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George B. Silberbauer
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1

Introduction

The "ethnographic present" in this book is the period 1958–1966. After that, when the decade-long drought broke in the late sixties, there was a rush of Tswana and Kgalagari pastoralists and their herds into the central Kalahari. Previously held back by the long drought, desperate for new grazing because their stock had exhausted the pasture within reach of established wells and boreholes, the cattlemen took advantage of the good rains. With no adequate government control, they effectively dispossessed many Bushman bands of their territories. Exploration for, and exploitation of, minerals in parts of the central Kalahari will further disrupt the lives of the Bushmen. Development will undoubtedly bring material benefits, but Bushmen, at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, will gain least. Lately the Botswana government has moved to do something for Bushmen, but, for better or worse, the close-knit, self-sufficient organization of band society, which is described in this book, and the completeness of the band members' control of their society are gone. The "ethnographic present" is now the past.

The G/wi are one of many Bushman peoples of the Republic of Botswana (Figure 1). They live in the Ghanzi district and their country stretches from the northeastern corner of the ranching block down into the middle of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve and includes most of the western half of the reserve. In the 1960s, they numbered nearly three thousand, of whom rather more than half lived permanently in the central Kalahari as hunters and gatherers. The others lived on the Ghanzi cattle ranches as farm laborers or squatters or visited the ranches more or less regularly to take advantage of the water supply and avoid the thirst and hardship of winter and early summer in the desert.

They call themselves *G/wikhwena* (bush people; i.e., people of the thorn forests). To avoid the dilemma of either being awkwardly pedantic and distinguishing between *G/wikhwesera* (two G/wi women), *G/wikhwema* (one G/wi man), and *G/wikxwisa* (G/wi speech, the language) or perpetrating inaccuracies that would be the equivalent of "an Englishmen," I have taken the element *G/wi* as the

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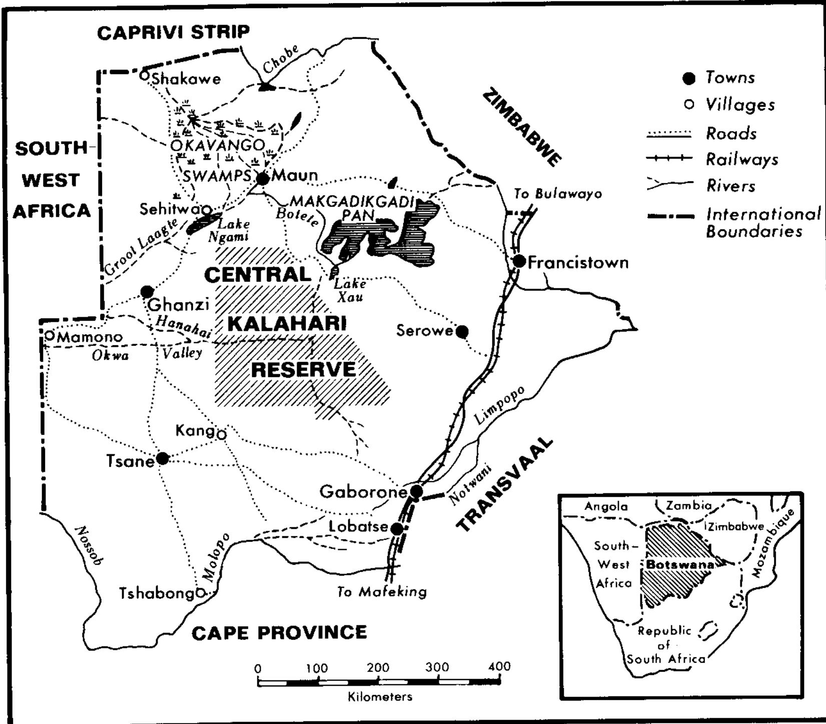

Figure 1. Republic of Botswana.

generic term for all things pertaining to the G/wikhwena. This parallels the ethnographic convention exemplified by referring to "the, a, or many Tswana" and "the Tswana language" instead of writing *Motswana*, *Batswana*, or *Setswana*.

The badge of language has social meaning and there is some feeling of unity among G/wi speakers. They are a timid people, fearful and initially shy and reserved in the presence of strangers. Such unity as exists within the language group is manifested by the reassurance and lessening of tension that is seen when a stranger is recognized as a fellow G/wi and by the subsequent eagerness to discover a link with him or her through mutual kin or friends. This is not to say that they will have nothing to do with non-G/wi; intermarriage with others occurs and is not stigmatized, and non-G/wi are accepted as friends, equals, or band fellows once acquaintance has overcome initial reserve.

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It was once assumed that the contemporary Bushman population was the refugee remnant that had been driven into the present inhospitable habitat by the punitive raids of whites and Bantu-speaking Negroes. The assumption is refuted by historical records, which indicate that Bushmen tenaciously resisted to the last man in the areas where they are now extinct. Both Tswana tradition and the records of the earliest white travelers in the Kalahari region mention the presence of Bushmen and there is no evidence at all of refugee migration. Linguistic evidence indicates that the present distribution of Bushman peoples is long standing. First, the languages of surviving Bushmen do not match those of the areas where extermination occurred. Second, the gradation of languages and dialects among adjacent groups of Bushmen speaking languages of the same family is too orderly to be the result of the random influx of a refugee hodgepodge. Third, the nature and extent of the lending and borrowing of words to and from neighboring Bantu languages show that the present location of Bushmen is more ancient than the relatively recent period of genocidal conflict. Cultural adaptation to their present environment, including the existence of full inventories of names of significant fauna, flora, and other environmental features, is of a nature and extent quite inconsistent with refugee status. Finally, the Bushmen themselves have no tradition of retreat and migration into the Kalahari. It is, of course, quite possible that small numbers of refugees found their way north and attached themselves to, and became absorbed by, locally resident Bushman communities, but this is not the same thing as the large-scale displacement of populations claimed by the refugee myth.

There is some controversy over the name Bushman. Like other groups of hunter-gatherers (and those who hunted and gathered in historical times but have since adopted some other style of life), these people had no unifying organization that would have fostered a sense of shared identity and a common name with which to express it. Lumping them together in one category was the invention of outsiders, whether it was a Tswana calling them Masarwa or a seventeenth-century Dutchman referring to them as Bosjesmans, and the criteria of classification reflected the outsider's knowledge and his needs in so classifying them. These do not fit very comfortably the different needs of those who come later, and, with other criteria of classification, require a differently sorted set of categories. In the early 1970s there was a move in the scientific community to adopt the name "San" in place of "Bushman" because of the fancied perjorative connotation of the latter. As "San" already had "acquired a low

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meaning" (Hahn, 1881:3) a century earlier, the choice could have been happier. "Bushman" distinguishes neither a language or even a family of languages, nor a unique style of living, nor a population that constitutes a particular physical type. Traill (1978) concluded that there are five separate language families among those of the yellow southern African hunter-gatherers. He found no satisfactory evidence of relationship among any of the grammatical structures of these language families and only rather low incidences of cognate forms (i.e., words with a discernible similarity of meaning and sound) between any two. Attempts at hypothesizing sets of rules governing sound shifts to account for the correspondences proved futile. It appears that there is not a family or even an order of Bushman languages. Their similarity is restricted to the use of clicks among their stock of consonants, which, because it is a feature unique to the speech of the hunter-gatherers and the Khoikhoi (the clicks in some Bantu languages – Nguni, Sotho, and some western languages – were borrowed from the Khoikhoi or the hunter-gatherers), tended to obscure the differences that closer examination makes obvious. One cannot distinguish hunter-gatherers from the Khoikhoi on linguistic grounds as one of the language families is common to both. G/wi, for instance, along with Nharo, G//ana, and others of Dorothea Bleek's Central Group (Bleek, 1956), is structurally and lexically akin to Nama and other languages of the Khoikhoi. Although these are referred to as Khoikhoi, or Hottentot, languages, there is no evidence that the G/wi and others acquired their languages from them. Because we do not know anything of the history of the language family, we label it Khoikhoi (or Hottentot) or Central Group Bushman, according to perspective.

Nurse and Jenkins (1977:16) conclude that "few morphological differences have been noted between the Khoi and the San except in overall size," that is, that Bushmen and Khoikhoi are the same physical type or of the same race.

In terms of economy, life-style, or sociocultural system, "Bushman" is again a nondistinctive term. Today there are Bushmen who are herders and there are Khoikhoi and Negroes who are hunters and gatherers. It seems, then, that Bushman is not a very exact term; it refers to an individual of the Khoisan physical type who follows a hunter-gatherer style of living, or whose ancestors were hunter-gatherers, and who speaks (or whose ancestors spoke) a language of one of the five families identified by Traill (1978). If this does not distinguish between a Khoikhoi who hunts and gathers for a living and a Bushman it is because the two are similar. Perhaps one should not expect labels of populations to have any very high degree of specific-

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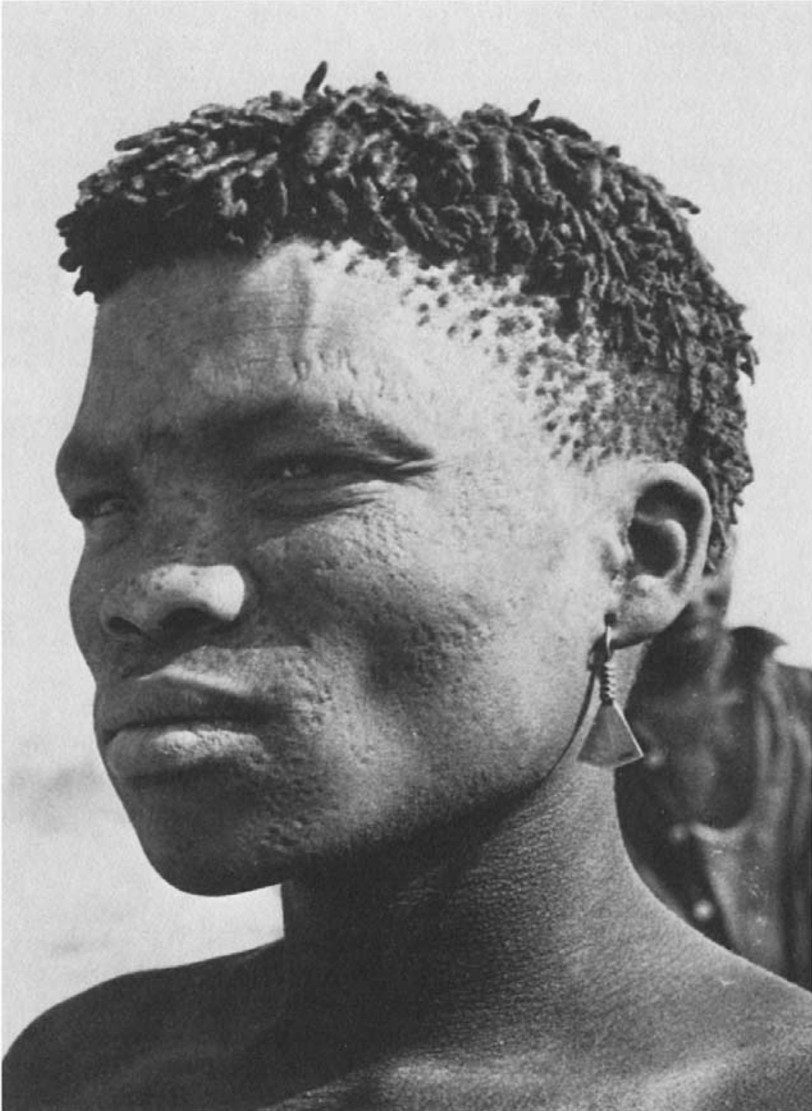

A G/wi man. Note the pockmarks, a legacy of the 1950 smallpox epidemic.

ity. After all, the term "Australian" may, with equal validity, be applied to a Turkish-speaking resident of Sydney, a member of the Pitjantjatjara people in the Musgrave Ranges in South Australia, and to Dame Edna Everidge of Moonee Ponds.

I shall use the term Bushman in reference to the G/wi because they

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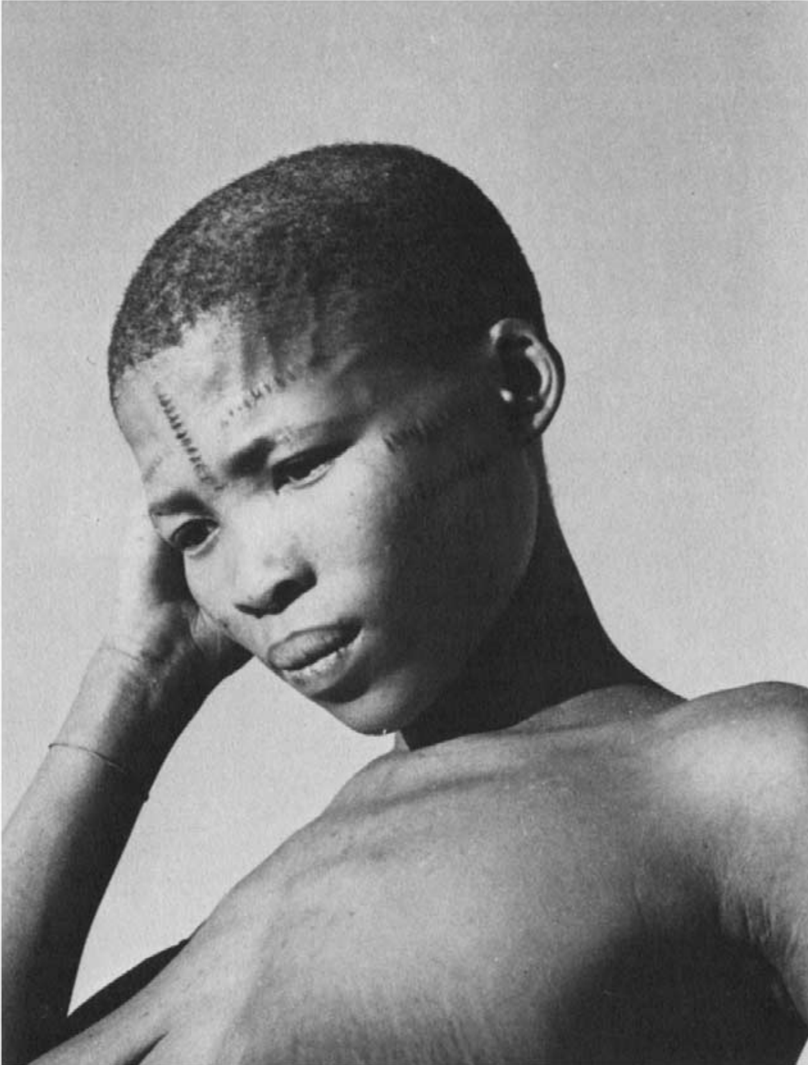

A G/wi woman. The marks on her face are recent cuts into which the ashes of medicinal plants were rubbed to cure an illness.

are included in the common (if imprecise) meaning of the word. Like other labels of other populations, this one may have to be hastily abandoned if the Bushmen unite and come to agreement in exercising their right to choose how they shall be known.

As Inskeep (1978) pointed out, we cannot be certain that the people who fashioned the artifacts of the Middle and Late Stone Ages in

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southern Africa were the ancestors of the Bushmen. There are still many archeological and paleontological gaps to be filled, but in the present state of knowledge it is reasonable to infer that they were probably ancestral to the population that, by 25,000 years ago, had come to closely resemble the modern Bushman. The putative ancestral type once inhabited the southern and eastern halves of Africa (Tobias, 1978). Although the antiquity of the Bushman presence in the Kalahari cannot be determined, there is no doubt that it has been the habitat of man for a very long time. Cohen (1974) described a Middle Stone Age site at Orapa diamond mine in central Botswana, to which he tentatively ascribed a date of 50,000 B.P. Similar sites are common along the eastern fringe of the Makgadikgadi and in parts of the Okwa valley, where I have also found Late Stone Age material.

As the wave of Negro migration spread across and down the continent from west Africa, the hunters and gatherers disappeared from the areas occupied by the black pastoralists and cultivators. Almost nothing is known of the history of their contact and it would be mischievous to equate black domination of the hunter-gatherers with either the ravages of white colonization or more modern instances of cruelties inflicted on Bushmen by their Bantu-speaking usurpers and overlords. Archeological evidence in the Transvaal Province of South Africa (R. Mason, pers. comm., 1973) indicates that there was a period of mutually rewarding and apparently peaceful coexistence of Iron Age Negroes and Bushmen in many localities. In these instances, dating from about 2000 B.P. onward, the local Bushmen were probably eventually absorbed into the larger population of newcomers, presumably the forebears of the present Sotho-Tswana peoples of central southern Africa. The rather later contact with Nguni peoples farther east seems to have been less amicable (Wright, 1971). Historical records of relations between Bushmen and Bantu-speaking peoples relate mainly to the Tswana and Kgalagari in and around what is now Botswana. Elsewhere, whatever relations may have existed between the two had been disturbed or destroyed by the combination of *Mfecane* (*Lifaqane* in Sotho) – the chain reaction of wars, pillage, and dispersal accompanying and following the rise of the Zulu – and the closely subsequent penetration and domination of the interior plateau by the Voortrekkers. John Campbell, who visited the southern Tswana in 1813 and 1820 describes Bushman raids on his hosts' cattle as if they were of fairly frequent occurrence. Retaliation ranged from giving the reivers a severe thrashing to the indiscriminate slaughter of men, women, or children encountered by the punitive party (Campbell, 1815, 1822). Missionaries and travelers who worked among and visited the Tswana in the second half of the

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last century report them as keeping Bushman slaves. Mackenzie, writing in 1870, said that the slaves were absolute property but that an ill-used Bushman might complain to the *kgotla* (chief's court) "and if his statement were borne out by fact he would get, not his freedom, but a change of masters at the discretion of the Chief" (Mackenzie, 1975:10). Southern Tswana tribes at that time treated their Bushmen better because, in Mackenzie's opinion, of "the proximity of the white man" (1975:10). He makes it clear that both the Tswana and the Kgalagari despised Bushmen and treated them very badly at times (Mackenzie, 1871:129–134). But few had much regard for Bushmen in those days; even the admirable Dr. Emil Holub refers to them in derogatory terms, despite owing his life to one (Holub, 1881, vol. 1:360 ff.). A. A. Anderson (1888:212–215), elsewhere sympathetic to the Tswana, described how hunting parties tortured Bushmen whom they suspected of having ostrich feathers or anything else worth taking. He was moved by these atrocities to petition the governor of the Cape Colony to extend Britain's protection to the Bushmen. Sir Henry Barkley refused on the grounds that the Kalahari was too distant. (Anderson's customary good humor failed him at this point and he wrote acidly of the governor's ignorance that the Kalahari was adjacent to his own colony.)

Hatred and hostility between Khoikhoi and Bushmen were reported by travelers from the earliest times, but whatever treatment the Khoikhoi and Bantu-speaking peoples may have dealt the Bushmen, the latter survived. When whites began to move inland from the Dutch East India Company's post at Table Bay, they followed the European pattern of closer settlement and more intensive use of land than was the habit of either Bantu or Khoikhoi. The result was the early development of murderous competition for hunting and grazing land. Initial contact with travelers was nearly always friendly, but when settlers moved in with their stock, the Bushmen, dispossessed of their hunting grounds, killed the cattle (which must have been tempting targets for hunters accustomed to wilder game). The settlers retaliated by killing the Bushmen and hostilities escalated to the point where each became the mortal enemy of the other, to be killed on sight. Their demise accelerated by epidemics of smallpox, measles, and other exotic diseases to which they had no resistance, the Bushmen were exterminated in a little more than 200 years after the start of the European thrust into the interior. To be more accurate, they seldom survived more than 50 years, or about two generations, of consolidated local settlement by whites. Both the Dutch and British governments at the Cape made a few halfhearted efforts to de-

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flect the head-on collision of interests of settler and Bushman. These failed for lack of resources and determination, and both governments were forced by pressure from settlers to revert to open warfare. Even after the enactment of legislation recognizing the rights of Bushmen, slaughter continued under the guise of retaliation (see, for example, Wright, 1971:56). Many Dutch, German, and later British farmers were killed and many more ruined by Bushmen. But every Bushman band whose territory became a frontier farm lost its livelihood, living space, and the lives of its members.

In the remoter parts of southern Africa, settlement occurred in a later and rather more enlightened age. Men and women were not so driven by hardship that they were not able to devise a way of living in the country of hunter-gatherers without destroying them. Colonial rule was not so firmly established that it could guarantee the safety of lives and property, but it had a presence real enough to inspire some confidence of eventual retribution for murderers and thieves of whatever race. The country settled at about the turn of the century was poor land for ranchers, the competition they offered the hunter-gatherers was less intense, and in the arid interior each had something valuable to offer the other. Bushmen were the only help available to settlers accustomed to a labor-intensive style of animal husbandry, and the settlers, once they had sunk their wells, had a permanent and adequate supply of water to slake the thirst of every Bushman in the vicinity. At a time when educated Englishmen were poisoning waterholes in the interior of Australia and shooting manacled lines of Aboriginal men and women, barely literate Afrikaners had at least learned how to coexist with their Bushman labor. It was far from an idyll of racial and industrial relations, but it was not the genocide that had become habitual in the preceding two centuries.

In the early nineteenth century the G/wi and other Bushman peoples were the only permanent inhabitants of the country between the several Bantu-speaking tribes in the Lake Ngami–Okavango swamps complex and the Khoikhoi along the Black and White Nossob rivers. Except for the waterholes along the Ghanzi Ridge, this country has no permanent water and even the permanency of these waterholes is debatable. Although Galton (1889:166 ff.) reported good water at Rietfontein on the western part of the ridge in October 1851 (the height of the dry season), Andersson (1856:373), who had accompanied him, found far less water at the end of the wet season 18 months later. Baines (1864) and Chapman (1971), passing through in 1861, reported finding only small quantities of water at each of the waterholes. It seems likely that these holes would fill when there was

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a succession of good wet seasons and then gradually dry up during the following drier and drought years. Rainfall records for Ghanzi date only from 1923; since then, two very wet periods occurred (1934–1936 and 1973–1976), during which water flowed along what were previously regarded as minor fossil drainages, and pans that are normally seasonal remained full for several subsequent years. Local folklore recalls other earlier wet periods. Campbell and Child (1971) reviewed the evidence of ecological change in this and other parts of Botswana and were inclined to exclude significant climatic change as the cause of the disappearance of such species as elephant and rhinoceros from the Ghanzi Ridge. They attributed this to habitat change wrought by human interference. I have no argument with their conclusion but question whether these animals were, in fact, a permanent part of the fauna of this area. I suggest that these and other highly mobile species that require frequent access to water might have migrated into the Ghanzi area during the very wet periods and remained until the waterholes dried up. This is consistent with the contrasts recorded by the early travelers and with the sporadic movemements of fairly large herds of buffalo from Ngamiland to south of Ghanzi in the mid-1950s. The subsequent extension and fencing of ranches along the ridge and the construction of the game-proof fence along the Ghanzi-Ngamiland border have since put a stop to the migration of large mammals.

It is known that the Tawana of Ngamiland had cattle posts along the ridge, but there is some confusion and controversy about the permanency of these posts and the extent of Tawana suzerainty over the area. If, in fact, the climate of Ghanzi did include several wet periods in the nineteenth century, it is quite possible that the Tawana would imitate the migrating mammals and extend their pastoral activities into this good cattle country when the barrier of water shortage was removed by exceptional rains. The early travelers do not mention Tawana settlements, but their writings suggest that there was some Khoikhoi movement eastward onto the ridge and that there was a fairly substantial but irregular traffic in cattle and other commodities between the Khoikhoi and the Yei and Tawana of Ngamiland.

The Nharo, Tsao, ≠aba, and ≠xãũ//ei Bushmen, whose countries include the Ghanzi Ridge, were exposed to this sporadic intrusion and to the fairly regular passage of Khoikhoi, Bantu-speaking, and later white travelers. Relations between Bushmen and the Khoikhoi appear to have been as unfriendly in this part of southern Africa as they were elsewhere, but there was a measure of amity between them and the Tawana. Galton (1889:165–166) mentions the Bush-

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