“With their backs to the wall . . . they were fighting like the cornered mongoose”: Contextualizing Kalahari San violence and warfare historically

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Abstract

The title’s epigram derives from Namibian colonial writings on the San and frames the substance of the paper. Its depiction of the !Kung as intensely violent and bellicose resonates with and is frequently referenced by contemporary writings on the allegedly bred-in-the-bone disposition for war and violence of not only the San but of hunter-gatherers and humans in general. The accuracy of colonial accounts on the San as instances of ethnographic reportage is examined revealing a number of shortcomings, prime among them the hyperbole and projection of their authors’ preconceived notions derived from the Zeitgeist of colonial settler society. The paper also contextualizes the violence that was perpetrated by some of the San peoples of colonial Namibia (and neighbouring Botswana). The context was one of political turmoil and upheaval deriving from the presence of intrusive settlers. This politicized and even militarized some of the indigenous San population, undermining a peace-prone pattern of sociality marked by egalitarianism and sharing.

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1 I am grateful to Professors Richard Lee, Kirk Endicott and Andrew Lyons for reading the manuscript of an earlier version of my paper and their feedback on its content. Versions of this paper, each of them dealing with different substantive or theoretical issues, were presented at the 10th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS 10) in Liverpool in June 2013, at the conferences of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) at Chicago and the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) in Toronto in November 2013 and May 2014, respectively. The second conference paper yielded a publication (Guenther 2014b) which is complementary to the present article, dealing fully with matters which are dealt with only tangentially in the paper at hand (and vice versa). The matters in the former paper are the historical contingency of San raiding and feuding, San sociality in pre-settler invasion as well as prehistoric times and the structural and ideational factors for San peaceableness. The present paper deals with the critical (con)textual analysis of colonial writings about the Bushmen and traces Wilhelm’s passage through
leaving behind one dead. Even though both parties have immediately left their respective camps and established different dwelling-places, the blood of the slain victim cries out for revenge. The related bands send word to each other and develop a plan of attack. As it happened, a Bushman from the enemy party has returned once again to the abandoned camp site to fetch a lost object. The scouts of the other party have found his tracks and have ascertained the direction of the other camp. After their return all of the men and youth capable of bearing arms assemble. Often young men, who happen to be at the camp looking for a bride, will participate in the campaign. Armed with spears, arrows and bows, kirris and axes, they set out toward the enemy camp. Carefully the scouts continue their tracking and look for the camp. What is required now is to locate the camp site precisely, without the enemy noticing. That they are nearby is determined by the tracks of camp residents searching for veld plants. The time has thus come for hiding and for awaiting the arrival of the main force. It soon arrives and everyone lies still, avoiding the slightest noise. No one in the camp is aware of the looming danger. With the sunset the women return, singing, and proceed with the preparation of the evening meal. The noise of stamping of the mortars, with which they grind the food, carries widely and reveals to the enemy the presence of the camp residents. Chatting amiably, the families sit together and eat their meal. The sunset has long faded and the night envelopes all in deep darkness. Here and there a camp fire flares up once more. A small child cries itself to sleep.

In the meantime the enemy approaches from all sides, noiselessly, like snakes. However, the attack is not to take place now but at dawn. Ever more tightly the noose is drawn around the camp. Still, one or another of the camp residents is awake. The dogs are not yet asleep and must not be disturbed. Quietly the night passes. The zodiacal light announces the new day. Everyone lies in their deepest sleep; even the dogs have lost their alertness and, freezing from the cold, have lain down near the glimmering fire. Closer and closer creeps the enemy. Now the morning starts to break. Suddenly the hapless sleepers are rushed from all sides. With piercing shrieks the opponents come forward with raised spears. Here and there one of the suddenly awakened men will reach for his weapon. But soon he collapses. There a man defends himself with his spear; however, he is fighting against superior strength and he falls, pierced with several spear thrusts. In horror mothers gather up their children and attempt to escape. However, cruelly and without mercy, they are slain. Here a mother was successful in rescuing her youngest. She almost got away from her pursuers, until a quivering arrow buries itself in her side. Overcome with pain she tosses her child from her and tries to drag herself further. Soon her strength abandons her, groaning she falls down and her pursuers get near, howling like beasts. A few blows with the kirri smash the child’s skull and also kill the mother. Only a few lucky ones are fortunate enough to escape, to flee to a befriended camp.
The red sun of the east rises, its first beam shining on the scene of horror. The victors stand by the camp and collect their booty. Everything of use is taken along. The clay pots are destroyed and the huts burned. Heavily laden with booty, the Bushmen start their trek home. In the distance a dog’s howling can be heard, who cannot explain the disappearance of its master, then all is deathly quiet. Soon the first savannah kites circle above the site of sorrow; vultures follow, and at night time hyenas and jackals feast on the corpses of the slain. When the few survivors draw near a few days later, all they find are bones, as remains of their relatives. But they, too, will have their hour of eye-for-an-eye retribution, no matter how many years may pass in the interim.

So it is that war is ceaseless amongst hostile bands and tribes. For the infraction of the one, all have to pay the penalty.2

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The passage above appears in Joachim Helmut Wilhelm’s posthumously published monograph on the !Kung (transcribed also as !Xun or !Khu) of north-eastern Namibia, which he had written in 1916 and presented to the Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig a few years later, on a visit to the homeland.3 Wilhelm had first-hand knowledge of this ‘interesting people’ some of whom worked on his frontier farm at Outjituo on the northern Omuramba Omatako in the remote Grootfontein District of colonial German South West Africa. An inveterate hunter, he also undertook a number of hunting trips into the hinterland to the east — the Kaukauveld, as it was known then — between 1914 and 1919, accompanied and assisted by his employed San as well as by San from the region he visited.4

Wilhelm’s passage has recently been lifted from obscurity. Its melodramatic style and content — an account of a bloody retaliatory dawn raid by one !Kung group on a neighbouring band over a previous hunting dispute in which a man had been killed — resonates with the vision of recent and contemporary writers from the ‘Bellicose School’ on humankind’s innate propensity for warfare, deeply rooted in our species’ phylogenetic and prehistoric past.5 As noted below, a number of them have referred to or

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4 Wilhelm also wrote a short monograph on one of these, the Kxoe, whom he got to know on three big game hunting trips into their region, in the Caprivi near the Okavango. As recently as the 1960s he was known to the Kxoe in their folklore, for his hunting prowess and the vast quantities of meat this yielded for the Kxoe, as well as for the assistance he rendered the people when they were attacked by Mbukushu slave raiders (Oswin Köhler, Die Welt der Kxoe Buschleute im südlichen Afrika: Eine Selbstdarstellung in ihrer eigenen Sprache. Band 1: Die Kxoe-Buschleute und ihre ethnische Umgebung, Berlin, Reimer, 1989: 490-493).

cited Wilhelm’s passage in their doomsday accounts on the human condition, as ‘empirical’ evidence of warfare in hunting-gathering societies. The latter include the !Kung, an allegedly peaceful hunter-gatherer group — indeed, a “harmless people”, a moniker applied to the !Kung’s southern neighbours and linguistic cousins, the Ju/'hoansi, half a century later by one field worker. The discrepancy here, between two first-hand accounts on the !Kung, is invariably and eagerly noted by the innatist writers for its poignant signalling of modernist neo-Rousseauian romanticizing of the Bushmen and hunter-gatherer folk like them.

While one might hesitate to apply the designation of ‘harmless’ to !Kung sociality in more recent times, it is certainly more apt in capturing its flavour than would be an adjective like ‘bellicose’ or ‘fierce’ (à la the Yanomami, the neo-Hobbesians’ paradigmatic egalitarian society representative). Ethnographers who have worked among the !Kung-speaking Ju/'hoansi since the middle of the last century, as well as among other Kalahari San, have noted that violence, while as much a threat to interpersonal relations as in any other society and capable of rearing its head, at times viciously so and with homicidal consequences, is also effectively restrained and contained. This is a function, in part, of specific tension-defusing, levelling mechanisms that are set in motion in San moral culture when conflict threatens, and in part it derives from a social chemistry of communalism. As I have shown elsewhere its active ingredients in San society are the practice and ethos of sharing and equality and flowing from them, reciprocity, cooperation and a measure of self-abnegation.

None of this jibes with what Wilhelm reports about the self-same !Kung, along with some of his contemporaries who similarly report !Kung-speaking San as being a warlike

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people, politically organized with power held by a ruthless war-chief and engaging in blood vengeance and feuding, as well as in the killing of territorial trespassers. A social and cultural pattern of intra- and inter-group aggressiveness and despotic leadership in the nineteenth century and, a century later, the opposite? How are we to explain this discrepancy? Are the German colonial reports wrong? If not, why were the !Kung and other Kalahari San groups bellicose then and why are they peaceful now? The remainder of this paper deals with the latter two questions.

Before turning to them I will briefly address yet another kindred question that arises from those just raised (one which might occur readily to some students in the field of San and hunter-gatherer studies): Is it the contemporary San ethnographers who are wrong? Is it in fact they, rather than their precursors, whose ethnography is suspect and who have thus depicted twentieth-century San sociality in overly, unwarrantedly peaceable terms that project a peacenik vision and agenda? This is part of the revisionist challenge that triggered a protracted and vitriolic Methodenstreit in San and hunter-gatherer studies a generation ago which in these fields has pretty well run out of steam. However the revisionists’ claim that their opponents – dubbed ‘isolationists’ – are wrong in their ethnographic portrayal of the !Kung and other San people is pounced and capitalized on by the ‘Hawks’ in the human war and violence debate, reaching stridency decibels that exceed even those of the ‘Revisionism Debate’. An example is the Dutch primatologist Johan M. G. van der Dennen’s name-calling the opposing camp, the ‘Doves’, a “Peace and Harmony Mafia”, in dogged pursuit of ideologically driven

11 Hugh Gusterson suggests that the Cold War climate generated studies and polemics of peaceful tribal societies among anthropologists, which “represented a displaced critique of the status quo, the salvage of a different potentiality in human nature” (Hugh Gusterson, “Anthropology and Militarism”, Annual Review of Anthropology, 36, 2007: 155-175 [158]). It was in that time period that the anthropology of war was in its ‘Golden Age’, according to Keith Otterbein’s review of the history of the sub-discipline (Otterbein, Keith, “A History of Research on Warfare in Anthropology”, American Anthropologist, 101, 1999: 794-805 [798-801]). Indeed, his Hawk-Dove categorization of positions on the matter, which crystallized in the 1990s, also had its origin in that period.

research that renders them “the intellectual equivalent of quacks”. While I will return again to the writers on the “man the warrior” perspective, I won’t deal with the revisionist challenge in this paper (having done so years ago, with Richard Lee). My simple statement on this matter is that I deem the accounts, by such anthropologists as Lorna Marshall, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, George Silberbauer and Richard Lee and various other Kalahari researchers to be ethnographically sound and grounded and as accurate a reflection of the nature and workings of San sociality as can be ascertained given the methodological and epistemological constraints of the ethnographic enterprise.

Was Wilhelm wrong?

I have dealt with this question elsewhere at some length, when critically evaluating Wilhelm’s, as well as some of his contemporaries’, texts as to their ethnographic reliability. Wilhelm does generally quite well on this score with respect to some of the information he reports on things and events he actually observed, such as people’s physical characteristics, their material culture, medical and magical practices, family, gender relations and, especially, on hunting and gathering activities, two subjects on
which Wilhelm, an inveterate big game hunter and an amateur botanist, was especially sound. Some of these ethnographic items Wilhelm describes in considerable detail and throughout his accounts he distinguishes first-hand observation from information he received from others or based on his own conjecture. He was also well read on some of the colonial literature on the Bushmen, referring to such writers as Schinz, Passarge, Seiner, Werner, Vedder and Bleek, and occasionally draws on their writings to complement his own account.

Yet, on two or three occasions Wilhelm deviates from sober reportage of observed fact and swings over to affective – embellished, melodramatic, strident – narrative of imagined fiction that he derives either from his own imagination or from second- or third-hand information and presents from the fiction writer’s narrative perspective of implied omniscience. Where this happens in spades is in his account of !Kung belligerence, such as the passage that is the focus of this paper. Here Wilhelm pulls out all of the stops on his murder and mayhem register: an array of weaponry (spears, bows and poisoned arrows, clubs and axes) wielded by dawn raiders “howling like beasts”, to kill ambushed men and women and crush mothers’ and children’s skulls. Victims’ corpses left behind by the departing raiders, weighted down with booty, provide a feast for jackals and hyenas. Kites and vultures circling overhead. In the distance a lone dog howling. Rounding out this grim tableau are reports of blood vengeance and executions, the former a jural requirement, notes Wilhelm, so severe in !Kung normative culture as to lead to the extermination of entire bands. The victims of execution are primarily thieves, both men and women, for so minor a theft as of a digging stick, and the method is either shooting or stabbing or “death by fire” (burned to death while tied to a tree). Also executed, according to Wilhelm, were adulterers – as opposed to adulteresses, who only received beatings. Territorial trespassers “anyone caught poaching, or prowling on foreign territory” were killed on sight.

Why does Wilhelm, an otherwise cautious observer, in the sections of his monograph on “political conditions and warfare” and “legal conditions”, throw methodological caution to the wind and leave the firm ground of observation to yield to surmise? One reason is that Wilhelm is here presenting cultural information on the Bushmen that he himself has not been able to observe. He thus draws on the reports of others, especially colonial soldiers and settlers and their reports in colonial journals and newspapers. The laying out and machinations of a snare, killing a brooding ostrich hen as she sits herself down on her eggs and on poison arrows stuck there by a !Kung hunter, impaling a springhare in its burrow and pulling it out, a nocturnal termite gathering expedition, dagga smoking, tool manufacture, children’s games and the like were all more or less everyday actions Wilhelm was able to observe and that he describes in extensive detail in his monograph. An event such as a nocturnal raiding expedition, on the other hand,

16 I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of my paper for the last point of this sentence.
18 Ibid.: 149-152, 152-155.
would have been sporadic and infrequent and not one that would be likely to occur in the presence of an armed and mounted German settler. Its observation would be even less likely if the colonial agent present was a *Schutztruppler* (colonial soldier), the other settler-type to venture into !Kung lands, whose published reports Wilhelm read and refers to in various places in his monograph. A settler referred to specifically in the section on politics is one “farmer Paasch”. He is marshalled by Wilhelm as a source of information on the topic of executions, on the basis of that farmer’s personal experience of being raided by !Kung Bushmen in 1903 while on a trek to the Okavango. In the attack most of Paasch’s family were murdered and their twelve year-old daughter, after first escaping from the Bushman raiders, was captured and executed by being tied to a tree and burned to death (a method of execution earlier described by Wilhelm as a !Kung mode of execution). That this event — the ‘Paasch affair’ much talked about in South West African settler society and reported on in their press — may have assumed tabloid ‘urban legend’ status in colonial society is suggested by the fact that accounts of the event differ in detail.19

The Paasch episode and other similar less violent but probably embellished incidents, contributed to the development of an increasingly pejorative and hostile view among the colonial settlers of the autochthonous San. Other mounting problems were stock theft and San attacks on Khoisan and Bantu-speaking farm labourers and migrant workers passing through frontier regions. These problems had all peaked at the time of Wilhelm’s writing and had earned the San the designation, in colonial government circles and settler society of “Bushman plague”, “Bushman danger” and “Yellow Peril”.20 The stereotype, which was also perpetuated by the settler press, became more and more self-fulfilling and reified, as settlers began projecting notions of aggressiveness and territoriality onto the indigenous Bushmen which derived from their own “aggressive land appropriation” and the “aggressive territoriality” ideology it was based on — both are terms Schmidbauer uses in his 1973 *Anthropos* article.21 Reports that were written about them were nurtured by such Bushman ‘atrocity stories’ as were in general

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19 In one of the accounts the girl was rescued by a commando of German settlers, who also killed some of the Bushman raiders (Robert J. Gordon, *The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1992: 51f.).


21 Schmidbauer, “Territorialität”: footnote 27 (“aggressive Landnahme” and “aggressive Territorialität”).

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circulation – in a style of reportage that became increasingly ‘war-ified’ – and more and more defined the expectations of both writers and readers of these reports on Bushman violence and anarchy. In the process ideological justification was provided to colonial officials and settlers for ever more ruthless actions in their dealings with the Bushman inhabitants of the colony; indeed, in ethnohistorian Rob Gordon’s view, such writings reflected and sustained a “local Zeitgeist (ethos) in which genocide could occur” – and did, as he demonstrates in the same article.

As is evident from his monograph, especially in the psychological sketch he presents of them at the conclusion, Wilhelm managed to hold on to a fairly positive image of the Bushmen – one German settlers had themselves entertained to some extent in the first two decades of the colony. Some of them, and certainly our author, regarded the Bushmen as a people more sinned against than sinning and sorely tried by history. Yet, we can also assume that Wilhelm was nevertheless also affected by the colonial Zeitgeist and its increasing condemnation of the autochthonous San. This was especially evident when he drew his information from settlers who were beholden, unequivocally and vehemently, to this Zeitgeist, such as farmer Paasch or a number of the other writers on the colony’s Bushmen. As noted above, the majority of these were colonial soldiers on commissioned reconnaissance expeditions into remote or frontier regions of the recently acquired colony whose purpose and vision in venturing forth into Bushman territory was framed by the colonial enterprise. Their credentials and marching orders came directly from the colonial or imperial government. Examples were such Schutztruppler as Lieutenant Kaufmann, Captain Müller, First Lieutenant Trenk and Imperial District Commissioner Seydel. Kaufmann wrote a brief ethnography on the =Auin (=Aul/eisi) of the Gobabis (now Omaheke) District in 1908 by order of the command of the Northern District of the colonial troops following a suggestion from the Museum of Ethnology in metropolitan Berlin. Müller’s ‘reconnaissance ride’ into the Kaukauveld in 1911 was undertaken at the behest of the colonial government as part of its decision to develop a ‘Bushman policy’ after decades of ad hoc measures vis-à-vis the Bushman inhabitants of the colony. Trenk and Seydel jointly mounted a massive expedition – 59 camels, carrying Trenk, Seydel and his men, along with such equipment as compasses, altimeters,

22 The adjective is derived from Douglas Fry’s noun “war-ification”, a term he uses for the penchant of colonial administrators and other writers on indigenous tribal people to lace their accounts with bellicose vocabulary – terms such as ‘warfare’, ‘battle’, ‘enemy’, ‘declaration of war’, ‘war paint’, ‘war dance’ and the like, “that are imprecisely and inappropriately applied to disputes” (Frey, Beyond War: 103).
23 Schmiedbauer, “Territorialität”: 553; also see Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt Biology of Peace: 141f. Wolfgang Schmiedbauer presents this take on the German settler-Bushman conflict in the context of his dispute with Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt on Bushman territoriality and aggressiveness (see note 12). A similar process, of vilification by settlers of Bushmen through self-serving pejorative stereotyping, happened in the previous two centuries in colonial Cape Province (Mathias Guenther, “From ‘Brutal Savages’ to ‘Harmless People’: Notes on the Changing Western Image of the Bushmen”, Paideuma, 26, 1980:123-140).
heliographs and a portable dispensary and sick bay — on the instructions of the colony’s governor von Schuckmann.27

In addition to the military branch of the colony the scientific-academic branch also set out for the Bushmen in the colony’s remote regions — geographers, zoologists or botanists, such as Hans Schinz, Siegfried Passarge, Franz Seiner, Leonhard Schultze and Rudolf Pöch.28 In addition to such academic questions as to whether or not the Bushmen were a Urrasse (primal race) physically and primäre Wildbeuter (primary hunter-gatherers) culturally29 a practical question with policy implications the researchers all addressed themselves to was whether or not the Bushmen of the territory were in actual fact zivilisierbar (capable of being civilized), rather than being doomed to extinction and thus not amenable to change and development by the colonial government. Related questions that preoccupied the colonial and imperial researchers were the whys and hows of settling the Bushmen on reserves as opposed to settlers’ farms as labourers.30 Research on these matters suited the colonial enterprise, was funded by it and left its imprint — and likely also its imprimatur — on it.

Of these writers Siegfried Passarge is especially relevant to Wilhelm in his bellicose portrayal of the !Kung. It is evident that Wilhelm had read Passarge as he mentions him in his text on a couple of occasions. When Wilhelm describes the political organization of the !Kung in terms of a “powerful captain”, “who is also a warlord” mounting raids into neighbouring Bushman territories and whose office is hereditary, his account is closely similar to Passarge’s description of the “Bushmen of the past” (by which Passarge means the recent past, before their subjugation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a matter to which I will return later).31 In depicting the Bushmen — those primarily of the Omaheke and the Ghanzi veld to the south and east of the Kaukau veld — in highly bellicose terms and as highly organized politically and with autocratic centralized political authority, Passarge may be projecting a personally held imperialist Weltanschauung onto the Bushmen and their polity (which tellingly he dubs a Buschmann Reich.32

27 English translations of the reports of these four colonial officers can be found in Guenther, Kalahari.
29 See Miklós Szalay (Ethnologie und Geschichte Zur Grundlegung einer ethnologischen Geschichts-schreibung. Mit Beispielen aus der Geschichte der Khoi-San in Südafrika, Berlin, Reimer, 1983: 70-72) for a discussion of the continuation of the debate on the Bushmen’s ‘primary’ hunter-gatherer status in post-colonial Germany. The debate deals with the same basic issue as that of the revisionists two to three generations later into the century.
30 Gordon, The Bushman Myth: 60-64, Guenther, Kalahari: 16f.
31 Wilhelm, “The !Kung Bushmen”: 149.
Another writer who reported raiding, feuding and blood vengeance among the Bushmen he had worked with in 1908, the !Kung-speaking =Auin (=Au//eisi), was Lieutenant Kaufmann. He presents a short account of a dawn raid, which he had received from a Tswana informant, who claimed to have been a participant in the raid when it was carried out years before. While less melodramatic in tone and more truncated, Kaufmann’s report echoes that of Wilhelm, written eight years later. Given the latter’s wide range of reading it is possible that he might have read Kaufmann’s monograph. The latter also presents an extensive discussion of =Auin blood vengeance — “a fundamental concept which pervades their notion of law” — and its corrosive, anarchical effects on social cohesion, such that “men may be stuck with so many mutual blood vengeance obligations that a meeting amongst camp representatives may readily lead to blood shed”.33 As the aggregation phase, in the dry season, sometimes brought together as many as 1000 people, according to Kaufmann, the accumulated and pending blood vengeance obligations triggered extensive, intensive and protracted feuding. Moreover, it gave rise to strong notions of territorial trespass, so much so that a “territorial infraction is unhesitatingly punished with death”.34 Much the same is reported by Wilhelm, in his discussion of the matter of territorial trespass.

In sum, while Wilhelm was sympathetic toward the Bushmen he wrote about, the view generally held of these people by his compatriots, as bellicose and violent, savage and anarchical, also left its mark on his account of them. This is evident in particular in his account of political and military processes which he had no occasion to observe first-hand, as he did hunting and gathering, tool making, medical practices and social interaction. He relied for this information on sources — settlers, soldiers, scientists — who were part of the colonial enterprise and in tune with its mission and vision. The latter was Hobbesian and attributed bellicosity to the !Kung, manifested in warfare by means of genocidal dawn raids, feuds, blood vengeance and executions.

One can expect this sort of scenario to resonate with the innatists’ view of the !Kung and hunter-gatherers as violent and warlike. But is it a correct portrayal of San society and sociality? How much of it is fact, how much fiction? To what extent is colonial settler hype congruent with colonial settler history? And if it is congruent, showing — as to a considerable extent it does — that the San of the colonial period were in fact violent and warlike, does that historical fact warrant designating this foraging people as bellicose? As Africa’s counterparts to ‘fierce people’ elsewhere in the world, especially in Amazonia and Highlands New Guinea (the prominent ethnographic cases on “Pinker’s List” of bellicose pre-state peoples)?35 The rest of my paper will consider these questions.

33 Kaufmann, “The =Auin”: 83.
34 Ibid.
Encroachment and encapsulation of the nineteenth-century Kalahari San

Returning to the “cornered mongoose” image of the !Kung in the title of this paper, the latter were indeed “cornered” throughout the nineteenth century.36 Having lived as foragers in the remote !Kung veld in north-eastern Namibia for centuries their traditional lands were encroached upon and enclosed from the south, north and east by peripatetic tribes and proto-states in search of grazing for their vast herds of cattle and hunting territories. Equally affected were neighbouring San groups around them, the !O!Kung to the north in Angola, across the Okavango river, the Hei//om (also transcribed Hai//om or Haikom) to the west bordering Ovamboland, the Kxoe to the east, in the Hukweveld along the Caprivi Strip and north-western Botswana, and the Ju/'hoansi, =Aュー/eisi — both groupings !Kung-speakers37 and the Naro to the south, the last found, respectively, in the Dobe-NyaNyae region (called Kaukauveld on the colonial maps), the Omaheke (or Sandveld) and Ghanzi (or Ghanziveld) (see maps 1 and 2).38

While the speed and transformative effects of these processes of encroachment and encapsulation were especially far-reaching in the last two decades of the century, the German colonial period,39 they had gone on throughout the previous decades, as pre-colonial herders and farmers made inroads on the land of the !Kung and their San neighbours. Some of these contacts were relatively free of conflict, such as the trade relations between the !Kung and the Tawana40 and the patron-client pattern of vassalage between the Ovambo and Hei//om, that had been established over the previous two centuries and which the San had come to accept. This was the case especially with those San — called Aakwankala by the Ovambo41 — who had become incorporated into Ovambo society and its clan system. In addition to labour service San vassals rendered tribute to their Ovambo overlords and acted as their spies, ‘mercenaries’ and executioners.42

38 The designation for these regions of north-eastern Namibia are taken from maps of the colonial period. They are used in this paper as they are convenient devices for delineating regions of the country that have no clear geographic markers.
In other regions the arrival of the intruders was fraught with conflict from the start. The incomers declared the Kalahari hinterland to be their hunting preserves and grazing grounds for their cattle, resulting in the progressive decline of game and its displacement from the water holes, pans and grazing lands. Moreover, they brought in stock diseases which were also infectious for antelope species and contributed further to their decline. The nutritional stress for the San that resulted from the ever more drastic decline of game was considerable, especially in those regions in which game was the major component of the people’s diet (such as the Ghanzi veld). The encroaching settlers’ most drastically and directly deleterious effect on the autochthonous Kalahari


44 “Verkommen durch Hunger” (“perishing of hunger”), as a result of the extermination of the game, was deemed the main reason by Passarge for why the San people of the Ghanzi veld were ‘dying out’ after the 1880s (Passarge, Die Buschmänner; 10).
San was the raiding they subjected them to, either in retaliation for cattle theft, or to subdue them or abduct them into serfdom or slavery.

The intruders consisted of two main ethnic groups, Bantu-speaking blacks and Khoe-khoe Nama and Nama- and Dutch-speaking ‘Oorlams’, displaced from northern frontier regions of Cape colonial society, who had made their way to the east, north and south of the !Kung veld, respectively. Some of these — the Herero and the Nama — were clan-based tribes while others — the Oorlams and the Tawana, and Mbukushu and other Kavango Bantu-speakers — were or became mini-states during the period considered in this paper.

The Oorlams arrived in southern Namibia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, from the Northern Cape. Mounted and armed with rifles, they and their vast cattle

45 My principal source on Oorlam and Nama history of nineteenth-century Namibia is the late Brigitte Lau’s commendable *Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time*, Windhoek, National Archives, 1987.
herds moved into the region north of the Orange in several contingents, each group led by its kaptein and his retinue. They quickly spread northward, as far as the Swakop river, where the most influential of the Oorlams, the Afrikaners, established their capital at Windhoek. The Oorlams raided and counter-raided each other for cattle and were engaged in on-going power struggles, consisting, in the 1860s, of a “complicated and continual process of reshuffling of forces, alternating between hostile clashes, reconciliations and attempted alliances, followed by even sharper clashes”.

The Nama, who had for centuries been in ‘Namaland’, as southern Namibia was known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were also raided and drawn into the turmoil the Oorlam brought into the land. Their guns were supplied by traders and German missionaries in exchange for cattle that was marketed to the south in the Cape where, after the British colonial takeover in 1806, the market for stock and pastoral products had expanded. In this process of ceaseless raiding and warring and forged and broken alliances the Oorlams not only expanded territorially but also transformed their polities from precariously organized predatory ‘commando groups’ to states with councils and constitutions that regulated the captain’s autocratic rule. The resident missionary was usually an integral part of these polities whose temporal role was to channel European trade goods, especially firearms, as well as being the captain’s advisor and go-between with the outside world.

The effects of the Nama and Oorlam expansion, cattle raiding and internecine warfare on the San people of the country were for the most part sharply antagonistic. Those in the southern region, in Namaland, had for centuries been subjugated by the Nama herders, becoming their tribute-rendering servants, as well as “mercenary fighters” for the Nama in times of war. As for the San people in the region this paper focuses on, north-eastern Namibia and north-western Botswana, the effects of Oorlam hegemony was direct in one region and indirect in another. The former was the Gobabis region in the southern Omaheke, the territory of the =Au//eisi !Kung south of the Kaukau veld. The Oorlam Captain Aamral Lambert, who made Gobabis his capital in 1855, declared himself overlord to several thousand San in the region, as well as the Ghanzi veld to the east, which he claimed as his hunting territory. His inroads into this remote Kalahari region — a “howling wilderness”, according to an early European traveller, “with every inch of the ground [...] unknown to Europeans” — became more and more determined.

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46 Ibid.: 137.
47 Edward Cavanagh “We Exterminated them, and Dr. Philip Gave the Country': The Griqua People and the Elimination of San from South Africa’s Transorangia Region”, in: Mohamed Adhikari, (ed.), Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When Hunter-Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash, Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2014: 88-107 (92f.).
48 Lau, Namibia : 31-33.
when ivory became the sought-after trade commodity. Lambert mounted a massive hunting expedition into the Ghanzi veld, at the time teeming with elephants and rhinoceroses, consisting of fifty riders, twenty ox wagons and a troop of Damara guides, servants and drovers that lasted six months and yielded over 600 lbs of ivory. There were other such inroads on San lands in other regions of Namaland, especially after the decimation of cattle through ‘lung sickness’ (bovine pleuropneumonia) in the early 1860s, when ivory and ostrich feathers replaced cattle as the principal trade commodity in the Oorlams’ trade for rifles. Modelled on cattle raids “in form and purpose”, such predatory “hunting commandos” by mounted, gun-armed hunter-raiders with ox carts, not only decimated the game but also harassed the San of the region, especially as they increased in incidence and expanded ever further into San lands. Those San regularly encountered were subjugated, especially when the invaders brought cattle to the region. As we will see below, another reaction of some San to the conflict and stress brought to them by the Oorlams was resistance.

A more indirect effect on San of Oorlam hegmony in the peripheral regions of their states was the incursion by people displaced by the Oorlams. This occurred in the north, when the Afrikaners, under their leader Jonker, who declared himself sovereign of most of Namaland, relentlessly raided and enserfed the Herero, the occupants of the Swakop region, who owned vast cattle herds. In the process Herero were pushed north-eastwards. They attacked the indigenous !Kung San of the region with genocidal ferocity, setting in motion an increasingly intense spiral of violence and ‘bitter enmity’ – a replay, in extreme form, of the ancient and universal herder-forager feud. The Herero-speaking Mbanderu of the Omaheke, who appear a century before to have spent “a certain time” in the Ghanzi veld to the east, were likewise put under Oorlam overlordship by Amraal’s people, triggering a decade-and-a-half long period of regional turmoil. After Amraal (and his entire family) had succumbed to a devastating regional outbreak of small pox in 1864, that followed hot on the heels of the bovine lungsickness epidemic, the Mbanderu defeated and routed the Gobabis Oorlam and sacked and plundered their capital. This ended Oorlam hegemony in the Omaheke region.

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52 Lau, Namibia: 45.
53 Ibid.: 45f.
54 A measure of the stress some San endured at the hands of their Nama or Oorlam masters is evidenced by Galton’s report of the brutal punishment one of their captains inflicted on eight San men and women, whom he suspected of sorcery: the victims were burned alive and buried in a deep pit (Galton 1851:72).
58 Lau, Namibia: 135; Sundermeier, The Mbanderu: 10-12, 15.
Turning to the northern regions of the !Kung veld south of the Okavango and into the Hukwe veld along the Caprivi once again, here the nineteenth-century indigenous Kxoe San were affected by the ongoing political tensions of regional states, such as the Mbukushu, the Gciriku, Mbwari, Kwangali (Kwangari), Nyemba, Tjaube and others, as well as the Tawana to the east and south, who were centred around Lake Ngami. As a result of this turmoil San groups in the region were also displaced, such as the Kxoe, who retreated northwards from the Lake Ngami region, to escape Tawana aggression, where, according to Wilhelm, they ended up being subjugated and enslaved by the equally tyrannical Mbukushu, as well as embroiled in feuds with local San groups.\(^59\) An account of the migrations and power struggles of these somewhat obscure Bantu-speakers is beyond the scope of this paper.\(^60\) The research on oral history by the German linguist and anthropologist Oswin Köhler sheds some light on this complicated history, mediated by oral history accounts Köhler collected from Kxoe informants. A recurrent theme of the older story tellers is raids, which are told with the tabloid melodrama that sometimes attaches to memories of atrocities and may thus not be altogether accurate historically. The raiders were Bantu-speakers including Mbwéla, Mbari, Nyemba, Mbukushu and Tawana, and the raids were either punitive in intent, for failure to send their chiefly master tribute (honey, veldkos and meat), or they were slave raids.\(^61\) These, the majority in the accounts, Köhler surmises, started at the end of the eighteenth century and continued to as late as the 1920s.\(^62\) A number of the Bantu-speaking slave raiders used the ‘middle-man technique’, directing the Kxoe or !O!Kung San to do the raiding for them in exchange for much coveted guns and ammunition as well as other valued trade goods such as blankets, cloth, shirts, jackets, copper rings and brass wire hoops. Alternatively, according to the stories Köhler obtained, Kxoe men, especially headmen, might sell one or several of their grandsons or nephews as a punishment for recalcitrant behaviour toward their seniors.\(^63\) Some of the San slaves, those taken by or sold to the Mbari from Angola, Köhler speculates, were taken to Luanda and Benguela, whence they were shipped to Guinea and Brasil.\(^64\) Other Kxoe slaves moved eastward, being sold by Mbukushu masters or raiders to Tawana in


\(^62\) Ibid.: 43, 442.

\(^63\) Ibid.: 443-446.

\(^64\) Ibid.: 441.
exchange for guns and ammunition. In addition to Kxo being slave-raided, Kxoe oral history also mentions Mbwéla attacking and abducting their southern neighbours, the ‘Forest !Kung’ (Ju/'hoansi).

The Tawana raids were in the living memory of some of Köhler’s Kxoe informants, one of whose two sisters and brother were taken when he was 10 years old. The Tawana raiders allegedly took away children and able-bodied Kxoe as their slaves and cut old people’s Achilles heels and left them behind at the raid site “to be eaten by the hyenas”. The oral accounts attribute to Tawana such other atrocities as cutting ears off elder Kxoe men when they did not properly understand their Tawana masters and punishing disobedience by impalement. Further south, in the Ngamiland-Ghanzi veld frontier zone of the Tawana realm, oral accounts of Tawana-San relationships that I collected from the Naro also report atrocities – so much so that the historian Barry Morton refers to this period, the last four decades of the nineteenth century, as a “general rule of terror”. Like Lambert Amraal’s Oorlams in the west of the Ghanzi veld, Lecholathebe’s Tawana in the east also claimed this region as their hunting preserve and as their cattle grazing land. There was even a clash between the two regional states, a border dispute near Ghanzi pan in 1879, in which the Oorlams were routed by the Tawana. A century earlier Mbanderu oral history also mentions clashes between the Tawana and the Mbanderu, who had settled in the Ghanzi region for a brief period during their generations-long peregrinations through north-central and western Namibia.

When the Germans established their colony in 1884, after eight decades of way-paving and bridgehead-building by European traders and missionaries, they entered a land that was in considerable turmoil, all the more so as from the 1860s onwards as the Herero were at war with the Nama to “shed the Nama yoke” again with heavy missionary and trader involvement. It was very much a case of German colonial officers and settlers in South West Africa – and their British counterparts in Bechuanaland – “only stepping into

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66 Köhler, Die Welt der Kxoe: 461.
67 Ibid.: 463.
71 Sundermeier, The Mbanderu: 6-8. The available oral history of neither the Mbanderu nor Naro provides information on the interaction between these two people.
72 Lau, Namibia: 119-142 (119).
local history”, rather than themselves being the trigger for that region’s history.73 Their brief, thirty-year colonial presence replaced Oorlam with German sovereignty, exacerbating old conflicts and rivalries and creating new ones, as colonial state hegemony was expanded further than ever before. Colonial soldiers, explorers and settlers entered even the most remote regions which before had been beyond the frontier and now were within it.74 The contacts with the San inhabitants of these regions also became more direct and pervasive than they had been before with Oorlam and Bantu-speaking states whose interaction with the San population had been more sporadic and regionally confined. The colonial contacts were also, as before, antagonistic, increasingly so as colonial policies became more and more oppressive, at times bordering on genocidal.75

In Botswana, which was colonized by the British in 1895 (as Bechuanaland Protectorate), the colonial presence in the frontier region to the west of the territory was far more tenuous. It was not until 1922 that a magistrate was established in the Ghanzi region, and with it roads and communication links to the outside world. Europeans had been there before, Boer settlers and pioneer farmers who had arrived at the very end of the century and set up loosely run pre-capitalist cattle ranches that utilized San labour. The employment pattern was an African-style patron-client relationship, in the context of a fairly benign form of racialist paternalism.76 Apart from isolated incidents of brutality on the part of one or other of the early Boer farmers, the Boer-Bushman relationship was peaceful and symbiotic (albeit, all of it within rigid racially cast social boundaries, a cultural heritage the Ghanzi settlers brought with them from their homeland in the northern Cape).

What this account of the historical context of the !Kung and their neighbours in north-eastern Namibia and north-western Botswana throughout the nineteenth century reveals


is a period of political upheaval and conflict, brought on by regional, pre-colonial states and, at the end of the century, European colonial rule. It played itself out around the San, encroached on their lands and inexorably engulfed them, pincer-like, from south, north and east. Two questions are raised by these historical events which will set the agenda for the next section of this paper: How did those San drawn into this maelstrom around them react? And how did this political tension and their reaction to it affect San society and culture?

San resistance, politicization and militarization of the IKung and their neighbours

While the reaction of hunter-gatherers to colonizers has frequently – and, some would argue, typically – been retreat, that of the majority of the San hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari was resistance, in the context of an interactive process of increasingly complex political development that provided the material, social and cultural prerequisites for resistance. A key reason that resistance rather than retreat constituted the San reaction to the intruders in the north-western Kalahari was geo-political: their “cornered mongoose” predicament, due to encroachment from south, west and east by better-armed and politically organized intruders, along with geographical barriers such as rivers to the north (Cunene and Okavango) and, to the east, a more or less forbidding, desert-like hinterland, some of it already occupied – and defended – by other San groups (such as the Naro in the Ghanzi veld). In regions where retreat was an option to its San inhabitants, this arguably ‘classic’ hunter-gatherer response to intrusion by oppressive, better armed and politically organized intruders was also resorted to.

The best ethnohistorically documented instances of Kalahari San politicization, militarization and resistance are those of the =Au//eisi and Naro of the Ghanzi veld who in the early decades of the nineteenth century appear to have had larger, more complex, centralized and autocratic polities than were in evidence a century later. The largest of

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these, numbering perhaps a thousand and consisting of a number of loosely amalgamated bands of =Au/eisi and Naro, was led by a ‘paramount’ war chief by the name of =Dukuri. Despotic, ruthless and feared, and in possession of an “arsenal” of spears and other weapons stored in special huts, =Dukuri collected tribute from vassal bands and on occasion raided them. Another chiefly task was the organization of large collective hunts that bagged as many as a hundred head of game at one hunt as well as the construction of labour-intensive props for these hunts which consisted of game fences and rows of pits stretching for two to three kilometres. These, according to Passarge, may have required the mobilization of up to 300 men, along with an “iron will” on the part of the leader. =Dukuri had probably come in from the west, the Omaheke region, after Amraal’s Oorlams had entered the region. Displaced from there, =Dukuri entered Naro territory. He subjugated the Naro, resulting in bitter enmity between these two San groups as well as mutual raiding and feuding. Under this war chief’s firm rule intrusions into the Ghanzi veld by Nama and Tawan a were infrequent; it was “a country where neither Hottentot nor Bechuana dared permanently settle”, according to the explorer Thomas Baines, who travelled through the region in 1861 and was impressed by the “manly independence” of the well-armed, self-assured, well-toned San he came across.84

There is also ethno- and oral-historical information on other ‘Bushman chiefs’ in the Ghanzi veld, including those among the Naro in the region’s eastern stretches that bordered Tawana territory. Further to the west, the Naro at Sandfontein told Dorothea Bleek in 1920 of a chief who in recent history had ruled over thirty to fifty Naro families and had multiple wives through whom he was allied to other bands. He too was a “war leader” who was engaged in “frequent fights” with other San bands or non-San neighbours. Another Ghanzi Bushman leader of some power and notoriety in this region was a man named Gert, a Dutch-speaking, acculturated and disaffected “Gobabis Hottentot” with a following of about one hundred Ghanzi San. He was mounted on one of his half-dozen stolen horses and armed with a stolen gun, all items plundered from Chapman and Baines who had hired Gert as one of their guides. He led a brigand’s life in the Ghanzi region, “assuming the rights and privileges of a chief over the regional Bushmen [and] exercising a despotic and arbitrary sway over them”, as reported by Chapman. After one
or two years Gert’s “rapacious career” ended when he was betrayed to a party of Barolong Tswana by one of his Bushmen and executed by them.86

Moving north-west, into the !Kung veld in the northern reaches of pre-colonial and colonial Namibia and north-western Botswana, ethnohistorical records here too indicate that some San groups resisted encroachment by pre-colonial Bantu-speaking and colonial European intruders. While many of them — especially the Hei//om and some of the western !Kung — lived largely within the socio-political orbit of and in a dependency relationship to the regional agricultural Ovambo states, Gordon nevertheless characterizes their position as one of “considerable autonomy”.87 In part this derived from their monopolistic and strenuously guarded control of the copper and salt trade, commodities which the San mined, transported and traded with the Ovambo, who were eager consumers, especially of copper.88 The Ovambo also tried, more or less effectively, to exact the same from their San vassals as tribute. As such the San were also expected to render labour as hunters, “cattle-watchers” and mercenaries, constituting “a kind of standing army for the Ovambo”.89 A San vassal was on occasion also appointed by the Ovambo king as headman over a number of bands. Armed with firearms, such ‘chiefs’ could become powerful and feared for their despotism and acts of brutality (such as ordering followers to kill men or women). One of them — named Quben Qubu — roamed as far south-east as the Sand veld west of the Kaukau veld, where he became widely feared and respected.90

The pastoralist Herero also triggered resistance and politicizing and militarizing effects among the San of the region; indeed, “the southern advance of Herero pastoralists was checked by some singular resistance by a Heikom [Hei//om] leader named Tsameb.”91 After a number of successful raids against the Herero, at times with Oorlam assistance, Tsameb was succeeded by his son Aribib, who continued “his father’s proud and effective resistance to Herero”.92 He also assumed a measure of influence in colonial times as the Germans recognized him as a Buschmann Kapitän and even drew up a treaty with him.93

No other treaties were entered into with any other Bushman chiefs during the subsequent decade-and-a-half of colonial rule which, as noted earlier, led to a rapid deterioration of the relationship between the colonizers and the indigenous San. This

86 James Chapman, Travels: 312f.
90 Gordon, The Bushman Myth: 27.
91 Ibid.: 29. There is some uncertainty about Tsameb’s ethnic status, as his son Aribib is also referred to as !Kung in the colonial literature (ibid.: 237, note 4).
92 Ibid.: 30.
93 Ibid.: 50.
story is told at some length by Robert Gordon in his history of San-settler relations in Namibia. Of relevance here is a recurrent theme throughout this story—and beyond, as it continues into the early South African Mandate phase—that of San resistance against the European settlers. It started with the short-lived Boer settlement of Upingtonia, near Grootfontein (1884-86), whose 500 settlers withdrew after one year, disbanding the settlement. The reason, in part, Gordon argues, was the “well planned and successful resistance” of Bushmen, most of them armed with firearms. The San wanted the Boers out because they suspected—rightly—the latter of coveting their copper operations. Relentless and effective rustling—in one raid alone some 500 head were taken—was the key mode of resistance. Armed bandit gangs, led by Hei//om, !Kung and =Au//ei war chiefs, crop up again and again, raiding either Herero herders or Ovambo labourers, as well as German farmers and their servants. One of them, the !Kung bandit leader Namagurub, raided German settlers for four years until his capture by the Germans. Greatly feared was the Hei//om leader Hans whose band of up to 40 Bushman followers—the ‘notorious Hans gang’—killed five white farmers and seven non-white farm labourers. In the 1920s the =Au//ei Zameko, leader of 150 to 300 =Au//eisi as well as some Naro who had joined his gang, killed the magistrate of Gobabis District, Frederick Jacobus Kriel van Ryneveld. He died from a poison arrow wound during a police patrol against the bandit leader which had been mounted because of recurrent cattle thefts, as well as threats against farmers and a missionary along with growing rumours about a ‘war’ his gang might start against the region’s white and black settlers.

Further to the north-east the evidence of resistance on the part of the Okavango and the Caprivi Kxoe and !O!Kung against Bantu-speaking intruders is more scant and more indirect. The contact of these peripatetic, politically unstable proto-states with the San autochthones appears to have been exceptionally vicious, as seen above from Köhler’s oral history accounts, consisting of more than the usual amount of raiding the San had to endure in their history of contact with agro-pastoral intruders. Many of them were slave raids, by rifle-wielding black raiders. They are events that inform people’s memory of the past to this day. The effect of such depredations on the Kxoe was to render them subdued and strongly dependent on their Mbukushu masters, whom they had to obey “on pain of death”. A few of the memorates Köhler collected tell of resistance—on one occasion with the assistance, as noted above, of none other than Wilhelm himself, on one of his hunting trips to the region. Indeed, Wilhelm himself reports that on

95 Ibid.: 41.
occasion a Kxoe camp, when attacked by Mbukushu slave raiders, may “reach for their weapons” and defend themselves, at times successfully. However, for the most part the oral accounts Köhler collected depict the San either as victims of or as participants in slave raiding. The latter was attributable to the lure of coveted trade goods, especially guns and, because of its self-perpetuating tendency, acted as a catalyst for internecine warfare. Ethnographic research in the 1950s, by the Portuguese anthropologist António de Almeida among the Angolan Kxoe-speaking Zama (or Kwengo) on the west bank of the Okavango, revealed a politicization process of a different kind: the construction of palisaded villages, out of three metre-high, thick stakes, as a defence measure against slavers or other enemies. The villages were led by chiefs who owned cattle and exacted tribute from their people.

For all their victimization by Bantu-speaking raiders, the San of the !Kung veld also appear from the available ethnographic evidence to have offered resistance; indeed, the Kwangari at the turn of the century, reportedly “feared the Bushmen” and for this reason stayed north of the Okavango. The German-Namibian ethnologist Maria Fisch who has conducted ethnographic research among Kavango Bantu-speakers talks of “serious conflicts” between the !Kung and incoming Bantu farmers in the second half of the nineteenth century, such that “no Kavango man was safe anymore from their poison arrows if he dared to hunt south of the river, or gather wild food plants”. The Kxoe also “showed strong resistance” to invading Mbukushu.

Those San groups who, at various times and for varying lengths of time offered resistance throughout this turbulent century of invasion, were affected socio-politically through this action. It changed what before these troubled times had been a loose, immediate-return, open society — a variant of the ‘egalitarian foraging band’ — into something different and more complex socio-politically. Political leadership became more centralized and differentiated rather than loosely defined, more permanent rather than situational and ascribed — bequeathed from father to son — rather than achieved. In some instances it evidently also became despotic, the grossest deviation, perhaps, from the casual, non-coercive leadership style — of “reverse dominance” — one so

100 Ibid.
101 António de Almeida, Bushmen and Other Non-Bantu Peoples of Angola, ed. by Phillip V. Tobias and John Blacking, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1965: 17, 21f.
103 Fisch, “Introduction”: 77.
104 Ibid.: 80.
commonly finds in hunting-gathering societies. Other elements of status differentiation and power accumulation among these Kalahari San ‘chiefs’ were polygyny, collecting of tribute, possession of stock and horses and ‘ arsenals’ of spears as well as rifles. In addition to leading followers into raids on both neighbouring San bands and non-San groups these chiefs appear also to have overseen ‘public works’ projects, such as substantial palisades (Zama of the Okavango) and large game hunting installations and drives (=Aur/eisi of the Ghanzi veld). Groups were larger and more heterogeneous than before, consisting of up to a thousand members made up of both amalgamated neighbouring bands and of subjugated neighbouring San of different linguistic groups (such as =Dukuri’s and Zamako’s =Aur/eisi and Naro followers).

The intensity of the resistance of the Kalahari San to hegemonic intruders during the nineteenth century and the extent to which it politicized and militarized San groups was affected by the geo-spatial proximity of the latter to the former. Where the San were a long way from and out of reach of the turmoil their egalitarian foragers’ ways were little affected throughout this period. One such region was stretches of land within the eastern Kaukauveld (the area of dispute in the Revisionism Debate). Another area, possibly, was the central Kalahari in the south-eastern Ghanzi veld where foraging lifeways of an apparently aboriginal cast were observed among such autochthonous San groups as the /Gwi, the Ikô (also transcribed Ixoon) and the //Gana, as argued by Osaki.

Where San resistance, politicization and militarization were most pervasive and most intense, manifesting themselves in such extreme forms as intra-tribal raiding and feuding, was in the peripheral stretches of the pre-colonial and colonial states of the region. This is the region that Brian Ferguson and Neil Whitehead refer to as a colonial state’s “tribal zone” and define as “the area continually affected by the proximity of the state but not under state administration”. It is an area that for a number of reasons is prone to violence, so much so that it can “saturate the fabric of social life” of the region’s indigenous inhabitants. Social processes and institutions can be ruptured through introduced diseases which also displace populations, engendering notions of trespass and fights over territorial infringements. Invidious sentiments and hostile actions may be triggered by introduced, highly coveted trade goods, especially rifles.

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108 Heinz, Social Organization.
111 Ferguson and Whitehead, “The Violent Edge”: 3.
112 Ibid.: 27.
What were scattered or subjugated remnant autochthonous population groups may become amalgamated and consolidated — as well as reified by settler stereotypes that are instrumentalist in intent and primordialist in content — as new ethnic entities. In vying for claims to new resources and territories the groupings so formed become more and more defined and consolidated, as well as opposed to one another, thus generating a new dimension of conflict in the region. The net outcome of all these stirrings in the tribal zone may be the ‘extreme conflict mode’ of ‘internecine warfare’ amongst its tribal inhabitants or a generation or two before may have had peaceful relations.

As seen in the two sections above, a number of these factors were also at play among the various San groups — the !Kung, =Au//eisi, Hai//om and Kxoe — of the !Kung veld, the Omaheke, Ghanzi veld and Caprivi — who were the indigenous people and regions of the tribal zone at the periphery of the pre-colonial and colonial states of nineteenth-century Namibia and Botswana.113 Of these it was internecine warfare that generated the most intensive hostility and violence among San groups in the tribal zone. Its manifestation — raiding, feuding and blood vengeance — is what fuels Wilhelm’s passage on !Kung murder and mayhem. While his account is apocryphal and exaggerated, it is likely that some of the San in the tribal zone of nineteenth century Namibia and Botswana did in fact raid and feud with each other. Maria Fisch, writing about the !Kung and Kxoe of the north-eastern region at that time, speaks of “the maxim of blood vengeance” which triggered “frequent fights amongst individual !Kung tribes, high in casualties”.114 Feuding and blood vengeance are also prominent topics in Isaac Schapera’s discussion on Bushman politics, in his Khoisan Peoples, which derives its information to a large extent from ethnohistorical sources (which exclude Wilhelm’s monograph as it had not been published at the time of Schapera’s writing).115 As seen above, inter-San raiding is a recurrent theme in the oral history accounts of the Kxoe of the Okavango in the context of slave raiding that was carried out in their region by Kavango tribes. There is enough ethnohistorical evidence — in addition to Wilhelm’s dubious account — to suggest that internecine warfare amongst San groups, conducted through raiding and feuding, were all bellicose actions that were carried out in the Kalahari tribal zone. They exacerbated the “overall militarization [...] [and] increase in armed collective violence” and raised San belligerence, in some regions, to degrees of intensity that have no precedent in San socio-political organization and ideology.116

Indeed, what is unprecedented as well are the very acts of raiding and feuding themselves. What the ethnohistorical evidence considered suggests, I submit - and develop elsewhere — is that both were forms of hostile group interaction that were

113 The various effects of the tribal zone on the pre-colonial and colonial San of the region featured here are detailed more fully elsewhere (Mathias Guenther, “Raiding and Feuding and San Sociality”, paper presented at 2013 American Anthropological Association Meeting in the Panel “Peace-building, the Neglected Half of the War-Peace Nexus”, Richard B. Lee, Organizer, Chicago, November 2013).


116 Ferguson and Whitehead, “The Violent Edge”: 3.
acquired by the San, rather than being agonistic patterns inherent within San sociality.\textsuperscript{117} They were likely new forms of violence for the !Kung and other San groups in the tribal zone of the north-western Kalahari, whose pro-social, peace-prone lifeways, derived from an egalitarian, nomadic band structure that, as suggested by archaeological evidence from the region, went as far back as 3,645 BP, to Later Stone Age (LSA) hunter-gatherers, the likely forebears of contemporary San peoples.\textsuperscript{118} As I have shown elsewhere, on the basis of a survey of prehistorical and ethnohistorical information from southern Africa,\textsuperscript{119} the same can be said of other San populations in pre-colonial and colonial times where, in case after case, from the “Mountain Bushmen” – the “Raiders of the Drakensberg”\textsuperscript{120} and others – to LSA Cape coastal foragers,\textsuperscript{121} an egalitarian and peaceful substrate inhered within San sociality all over southern Africa (albeit with the proviso that over so vast a region and span of time San sociality also displayed a correspondingly vast range of diversity).\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{117} Guenther, “War and Peace”.


\textsuperscript{119} Guenther, “War and Peace”.

\textsuperscript{120} John B. Wright, Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg, 1840–1870, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1971.

\textsuperscript{121} John Parkington, “Seasonal Mobility in the Late Stone Age”, African Studies, 31, 1972: 223-244.

The assumption of this form of social organization — egalitarian, peaceful — cannot thus be attributed simply to the imposition of any ‘King’s Peace’, through a colonial or post-colonial state, as is the view of Pinker and others in the *Homo bellicus* camp.\(^{123}\) Once the turmoil and conflict that had politicized and militarized the north-western Kalahari San, especially those in the tribal zone, had subsided, they were able to return to their pre-resistance, pre-raiding and feuding social ways, based on egalitarianism, openness and sharing.

‘The passage’: hysterical hype vs. historical fact

The turmoil had not subsided at the time Wilhelm and the other colonial writers wrote their bellicose reports about the San; indeed, it was at its peak in some of the regions they visited and got their information from. And so the San’s reaction, of resistance and its politicizing and militarizing effects on their society and culture, was exacerbated through the effects of the tribal zone much of which, in the north-western Kalahari, corresponded geo-politically with ‘Bushmanland’. Wilhelm’s passage, for all its hype and hyperbole is thus as much historical as it is apocryphal. While the !Kung were at times and in some regions bellicose and violent at the time Wilhelm wrote about them, they were probably not as bellicose and violent as he depicts them in an imagined account that suffers from excessive (melo)drama and exaggeration. This makes Wilhelm’s report about !Kung politics and warfare methodologically flawed and his text cannot be taken at face value nor treated as ethnographic evidence on San sociality, specifically its allegedly inherent violence. What it is evidence of is San violence and warfare that was elicited, nurtured and exacerbated by a historical context of violence, to which the San responded in kind. As the decades rolled on this response became more and more intense — as well as mediated by an increasingly complex San polity — as vicious-cycle spiral and feed-back loop dynamics were set in motion.

Considered together with other, more reliable and somewhat less incendiary ethno-historical information, Wilhelm’s and some of his fellow colonial writers’ reports on San raids, feuds and executions are seen to be flawed methodologically. What Wilhelm reports needs to be tempered, as well as historically contextualized. Given their blending of fact and fiction and considering the historical impact on the San socially and politically it is entirely unwarranted to draw from Wilhelm’s passage any conclusion about bellicosity being an ingrained quality of San social organization and ethos, as do the innatist writers. Instead, San bellicosity is historically contingent: in the regions in which violence and war were perpetrated by San they were reactions to a century of social stress brought on by intruders who had been encroaching on their lands for four or five generations. Rather than defining the autochthonous hunter-gatherers’ society and culture before the pre-colonial and colonial century of contact and turmoil, what is more likely is that bellicosity was as subdued and controlled within San sociality in the pre-

contact past as it was described to be by ethnographers who worked among the San in post-colonial times.\textsuperscript{124}

We can be certain, then, that at neither time were the San exemplars of Man the Warrior. In trying to argue they — and by analogy and extrapolation, hunter-gatherers and humankind in general — were such, Pinker and the rest of the bellicose beagles are barking up the wrong tree. And as they do, we can hear a recurrent, tone-setting note in their baying: the passage. The dawn raid of the !Kung appears repeatedly in the texts of the bellicose school.\textsuperscript{125} Its writers cite or reference this passage again and again, relying and valorizing it in the process and giving it evidential authority that gets more canonical, dogmatic and seemingly irrefutable each time it appears. Written, as noted above, in 1916 and published in 1954 in an obscure East German museum publication, the passage reappears in the annals of scholarship a generation later, when the human ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt cites it in full in his foundational Krieg und Frieden published in 1975.\textsuperscript{126} The book appears in English — as Biology of Peace and War — four years later, bringing the passage to anglophone readers and researchers at the time research on the anthropology of war is in its ‘Golden Age’.\textsuperscript{127} Ten years later it reappears in summary form in Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s textbook on human ethology, in its English translation.\textsuperscript{128} In subsequent years the passage is referred to or partially cited, by writers from numerous disciplinary walks of life. In their Demonic Males the primatologist pair Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson refer to Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s later work in a one-sentence précis of the latter’s summary.\textsuperscript{129} Wrangham and Peterson, in turn, are referred to by neuroscientist Steven Pinker in his 2002 best-seller The Blank Slate.\textsuperscript{130} The passage resurfaced again a year later in political scientist Joshua Goldstein’s much-cited War and Gender. Goldstein presents the passage verbatim from

\textsuperscript{124} The time referred to here is prior to the socially disintegrative effects of such acculturative developments as wage labour, sedentism, overcrowding around government posts, alcohol abuse and (lumpen)proletarianization (Thomas 1990, 2006:225–43; Lee 2003:151–90).

\textsuperscript{125} It does so, in just about all instances, alongside the even more often repeated ethnographic case of the elevated, urban American level !Kung homicide rate, as per Richard Lee’s ethnographic account (Lee, The !Kung San : 382–400). These two features of !Kung ethno-history and ethnography are wedded in the innatist literature in the sections on hunter-gatherers, as key pieces of empirical evidence for these people’s bellicose proclivities. I note that the term ‘bellicose school’ is Richard Lee’s designation for Pinker & co (Richard B. Lee, “An Uphill Struggle: Convincing the World of the History of Peace in an Age of Violence,” paper presented at the CASCA [Canadian Anthropology Society] 2014 conference, April 30 – May 3, 2014, York University, Toronto; idem, “Hunter-Gatherers”).

\textsuperscript{126} Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Krieg und Frieden aus der Sicht der Verhaltungsforschung, Munich, Piper, 1975: 203ff.

\textsuperscript{127} Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, The Biology of Peace and War : 171ff.


\textsuperscript{130} Pinker 2002 best-seller The Blank Slate : 56.
Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1979) in truncated form, presenting the more lurid sections, about the raiders killing a woman fleeing with her baby and smashing the child’s skull.131 In addition to mentioning Eibl-Eibesfeldt as his source Goldstein also mentions Wilhelm along with his contemporary Karl Weule, an anthropologist at Leipzig, whom Wilhelm had probably presented his manuscript to when he visited Leipzig after the war. Goldstein is Pinker’s source in his 2011 The Better Angels of Our Nature.132 There are also echoes of the passage in military historian Azar Gat’s War in Human Civilization (2006), in his discussion of the “abundant” evidence of historical hunter-gatherers fighting. A case in point for Gat are the !Kung and their pre-contact internecine fighting, citing as one of his references Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s Biology of War and Peace.133

Because of its hollow ring this process of reification and ratification through repetition is an unproductive mode of scholarly discourse which spins the wheels of an argument rather than advancing the same. It is especially troubling when what is repeated and ratified is information that is of dubious merit, both because of inherent flaws in the information itself and because it has received no critical evaluation from the writers who use it.

There is some irony to the fact that in the 1970s in the book that launched Wilhelm’s passage into the innatist camp and set it on its repetition-reification trajectory and move from obscurity to orthodoxy, Eibl-Eibesfeldt himself made much the same point when he identified the “uncritical repetition of old, long superceded information” as one of the methodological shortcomings in the study of human aggression.134 That methodological shortcomings also attach to the passage he uses so expansively is something of which Eibl-Eibesfeldt might have been aware. His ethnographic consultant during his field work among the !Kõ on which much of his ethnographic data is drawn in his Biology of War and Peace was H. J. Heinz, who presented his field data on the !Kõ in 1966 in a subsequently (1994) published master’s thesis for the University of South Africa.135 Heinz addresses himself specifically to Wilhelm’s bellicose portrayal of the !Kung:

[Wilhelm] speaks of blood feuds in which all kin were exterminated, and gives examples of the death penalty (by burning at the stake in case of women) for theft. Their [!Kung’s] reputed ruthlessness toward others and toward each other is far from what I have found to be normal and it is certainly not observable today. Wilhelm’s findings may have been the result of the fact that the Bushmen were the most hounded people in the world during the nineteenth century. With their backs to the wall, and as prisoners within a cultural pattern that limited their territory, they were fighting like the cornered mongoose.136

131 Goldstein, War and Gender: 28f.
133 Gat, War in Human Civilization: 15, 677 note 10.
135 Heinz, Social Organization.
136 Ibid.: 39f.
Heinz thus clearly puts Wilhelm’s information into a historical perspective. Such a perspective is nowhere in evidence in Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s use of Wilhelm’s account, however. Instead of relativizing and contextualizing the dawn raid passage historically, Eibl-Eibesfeldt essentializes the same by likening the raid Wilhelm describes to “tactics reminiscent of hunting” specifically, and to “war among primitives” generally.\(^\text{137}\) The information from other colonial writers Eibl-Eibesfeldt marshals as evidence for San bellicosity in his book — Kaufmann, Gentz, Passarge, Vedder, Pöch, Lebzelter —are treated the same way, without any historical context provided or considered as a contributing factor to nineteenth-century San territoriality and aggressiveness.\(^\text{138}\) These he finds in yet another area of San culture, San rock art, and once again his use of the available evidence has the same shortcoming, lack of historical context.\(^\text{139}\) The scenes he provides do indeed depict what appear to be bellicose themes. However, the scenes are also clearly historical, as they depict cattle raids and black and white adversaries, some of them mounted and wearing the red tunics of British colonial soldiers.\(^\text{140}\)

The current writers in the bellicose school are certainly very much more aware of the historical context of internecine warfare among hunter-gatherers than was Eibl-Eibesfeldt and other ‘human ethologists’ of the time, working, as they did, with a paradigm that was evolutionary rather than historical. Attunement to history in the study of the anthropology of war is due first and foremost to the great impact on the field of the tribal zone paradigm. Ferguson and Whitehead’s foundational volume on the same was widely reviewed and discussed after its publication in 1992 and reissued in 1999, with a new preface by the editors.\(^\text{141}\) The volume’s reissue also led to the publication of a special issue on “Warfare and Violence in Ethnohistorical Perspective” of *Ethnohistory* (1999). The bellicose school, while aware of the paradigm, was dismissive of it — “romantic nonsense” to Pinker, “blinded to reality by political correctness” to Keeley,\(^\text{142}\) a “largely overblown stir” in the field of warfare studies to Gat bringing to mind —


\(^{138}\) Ibid.: 141-146.

\(^{139}\) Ibid.: 141-143.

\(^{140}\) Gat, in line with Eibl-Eibesfeldt, also uses Drakensberg rock art depictions of bellicose scenes, in the same uncritical, ahistoric fashion, even though the rock art researchers themselves may explicitly situate the panels they examine historically. One of them is Colin Campbell, in an article on depictions of war on Drakensberg rock art panels. Campbell presents the same as “contact period art”—a record of stone age life and its confrontation with herders, farmers and colonists” (Colin Campbell,“Images of War: A Problem in San Rock Art Research”, *World Archaeology*, 18, 1986: 255-268 [256]). Extending the panel’s historical note is the fact that it is also interpreted by Campbell as “resistance art”, depicting, along with the actual San fighters wielding bows and arrows, also medicine men in trance, wielding mystical weapons against intruders (ibid.: 265).


Chagnon’s — the coke bottle that fell from the sky from a passing plane and caused a ruckus among the Kalahari !Kung on the ground below. However, to be credible in the current field of warfare studies and irrespective of where they stood on the matter, the innatists should have considered both the tribal zone concept and the general theoretical space — historical contextualization — it is situated in.

Not to apply such a perspective to a piece of ethnohistorical writing, such as Wilhelm’s passage, so obviously shaped by this kind of historical circumstance, is very much an instance of “cultural bias scuttling scientific objectivity”. These are the terms in which Douglas Fry frames his recent hard-hitting critique of Pinker’s *Better Angles* which focuses on the ethnographic examples the latter advances as exemplars of pre-state Man the Warrior and complements Ferguson’s above-mentioned critical exposé of his list of prehistoric cases. The double-barrelled critique of “Pinker’s List” reveals to Fry a “monumental degree of disconnect between what archaeological and nomadic forager data actually show” about the bellicose ways of such peoples and assertions that Pinker and other innatists make about them.

I submit ‘the passage’ as a further datum to Fry’s and Ferguson’s critique of the take Pinker and other writers in the bellicose school have on hunting-gathering societies. Again, as so many times before, it comes from a field — history, specifically colonial settler history — that is as much a blind spot to that school as it is its nemesis.

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Appendix


So herrscht fortwährender Krieg unter den feindlichen Sippen und Stämmen. Für das Vorgehen des einzelnen müssen all mitbüssen. 147