The Disappearance of the Drakensberg San

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PEOPLE OF THE ELAND

ROCK PAINTINGS OF THE DRAKENSBERG BUSHMEN AS A REFLECTION OF THEIR LIFE AND THOUGHT

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Drakensberg San – N//η (People of the Eland)
San in Mnweni Valley

- 5,000 years
- Oldest dated paintings – 3,000 years
- Trade, hunting, and intermarriage for 400 years with amaZizi
Archaeology

- Archaeology – Aron Mazel 1978-1996
- Rock art – Meridy Pfotenhauer and Justine Windjes – 1996-2010
Cape San – late 18th century
amaZizi –
Miya clan 1500s
(from Wright and Mazel 2007)
amaNgwane –1830s
(from Wright and Mazel 2007)
San raiders – 1840s – 1870s
(from Patricia Vinnicombe 1976 – *People of the Eland*)
Cultural extinction

To lose a culture is to lose something of ourselves.

(Wade Davis 2009 – The Wayfinders)
Extinction of San in South Africa - Politicians

Thabo Mbeki (May 8, 1996 – “I am an African” speech)

*I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide . . . they who, as a people, perished in the result.*
Historians

In Natal a few stories have survived of individual Bushmen being found in the Drakensberg foothills in the early 1900s... but it was in these early years of the twentieth century that the Bushmen of the eastern highlands finally died out.

(John Wright 1971:180)
By the end of the 19th century there were no San hunter-gatherers left in the Natal Drakensberg. Some unconfirmed accounts suggest that isolated San may have survived into the 20th century, but ostensibly by the 1880s their occupation of the Natal Drakensberg was over.

(Aron Mazel 1992:758, 760)
But . . .

- 1878 – honeymoon couple saw San north of Mnweni
- 1926 – hunting kit found in valley south of Mnweni
- 1930 – rancher killed by poisoned arrow near Kamberg

(Prins 2009)
A hunting kit found in Eland Cave in 1926. 
Source: Natal Museum
(from Wright and Mazel 2007)
Oral history in South Africa

Sensitive issues in Mnweni:

- apartheid
- HIV/AIDS
- ethnic violence
- politics (traditional/ party politics)
- secret/sacred knowledge
- marijuana trade
Oral history

Pieter Jolly (1996; 2007) – interviews with San descendants in southern Drakensberg and Lesotho

Mnweni Cultural Centre staff and guides
Magagetshane Mohlakwane Miya and granddaughters
Thomas Miya
- Great grandfather
- hunted with San – 1850s – 1860s
Mtatata (Jim) Miya
- amaZizi settlement of eBusingatha area
  displaced San – ca. 1850s
- Great grandfather saw San – ca. 1880s
Maswazi Miya – taught to make San bow and arrows by father

- Great grandfather hunted with San and witnessed rock art painting – ca. 1880s
Mgwazeni Hlongwane
- Grandfather saw San ca. 1890-1910 on south side of Mnweni valley
Elliott Nxumalo
- Grandparents saw entire families of San in upper valley – ca. 1900
Chief Mthetwa Miya (amaZizi *inkosi*)
- Grandfather observed San family doing a dance to celebrate a hunt - ca. 1900-1910
- amaZizi hunted with San 1700 -1800s for eland
- leads an annual “royal hunt”
Themba Ndaba

- Observed campfires of San in rockshelters in upper valley – 1910-1920
Maswazi Chebekhulu
- Grandfather and parents saw San families on south side of Mnewni valley – ca. 1900-1920s
Ephraim Dlamini
- Observed old San individuals in upper valley – ca. 1940s
San in Mnweni Valley – oral history findings

• San in rockshelters in southern and upper Mnweni valley in late 19th / early 20th century

• San hunted with amaZizi (i.e. Miya) – 1700s-1900

• San travelled through and encamped in valley – ca. 1910-1920

• Last reported San ca. 1930-1940s
Kamberg Rock Art Centre
San renaissance in South Africa

• “Coloured” communities = Khoe-San identity

• Zulu community (Duma clan – Kamberg) = San identity

Why?

Post-apartheid – safe, Indigeneity honoured + for psychological, political, material benefits (e.g. land claims, cultural tourism)

(Besten 2009; Francis 2009, 2010; Lee 2003)
Today - San in Mnweni valley

- San have been embedded culturally (and probably genetically) in amaZizi and amaNgwane
- Denial of San ancestry (proudly Zulu + no perceived benefits)
- San rock art and shelters – rightful owners are amaZizi and amaNgwane
- San did not become “extinct”
Bawinile Mtolo – amaZizi rock art guide
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