselves but killed them whenever they could, whether in battle, ambushing them in pastures or burning down stables.<sup>55</sup>

Despite being at a considerable disadvantage, San nevertheless put up fierce and protracted resistance to colonial invasion and remained defiant. For example, in 1715, in one of the earlier clashes between colonists and San raiders near Tulbagh in which several robbers were killed, it was reported that, 'the San audaciously promised to return and said that the farmers would not be able to catch them as they would hide in the highest mountains.'<sup>56</sup> This was not an isolated incident. In 1731 a Khoisan stock raider who had eluded a commando that had killed or wounded most of his confederates shouted from a cliff top that the cattle they had killed and maimed were lost to the boers, that there were still many Bushmen, and that they would not leave the Dutch in peace.<sup>57</sup> In 1754 a Roggeveld commando, unable to dislodge a San band ensconced behind a rocky outcrop withdrew in the evening to jibes that the boers 'would not be able to hide their stock anywhere that [the San] could not find them.'<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the most telling instance of defiance is provided by the San leader Koerikei, whose name means bullet dodger, and who had lived with trekboers long enough to learn Dutch. This incident was narrated by commando leader, David Schalk van der Merwe, in November 1777 to Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon, commander of the Dutch garrison in Cape Town, who kept a journal of his travels into the interior in the 1770s and 1780s. Koerikei, having successfully evaded van der Merwe's commando, stood on a cliff out of range of their muskets and shouted, 'What are you doing in my territory? You occupy all the places where eland and other game live. Why do you not remain where the sun sets, where you first were?' When asked why he did not live in peace with colonists as he had done before, Koerikei replied that he did not want to lose the land of his birth, that he would kill their herdsman, and chase them all away. As he went off he added that it would be seen who would win.<sup>59</sup>

Not only were they defiant but there were times when San—perhaps more accurately Khoisan—were able to band together to provide formidable opposition to commandos. For example, in December 1728, twenty-three cattle of wealthy farmer Jan Valck were raided in the Sandveld along the Cape west coast by a group of San. When a hastily assembled informal commando gave chase they caught up with a gang of 300 plunderers who challenged them to a fight and attacked them with spears and arrows. In the ensuing exchange the firearms of the trekboers proved decisive. At least twelve San were killed and the rest put to flight. Eighty-five cattle in all were recovered.<sup>60</sup> In October 1738 the landrost of Stellenbosch reported that when a group of farmers went in hot pursuit of San cattle rustlers they found that the gang of one hundred entrenched in a dense thicket was too large for them to attack. They sent a Khoikhoi servant to

ask why the San were stealing trekboer stock. The response was that they did this to chase the boers out of their land and that this was just the beginning. They would do this to all the boers living there and, if the boers did not leave, they would burn all the wheat growing in their fields as soon as it ripened so that they would be forced to retreat.<sup>61</sup> In the 1770s there were numerous reports of groups of San several hundred strong congregating on the frontier with hostile intent. These assemblages were far larger than would have occurred in pre-colonial San society and was clearly a response to settler encroachment. Trekboers felt seriously threatened by these gangs.<sup>62</sup>

As the clients and servants of trekboers, Khoikhoi were frequently complicit in violence against San and many participated in commando raids as surrogates for reluctant trekboers. One reason for this animus was that it was often Khoikhoi servants who bore the brunt of San attacks and many were killed while looking after farmers' herds. For example, in the Camdeboo district alone the records show that 107 herdsmen were murdered and twenty-four guns stolen from them in the eighteen months from mid-1786. Those Khoikhoi dependents who were allowed to keep stock were equally threatened by San raids. Some commandos, particularly in the latter part of the eighteenth century had a majority of Khoikhoi members. There was some incentive for Khoikhoi to go on commando in that they often got a share of the spoils, albeit smaller than that of trekboers. They might get some of the recovered livestock or captured San women as sexual partners.<sup>63</sup> Khoikhoi were skilled scouts and trackers, and were routinely sent into dangerous situations where trekboers were not prepared to risk their own skins. Many Khoikhoi participants, in the words of Nigel Penn, probably made the calculation that, 'It was better to be a low-status member of a commando than a defenceless object of its wrath.'<sup>64</sup> The relationship between San and Khoikhoi was, however, complex. Independent Khoikhoi pastoralist communities beyond the colonial frontier were often in conflict with San who raided their stock. Hunter-gatherers were sometimes also taken up as clients in Khoikhoi society and it was not unusual for dispossessed Khoikhoi to join San in resisting colonial intrusion.<sup>65</sup>

From about 1770 through to the late 1790s official commandos against the San were organized annually, often more frequently, and generally consisted of between forty and 100 armed men on horseback. The largest of these search-and-destroy missions, the General Commando of 1774, comprised 250 men. The preferred modus operandi of the commando was to locate San camps by means of their fires, surround the sleeping kraal under cover of darkness and then attack at dawn. With the advantages of guns, horses, numerical superiority and surprise on their side, San encampments stood little chance against commando attacks. The small size of hunting bands, which rarely had more than eight males of fighting age, was a boon for trekboers because it meant that the San were heavily outnumbered in most hostile engagements.

While commandos generally destroyed San kraals one at a time, there were a number of larger massacres. Swedish naturalist, Carl Thunberg, who lived at the Cape for three years in the first half of the 1770s and led three expeditions into the interior, reported the massacre of 186 San in the Roggeveld region in



1765.<sup>66</sup> A decade later, in early August 1775, *veldwachtmeester* Adriaan van Jaarsveld used a deceitful manoeuvre with devastating effect against San along a section of the Seekoei River valley on the north-eastern frontier. Van Jaarsveld was at the head of a commando of seventy-seven men and intent on retaliation for stock raids in the Sneeu-berg in the preceding months. Posing as a friendly hunting party, they obligingly shot several hippopotomi which they left on the river bank for the San to consume, and moved on downstream. Guessing correctly that San from the surrounding area would congregate around the kill for a feast through the night, they returned stealthily under cover of darkness. In the surprise attack at dawn van Jaarsveld's commando killed 122 San and took twenty-one prisoner. Only five managed to escape by swimming across the hippo pool.<sup>67</sup> The following year, in March 1776, *veldwachtmeester* Jacob de Klerk of the Nieuweveld judged that his commando was too small to engage a sizeable contingent of 'robbers' ensconced in fortified caves. He called for reinforcements from the Sneeu-berg and 111 San were killed by the combined commandos.<sup>68</sup> In September 1792 an unusually large agglomeration of San raiders were attacked by a large commando set up by the VOC to clear the Nieuweveld of San after a particularly audacious raid on the herds of the van Reenen brothers in the Leeugamka region. An estimated 300 San were killed and fifteen captured in this assault.<sup>69</sup>

While many San bands were exterminated singly and with little risk to commando members, it was not always that easy for commandos because it was difficult to hide their presence in open country or because San sometimes lived in naturally fortified locations. San could retreat to remote, inhospitable areas where horses often could not follow for lack of water or the ruggedness of the terrain and where it became difficult to track them over stony ground. Mountainous country provided greater opportunities for defence as San could take refuge in caves or behind boulders. This could result in protracted stand-offs in which the San usually came off second best if trekboers were prepared to lay siege to them. If prevailing winds were favourable, the commando members might light fires at cave entrances to smoke out the fugitives or they might advance behind a lattice of shields. San on occasion rolled boulders down onto advancing trekboers from high ground. But mountains also held perils for the San as they were sometimes caught up against sheer cliff faces or the edges of precipices, or were cornered in gorges.<sup>70</sup> The essential dynamic of frontier violence was thus one of trekboer encroachment followed by San resistance and retaliatory massacres by commandos.

### **The case for genocide**

In commando raids San men were, with few exceptions, put to death on the spot while many women and especially children were taken captive. Adult males were killed because they were regarded as extremely dangerous and as not having much economic value. They were generally perceived to be irredeemable savages who could not be schooled in any useful activity. The chances of escape and revenge on the frontier were simply too great for many farmers to contemplate taking them as

forced labourers. Guarding and looking after a sizeable contingent of adult male prisoners while the commando moved about the Wildernis was difficult and potentially dangerous.<sup>71</sup> San men were regarded as particularly menacing because they gave no quarter in combat and generally fought to the death. San fighters often displayed remarkable fearlessness, throwing themselves into suicidal assaults against attacking commandos in the vain hope of allowing women and children a chance to escape. This is not to romanticise the San response as the historical record is clear about the ferocity of San resistance.<sup>72</sup> Surrender seems not to have been an option many San men considered—but then it was rarely on offer by commandos. Besides being a reaction to their desperate situation, Nigel Penn partly attributes their uncompromising resistance to the San's bond to their territory being of such an intensely spiritual nature that 'to lose the land was to lose literally everything.'<sup>73</sup>

Women and children, especially the former, were also often massacred. The more brutal trekboers were not beyond smashing the heads of children against rocks or skinning the breasts of women they had killed to make tobacco pouches.<sup>74</sup> Women not killed were taken as servants in trekboer households or as concubines for Khoikhoi dependents. Besides being used as domestic drudges they could, with some training, help with the making of commodities such as candles, soap and hides that trekboers sold on the Cape market.<sup>75</sup> Female captives had added value in that their offspring would in time augment the farmer's labour supply. San children were prized because they were more easily controlled and assimilated into the trekboer economy as menial labourers. They could, from a young age, be trained to work as herders and do a variety of tasks around the farmstead. The vulnerability of child captives and children born into captivity made them an ultra-exploitable class of labourers. From 1775, what had for over half a century effectively operated as a system of child slavery, was institutionalized by the VOC through the *inboekstelsel* (apprenticeship system) whereby these children, or *inboeselings* (apprentices), were bound to masters until the age of twenty-five.<sup>76</sup> Since few San knew their precise ages and the colonial state was hardly in a position to police the situation on the frontier, farmers were generally able to coerce apprentices to remain in servitude until they were much older, and often for life.<sup>77</sup> The bartering and gifting of San, especially children, was a common practice on the frontier.<sup>78</sup> Captured San were slaves in every sense except that they could not be sold openly.<sup>79</sup> This much was apparent from one of the demands of Swellendam farmers who had gone into revolt against DEIC rule in 1795. The rebels insisted that they be allowed to keep San captives and their descendants as slaves in perpetuity, and trade them without impediment.<sup>80</sup>

Racism was an important determinant in the inhumane treatment and extreme violence visited upon San. There can be little doubt that trekboers from the outset saw themselves as unequivocally different and superior to indigenous peoples. Settlers signalled this perception by referring to themselves as 'Christian' in opposition to indigenes. Thus, commando leader Adriaan van Jaarsveld in 1775, for example, used the term as a racial descriptor when characterizing his force as consisting of '... 46 Christians and 31 Hottentots.' Similarly, in 1774 the war

council planning the General Commando described the force it was hoping to mobilize as potentially consisting of ‘100 Christians and 150 Bastards and Hottentots.’<sup>81</sup> Settler racial attitudes were pithily summed up by landdrost Alberti from Uitenhage in 1805:

According to the unfortunate notion prevalent here, a heathen is not actually human, but at the same time he cannot really be classed among the animals. He is, therefore, a sort of creature not known elsewhere. His word can in no wise be believed, and only by violent measures can he be brought to do good and shun evil.<sup>82</sup>

San were usually judged to be on the very lowest rung of the racial hierarchy, certainly below the despised Khoikhoi. Being hunter-gatherers, San appeared to be living in a feral state not far removed from animals. Their nomadic way of life, phenotypical differences, degree of nakedness, apparent lack of religion or social organization beyond the family put them at the polar opposite of the trekboer ideal of humanity. To settlers the San lacked many of the elements that characterized human society including basic concepts pertaining to private property, law, government, or God. It appeared to many that the San did not even speak an intelligible language, a key feature separating humanity from animals. This excessively negative stereotyping added up to a questioning, if not denial, of their humanity.<sup>83</sup> Not surprisingly, San as well as other indigenous peoples were referred to as ‘*schepselen*’ (creatures, or more literally, objects of creation) which reveals a polygenist mindset amongst colonists.<sup>84</sup> Even amongst those from whom one would expect a degree of sympathy there was often little but jaundiced pre-judgement. For example, Johannes Kicherer, who led the first mission to the San, caricatured every aspect of their culture as being so barbarous and repugnant as to place them ‘on a level with brute creation.’<sup>85</sup>

Although economic competition in a situation of acute resource scarcity was the main reason behind trekboer violence toward San, this dehumanization, no doubt, made it easier for colonists to justify occupying San land, enslaving and killing them. What is more, trekboer isolation and their small numbers fed feelings of insecurity and ruthless behaviour toward enemies. The San’s fierce resistance only intensified the fear and hatred felt toward them. It should thus come as no surprise that many frontiersmen shot San with impunity, arbitrarily and often on sight. Writing in 1775 traveller Anders Sparrman related that, ‘Does a colonist at any time get sight of a Bushman, he takes fire immediately, and spirits up his horse and dogs, in order to hunt him with more ardour and fury than he would a wolf or any other wild beast.’<sup>86</sup> Louis de Grandprè, a French army officer who visited the Cape in 1786–87, accused trekboers of being even more bloodthirsty than the conquistadors because ‘they have hunted the Boschis as one would hunt hares; their dogs are trained for it.’<sup>87</sup> John Barrow, who came to the Cape in 1797 as private secretary to governor Lord Macartney and travelled extensively through the interior, cited the example of a frontier farmer who casually mentioned ‘with as much composure and indifference as if he were speaking of partridges’ that he had as a matter of course shot four San he had encountered

along the road.<sup>88</sup> Gratuitous violence of this sort against San was common on the frontier and continued into the nineteenth century.<sup>89</sup>

It seems clear that trekboer economic interests, anxiety about the dangers of frontier life, the dehumanization of San, and repeated exposure to violence against indigenes, all contributed to trekboer indifference to the suffering of San and a normalization of brutality toward them. As conflict with the San mounted through the eighteenth century trekboer society also developed an exterminatory attitude toward the San—that they were little better than vermin and San society as needing, even deserving, to be eradicated.<sup>90</sup> W. M. Macmillan, generally acknowledged as the leading South African historian of his generation, in 1927 pithily summarized these attitudes in *The Cape Colour Question*, ‘The well-established colonial tradition came to be that the Bushman is a wild animal to be shot at sight; and unhappily it was on this inadequate theory that the Bushman of earlier days was usually dealt with and destroyed.’<sup>91</sup> Colonel Richard Collins, who toured the interior in 1808–9 on behalf of the governor to advise him on ending frontier conflict, noted that prior to the conciliatory policies implemented by the British administration from 1798 onwards, ‘The total extinction of the Bosjesmen race is actually stated to have been at one time confidently hoped for’ amongst frontier settler communities.<sup>92</sup>

The exterminatory impulse behind commando activity is clearly apparent in the way these state-sponsored expeditions were conducted. Despite often being given instructions not to attack San of peaceful disposition nor to harm the defenceless,<sup>93</sup> commandos in effect set out to annihilate any San kraals they encountered, often with the express purpose of completely clearing particular areas of them. Kraals were attacked without provocation and people were slaughtered for no other reason than that they were San, or perceived to be such.<sup>94</sup> San not killed were taken captive. The largest of these offensives, the General Commando of 1774, that broke up into three squads and scoured the entire frontier zone for San kraals from mid-August to early November, reported 503 San killed and 239 taken prisoner at the cost of one settler death and a few minor injuries.<sup>95</sup> The larger official commandos of the latter part of the eighteenth century typically resulted in hundreds of San deaths and captive ratios of one in three or four of those killed. Referring to the north-eastern frontier Colonel Collins reported that a former commando leader had informed him ‘that within a period of six years the parties under his orders had either killed or taken 3,200 of these unfortunate creatures; another has stated to me that the actions in which he had been engaged had caused the destruction of 2,700.’<sup>96</sup> George Thompson, an English merchant who travelled through the interior in 1823, spoke to a Commandant Nel who told him that ‘within the last thirty years he had been upon thirty-two commandos against the Bushmen, in which great numbers had been shot, and their children carried away into the Colony. On one of these expeditions, not less than two hundred Bushmen were massacred.’<sup>97</sup> Government records of the Graaff-Reinet magistracy show that in the last decade of Dutch rule commandos killed at least 2,504 San and took 669 prisoner, a set of statistics that historian P. J. van der Merwe correctly describes as ‘definitely very incomplete.’<sup>98</sup> It is

apparent that commandos of the Dutch colonial period targeting San, particularly after 1770, operated as mobile killing squads.

Commando raids clearly had a catastrophic demographic impact on Cape San society in the last three decades of the eighteenth century when they became a regular feature of frontier life. At a conservative estimate an average of 300–400 San were killed annually and about 100 taken captive from about 1770 until 1798 when the British administration made a concerted effort to put an end to frontier violence. Official figures significantly underestimate San casualties because commandos did not make full disclosure of killings, captives taken, or violence inflicted. Importantly such figures do not reflect casualties of informal commandos and gratuitous violence by trekboers. Significant numbers of San would also have died due to their loss of access to resources and disruption caused by the fighting. Such loss of life would have been particularly severe in times of drought not only because food would have been scarce but also because an ineluctable feature of life as a forager is that one at any given time needs to be within walking distance of a source of water. Often being displaced or cut off from traditional supplies of food and water postponed death for such bands until the next drought, a regular occurrence in the Cape thirstland. Difficult to quantify, but of no mean demographic significance, was the impact of sustained conflict and chaos on fertility rates and the ability of San society to reproduce itself biologically.

The effacement of San identities formed a significant part of the genocidal process. Those assimilated to trekboer society as forced labourers were usually referred to as ‘Hottentots’ (Khoikhoi) and in time many came to see themselves as such. This would particularly have been the case with child captives for whom their experience as hunter-gatherers would not have been all that formative and who would have acquired elements of colonial culture more easily than adults. In the latter decades of the eighteenth century the already ambiguous distinctions between Khoikhoi and San, and between forager and herder, had become even more blurred in the eyes of frontier society as increasing numbers of San were taken up as labourers, as Khoikhoi joined up with San resisters, and as the status and freedom of Khoikhoi in the service of farmers declined. Generally speaking, in trekboer society ‘Bosjesman’ referred to independent hunter-gatherers living in the ‘wild’ whereas ‘Hottentot’ included ‘tame Bushmen’ in colonial service. Indeed, indigenes were often referred to as ‘Bushmen-Hottentots’ which indicates both uncertainties about the identities of the people in question as well as ambiguities around these categories.<sup>99</sup> Anders Stockenstom, *landdrost* of the frontier district of Graaff-Reinet, in 1807 reported to the governor that in his district most of the ‘Hottentot’ labourers were ‘generated from the Bosjesmen.’ Fifteen years later his son Andries, who succeeded his father as *landdrost*, confirmed that in general San bound to farmers ‘were confounded with the Hottentots.’<sup>100</sup>

While commandos generally operated with local exterminatory intent, the authorities in Cape Town habitually cautioned restraint. This changed in 1777 which marks a radicalization in the attitude of the Cape government toward the San. Up to that point the VOC government held some hope that the San threat could be

contained either through a show of force, as with the General Commando, or through some peace initiative such as negotiating with San leaders. By 1777 it appears to have lost hope of any such outcome as a result of escalating San attacks.<sup>101</sup> Whereas the governor previously gave instructions to commandos to subdue only hostile San, to spare the defenceless and take captives as they deemed fit, for the first time on 5 June 1777 the Council of Policy explicitly sanctioned the eradication of San wherever and whenever they were encountered.<sup>102</sup> If ever there was a ‘genocidal moment’—to borrow Dirk Moses’ term<sup>103</sup>—in Cape Dutch settler relations with the San, this was it.

Two years previously, commando leader Adriaan van der Walt had asked permission to kill all San encountered rather than take any prisoners because of the danger they posed. A year later Godlieb Rudolph Opperman, leader of the General Commando, made a similar request, asking permission to give the San ‘no quarter’ and complaining that executive restrictions hampered their effectiveness. Although the VOC government demurred on both these occasions it did not take long for it to shift to an explicitly exterminatory policy.<sup>104</sup> Under pressure from frontier farmers to act decisively in the face of intensifying San offensives, governor van Plettenberg decided to endorse a policy of systematic extermination of those San within reach of commandos.<sup>105</sup> This shift was of greater symbolic import than of practical significance in that the governor was not so much implementing a harsher killing regimen than sanctioning what was already happening on the frontier. The governor and Council of Policy were prepared to leave San to the mercy of commandos by withdrawing any pretence of restraint and acceding to the requests of commando leaders that they be given the freedom to deal with the San as they saw fit.

The VOC government’s exterminatory stance was subsequently ameliorated. Unlike most of its citizens on the frontier, government officials in Cape Town generally regarded the San as human, though they qualified this view heavily. A 1792 resolution by the Council of Policy summarized its stance succinctly, ‘... the creatures against whom these measures are aimed, however wild and savage they may be, belong to the class of humanity and therefore their lives need to be spared as much as possible.’<sup>106</sup> This same resolution offered a reward of fifteen rixdollars for every San and ten rixdollars for children under seven captured on officially sanctioned commandos in the hope that this would mitigate violence against them. Predictably this spurred some frontiersmen to hunt San purely for profit.<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion

Although settlers enjoyed great advantages in frontier conflict and foraging societies were not able to match the organized fire power of the commando, it was not at all easy for trekboers to defeat this enemy comprehensively or to annihilate San society completely. Trekboers were thin on the ground, commandos could operate only sporadically, usually for a few weeks at a time, and their impact was often inconclusive. That San society consisted of a large number of small, self-sufficient, social units scattered over a vast, often inhospitable landscape operated



greatly in its favour. In addition, the San resisted fiercely, using guerrilla tactics successfully. While the Cape San peoples were not by any means defeated by the time the British took control of the Cape Colony in 1795, the process of eradication was far advanced even though it might not have been apparent to contemporaries. Not only had the San suffered drastic loss of land and life but its ability to reproduce itself culturally and biologically had been severely compromised. Despite relatively accommodating British colonial policy, Cape San society nevertheless suffered almost complete destruction during the course of the nineteenth century in an incremental process of encroachment on their remaining land, enforced labour incorporation, and periodic massacre. The extinction confidently hoped for on the frontier in the late eighteenth century took the better part of another century to be accomplished.

In cases where pastoralists producing for capitalist markets invaded the territory of hunter-gatherers the global economic system tended to bring together the practices of metropolitan and colonial governments, the interests of providers of capital and consumers of commodities, and the agency of local actors ranging from military commanders to graziers in remote outposts in ways that fostered the violent dissolution of native society.<sup>108</sup> With the Cape San, the diverse impulses driving Dutch colonial expansion through the eighteenth century radicalized settler animosity into an exterminatory campaign against them. These observations are not in the least meant to diminish either the agency of foraging societies engaged in frontier conflict or the reality that settler society at times had a rather tenuous hold on power. It was, after all, hunter-gatherer resistance that usually precipitated extirpatory offensives against them. These comments are intended rather to indicate that, in the final analysis, such struggles were inherently very uneven and that the assault on the land, lives and culture of hunter-gatherer peoples was in most cases genocidal in nature. Because of its small scale and relative lack of social differentiation, almost any form of organised violence against foraging peoples took on the aspect of total war, and violence on any appreciable scale started assuming genocidal proportions. That there was likely to be a blurring of distinctions between warriors and non-combatants in hunter-gatherer society, and that settler violence was often indiscriminate rather than targeted at fighters or stock raiders, made this doubly so.<sup>109</sup> This meant that in sustained clashes between foragers and capitalist stock-keepers genocide seems not so much an aberration as normative. The fate of the Cape San, Australian Aborigines, as well as hunter-gathering peoples that once lived in what are now stock farming areas of the United States, Argentina and Brazil, amongst others, testify to this. The counter example of San communities in Botswana's Ghanzi district<sup>110</sup> cautions against making absolute claims in this regard, though.

## Notes and references

- 1 J. Crwys-Williams, ed., *Penguin Dictionary of South African Quotations* (Sandton: Penguin, 1999), p 62.
- 2 VOC stands for its Dutch title *de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*.
- 3 See Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers and the Shaping of the World* (New York: North Point Press, 2000) especially pp 6–7, 143–150.

- 4 Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State, Vol 2: The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (New York: I. B. Taurus and Co., 2005), pp 77–78; John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), pp 147–151; Brody, *Other Side of Eden*, pp 79–86, 112–114; Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol 8, No 4, 2006, p 395; Patrick Wolfe, 'Structure and event: settler colonialism, time and the question of genocide', in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), p 104.
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### Notes on contributor

**Mohamed Adhikari** teaches in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has published widely on coloured identity and politics in twentieth century South Africa and has recently developed an interest in colonialism and genocide.



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